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The successful impotent

Deconstructing Platonic Eros in Walter Siti's *Scuola di nudo*¹

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the development of the protagonist's conception of desire in one of the most relevant works in the Italian queer canon – Walter Siti's *Scuola di nudo* – in order to show how the Platonic erotic conception eventually yields to modern theories on social behavior in the context of power relations between individuals as formulated by Hegel, Kojève, and Girard. Such a conclusion marks the paradoxical failure of the main character Walter, since it proves his intellectual defeat against the prevarication logic governing the contemporary world. From the close reading of the novel, it appears that the analysis of desire becomes the stage of Walter's personal struggle, who at the end of the novel rejects intellectualized love and accepts abusive relationships as the only successful kind of relationship. An effective image to describe Walter's inner development throughout the novel is the “katabasis”, since he moves from an extremely intellectualized to a utilitarian conception of love. Such a shift of perspective ensures Walter's integration into society, but on the other hand confirms his intellectual ineptitude and inability to oppose an ideological system which he despises.

KEYWORDS: Walter Siti; contemporary Italian literature; Plato, theory of Eros; Queer theory; Slave-master dialectic; René Girard, mimetic desire.

Walter Siti's *Scuola di nudo* (1994) can legitimately be considered a novel about desire.² It is an *autofiction*³ about Walter,⁴ a homosexual professor of literature at the University of Pisa and first-person narrator, and his

¹ This article is greatly indebted to Prof. Alessandro Grilli's and Prof. Nikolas Kakkoufa's helpful suggestions and criticisms. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers at *Whatever* for their criticisms and bibliographical recommendations.

² MAZZONI 1995: 153; SIMONETTI 1995: 114; GRILLI 2012: 445.

³ I will not address in this analysis the genre issues surrounding this work, which has been classified as autofiction. The word *Autofiction* designates a fictionalized autobiography (see GASPARINI 2008). The relation between fiction and biography has been at the center of the attention of Siti scholars – and in general of the Italian contemporary literary debate – for at least two decades now. This topic already came up in Siti's first reviews (MAZZONI 1995: 150; SIMONETTI 1995: 113-114; CONTARINI 1999), which were followed by several essays. See for example CASADEI 2008: 51-52; GIGLIO 2008. For an overview about the Italian contemporary autofiction see MARTEMUCCI 2008, ZINATO 2011, DONNARUMMA 2014: 127 ff. and MARCHESE 2018. See also Walter Siti's own perception on his fake autobiography in CRISTIANO 2012.

⁴ I will henceforth refer to the author as Walter Siti (or just Siti) and to the character as just Walter.

attempt to write a monograph about male nude, alternating it with his own (auto)biographical erotic experiences occasionally inspired by real life episodes. More precisely, *Scuola di nudo* is a novel about unsatisfied desire, specifically Walter's desire for self-affirmation, which is addressed from both a sexual and a social point of view. The novel's theoretical assumption is that everything in the world is governed by the individual desire to prevaricate.⁵ Such a worldview comes to Siti from Hegel's slave-master dialectic and its subsequent developments by Alexandre Kojève and René Girard, who have a great part in shaping the novel's universe (SIMONETTI 1995: 114-115; GRILLI 2012: 435-436).

In such an agonistic logic, Walter is destined to lose because of his innate passivity. Siti makes this very clear halfway through the novel, when he has Walter reassess his own story, by changing it from "the story of a homosexual" to "the story of an impotent" (*SDN*: 255) He is socially impotent, since he cannot affirm his own will at the others' expense. This inevitably affects Walter's sexual relations: he can be nothing but passive, to the point that he ends his relationships when asked by his partners to penetrate rather than to be penetrated. Being unable to conform to the power dynamics underlying human relationships, Walter tries in his monograph to formulate an alternative erotic conception – the theory of Eros – based on the aesthetic enjoyment of the abstract perfection of male bodies. To oppose the slave-master dialectic Walter draws on Plato and his followers (GRILLI 2012: 446-448; TINELLI 2017: 104-106). Walter's theory is therefore an intellectual rebellion to the dominant theoretic framework which Siti adopts for the rest of his novel. Walter rightly presents his monograph as an act of revolt, a way to free himself from the violence of this system:

Resterò seduto quando la frase si chiude: non ho da perdere che le mie catene, ho un'individualità da guadagnare. Trentacinque anni sono forse troppi per uscire di minorità: ma si sa che l'omosessualità e l'accademia fermano gli orologi. (*SDN*: 6)

I will stay seated when the sentence ends. I have nothing to lose but my own chains, I have my own individuality to acquire. Thirty-five years are too many to

⁵ *SDN*: 157, "E dai con la storia del senza-desiderio: ma l'universo è impastato di desiderio, e mi pare un po' vigliacco, se non ti dispiace, sottrarsi al dolore dei desideri frustrati." ("Enough with this no-desire story! Universe is stuffed with desire, and I think it's cowardly – if you don't mind – to avoid the pain arising from frustrated desires").

leave minority. Though everybody knows that homosexuality and academia stop the clocks.⁶

By adopting a new theoretical framework, Walter promotes an intellectual dissociation from the worldview as it is offered in the novel and advocates for his own passivity and impotence, namely for his right to be an under-achiever. Walter's erotic theory is hence an existential, other than an intellectual statement: Walter is interested in alienating himself from the world by focusing on intellectual beauty – this way, he does not have to comply with the prevarication logic which regulates social relationships. Walter's theory of Eros is an attempt to intellectually justify his social impotence. In this regard, the novel is not simply an account of Walter's sexual life and of his own erotic conception, but it rather engages with Walter's *Weltanschauung*, which is described through the lens of the homosexual desire.

The novel's complex structure – which alternates narrative, essays, and more introspective parts – reflects the complex nature of desire, which is addressed from many different perspectives. We can enucleate two macro-areas of critical reflection on desire: the former, which mostly corresponds to the extracts of Walter's in-progress essay, deals with the theoretic aspects of desire and is inspired by the above-mentioned Platonic theory. The latter draws on Hegel-Kojève-Girard's social theory and relies on the narration of Walter's (auto)biographical experiences.

Such a dichotomy⁷ can be summarized not only as an opposition of theoretical paradigms, but also as a conflict between theory and practice, namely between what Walter would want for himself and what he experiences in his life. Specifically, Walter's theory proves more and more delusional as the story progresses, being continuously confuted by the events. Halfway through the novel, Walter becomes physically impotent: such a traumatic event leads him to try to reacquire his sexual prowess by any means. This unexpected desire forces Walter to review his own theory. In fact, when he becomes impotent, Walter realizes that he is not immune to the society's prevarication logic and wants to succeed like anybody else. This brings Walter to progressively reassess his theory, until he eventually disproves it. Walter's colleague and *alter ego* Matteo, nicknamed il Cane (the Dog), plays a great part in this revision process. Matteo, unlike Walter,

⁶ All the English translations are my own.

⁷ For a systematic survey of the dualistic tendency in Walter Siti's works see CUCCHI 2021.

is the prototype of the successful man according to the society's standards: he has no qualms about destroying the others for his own benefit, and he is also sexually very capable. The relationship with Matteo deeply influences Walter's theory – Walter formulates it in the first place to distance himself from Matteo, but eventually he has to admit that Matteo's worldview is the only possible response to the contemporary society. In the end, Walter quits writing his monograph and abandons his intellectualized conception of desire. From an intellectual perspective, Walter's final act marks the victory of the Hegelian social theory over Platonism.

In this article I will try to reconstruct the novel's interplay between erotic and social theory in order to show how the former eventually yields to the latter. More precisely, I will show how Walter's erotic theory – modelled after Plato and his followers – is progressively destroyed by the novel's theoretical framework, dominated by the social theories of Hegel, Kojève, and Girard. Through my reading I will illustrate how in *Scuola di nudo* the analysis of desire becomes the stage of a theoretical struggle, in which contemplation-oriented philosophy yields to social studies. An effective image to describe this theoretical movement is the "katabasis". I am using this term with reference to Dante's journey to the Underworld in the *Inferno*, which is one of *Scuola di nudo*'s hypotexts (BROGI 2007; FONIO 2008: 195-197). Like Dante in the first *cantica* of the *Commedia*, Walter goes further and further down into moral abjection, except that he totally embraces and enjoys it at the end of the novel. As in a katabasis, he moves from a hyper-idealized down to an extremely opportunistic conception of love and desire, to the point of equating them to consumer goods in the conclusion of the story. However, unlike traditional katabaseis, Walter never comes back from his journey, nor learns a good lesson for the rest of his mortal life. On the contrary, throughout *Scuola di nudo* Walter rejects something morally higher to embrace something lower: his katabasis is of no moral example to him, but it rather marks a one-way trip to abjection. What makes this conclusion even more paradoxical and sarcastic is the fact that Walter's final corruption in fact establishes his own social success. At the end of the novel, Walter is well regarded by his colleagues, who finally consider him a full-fledged member of their community. Nonetheless, this success is the ultimate proof of Walter's social impotence – by rejecting his theory, Walter renounces to advocate for his own passivity. Therefore, *Scuola di nudo* is the story of the failure of Walter's theory, which proves

ineffective before the world's social struggle; this theory, on the other hand, was formulated by Walter in the attempt of preserving his own identity. Consequently, *Scuola di nudo* is the story of a doubly failed act of revolt, both from the intellectual and from the social point of view. In the end, Walter is a paradoxical 'successful impotent': he is successful because after giving up on his ideal Eros he finally manages to integrate in the society;⁸ on the other hand, he is impotent because he has not been able to oppose the system. Consequently, Walter is paradoxically impotent because he is not able to advocate for his own impotency and even repudiates his initial theoretical cornerstones.

Desire indisputably is the novel's main theme. In a long paragraph, Walter quotes an anonymous source in the attempt of investigating the nature of desire:

Il desiderio umano ha sempre come oggetto un altro desiderio: ma desiderare un desiderio significa voler sostituire se stessi al valore desiderato da questo desiderio... Ogni desiderio umano, antropogenico, è quindi in ultima istanza funzione del desiderio di "riconoscimento": l'azione tesa al soddisfacimento di questo desiderio fondamentale si inizierà con l'atto di imporsi al primo "altro" in cui ci si imbatte... E poiché questo altro, se vuol essere un essere umano, deve fare altrettanto, la prima azione antropogenica assume di necessità la forma di una lotta: di una lotta mortale tra due esseri che pretendono di essere uomini. Senza questa lotta mortale, di puro prestigio, non ci sarebbero mai stati, sulla terra, esseri umani... Ciascuno dei due deve distruggere il valore dell'altro come valore umano oggettivo, e incorporare questo valore nella propria soggettività; di fatto esistendo lui solo e negando l'esistenza umana dell'altro... Se tutti gli uomini si comportassero nella stessa maniera, la lotta condurrebbe necessariamente alla morte di uno degli avversari o di tutti e due a un tempo; ma in tal caso la rivelazione dell'essere umano sarebbe impossibile, perché nessuno potrebbe "riconoscere" l'altro o farsi riconoscere da lui. Perché la realtà umana si possa costituire come realtà "riconosciuta", occorre che i due avversari sopravvivano alla lotta. Ora, questo è possibile solo a patto che nella lotta si comportino in maniera diversa: uno di essi deve aver paura dell'altro, deve cedere all'altro, deve ritirarsi di fronte al rischio mortale – ciò equivale a riconoscere l'altro come signore e a farsi riconoscere come suo servo... quest'ultimo è l'avversario vinto, che nel rischio della vita non si è spinto fino all'estremo: ha preferito alla morte la schiavitù e perciò, rimanendo in vita, vive da servo. (SDN: 102)

⁸ See STURLI 2020: 193 ff. on Walter's (and Siti's) paradoxical integration.

Human desire always has another desire as its object; however, to desire a desire implies to be willing to substitute ourselves to the value that we attribute to this desire... Therefore each human desire – being anthropogenic – ultimately is a function of the “identification” desire: the act of satisfying such basic desire will start by imposing the self on the first “other” we will encounter... And since this other has to do the same, if he wants to be a human being, the first anthropogenic action is by necessity a form of conflict. A mortal conflict between two entities demanding to be humans. Without this mortal conflict – a conflict of mere prestige – there would never have been humans on the earth... Each of the two must destroy his adversary’s value in its objectivity and humanness, and to incorporate such value in his own subjectivity; in fact, by so doing he must negate the other’s existence as a human and only admit his own existence... If all men acted the same, the conflict would necessarily result in the death of either or both the adversaries. But in this case the human’s revelations would be impossible, since nobody could “identify” the other or be identified by him. In order for the human reality to be “identified”, the two adversaries need to survive the conflict. This cannot happen unless they act differently in the conflict: one must fear the other, must yield to him, must withdraw before deadly risk. This means to identify the other as master and be identified as slave... The latter being the defeated adversary, the one who did not push himself to the extreme risk. He chose slavery over death and thus, being still alive, he lives as a slave.

Even though not revealed by the author, this long passage is a quotation from Kojève’s commentary to Hegel’s slave-master dialectic in his *Introduction à la lecture d’Hegel* (MAZZONI 1995: 152): social relationships are based on prevarication, namely on one’s desire to annihilate the other. For this reason, in Hegel-Kojève’s view no other form of relationship is possible than the one between master and slave. In other words, any relationship is a struggle for supremacy. Such theoretical framework is enriched by Girard’s notion of mimetic desire – as explained in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* –, according to which an individual ends up desiring someone else’s object of desire exactly because someone else is desiring it (SIMONETTI 1995: 114-115). In other words, any desire is triggered by the more powerful desire of dominating the other, which necessarily generates a conflict for supremacy between two selves (“E poiché questo altro, se vuol essere un essere umano, deve fare altrettanto, la prima azione antropogenica assume di necessità la forma di una lotta”). The only possibility for the world to survive is that one of the selves submit to the other, namely recognize the other’s ontological superiority. This

social dynamic is represented by the master-slave dialectic (“uno di essi deve aver paura dell’altro, deve cedere all’altro, deve ritirarsi di fronte al rischio mortale – ciò equivale a riconoscere l’altro come signore e a farsi riconoscere come suo servo...”), which logically and inescapably divides the world into winners and losers.

Walter undoubtedly fits the second category: a few pages after having presented this theory, he defines himself as an inept:

La mia indegnità è un dato semiologico, una particolare disposizione endocrina che mi vieta di reagire: non discrimino tra minacce e inviti, tra gentilezze e incubi. Ritiro la punta del pensiero prima che esca il sangue, evito le zone nevralgiche o di pelle sottile: non tanto per paura di soccombere ma come se temessi di aizzare me contro me stesso. (*SDN*: 159)

My inaptitude is semiological, a specific endocrine condition which prevents me from reacting. I make no distinction between threats and invitations, pleasantries and nightmares. I take back the tip of my thought before I start bleeding, I avoid neuralgia areas and thin-skinned zones. I fear to succumb no more than to pit me against myself.

Walter describes himself as passive and incapable of taking actions. Consequently, he has the others decide for him. In Walter’s own words, this has been his lifestyle until he decided to write his monograph. His academic supervisor – significantly nicknamed *il Padre* (the Father)⁹ – has always picked the research topics for him, therefore Walter has gone down a path which *il Padre* chose for him – “Ho fatto la mia carriera come un cane ammaestrato”, he says in the very first pages of the novel (*SDN*: 4, “I pursued my career as a trained dog”). In the slave-master dialectic system, Walter is a slave, someone who gave up on himself to submit to someone else’s will. His monograph marks a break with this system both theoretically and practically. It proposes an idea of relationship which theoretically challenges the Hegel-Kojève-Girard’s social scheme. Moreover, this is Walter’s first project not to be approved by *il Padre*. Thus, this monograph is Walter’s intellectual attempt to detach himself from the oppressive environment which surrounds him.

⁹ The name is clearly inspired to Freud’s theory, which gives great importance to the father in a man’s psychological development. For the Freudian implications behind the relationship between Walter and *il Padre* see FONIO 2008: 202-203 and GRILLI 2012: 434-436.

Halfway through the novel Walter exposes his own erotic theory. Drawing on Plato,¹⁰ Walter introduces his concept of Eros:

L'eros è desiderio, tensione verso l'alto, fiamma scala volo freccia, attratto dal sublime e dall'assoluto; mediante l'eros il soggetto si distacca dalla miseria e dall'insensatezza di questo mondo e si proietta in un più nobile aldilà; motivato dal fulgore del suo oggetto, l'eros percorre tutti i gradi dell'essere e trasforma l'amante in una scintilla esule alla ricerca della propria origine; liberando il soggetto dalle catene, lo proietta in una sfera iperurania e lo rende inattaccabile dall'impurezza. (*SDN*: 437)

Eros is desire, upward tension, flame ladder flying arrow, and it is attracted to the sublime and the absolute. Through Eros the subject parts from this world's misery and nonsense and tends toward a nobler "beyond". Motivated by its object's radiance, Eros climbs up each grade of being and turns the lover into a wandering spark looking for its own origin; by releasing the subject from his¹¹ chains, Eros sends him to hyperuranium and makes him impurity resistant.

Eros enables the lovers to part from the world ("mediante l'eros il soggetto si distacca dalla miseria e dall'insensatezza di questo mondo e si proietta in un più nobile aldilà"); they do not love the object per se, but they aim to attain perfection through it. Following Plato, Walter loves perfect bodies to come closer to abstract perfection.¹² From the very beginning Walter justifies his love for the male nudes as an attempt to reach the infinite:

Il primo significato costante del bel nudo maschile è la sua natura di corpo infinito: se guardo una foto di glutei e ne seguo la curva, capisco che infinite altre curve infinitamente vicine a questa potrebbero disegnare glutei attraenti, e molte altre fotografie potrebbero stare al posto di quella che ho scelto – ma nel momento in cui avverto la contrazione al basso ventre allora quella curva è la sola possibile. L'infinito si è condensato in quel solco, che è il risultato di un'approssimazione infinitesima; i numeri alla destra e alla sinistra dell'*x* si precipitano sempre più fitti a delineare l'inafferrabile nettissimo profilo. Il desiderio nel suo livello più

¹⁰ The text seems to recall what Plato says in the *Symposium* – Eros desires and aspires to wisdom, hence he is *philosophos* ("lover of wisdom"). Consequently, the lover is inspired by Eros to pursue wisdom (Pl. *Symp.* 210d6-211a7). For further details on Siti's sources see GRILLI 2012: 446-447.

¹¹ Although the Italian is ambiguous (*amante* can be either masculine or feminine) I have chosen to use the masculine version. Given the topic of Walter's essay, I assume that he is talking about a male lover attracted to another man.

¹² For the development of Eros in Siti's subsequent production see RACCIS 2017. See also STURLI 2017: 466-467.

profondo ha sempre a che fare con grandezze infinite; la struttura dell'essere si divide e si complica progressivamente, ma c'è una zona del nostro cervello che reagisce a questa complicazione immaginando un mondo dove non c'è né prima né poi, né tempo né spazio, né effetto né causa, né io né nonio. Il nudo maschile, quando è perfetto, è il materializzarsi di questo desiderio: non un oggetto ma uno scatto che realizza l'assenza di relazioni logiche. Il bel nudo maschile non ha durata, è solo l'astratto luogo matematico dove il principio di piacere si confonde al principio di inerzia. (SDN: 10-11)

The first continuous meaning of the handsome male nude is its status of unlimited body: if I look at a picture of buttocks and follow their curve I can see that infinite other curves immeasurably close to this one could outline attractive buttocks, and many other pictures could replace the one that I picked out. But as soon as I have that contraction of the lower abdomen then I know that that very curve is the only possible. Infinity condensed in that slope which is the result of an infinitesimal approximation. The numbers to both the right and the left of x progressively pile up in order to outline the ungraspable, very distinct, silhouette. Desire at its deepest stage has always something to do with unlimited measures. The structure of being is progressively split and becomes more and more complicated; however, there is an area in our brain which reacts to such a complication by imagining a world with neither before nor after, neither time nor place, neither effect nor cause, neither "I" nor "non-I". The male nude – when perfect – is the materialization of this desire. It is no object, rather a snapshot materializing the absence of logical relations. The handsome male nude has no duration, it is but the abstract mathematical locus where the pleasure principle mingles with the principle of inertia.

As we can see from this description, Walter's love is intellectual – he is attracted to ideal models rather than concrete individuals. The perfect male nude is a "mathematical locus", an ideal place. Interestingly, the perfect male nude is also the place "where the pleasure principle mingles with the principle of inertia", namely the place in which he can indulge into inertia and passivity. In order for Walter to achieve this, these nudes must be detached from the reality: they are "alien to history"¹³ and "live a life opposed to life"¹⁴, meaning that they are the negation of life. Consequently,

¹³ SDN: 12, "Il nudo maschile è estraneo alla storia, non ha niente a che fare col tempo e quindi è del tutto estraneo al movimento" ("The male nude is alien to history, it does not have anything to do with time and therefore is completely alien to any movement")

¹⁴ SDN: 13, "I nudi maschili vivono una vita che si oppone alla vita, se ne separa come le gocce d'olio in emulsione nell'acqua; per questo la macchina fotografica è l'autentico organo del mio desiderio, perché fissa il movimento in poche immagini statiche su una sottile membrana; per questo, anche, le mie più stupende avventure si concludono in un clic" ("Male nudes live a life

they are also alien to the social conflict, and hence provide Walter with a safe space to escape the struggle for supremacy. As an Eros lover, Walter is only interested in the body builders as a symbol for aesthetic perfection:

Il nudo divino è ospite in un corpo, vi emerge come una roccia dalla sabbia, disarmonico dal punto di vista della materia che l'imprigiona; il suo torace è troppo sviluppato rispetto alla parte inferiore del corpo, o le gambe un po' corte e arcuate sono il segno che la sua perfezione appartiene a un altro ordine; ogni eleganza, ogni snellezza, o levigata armonia sarebbero un ingresso per l'estetica e quindi per la storia. (*SDN*: 16)

The divine nude is a guest in a body, from which arises as a rock from the sand, inharmonious with respect to the imprisoning material; his overbuilt torso – compared to the lower part of his body –, or his legs – slightly short and bandy – are the sign that such a perfection belongs to a different order of things; any elegance, any slenderness, would be a gateway to aesthetics and hence to history.

As he explains, the bodybuilder's body is but a host, the carrier of perfection. To engage with this carrier would mean to engage with reality and hence any perfection would be lost. Eros is thus an exercise for the lover to attain perfection, it does not actually pertain the love object.

Walter is aware that such love has no correspondence in the real world: “[l']eros si nutre dell'illusione di poter diventare come dei”, (*SDN*: 438, “Eros feeds on the illusion to be able to become like gods”), says at some point of his treatise. On the other hand, he has no interest in dealing with the real world – in fact, he elaborated this theory precisely to avoid becoming involved in it. Following Plato, he loves the bodybuilders' bodies as the corporeal copy of the archetypal perfection. He has no more interest in the individual behind the body than in what that body stands for – an image of perfection. Consequently, Walter's love is solipsistic, and it is only meant to boost the lover's self. To make this happen, the love object has to prevent any interaction between the lover and the outside world. For this reason, Walter describes his lovers' bodies as ‘too full’ to welcome life:

La rotondità dei muscoli ha anche questo significato, di un ‘essere troppo pieno’ che respinge la vita da sé come si respinge il cibo quando si è fatta indigestione. Il

opposed to life, separate from it as oil drops in water emulsion. For this reason the camera is the authentic organ of my desire, since it captures movement in a few static images on a fine membrane. For this same reason my most wonderful adventures end in a click”).

nudo maschile è *corpo gnostico* perché comunica un'infinita voglia di non partecipare. (SDN: 22)

The muscles' roundness stand for this too, for someone being "too full", pushing life away from him as one pushes food away when having indigestion. The male nude is a *gnostic body* because it expresses its great unwillingness to participate.

The male nudes' principal attributes are roundness and fullness – traditionally, the circle is a symbol of perfection and completeness – which make them appear self-sufficient. In Walter's view, the bodybuilders' bodies are literally 'full of themselves', to the point that they cannot participate in the world: being perfect, they do not need to engage with life, since they already have everything that they need. This is the kind of perfection to which Walter aspires and to which he devotes his theory.

Walter follows this logic up until halfway through the novel, when he starts a long-term relationship with Ruggero. At some point, after a long delay, Walter accepts to penetrate Ruggero, but he fails. After realizing that this is not an isolated case, Walter must admit that he is impotent. Such a revelation makes him reassess his own erotic theory:

Ciò di cui ci si vergogna di più non è necessariamente il più sotterraneo: amo i corpi divini perché sono i., o sono i. perché desidero l'infinito? Il mio corpo è più saggio di me, o è il tiranno storpio dei miei pensieri? (SDN: 254)

What you are most ashamed of is not necessarily the deepest. Do I love divine bodies because I am i., or maybe I am i., because I long for the infinite? My body is wiser than I am, or it is rather the crippled tyrant of my thoughts?

Once he discovers his impotence, Walter can no longer ignore the body as a physical entity. Until now, his mind intellectually justified his body's failures, even to the point of making up a theory which totally neglects the body ("Il mio corpo è più saggio di me, o è il tiranno storpio dei miei pensieri?"). Yet, as soon as Walter realizes that he is impotent, he shifts his point of view, moving from the *a priori* to the *a posteriori* logic. In other words, he acknowledges that he made up his erotic theory to cope with his own impotence. From this new point of view, Walter realizes that Eros is an intellectualistic alibi in order not to admit his impotence:

Ora ho rivelato a me stesso che il fiasco non è l'eccezione, ma la regola: se voglio, non ci riesco. La mia illusione di virilità è stata finora come quegli omini dei videogiochi, ognuno dei quali arriva, subisce angherie e finisce schiacciato ma subito elettronicamente sostituito da un altro: adesso basta, resterò in eterno a fissare il game over. Appesantito dalla coscienza, il mio cazzo di piombo cade per ottomila metri lacerando le nubi.

Lo sfintere che dovrebbe essere forzato per entrare è il punto di comunicazione tra me e la realtà; avendolo sistematicamente trascurato è diventato il luogo geometrico del mio odio, l'astrazione intellettuale di un diaframma che mi separa dal mondo. Mentendo per tutta la vita a proposito di questa questione fondamentale, mi è parso naturale mentire sul resto: e siccome sulla questione fondamentale mi sentivo innocente, ho preso l'abitudine di sentirmi innocente per qualche menzogna. Se l'erezione è un mezzo per arrivare a un fine, ossessionato dal mezzo ho elevato questo fine e ho perduto ogni idea di una meta da raggiungere, di un altro da amare. [...] L'erezione serve per entrare in un altro ma io non ho voglia di entrare in nessuno, ho solo voglia di dimostrare a me stesso che posso avere un'erezione: sviliti nella loro essenza, i corpi cavernosi si ritraggono. (SDN: 255-256)

Now I have disclosed to myself that the failure is not the exception, but the rule: if I want, I cannot. My illusion of virility has until now been like those videogame stickmen, each of which shows up, gets abused and ends up crushed. It is substituted by another in no time. Now that is enough, I will stare at the game over forever. Weighed down by consciousness, my lead cock falls from 8000 metres ripping the clouds.

The sphincter which one is supposed to break in is the communication point between myself and reality; since I have systematically neglected it, it has come to be the geometrical locus in which my hatred converges, the intellectual abstraction of a diaphragm separating myself from the world. Since I have been lying my all life about this fundamental issue I considered it obvious to keep lying about the rest; and since I felt innocent about the fundamental issue, then I started feeling innocent about some lies. If erection is a means to achieve a goal, obsessed by this means I elevated this goal and I lost any concept of a goal to achieve, of another to love. Erection is to enter into someone else, but I do not want to enter into anybody, I just want to prove to myself that I can have an erection: the corpora cavernosa shrink, demeaned in their own essence.

Walter must admit that his theory of Eros is an attempt to intellectually dignify his impotence – Eros is an “illusion of virility”, as well as body-builders are illusions of live bodies.¹⁵ Once he becomes aware of this, Walter

¹⁵ SDN: 28, “Usare i nudi non per prendere o dare piacere ma per convincersi, abitando piramidi con i cilindri, di quanto la vita sia schiuma precaria, guittata estemporanea. Come esiste una

reaches the conclusion that physical love is inseparable from the power dynamics underlying every interpersonal relationship. He makes the relation between sex and power very clear: the sphincter is “the communication point” between Walter and reality, namely the place where he must prove his virility. Consequently, by treating the sphincter as a purely ideal locus Walter does not need to prove anything. On the other hand, Walter admits that this is but an attempt to cover up his impotence (“Lo sfintere che dovrebbe essere forzato per entrare è il punto di comunicazione tra me e la realtà; avendolo sistematicamente trascurato è diventato il luogo geometrico del mio odio, l’astrazione intellettuale di un diaframma che mi separa dal mondo”): in order not to admit it, he has so far considered the anus as a mathematical locus, as an abstraction; yet, Walter is forced to stop when he has to treat the anus as a physical entity.

To look at the world abstractly has two advantages – it keeps Walter from taking his chances and preserves him from the possibility of failure. He makes this very clear at some point in the book, when he describes the conclusion of a sexual encounter:

Volevo parlare di casi fortunati e ho finito per parlare di occasioni perdute (d’altra parte ogni caso fortunato non è che l’indicatore di innumerevoli occasioni perdute: se alle dieci e quarantadue di martedì incontro un ragazzo, vuol dire che in qualunque minuto di qualunque giorno molti ragazzi si trovano dove io non sono). Se un culturista si prende la briga di salire nella tua camera, si mette come vuoi tu, si fa tastare, è perché ha preso atto e gli sta bene, altrimenti non ti farebbe arrivare fin lì. Passata più o meno implicitamente quella linea, risulta più strano per lui, e più difficile per me, non fare piuttosto che fare; qual è la controenergia che mi trattiene, che cosa ci guadagno a ritirare la mano?

Timidezza, è la diagnosi più ovvia; incertezza sull’obiettivo finale del desiderio, la seconda – voglio un uomo da amare, o voglio la conferma dell’impossibilità di amare un uomo? Si soffoca con la soddisfazione troppo addosso. Là dove la vita non ha altra pelle che se stessa, delizia insopportabile. I pettorali dei culturisti, alba pratalia, sono cosparsi di un polline che aggiunge alle loro perfezioni la perfezione ultima che è l’inesistenza; il caso che sorride nasconde una maschera che piange, e quella ancora una bocca che sorride e così via: questa alternanza è l’unico destino che sopporto. L’assenso è un sole troppo glorioso perché possa

pomata spermicida, i culturisti hanno una gelatina cosmocida spalmata su di sé”, (“To use the nudes not to receive or give pleasure but to be persuaded, by inhabiting pyramids, cones, and cylinders, that life is but ephemeral foam, an extemporaneous flicker. As there is a spermicide gel, so the bodybuilders have a chosmicide gel spread all over their bodies”).

guardarlo direttamente in faccia. Ripetere la sconfitta è il modo più economico per restare nei pressi della vittoria. (SDN: 181-182)

I would have liked to talk about fortuitous events, but I have ended up talking about missed opportunities (on the other hand, each fortuitous accident is but the sign of countless missed opportunities: if on a Tuesday, at 10.42 AM I meet a boy, this means that every minute on any other day many boys are somewhere else). If a bodybuilder bothers to come up to your room, stands as you like, lets you touch him, it is because he is aware and is fine with it. He would not let you go that far otherwise. Once you cross that line – more or less implicitly – it gets weirder for him and harder for me – to act rather than not, I mean. What is this counter-energy that keeps me, what do I gain from withdrawing my hand? Shyness, most obviously. Then, uncertainty about desire's final goal, Do I want a man to love, or do I rather want to be certain that it is impossible to love a man? Too much satisfaction will suffocate you. Where life has no other skin than its own – unbearable pleasure – the bodybuilders' peccs, *alba pratalia*, are sprinkled with pollen adding the ultimate perfection on top of all their perfections, namely inexistence. The smiling fortune hides a crying mask, and this hides a smiling mask and so on. This succession is the only fate which I can bear. Consent is too a glorious sun for me to watch. To perpetuate defeat is the easiest way to stand by victory.

Walter explains that he did not want his lover to consent to the sexual act, in order not to risk failure. The intellectualized love allows Walter to withdraw his hand before the actual sexual encounter starts. This way, impotence can be only a suspect, as well as Walter's social inadequacy.

In fact, he is aware that even sex is affected by the agonistic mentality which he despises. As said above, Walter developed his theory of Eros in opposition to the slave-master dialectic and its further elaborations. However, his reflections after the sexual failure with Ruggero prove that he is not immune to the agonistic mentality as imposed by the slave-master system. In fact, at the end of his confession, Walter says that he cares to regain his sexual potency to prove that he is able to have an erection even more than to enjoy sexual intercourse (L'erezione serve per entrare in un altro ma io non ho voglia di entrare in nessuno, ho solo voglia di dimostrare a me stesso che posso avere un'erezione"). In the slave-master system the ability of having an erection comes together with the ability of being a master: for this reason, as soon as Walter acknowledges his impotence, he feels compelled to leave the realm of theory and join the struggle for supremacy – he must overcome his impotence in order not to be a slave.

Thus, impotence is a traumatic discovery not only because of its sexual implications, but also and above all because it proves Walter's theory of Eros ineffective. Despite all his efforts, Walter still finds himself trapped in the world's agonistic mentality which he tried so hard to avoid. He fails twice, since he must admit first that he is impotent, and then that he is not immune to this twisted self-affirmation logic. Since sex and power are so tightly related, Walter's impotence is therefore much more than a physical problem – his inability to penetrate puts his social status at risk. For this reason, his attempt to regain sexual potency is closely tied to his ability to impose his own will over the others.

Walter's desire of self-affirmation is connected to his personal struggle with his colleague Matteo, complementary to him¹⁶ and his rival in gaining il Padre's favour. Unlike Walter, Matteo is successful and feels perfectly comfortable in the agonistic system. Since he shares and promotes the pre-variation system, he is il Padre's favourite. Walter, on the other hand, proves unable to comply with this logic and hence formulates his own theory of Eros. At the beginning of the novel, Walter admits that he is writing his monograph to differentiate himself from Matteo:

Quando mi perdo nelle cattedrali dei muscoli, tra bicipiti e deltoidi, trapezi e radiali, addominali striati e obliqui esterni, è per non essere costretto a pensare che si può essere come lui, che a questo può ridursi un uomo. Lo schifo che provo per il suo corpo e l'adorazione dei nudi angelici nascono dai labbri della stessa ferita. (SDN: 34)

When I get lost in the muscle cathedrals, between biceps and delts, trapezius and radial muscles, striated abs and obliques, it is not to be forced to think that you can be like him, that this is the point which a man can reach. The disgust I feel for his body and the adoration for angelic nudes come from the edges of the same wound”

Walter associates the opposition between ideological Eros and social circumstances with the opposition between the bodybuilders' body and Matteo's. Unlike the bodybuilders, Matteo's body is not idealized – it is a body

¹⁶ The novel, for example, plays on how their names' initials (W and M) are one the mirror-image of the other, and Matteo playfully describes himself as Walter's "Walter-ego" (SDN: 35). For more detail about the kind of relationship the two characters share see MAZZONI 1995: 151; FONIO 2008: 200; GRILLI 2012: especially 435.

meant to act rather than to be contemplated. As a worthy representative of the ‘masters’, Matteo is also sexually dominant. More precisely – in Walter’s view – Matteo is successful exactly because of his sexual behavior:

– ‘Rompono i coglioni e le donne più di loro: sembra che perché hanno partorito abbiano fatto un’opera rara.’

– ‘Ci vogliono troppe vite per farne una.’

– ‘Sicché voi che non vi riproducete, adesso vi sentite all’avanguardia.’

– ‘Ho smesso di considerarmi omosessuale: il vostro guaio è che siete soltanto voi stessi.’

– ‘Coi paradossi si va poco lontano.’

– ‘Se i ricchi continuano a diventare sempre più ricchi e i poveri sempre più poveri, spero che alla fine qualcosa succederà.’

– ‘Ne hai voglia, eh, di marocchini che ti facciano il culetto?’

– ‘I giovani si suicidano come lemming: una società che progetti se stessa come totalmente confortevole corre verso l’autodistruzione... il vuoto che volete cancellare vi distruggerà.’

– ‘Ma ‘vi’ chi?’

– ‘Voi collaborazionisti.’

[...]

– ‘Per voi la fica è un mezzo di produzione, il culo per me è poco più di un effetto speciale.’

– ‘Invece la materialità del culo è fondamentale, scusa: quella carne bianca, un po’ frolla...’

– ‘La predisposizione fisiologica al possesso vi aiuta quando si tratta di prevaricare.’ (SDN: 432-434)

– They [new fathers] bust our balls and women even more: it seems that since they gave birth they made a masterpiece.’

– ‘It takes too many lives to make one’

– ‘So, since you guys don’t breed, you now feel like you’re on the cutting edge.’

– ‘I stopped considering myself homosexual; your problem is that you are just who you are.’

– ‘You won’t go far by paradoxes.’

– ‘If the rich keep becoming richer and richer and the poor poorer and poorer I hope that eventually something will happen.’

– ‘You are dying for Moroccans to fuck you up, aren’t you?’

– ‘The youth kill themselves as lemmings: a society projecting itself as totally comfortable runs toward self-destruction... The void which you want to fill up is going to destroy you.’

– ‘But... ‘you’ who?’

– ‘You collaborators.’

[...]

- ‘For you the pussy is a means of production, for me the ass is little more than a special effect.’
- ‘And yet the ass’ materiality is fundamental: that white, a bit flabby, flash...’
- ‘Your physiological predisposition to possess helps you when it comes to prevaricate.’

In this long conversation with Matteo, Walter draws a parallel between sexual conduct and social role; significantly, he describes the female organ as a “means of production” (“per voi la fica è un mezzo di produzione”) and defines Matteo and his fellows as physically predisposed to possession. Earlier in the novel, in conversation with il Padre, Walter describes society as “erection-based”.¹⁷ Consequently, success is inseparable from sexual potency – for this reason, Walter perceives his impotence as the proof of his unfitness for the social struggle. On the other hand, Matteo’s sexual prowess makes him an accomplished and successful man. That is why so many pages in the novel are devoted to the description of Matteo’s body, which Walter perceives as extremely vigorous and life-giving, but also overpowering and oppressive. For example, Walter witnesses a sexual intercourse between Matteo and their colleague Fausta:

Come se guaisse, come se avesse la testa infilata tra le ginocchia del Cane; immagino pose terribili perché indistinte. Ma finalmente posso spiarli, lui è seduto sulla poltrona e lei si è rannicchiata sullo sgabello; lui è nudo, lei no. Una volta l’ho vista che masturbava due paracadusti, due cazzi uno per mano: ma ora è peggio, l’oscenità che vedo mi rovina addosso e mi respinge indietro, luminosa come un bue squartato – ora lei gli sta tagliando le unghie dei piedi. La manica di cotone azzurro del kaftano sottomessa alla pianta rossiccia del piede come il bene sottoposto al male. Lui è nudo e il suo corpo si espande. (SDN: 96)

It seemed that she was yelping, with her head between il Cane’s knees. I imagine terrible positions, since they are undistinguished. I finally get to peek at them: he’s sitting on the armchair and she is crouching on the stool; he’s naked, she’s not. Once I saw her masturbating two paratroopers, one cock per hand. Now it is even worse, though. The obscenity which I see crashes upon me and pushes me back, as shiny as an ox ripped apart. Now she’s cutting his toenails. The sleeve of her blue cotton kaftan was submitted to the reddish arch of his foot in the same way as the good is submitted to the evil. He is naked and his body expands.

¹⁷ SDN: 189, “Una società basata sull’erezione”.

This scene clearly shows how sexual behavior mirrors social behavior: Walter is spying on Matteo and their colleague Fausta, with whom Matteo has started a sexual relationship. The scene is set up to display the power relations between the two: Fausta consents to cutting Matteo's toenails and sits on a stool, while he sits in an armchair. Walter's attention is caught by Matteo's body, perceived as an expanding organism. Unlike the bodybuilders, whose bodies are static,¹⁸ Matteo's body is moving, incorporating everything around it, including his partner. As a result, Matteo's relationships are abusive, modelled after the slave-master relationship. This clearly appears in the relationship with Fausta, who is described in this scene as a slave attending to her master's needs, to the point of cutting his toenails. Accordingly, Walter describes Matteo and Fausta respectively as the evil suppressing the good ("come il bene sottoposto al male"). Fausta wears a blue kaftan, which Matteo tramples with his reddish feet: such an image paradoxically reverses the traditional Christian image of the Virgin Mary trampling the devil, in the form of a snake. Blue is Virgin Mary's traditional color, while red stands for the devil and hell. Matteo is hence depicted as the devil crashing the innocent Fausta. In a system based on the slave-master dialectic, the only successful relationship is abusive. Fausta's submission to Matteo, for example, is not only sexual, but also physical and psychological, since Matteo beats her up and controls her career.

Yet, Walter's judgment on Matteo's behavior is never totally negative. For example, when Walter comforts Fausta after Matteo's attack he discovers himself willing to emulate Matteo:

Mi gemeva all'orecchio con un grido cadenzato come di gru: la sbarra mi abbassava la cerniera, mi cercava l'ano. Pestarla. Mi disgusta l'idea che Matteo abbia fatto di lei quel che voleva, non mangerò nel piatto dove lui ha sputato (mi piacerebbe essere lui e lei nello stesso tempo). [...] Il suo dito mi penetra, le cosce mi diventano di ceramica, si indurisce quello che lei inghiotte tra saliva e lacrime; poi abbiamo sbriciolato il pane per le tortore. (SDN: 203)

¹⁸ Usually Walter asks his lovers to stand in specific positions and even takes picture of them. The bodybuilders' bodies are hence objects for contemplation, images rather than physical entities. See for example *SDN*: 14: "Quando un corpo infinito si muove, ho bisogno di fissarlo in una posizione che riassume tutte le altre, una posizione perfetta che può essere determinata solo dal caso e che è abolizione del caso." ("When a measureless body moves, I need to catch it in a position encompassing the others, a perfect position which cannot be determined by anything but chance, but which is the elimination of chance"). For further details about Siti and photography see TINELLI 2017: 206-207.

She was moaning in my ear by rhythmically crying like a crane, the bar unzipping my pants, looking for my anus. To beat her. I'm disgusted by the idea that Matteo did what he wanted with her, I'm not going to eat in the dish where he spat¹⁹ (I would like to be him and her at the same time). [...] Her fingers penetrate me, my thighs turn into ceramic, she swallows among tears and saliva something getting harder. Then we crumbled the bread for the turtledoves.

In Walter's description, pain and sex overlap – Fausta moans of desire as well as of pain. Though disgusted by Matteo's behavior (“Mi disgusta l'idea che Matteo abbia fatto di lei quel che voleva, non mangerò nel piatto dove lui ha sputato”), he cannot conceal his admiration for him and even admits his desire to be like Matteo (“mi piacerebbe essere lui e lei nello stesso tempo”). Furthermore, he also wants to be Fausta and be possessed by his colleague. However hard he tries to deny it, Walter not only admires, but he even desires Matteo, therefore he unconsciously approves his behavior and is willing to emulate it. Proof of Walter's ambiguous attitude toward Matteo is a dream which he has immediately after he discovers Matteo's relationship with Fausta:

Due notti dopo l'ho sognato vestito come Bruno, camicia bianca e cravattino nero, e anche i capelli corti a spazzola. Era seduto sul davanzale della finestra (nel sogno ho rovesciato la situazione reale di vertigine, come se l'inconscio fosse più realista di me) e mi stava insultando: ‘Ma cosa credi, che sia possibile mettere alle strette un uomo di fronte alla sua famiglia, porco, lurido verme, avvicinati ancora che voglio sputarti in faccia’. Mi avvicino e sento prudere le mani, montare la rabbia, urlo: ‘Ieri m'hai detto ‘non buttarti giù’, be’ adesso sei tu che devi reggerti perché sta per arrivarti la più spaventosa scarica di botte della tua vita, figlio di cane, tu che ti ritieni apprezzato dalle donne, con un calcio ti spappolo la ragione per cui ti stimano tanto, e getta la sigaretta che ti servono tutt'e due le mani per coprirti quella faccia di merda’. Ma la tensione nelle dita invece di chiudersi a pugno si apre a toccare la stoffa all'altezza delle ginocchia, rovesciandolo indietro e cercando la cerniera, mentre allarga le gambe. Ho voglia di fare l'amore con lui, gli accarezzo l'interno delle cosce e sto per arrivare al cazzo.

È lui l'infinito. Mi sono svegliato che battevo i denti; non può essere vero, sarebbe come dire che il sale diventa zucchero.

[...] [S]e ammetto questo non torno più indietro. Ma è il patto, non mentire per quanto è possibile. Il latte di mia madre inacidisce nei fossi, dunque diciamolo: ‘io amo quest'uomo’. (SDN: 164-165)

¹⁹ It's an allusion to the Italian saying “sputare nel piatto in cui si è mangiato” (to spit in the dish where one eats), namely to reject something that we liked in the first place.

Two nights later I dreamt of him. He was dressed up as Bruno – white shirt and black tie – even with a crew-cut. He was sitting on the windowsill, insulting me (in my dream I reversed the vertigo scene happened in the real world, as if my unconscious were more down-to-earth than myself): ‘What were you thinking, that you could put a man with his back to the wall in front of his own family? You creep, bastard, come here, so that I can spit in your face!’ I approach him and my hands start itching, I feel the rage building... I cry: ‘Yesterday you said: ‘don’t jump off!’ What now? Now brace yourself, because you’re about to take the most tremendous beating of your life, son of a bitch! You who think that women cherish you – I will crush the reason why they appreciate you so much with a kick – and throw away that cigarette, you will need both hands to cover that fuckface of yours.’ Yet, the tension in my fingers did not lead me to make a fist. On the contrary, I opened my hand to touch his pants at the height of his knees, overturning him while looking for the zipper. He spreads his legs – I want to make love to him, I caress his inner thigh and am about to reach his cock. He is the unmeasurable. I woke up, my teeth chattering. It can’t be true – it would be like saying that salt can turn into sugar. [...] [I]f I admit this there is no going back. This is the deal, though, not to lie as much as possible. My mother’s milk turns sour in the ditches; let’s say it, then: ‘I love this man’.

In his dream Walter tries his best to oppose Matteo and apparently wants to castrate him (“tu che ti ritieni apprezzato dalle donne, con un calcio ti spappolo la ragione per cui ti stimano tanto”), but in the end he finds himself attracted to him. As in the scene with Fausta, pain and desire are closely connected, so much that pain is the precondition to desire. Walter is hence unconsciously attracted to Matteo’s violent behavior and wants to be possessed by him. In addition to this, he also wants to emulate his colleague’s sexual conduct by reacquiring his potency – a few pages earlier, Matteo challenges Walter and asks him to be penetrated. Eventually, Walter declines.²⁰ Walter is therefore torn between attraction and repulsion for Matteo – since he knows that he cannot compete with him nor possess him, he uses his theory of Eros to subjugate him at least on the intellectual plan.

Walter’s hateful admiration for Matteo and his ability of imposing over the others is proved by the many descriptions of Matteo’s body throughout

²⁰ SDN: 162, “Il mio regno per un’erezione, che lo spaventi e gli certifichi la mia serietà; lontano rumore d’aereo, volante cavallo dei pantaloni. Mi sfida: ma gli intestini diventano di smeraldo, scoiattoli e vegetali si pietrificano nei loro colori fiammanti.” (“My kingdom for an erection, to scare him and prove that I’m serious. An airplane roaring in the distance, flying crotch pants. He dares me. My guts turn into emerald, squirrels and vegetables freeze in their bright colors”).

Scuola di nudo. Walter is obsessed with Matteo's body and devotes many pages to its description. In particular, Walter lingers on Matteo's extraordinary sexual prowess, which is symbolized by his body expanding. In Walter's perception, Matteo's body expands because he imposes his personality over the others. In a dream, Walter even sees Matteo's body endlessly reproducing:

Ho sognato che aspettava un figlio da una ragazza sconosciuta: i dottori circolavano per casa come fosse una clinica, anzi no era casa di Fausta, io e Alfredo eravamo saliti sul terrazzo a vedere i fuochi che scoppiavano mosci, giù c'era grande agitazione perché il bambino era morto, ma Matteo ne stava avendo un altro da un'altra donna. Un medico arrivava da una stanza lontana e annunciava che la seconda donna aveva un utero "a cannocchiale", e dietro il primo bambino se ne intravedeva un altro, e poi un altro ancora; indicava Matteo e diceva: 'è una forza della natura'. (SDN: 182-183)

I dreamt that he [Matteo] was expecting a child from a stranger. The doctors moved all around the house as if it were a clinic – it was Fausta's place, actually. Alfredo [Walter and Matteo's boss] and I were on the terrace to see the fireworks, which were prosy, and the people downstairs were upset, since the baby was dead. But Matteo was having another one with another woman. A doctor coming from a room far away announced that the second woman had a "spyglass" uterus, and therefore there was a baby peeking from behind the first one, and one more behind him. The doctor pointed to Matteo and said: 'This man is a force of nature'.

Matteo is described by Walter as extremely potent and capable of replicating *ad infinitum*. Such a description betrays a certain admiration from Walter for the vital energy coming from Matteo's body, which opposes Walter's lovers' perfect bodies, whose "life is opposed to life". While Walter and his lovers reject life, Matteo not only embraces, but even generates it.

In terms of erotic theory, by Walter's descriptions of Matteo's affairs a new kind of love emerges, a love serving the slave-master dialectic. From the quotations so far analyzed, we can gather that this kind of love is as self-centered as Eros, but in this case the lover is willing to take over the world rather than escape it; for this reason, he subjugates the others and exploits them at his own will.²¹ I will call it mimetic Eros, since the lover adapts Eros' self-affirmation principle to the social struggle induced by

²¹ I am here using the male pronoun only because in the novel this kind of love seems to be only associated to male characters, such as Matteo and il Padre.

Girard's mimetic desire. Like Eros, the mimetic Eros is concerned by the love object only to boost the lover's ego; yet, while Eros is meant to obliterate the world and project the lover onto an ideal plan, mimetic Eros exploits the love object in order to enable the lover to win the social struggle. In other words, Matteo's mimetic Eros serves the agonistic logic.

The most significant example of mimetic Eros happens in the second half of the book, when Matteo impregnates il Padre's wife.²² The relationship between Matteo and Olga, the wife, is interpreted by Walter as a case of Girard's mimetic desire:

– In ogni caso non avresti dovuto contribuire personalmente e comunque non di nascosto, strisciandogli in casa di soppiatto.

– È impressionante il maschilismo di voi froci : secondo te è stata una faccenda tra noi due, eh, Olga era la vittima che se ne stava lì a aspettare ...

– È cominciata prima o dopo che ti facesse vincere il concorso?

– Durante. Ero su una brutta piega e Olga m'ha tirato fuori, quella donna le perversioni non sa neanche cosa siano; non ci son stati problemi, ha risolto tutto con una risata. Se vuoi saperlo mi ero buttato sul sadico per compensare.

– Questo mi secca.

– In che senso?

– Mi secca che quando la crisi di impotenza l'ho avuta io, non ho trovato il coraggio di parlargliene.

– Credevi di avere l'esclusiva?

– Non ti facevo così fraterno, anzi, fratello sì ma che ha vinto la battaglia per il miglior capezzolo. (SDN: 348)

– In any case you should not have contributed personally and not behind his back, by sneaking into his own house.

– It's incredible how sexist you faggots are – you think it was between me and him, don't you? That Olga was the victim standing there, waiting...

– Was it before or after he made you win the competition?

– In the meantime. I was doing bad and Olga saved me. She has no idea of what perversions are. There was no problem, she handled it with a laugh. If you care to know, I turned to sadism to compensate.

– This annoys me.

²² This episode can be described as the enactment of Freud's Oedipus complex, since Matteo lies with his symbolic father's wife. SDN: 347, "– Lo aiuto, una donna così non la regge da solo. – C'è qualcosa d'incestuoso." ("– I'm helping him, he cannot handle such a woman by himself. – This is some sort of incest"). Matteo, unlike Walter, manages to emancipate himself from the father by symbolically killing him (he succeeds him as department chair) and coupling with the mother. See GRILLI 2012: 434-435.

- How so?
- It annoys me that when I was impotent I didn't have the guts to confront you.
- Did you think you were the only one?
- I didn't think you were so brotherly. In fact, a brother who won the fight over the best nipple.

In Walter's view, Matteo started the relationship with Olga to win the competition to become full professor. Matteo replies by accusing Walter of sexism, since he interprets the whole matter as two men fighting over the possession of a woman. More precisely, according to Walter, Matteo is trying to subjugate il Padre by seducing his wife. This kind of situation falls into Girard's mimetic desire: Matteo desires Olga because she is il Padre's object of desire.²³ Although disgusted by the agonistic system, Walter cannot find an alternative way of interpreting relationships. He is so haunted by the agonistic mentality that when Matteo tells him that he experienced sexual failure before meeting Olga ("Ero su una brutta piega e Olga m'ha tirato fuori, quella donna le perversioni non sa neanche cosa siano; non ci son stati problemi, ha risolto tutto con una risata.") Walter is disappointed because he was not brave enough to share the news of his impotence with Matteo. Even a shameful event as impotence becomes a challenge. Once again, Matteo wins, because he has managed to overcome his impotence and at the same time secure his career. Furthermore, Matteo's confession is annoying to Walter because it removes any possibility for him to differentiate from his colleague. Up to that moment, impotence, shameful though it was, still marked some sort of ontological difference between Walter and the others. Impotence somehow justified his staying at the margin, as it appears from this encounter with il Padre:

Alfredo è al telefono, lui è un maschio adulto e io sono i.: posso soltanto andarmene per non disturbare. (*SDN*: 267)

Alfredo is on the phone. He is an adult male and I am i. I can just go not to bother him.

²³ From a gender perspective, this is exactly a homosocial desire kind of situation. This term was coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her *Between men. English literature and male homosocial desire* (1985). Taking her cue from Girard's mimetic desire, she explains that male relationships are governed by homosexual desire, which is covered by a specious desire for a woman. The male desire's object would then ultimately be the other man, rather than the woman, who is but a surrogate, the socially acceptable object of desire.

Walter's impotence is a form of denial: since he is impotent, he cannot take part in the social struggle. Even this excuse drops when Walter finds out that also Matteo suffered from impotence: Walter not only must admit that he is not different from his colleague, but he also must face the fact that Matteo managed to overcome it and successfully re-enter the social struggle. Even in their shared condition of impotence, Matteo is more successful than Walter. Such a move implies that Matteo accepted and faced the impotence, unlike Walter, who on the contrary formulated his theory of Eros as an intellectual self-justification.

Impotence uncovers Walter's wishful thinking and exposes his desire to be in the social struggle. On the other hand, such a troubled relationship with Matteo – and consequently with the 'masters' – prevents him from joining the battle for supremacy. Initially, he tries his best to regain his potency. When it finally happens, he feels satisfied because he can physically perform the master's duty:

Sono guarito per sempre dall'impotenza e per questo posso nominarla. Penetro dove e quando voglio, come i padri energici e sonori; ogni ingiustizia è dimenticata. *Mo' so' uguale.* (SDN: 341)

I recovered from impotence for good. Now I can nominate it. I can penetrate wherever and whenever I please, like the energetic and loud fathers. Any form of injustice is now gone. *Mo' so' uguale* (now I am like them).

Reacquiring sexual potency means to Walter to fully participate in the 'erection-based democracy': by being able to penetrate, he can dominate the others "like the energetic and loud fathers".²⁴ Sexual prowess makes him like the people whom he despises and fully enables him to participate in the social system which he dislikes. From an intellectual point of view, Walter's acquired potency is a failure – once he discovers his situation, he is not able to resist the slave-master system. When Walter realizes it, he goes through a personal crisis, which Siti symbolically describes as a disease. A few pages after the narration of the reacquired prowess, Walter starts feeling sick and believes that he has AIDS:

Condiscendendo al mio bisogno di normalità, ho trasgredito al mio dovere di

²⁴ Earlier in the novel Walter felt ashamed of being around il Padre because of his impotence. See n. 39.

trasgressione: per poche natiche conquistate (quattro) ho sventolato uno stracetto di giubilo, mi sono permesso di consentire. C'ero quasi arrivato, a esser gentile col mondo perché il mondo fosse gentile con me. Mi contraddico, anche l'orgoglio della lucidità m'abbandona. Ho accettato la promiscuità mentale, la contaminazione assiologica. Troppo ansioso di essere uguale ai miei nemici ho abbattuto le paratie dell'io e con quelle sono cadute le difese; l'appagamento entrando in me ha operato una mutazione genetica e m'ha reso vulnerabile. L'Aids è la sola interpretazione, fermentata in patologia, che il mio organismo poteva dare del concetto di socialità. (SDN: 356)

I transgressed my transgression duty by indulging my need of normal. I rejoiced for a few buttocks conquered (four), I allowed myself to assent. I was almost there, to be kind to the world so that it would be kind to me. I contradict myself, even the pride of clear-sightedness deserts me. I accepted mental promiscuity, axiological contamination. Too anxious to be like my enemies, I knocked down the bulkhead of ego and along with it my defences fell. Satisfaction, by getting into my body, modified it genetically and made me vulnerable. AIDS is the only interpretation – turned into disease – that my body could give of the concept of sociality.

Walter thinks that he got AIDS as a punishment for surrendering to the slave-master dialectic (“Condiscendendo al mio bisogno di normalità, ho trasgredito al mio dovere di trasgressione”). He rather consented to a mentality which he found abject than persevering in impotence and rejecting the agonistic mentality, which ultimately makes him a loser. Therefore, at this point of the novel, Walter feels guilty and develops this imaginary disease which he associates with AIDS.²⁵ Interestingly, Siti symbolically pairs up the aggressive behavior of individuals like Matteo to illness and destruction – when Walter starts adopting this same attitude, the disease arises. This symbolizes the dangerous effects that this social system has on individuals and pushes Walter to dissociate from it.

As we have seen, neither impotence per se nor the reacquired potency make Walter feel morally and intellectually better than his adversaries. Furthermore, he perceives potency as an even bigger failure than impotence. Therefore, he tries to find an alternative way to enjoy his new condition without embracing the slave-master dialectic. Since his theory of Eros proved ineffective, this time Walter shifts the focus from the intellectual to

²⁵ It is worth remembering that AIDS traditionally is a “gay disease”, but in this case Siti associates it to a mainly heterosexual context, since Walter gets it after imitating Matteo and il Padre’s behavior.

the sentimental plan and tries to have a long-term relationship:

Della fine dell'impotenza non ho potuto vantarmi con nessuno perché non l'avevo mai confessata; ormai mi conviene mirare al bersaglio più difficile e vantarmi direttamente di un amore realizzato. (SDN: 347)

I never got the chance to brag about the end of my impotence because I never confessed it. Now I better aim at the hardest target and brag about an accomplished love.

The “accomplished love” about which Walter talks is the relationship with Ruggero, his former lover, whom he had left when he found out about his own impotence. After having reacquired his potency, Walter goes back to him and starts a committed relationship. Unlike in the past, he focuses this new relationship on Ruggero rather than on himself,²⁶ in the attempt of rejecting both Matteo's mimetic Eros and his own intellectualistic Eros.

If Matteo is the representative of the mimetic Eros, Ruggero is a Caritas lover, an alternative kind of love which Walter explains along with his theory of Eros. As opposed to Eros, Caritas is a selfless kind of love, entirely oriented toward the others.²⁷ It is not meant to dignify the lover, but to humiliate them:

La caritas non si innalza ma si abbassa, ama ciò che non ha valore e proprio perché non ne ha; il suo modello è l'amore immotivato di Cristo per la nostra miseria; non purifica il soggetto ma lo coinvolge nell'imperfezione, si gloria dell'umiliarsi come di una più matura offerta di sé; vive dentro ciò che è limitato e muta insieme a quello. (SDN: 438)

Caritas does not raise, it puts itself down. It loves what is not worthy exactly for that. Its model is Christ's unjustified love for our misery. It does not purify the subject but it rather brings it into imperfection, it exalts itself in humiliation as a more conscientious self-offering. It lives in the limited and changes along with it.

Unlike Eros, Caritas is a temporal feeling (“vive dentro ciò che è limitato e matura insieme a quello”).²⁸ The Caritas lovers do not aim to reach an ideal

²⁶ SDN: 374, “D'ora in poi dovrò risolvere un problema che non mi ero mai posto: *che farne della vita di un altro*.” (“From now on I will have to handle a problem which I have never considered before: *what I should do about some other's life*”).

²⁷ Not surprisingly, this kind of love has its roots in the Christian tradition. See again GRILLI 2012: 446-447 for further details.

²⁸ SDN: 437, “[M]a la caritas non se ne cura perché è fatta della stessa sostanza del mondo, cioè

realm, nor think of the others as a metaphor of perfection – they love the others as imperfect beings and put them before themselves.²⁹

Despite what may seem, Caritas is not exactly opposite to Eros, but rather complementary to it. In fact, they share some degree of idealization, since they are both attempts to have no part in the social struggle. While Eros is meant to alienate the subject from the world, Caritas makes the lover put their ego aside. In other words, both Eros and Caritas allow the lover to lose the social struggle – the former by ignoring it, the latter by surrendering to the other. Eros rejects the conflict by making the lovers assume that they are the winners, whereas Caritas makes them assume that they are the losers. Therefore – once Eros is defeated – Walter turns to Caritas in the attempt of opposing the mimetic Eros. The perfect opportunity comes when Walter finds out that Ruggero is sick of MS and decides to assist him through his illness, trying to put his ego aside. Walter starts taking care of Ruggero in the belief that this could be an alternative, more edifying way to participate in the world, since he would now be forced to take care of someone other than himself:

In generale, forse, l'angoscia agisce mediante una seduzione di maturità: hai l'impressione che le motivazioni per vivere siano infantili e che il cervello, adulto, ti mostri la mancanza d'uscite. In altre parole, la cosa spaventosa dell'angoscia è che ti pare che abbia sempre ragione. Ruggero è il simbolo del mondo infermo e inchinarsi a lui è un rito iniziatico. (*SDN*: 386)

Overall, anxiety acts perhaps through a mature seduction: you think that motivations to live are infantile and your adult brain shows you that there are no ways out. In other words, what's scariest of anxiety is that you think it is always right. Ruggero is the representative of the ill and to kneel to him is an initiation rite.

He talks of Ruggero as “the representative of the ill” and thinks of taking care of him as an initiation rite to Caritas. In fact, Caritas and illness are connected in Walter's view; Ruggero is described in many places as consumed by love, which would be the real responsible of his disease:

di sacrificio” (“but caritas does not care, since it is made of the same stuff as the world, namely sacrifice”).

²⁹ *SDN*: 437: “[N]ell'eros c'è più odio che amore, nella caritas più compassione che odio; l'eros è superbia che gonfia, la caritas altruismo che edifica.” (“There is more hatred than love in Eros, more compassion than hatred in Caritas; Eros is boosting pride, Caritas edifying selflessness”).

Lui che accusavo d'essere troppo influenzabile dall' esterno è invaso da un auto-cannibalismo che non sembra avere limiti; è questo l'amore, questa decomposizione impresentabile? Questa devastazione dell'io? Quando si dice «capisco quello che provi», non è vero; se si capisse quel che l'altro prova, nessuno lascerebbe mai nessuno. (SDN: 408)

The man [Ruggero] whom I accused of being too easily manipulable by external factors is instead affected by an apparently limitless self-cannibalism. Is this love, this unpresentable degradation? This ego devastation? When someone says "I feel you" it is not true. If anybody knew how the other feels, nobody would ever leave anybody.

Caritas is destroying Ruggero, as if it were his actual disease. Walter comes to this conclusion after experiencing first-hand the devastating effects of Caritas, when he tries to sacrifice himself for his lover. For example, once regained his sexual function, he tries to direct his newly acquired vital potency toward Ruggero through pranotherapy, but he thinks that this is dangerous for himself:

Perché non dovrei avere capacità di pranoterapeuta, dopotutto? Gli si rilassano le reni, l'insensibilità dolorosa alle gambe s'attenua («la forza dell'amore»); gli impongo le mani a lato delle ultime vertebre e la corrente comincia a passare. Le palme si informicolano come quando mi venivano le crisi isteriche, solo che allora ero sigillato in me stesso mentre adesso il formicolio è transitivo; l'energia varca la frontiera della mia pelle ed entra attraverso la sua. Quello che passa è fluido vitale che io possiedo e lui assorbe: non ne possiedo all'infinito, quel che trasmetto a lui viene a mancare a me. (SDN: 380)

Why should I not be a good pranotherapist, after all? His limbs relax, his painful leg numbness decreases ("the power of love"); I put my hands beside his last vertebrae and energy flows. My palms tingle as when I had hysterics, with the difference that then I was wrapped up in myself, while now this tingling transits. Energy crosses my skin's border and enters his. What flows is vital energy which I have and he absorbs. It is not unlimited: what I transmit to him is no longer mine.

Pranotherapy symbolizes the sacrifice which each Caritas lover should make, that is to give some parts of themselves to the loved one. Yet, Walter cannot sacrifice himself: burdened by Ruggero's sickness, he takes body-builders as lovers.³⁰ Eventually he leaves Ruggero, accusing him of keeping

³⁰ SDN: 395, "Le pienezze di Steve m'impediscono d'inghiottire una qualunque delle sporgenze

him down.³¹ In other words, Walter blames Ruggero for the care needed and the sacrifice required on his part. Significantly, Ruggero replies this way:

- «La mia bella pergolina: l’avevo preparata per te, per leggere in primavera.»
[...]
- «Ci inviterai i tuoi amici.»
- «Che amici, io non ce n’ho amici, quelli che avevo son diventati i tuoi perché te sei espansivo, geniale...»
- «Non posso fare lo stupido e il cafone per non darti ombra.» (SDN: 408)

- “My lovely porch, I had built it for you, in order to read outside in the spring.”
[...]
- “You will invite your friends”
- “What friends? I don’t have any friends; the ones I had are now your friends, because you are expansive, brilliant...”
- “I can’t act like a fool and a slob not to overshadow you.

Ruggero accuses Walter of being “expansive”.³² Even the different physical structure of Walter’s and Ruggero’s bodies represents the different roles which they play in their relationship: Ruggero is thin and emaciated, whereas Walter tends to gain weight.³³ Ruggero, as a Caritas lover, donates, whereas Walter absorbs and expands, even in this supposedly committed relationship. This confirms that Walter is structurally unable to be a Caritas lover. Walter’s physical characteristics make him resemble Matteo and his expanding body more than he would like to admit. The end of the relationship with Ruggero forces Walter to realize that he is not able to choose someone else over himself, which makes Caritas as ineffective as Eros.

di Ruggero: quel po’ di sesso, ora, è una tale sfacchinata, un cilicio di letame e di brina.” (“Steve’s fullness prevents me from swallowing any of Ruggero’s bumps: that tiny bit of sex is such an ordeal now, a sackcloth made of dung and frost”).

³¹ SDN: 406, “M’hai tenuto sotto sequestro per troppo tempo... non potrò combinare niente di importante finché ci sei tu.” (“You have kept me as an hostage for too long... I will never be able to do anything important until you are around”).

³² The original Italian plays on “espansivo”’s double meaning, “friendly” and “having a tendency to expand”.

³³ SDN: 448, “[L]ui con le curve all’incontrario, la gobba e un po’ di buzzo nonostante la magrezza che gli fa contare le costole, io condannato a questa enfiagione della sostanza corporea: per ora sette-otto chili, non di più, ma abbastanza per dilatare dove non serve e far pendere quel che non dovrebbe.” (“He was convex, hunchbacked and pot-bellied though being so thin that one can count his ribs. I was condemned to bloat: 7-8 kilos for now, no more, yet enough to unnecessarily swell and become flabby”).

In fact, the power dynamics between Walter and Ruggero serves the social struggle more than Walter would admit. Once he has become potent, Walter cannot help imposing his will over Ruggero:

Fin che era lui il potente e io l'i., lo squilibrio bilanciava la mia superiorità in tutto il resto; ora è la sua stessa schiacciante inferiorità che me lo fa apparire irraggiungibile. (*SDN*: 379)

As long as he was the potent and I was the i., this unbalance balanced out my superiority in everything else. But now it is his own inferiority which makes him appear unattainable in my eyes.

Ruggero appears unattainable to Walter exactly because of his inferiority, namely his ability to humiliate himself for the loved one. This proves that Walter cannot be a Caritas lover, but he on the contrary “expands” at Ruggero’s expense. As Ruggero remarks, at the end of their relationship Walter isolated Ruggero from his friends; after all, the relationship between Walter and Ruggero was an abusive relationship which Walter elevated as a Caritas love. When he went back to Ruggero, Walter thought that he could learn how to be a Caritas lover and differentiate from Matteo, but he eventually finds out that he was acting like Matteo all along. In fact, he never accepts Ruggero’s illness:

La malattia lo sta rendendo legnoso, lo chiude in un tronco; le cellule immunitarie divorano una parte del corpo a cui appartengono, sicché si può dire che il malato di sclerosi è un violento contro se stesso. [...] Quando mi tocca, anche la mia epidermide si trasforma in corteccia: ho dovuto proporgli di non fare più l’amore insieme [...] (*SDN*: 422)

His disease is turning him into wood, he wraps him up in a log. His immune cells destroy their own body, therefore one can say that the MS patient suffers self-destructive behavior. [...] Whenever he touches me, my skin turns into wood too; I had to ask him not to make love to me any more [...].

From Walter’s words it is clear that he does not want to be like Ruggero; Walter is scared of getting Ruggero’s disease, which means that he is scared of getting Caritas too. This proves that Walter is not capable of embracing Caritas. Once he realizes it, he leaves Ruggero, who eventually dies of MS. The end of the relationship forces Walter to realize that he is

not able to choose someone else over himself, which makes him as overpowering as Matteo.

Walter loses his last chance to oppose Matteo and his mimetic Eros along with Ruggero. Consequently, after Ruggero's death he is devastated and decides to leave for a long journey. However, when he comes back, he has changed: he has taken a male prostitute as his lover and has reconciled with il Padre, obtaining a permanent position at the University. Most importantly, he quit his monograph on the male nude. In the last pages, Walter exposes his revised theory:

Che cosa meglio del puro denaro per soddisfare il desiderio d'assoluto? Il denaro è l'archetipo dei nudi perché è il modello di un bene che vale per l'immagine di pienezza che riflette e non per l'uso che se ne fa. Se il corpo muscoloso è merce, il denaro è ciò in cui tutte le merci si dissolvono: il culturismo è ricchezza muscolarizzata. (Detto altrimenti: il denaro è la forma universale in cui tutte le passioni possono essere scambiate, è la passione stessa liofilizzata e privata dei cattivi odori.) (*SDN*: 574)

What's better than pure money to satisfy my longing for absolute? Money is nudes' archetype because it is the model for a good worthy for the image of completeness which it reflects and not for its own use. If the muscular body is commodity, then money is the thing in which all the commodities dissolve. Bodybuilding is muscular wealth. (In other words: money is the universal form, in which all passions interchange, is passion itself lyophilized and odorless.)

At the end of the novel, Walter is resigned to following Matteo's example and the society's rules. In particular, he comes to the conclusion – always suggested, but never clearly stated in the novel³⁴ – that money is the only way to gain power and hence self-affirmation. Consequently, masters have money and power, through which they dominate the slaves. Therefore, he decides to take a prostitute as his lover so that he could be mentioned among the masters. By doing this, he brings to the extreme the concept of Eros as he learnt it from Matteo – a way to win the social struggle – and turns it into a consumption good (SIMONETTI 1995: 127-128). Since money is the dividing point between slaves and masters, Walter must buy his slave – in this sense, mimetic Eros is a purchasable good. Walter then

³⁴ For example, in conversation with Matteo, when Walter defined the femal organ as a “means of production”.

simply embraces the idea of bodies as a means of production and literally buys them to win his social struggle. After having rejected the bodies' physicality in the name of the abstract and symbolic perfection of the male nudes, he now admits that the body is tragically concrete, in such a way as to even be commodifiable.

By treating the body like a tradable good Walter reaches his katabasis' last stage, in which he deprives love of any symbolic value. It is no longer the way to attain perfection – as it was Eros – nor a moral alibi like Caritas. The only possible love is the mimetic Eros, which needs to serve the social struggle. Consequently, the only way to be happy is to comply with the slave-master system. Therefore, at the end of the novel, after having experienced the failure of all his alternative models of love, Walter surrenders to the system. Consistently, he gives up on his monograph, since he no longer intends to attempt his intellectual revolt:

Non lo scriverò più, il libro, vivere non richiede giustificazioni. C'era una sproporzione tra mezzi e fine, ero disposto a rovinarmi la vita pur di creare nei miei nemici un piccolo sconcerto. Per paura del mondo la mia scrittura la tenevo al riparo: invece che il mio bambino era diventata il mio parassita. Era una gravidanza isterica, e il culto della bellezza un alibi alla depressione. (*SDN*: 577)

I'm not going to write my book. Life does not require justifications. There was a disproportion between means and goal: I was willing to ruin my own life as long as I could slightly baffle my enemies. I used to keep my writing hidden in fear of the world – rather than my baby, it was my parasite. It was a false pregnancy, and my cult of beauty but an alibi to depression.

Walter expressly blames his male nude theory for his distress and admits that he feared the world, therefore he made up the erotic theory in order not to take part in it. He calls intellectual Eros “an alibi to depression”, namely a way to elevate his inability to engage with the social struggle.

Eros is not the only one to be dismissed by his own author: the same thing happens to Caritas, since the novel ends with a marriage of convenience between Walter's lover and Fausta, so that he can get the Italian citizenship and stay in Italy with Walter. Then even Caritas, which is supposed to be the marital love,³⁵ is diminished. Even the marriage complies

³⁵ *SDN*: 437, “[Caritas] È l'amore coniugale dopo che sono passati anni dal matrimonio” (“[Caritas] is the marital love years after the wedding”).

with Walter's new ruling principle and is only a way to keep Walter's partner with him.

In the end Walter destroys any alibi and symbolic meaning which he has created so far and totally embraces reality as it is, a battlefield for self-affirmation:

Perdo l'amata tranquillità, guadagno il rischio di far rigermogliare la mia vita. Di nascere, finalmente. È finita la stagione in cui mi vergognavo di guardare il denaro dritto negli occhi. (SDN: 575)

I am loosing my beloved tranquillity, but I am gaining the risk to make my life spring forth again; to be born, finally. The time when I was ashamed of directly looking at money is over.

Walter "makes his life spring forth again". For the first time in the book, he associates himself to life rather than non-life – this testifies that he has finally renounced his believes to follow Matteo's example. This apparently gives Walter everything that he wanted: a lover, a career, his former enemies' respect. Yet, the book's very last pages question Walter's newly acquired satisfaction:

(il rimedio è stato peggiore del male, non si esce da una stanza se la porta è finta, sto qui a guardare la mia torre che si scioglie, come se fosse un gelato, questa è la storia di un poveruomo che non è stato capace di vivere, la storia di un uomo vile che non è stato capace di non esser capace di vivere, non credevo di dover rimpiangere persino il terrore). (SDN: 596)

(the treatment turned out to be worse than the disease. You can't exit a room if the door is fake; I'm standing here looking at my tower melt – as if it were an ice cream – this is the story of a poor man who has not been able to live, the story of a vile man who has not been able to not be able to live. I didn't imagine I would have even regretted terror).

In the end, the character confesses to be still unsatisfied: he got rid of all his alibis, but he still trapped himself in an unauthentic life ("non si esce da una stanza e la porta è finta"), made of a fake marriage, a fake love and an even faker success. In fact, he did not win the supreme social challenge – the challenge against life – because he did not manage to dominate it. In the end, he surrenders to life and adjusts to the system, and therefore he

loses the social struggle. Nonetheless, he is now like his former enemies, who consistently accept and respect him: Walter's paradoxical acceptance among the winners shows how inconsistent the slave-master system is. In fact, to be a winner is necessary to surrender to life, therefore nobody will ever be a winner.

Walter's paradoxical success is thereby a shared condition – the novel shows that there is no alternative to being a loser, since the individual is structurally forced to either surrender to reality – and then being intellectually defeated by it – or to live against it and be perceived as a loser. At the end of the novel, reality urges Walter to accept its brutal slave-master system, with no possibility of intellectual or moral elevation. The conclusion of the novel illuminates the man's helpless condition, who can only affirm themselves by self-suppression. In sum, however one decides to act they are destined to lose on some front – on the intellectual and moral front if they embrace the social struggle, on the social front if they reject it. In Walter's case, he ends up being a loser before himself rather than before the society, since he gave up on his theoretical principles in order to be socially accepted. Such an attitude, since it concerns the moral implications of Walter's choices, justifies the novel's katabatic motion. Furthermore, the very katabatic structure of the story and its paradoxical happy ending reveal the inescapability of this condition, according to which one must be morally and intellectually unsuccessful in order to be socially successful. Thus, the society as described by Siti is ultimately a trap, in which the katabasis is an unavoidable experience. Walter's individual experience is but a sample of everyone's experience, which implies that there are no winners and losers, as the slave-master dialectic makes us believe, but there are only losers. In this context, any attempt of emancipation and self-affirmation is nothing but delusional. In this theoretic framework, Walter appears to be successful, since he acknowledges the delusion of his newly acquired success and resigns to perpetual failure.

In conclusion, we can see that *Scuola di nudo* clearly is “the story of an impotent”, as well as a novel about desire: in fact, it is a novel about the frustrated desire of an impotent to become potent, who eventually gives up an illusion for another, even crueller. As in a katabasis, the character has travelled all the way down from the theory to the materiality, from Eros to the mimetic Eros, from the intellectual self to the socially imposed self, and has eventually discovered that none of these brings

success. As in a traditional katabasis, Walter has experienced the peak of moral abjection, which gave him insight and self-consciousness. Though in this case, unlike a traditional katabasis, there is no way out.

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