



Pensare l'Antropocene: prospettive linguistiche, letterarie e artistiche

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**A Diorama of Human History:
Visions of the Anthropocene in
Giuseppe Genna's *Discorso fatto agli
uomini dalla specie impermanente dei
cammelli polari* (2010)**

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which the Anthropocene concept is visible in recent Italian narrative fiction, namely in Giuseppe Genna's *Discorso fatto agli uomini dalla specie impermanente dei cammelli polari* (Discourse Given to Humankind by the Impermanent Species of Polar Camels, 2010). In this text, the extinct species of the polar camel holds up a mirror to humans and reminds them of the human transience. I show how the author not only combines allusions to palaeogeological deep time or deep future (in which everything will have 'dissolved') with references to some of the great modern authors like Giacomo Leopardi, T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett, but also presents an (auto)fictional story of a writer who realizes that he shall become a new kind of *poeta vates*.

Riassunto

L'articolo esamina i modi in cui il concetto di Antropocene è riconoscibile nella recente narrativa italiana, in particolare nel *Discorso fatto agli uomini dalla specie impermanente dei cammelli polari* (2010) di Giuseppe Genna. In questo testo, la specie estinta del cammello polare si rivolge agli uomini come a uno specchio, ricordando loro la caducità del genere umano. Lo studio evidenzia come l'autore non solo combini allusioni al *deep time* paleogeologico o al *deep future* (in cui tutto si sarà "disciolto") con riferimenti ad alcuni grandi autori moderni come Giacomo Leopardi, T.S. Eliot e Samuel Beckett, ma anche presenti la storia (auto)finzionale di uno scrittore che si rende conto di dover diventare un nuovo tipo di *poeta vate*.

1. The Anthropocene and Contemporary Literature: Preliminary Remarks

The term Anthropocene, coined in 2000 by the meteorologist and chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer, has received remarkable attention in recent years. It refers to the geological age of the Earth in which humans have made a significant impact on the planet that has affected the Earth's geology and climate in equal measure to that of nature. Anthropogenic interventions in the biosphere and the geosphere are causing serious global problems like climate change, reduction of biodiversity, and the deposition of radioactivity on the Earth's surface (cf. CRUTZEN/STOERMER 2000; CRUTZEN 2002: 23). There is no longer any segment of the globe in which the 'human footprint' is not detectable. Since the group of experts known as the *Anthropocene Working Group* recognized the Anthropocene as a

geological epoch in 2019, even more arguments have surfaced for those who believe that we are no longer living in the Holocene but in the Anthropocene (cf. ANTHROPOCENE WORKING GROUP 2019). In July 2023, the Working Group informed the public that they have agreed to date the beginning of the Anthropocene in the early 1950s, i.e. the moment when anthropogenic markers became detectable on a global scale and ecological crises dynamically increased in what is called the ‘Great Acceleration’ (cf. STANWAY 2023).

Since the term Anthropocene quickly spread beyond the geological and scientific debates, it is no longer a purely scientific term and concept but a cultural one as well (cf. DÜRBECK 2019: 275; HORN/BERGTHALLER 2020). As an “inter- and transdisciplinary concept”, it “bridg[es] different discourses and disciplines” and equally blurs the lines “between science and the public” and “the sciences and the humanities” (DÜRBECK 2019: 275). In the arts and humanities, the term is particularly used for rethinking the relationship between nature and culture, humans and the environment. It also serves “as an opportunity to rethink mankind from a posthumanist perspective” (DÜRBECK 2019: 275). The term Anthropocene has been linked to rather opposing ideas: both to posthumanist and neohumanist considerations which differ substantially in their attitudes towards anthropocentrism (cf. BAJOHR 2020: 5-7).¹

Yet, one question necessarily arises which concerns all of us: what comes after the Anthropocene? In other words, what happens when the ‘age of humans’ ends, when *homo sapiens* becomes extinct or at least loses their unique position, possibly being replaced by another species (or by artificial intelligence)? In fact, the physical extinction of humankind seems only one of numerous possibilities for imagining a posthuman age. We might also think of a mere “depotentialization [...] of humans” in which the human hegemony over the Earth would be broken: humans would no longer dominate nature and other species (SCHMIEDER 2014: 43). With this in mind, I will refer to this post-anthropocentric age throughout this article as (for lack of a better term) the ‘Post-Anthropocene’.

The concept of Anthropocene has indeed been associated with ‘crisis’ and even ‘catastrophe’ from the outset.² However, such an association could also be interpreted in a positive way. What appears as a disaster from today’s perspective might be seen

as an advancement from the perspective of future life forms and future social orders: as a liberation from the problems of the Anthropocene and the establishment of a new, better order.

Such ideas can actually be found in current narrative fiction. The writer Wu Ming 1 (alias Roberto Bui), for example, imagines the Post-Anthropocene as an opportunity for humans and the environment.³ In his short story *Arzèstula* (WU MING 1 2009), set in the near future, an enormous economic and political crisis has pushed Italian society (and possibly Europe and the rest of the world) to the edge of collapse. Archaic social forms, however, have begun to re-emerge. Such forms are based on solidarity and integration instead of exclusion: people are learning to live in harmony with animals and vegetation again, and nature gradually reclaims the territories once created and occupied by humans. Step by step, nature erases all human traces.⁴ Of course, different literary scenarios are conceivable for imagining a Post-Anthropocene. As is well known, literary creation, especially in the modern age, has spelled out various visions of possible future existences in utopias, hetero- and dystopias. In order to evoke a Post-Anthropocene era, a literary text does not necessarily have to be set in the future. A critical look at our present and the past can fulfil this purpose as well.

The following elements seem essential to me if we want to relate a text to the term and concept of the Anthropocene: it must evoke a) the typical problems of the Anthropocene (e.g. climate and environmental problems, extinction of species, nuclear threat, the collapse of planet Earth, etc.); b) the potential or actual human-caused extinction of *homo sapiens*; and c) a palaeogeological perspective that provokes a “clash of scales” (HORN/BERGTHALLER 2020: 102),⁵ which confronts the short human history with geological “deep time” (GOULD 1987; SHRYOCK/SMAIL 2011). The ecological problem may be central, but by itself it is not sufficient to constitute “Anthropocene fictions” (TREXLER 2015) or “the Literature of the Anthropocene” (DE CRISTOFARO/CORDLE 2018): other anthropogenic factors, such as wars or epidemics, could also be responsible for the decline of humanity. For this reason, contemporary literature often evokes not one single disaster, but “multiple complex and interrelated disasters” when it alludes to “the future as catastrophe” (HORN 2018: 14). All three aspects – a) to c) – characterize the text I will analyze in the

following section: Giuseppe Genna's *Discorso fatto agli uomini dalla specie impermanente dei cammelli polari* (2010).⁶

2. Genna's *Discorso* as a "Diorama della Storia Umana"

When Giuseppe Genna published the *Discorso* in 2010, he had already 'buried' Italy in his previous book. In *Italia De Profundis* (2008; cited as 'IDP'), the writer, born in Milan in 1969, links the suffering of an ailing Italy with the suffering of the (physically and mentally) sick self. As an autofictional text, both types of suffering are experienced by the author-narrator called 'Giuseppe Genna'. With biting sarcasm, Genna presents a Requiem for Italy, which proves to be 'de profundis' in two senses: as a lament for the dead, and as an examination 'from the depths' of contemporary Italian society. In *Italia De Profundis*, Genna hints at the end of the Anthropocene: firstly, by referring to a new ice age, a "period[o] glacial[e]" (IDP 54), i.e. a palaeogeological term; secondly, by presenting Italy (and the Occident) as a civilization destroying itself through the loss of humanity ("l'umano"). The 'anti-human' ("l'antiumano"), the author-narrator says, eradicates everything human like a virus, and coincides with the decline of the West and humanism ("l'umanismo") (IDP 68-69). This is explicitly related to the idea of the imminent end of the species ("la fine di specie", IDP 69): Genna argues that the spiritual extinction of the human (in both intellectual and spiritual terms) was not a future scenario, but already underway – by destroying human self-consciousness.⁷ While a clash of scales is missing in *Italia De Profundis*, the book insists on the impending end of the human species because, for Genna, Italy is a stand-in for a far larger, global problem. The story told, we read at the end of the book, was not only that of 'Giuseppe Genna' or Italy, but that of 'everyone': "Questa è la storia di: Ognuno" (IDP 343). And such a story provides little hope for salvation. With the final (bomb) explosion in a tourist resort, the entire Italian nation metaphorically 'blows up': "la nazione è esplosa" (IDP 338). Despite this sinister vision, which clearly alludes to the end of humanity, Genna's book ends on a conciliatory note by quoting the final call for 'devotion, compassion, self-control' and 'peace' from T.S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* (1922): "*Dono. Compassione. Autocontrollo. Shantih shantih shantih*" (IDP 345; italics in original).⁸ These words refer to the Sanskrit formula *shanti shanti shanti*

which translates as ‘Let there be peace peace peace’ and is usually found at the end of a traditional Hindu Upanishad (a philosophical writing that is part of the Veda). In a note on his poem, T.S. Eliot has associated it with a quotation from the Bible (Philippians 4:7): “The peace which passeth understanding” (ELIOT 2022: 66). According to Genna’s text, this ‘truth’, as the formula is called, can only be heard in the ‘immense variance of vibrations’, beyond both language and time, i.e. ‘de profundis’:

Nessuno dice, lo dice per sempre, oltre qualunque parola, ciò che nessuno tra i linguaggi riesce a dire. Lo dice e lo ripete nella varianza immensa delle vibrazioni, la verità di qualunque postura che è stata detta o è ora detta o sarà detta o sarà stata detta De Profundis:

Dono. Compassione. Autocontrollo.

Shantih shantih shantih

(IDP 345; italics in original).

Italia De Profundis ends with these pacifying words. They resonate not only with Hindu spirituality, but also with their adaptation in T.S. Eliot’s poetry.⁹ At the same time, they link *Italia De Profundis* to Genna’s subsequent book, the *Discorso fatto agli uomini dalla specie impermanente dei cammelli polari* (‘Discourse Given to Humankind by the Impermanent Species of Polar Camels’). In this short, 55-page text, polar camels’ speech exists only as ultrasound before it is deciphered and transcribed by a human being. Before transcription, it is an unintelligible sizzling or whirring sound in a kind of ‘digital language’ (“sussurrano”, D 11; “[l]a loro lingua digitale, nivea, ulcerata dalla luce”, D 14; “sibilo”, D 56). Like *Italia De Profundis*, the *Discorso* ends with an appeal for peace (“pace”, D 61): it promotes a state of being which comes close to that of the speechless and timeless *de profundis* mentioned above. In this respect, the *Discorso* can be considered a continuation of *Italia De Profundis*.

Yet, in the *Discorso*, Genna focuses more on a global (and less on the Italian) context. For the first time, he dares to investigate a posthuman age, a time when *homo sapiens* will have ‘dissolved’ into another form of existence. We, as readers, learn about this ‘dissolution’ into another form of existence in the frame story in which the polar camels’ discourse is embedded. The frame story is itself a discourse: it is a speech in which the so-called ‘dissolved ones’ (“i disciolti”, D 61) speak to their (unspecified) ‘friends’ (“Amiche e amici”, D 59). It remains unclear who or what exactly these

disciolti are supposed to be; the final lines of the narrative merely suggest that they have evolved from *homo sapiens* (cf. D 61). They speak as an unspecified ‘we’ (“noi”, D 61) that exists ‘at the root of all existence’ – beyond light and shadow, beyond language and origin, beyond time, history, and ‘poor truths’:

Accelerammo con lui verso l’inevitabile radice di qualunque esistenza, priva di luce e ombra, inarrivabile da ogni lingua e lignaggio, accelerammo a qualunque sempre, oltre le poverissime verità, senza nessuna storia, privi di qualunque tratto, noi: i disciolti, la pace. (D 61)

Similarly, the *disciolti* appear as ‘featureless’ (“privi di qualunque tratto”) and, probably for this particular reason, as synonymous with peace (“noi: i disciolti, la pace”, D 61).¹⁰

Genna’s narrator is actually the *uomo che scrive*, the ‘man who writes’, i.e. the former ‘writer’ (“scrittore”, D 47) and ‘poet’ (“poeta”, D 46), who is writing down the polar camels’ discourse for us. The camels, in their speech, address him gratefully as the ‘man who has deciphered us’ (“[u]omo che ci hai decifrato: grazie, amore – pace”, D 58).

The fate of this *uomo che scrive*, who is said to be equally incapable of living and dying, is summarized in the final pages of the text.¹¹ On 14 March 2010, after completing the polar camels’ speech, he was so desperate that he attempted to commit suicide. He felt trapped in an immaterial dungeon and could no longer ‘see’ (“vedere”, D 60) the future. Obviously, he had become unable to fulfil the traditional role of the *poeta vates* (‘poet-seer’, ‘poet-prophet’), whose task it is to have a vision of the future.¹² In his despair, he cut his wrists and went to bed. When he woke up again, he reread his text (i.e. the speech of the polar camels) and realized that he was obliged to live – even if he did not know ‘how to do so’ (“come fare”): “Si risvegliò. Rilesse. Fu obbligato alla vita, questo residuo di amore che doveva apprendere ad amare e non sapeva come fare” (D 61). The following sentence repeats that last expression, albeit in a different tense: “Non seppe come fare, restò molto zitto” (‘He did not know how to do so, he remained very quiet’) (D 61). The shift from *imperfetto* (“sapeva”) to *passato remoto* (“seppe”) is significant: it marks a change of perspective that situates everything that is said afterwards in a different time frame. In turn, the writer’s story is now looked upon as something completed, something that happened in the distant past.

Furthermore, the following sentence – which is the last sentence of the *Discorso* – is marked by yet another shift: to a first-person plural narration, in which the narrative voice is revealed as a ‘we’ (“noi”, D 61). It now becomes clear that it is the *disciolti* who speak and that they speak from a new time, a new era. This explains the shift to *passato remoto* in the previous sentence. In the final sentence of the *Discorso* (already partially quoted above), the *disciolti* state that they have moved towards the new era along with the writer: “Accelerammo *con lui* verso l’inevitabile radice di qualunque esistenza [...], noi: i disciolti, la pace.” (D 61; italics are mine). This is the framework in which the speech of the polar camels is embedded – and it appears to be a profoundly pessimistic framing that seems to provide no way out other than the acceleration of the inevitable: the demise of the human species.¹³

But who are these polar camels? In fact, they do not refer to a phantasm, but to an extinct species: the bones of a giant arctic camel, discovered in northern Canada, prove it.¹⁴ This is why Genna’s camels call themselves a ‘finite species’ (“specie impermanente”, D 19)¹⁵ and, in their speech, address the equally finite human species (“l’impermanente specie degli uomini”, D 20). Tellingly, humans appear as a ‘defenseless and highly guilty species’ (“specie [...] inerme e colpevolissima”, D 58), and the camels warn them of human extinction. Humans should, therefore, open wide their only eye and prepare for their demise: “Figli monocoli della terra, spalancate il vostro occhio unico, pronti alla scomparsa” (D 58). Until they disappear, however, they should behave peacefully, and return home and be friends: “tornate alla casa. Siete amiche e amici” (D 58). This is how the embedded, 40-page speech of the polar camels ends. Yet, this speech also provides a self-description of the camels. They initially present themselves as indifferent to everything, including time. They claim to have been travelling along the horizon since time immemorial: appearing here, appearing there, often simultaneously at two different points of the globe or in different universes (cf. D 26). Despite this, they claim to have remained unnoticed until the *uomo che scrive* came and translated their speech. No one who had ever seen them had ever wanted to believe in them or recognize that they were capable of speaking (cf. D 7-10). According to the polar camels, this was precisely the problem: humans had not learned to ‘see’; they preferred to believe what they themselves had invented or what they imagined to be true (cf. D 34). They were wrong to consider the polar camels

to be a transient species without accepting that they themselves belonged to an ‘impermanent species’ (“impermanente specie”, D 33).¹⁶ Even worse, although humans had developed countless theories about what had happened in the universe long before their time, they left the central question unanswered: how do they want to cope with their future on the planet? So, the polar camels address the question directly: “Come fate?” (“How do you want to make it?”, D 34).

What appears, from the polar camels’ perspective, as a future that will still take shape, already belongs to the past from the point of view of the *disciolti*: for the latter, the Anthropocene, or ‘age of man’, is already over. As readers, we are confronted with a clash of time scales: the long history of the Earth is compared to the short chapter of humanity. This clash is emphasized again when the polar camels refer to themselves as witnesses (“testimoni[...]”, D 33) of the ‘complete human history’ (“[l’]intera storia umana”, D 15). Significantly, they speak of a “diorama” (D 15) in this context: they claim to be able to present countless scenes from the ‘diorama of Human History’ (“diorama della Storia Umana”, D 17). This term clearly evokes a palaeogeological perspective, which, as I initially noted, seems necessary in order to constitute ‘literature of the Anthropocene’. By referring to the diorama of Human History, the polar camels evoke *homo sapiens* as an impermanent species exhibited in a natural history museum. Accordingly, they talk about both the beginning and the end of human history. They report that humans looked like fat rats in the beginning. This is certainly an allusion to the parasitism of the human species, to its intelligence and its ability to adapt to different habitats. Yet, in the end, after millennia of unnatural labor with which they deceived themselves (“lavori innaturali con cui ingannate [...] voi stessi”, D 34), humans, these ‘judging puppets’ (“pupazz[i] giudicant[i]”), would be ‘among the lost’ (“tra i perduti”, D 37). The events that happened to the *poeta* (i.e. the writer, the *uomo che scrive*) are described as symptomatic of such decline. They are the subject of the episode in which the *poeta* metaleptically inscribes himself into the camels’ discourse. I will examine this episode in more detail below. We will see how the end of Genna’s text transforms from a pessimistic into a more optimistic view – for humans in general and for writers in particular.

3. Creating a 'New World' Together: The *Discorso* and New Forms of Committed Literature

The episode takes the reader into the 'capital of nervous living' ("capitale della vita nervosa", D 37) at the beginning of the 21st century.¹⁷ The *poeta* observes a man on the street who is continually stumbling over non-existent obstacles. This is a clear allusion to Giacomo Leopardi, the famous 19th-century poet known for his deep pessimism about man's capacity to be (or become) happy, a pessimism that resulted from Leopardi's own suffering and personal struggles with disease. Likewise, Genna's *poeta* is suffering from a 'nervous disease' ("contagio nervoso", D 42) that, as we learn later, would spread pandemically over the following centuries, and thus result in the decline of humanity.¹⁸ As the polar camels point out, the writer himself was a symptom of the disease ("patologia", D 47). If man continued to exist physically at all, he would finally give up phonetic speech ("la parola, la fonazione", D 47). This is what the polar camels prophesize to humanity, thereby foreshadowing the 'dissolution' of the species. As for the *poeta*, he is shocked when he sees the man with the tic, and all the more so when he realizes that it is he himself whom he observes in a schizoid vision.¹⁹ Becoming aware of his own miserable condition makes him ill; he has 'seen the polar camels' and learned 'to decipher their ultrasonic whizzing' ("egli ci [i.e. the polar camels] ha veduto" (D 43); "riesce a decifrare il nostro sibilo in ultrasuoni", D 44). Like all those to whom this happens, he no longer wants to live: the future frightens him; he does not know what he shall do, how he shall make it: "L'avvenire lo terrorizza. [...] Non sa come fare" (D 45).

Yet, since the illness is caused by his 'learning to see' ("imparare a vedere", D 42), by his understanding, the illness itself contains the cure: the "cura" equals the "malattia stessa" (D 42-43). This refers to insight into our transience, which can cause fear, but at the same time, it can also heal us since it makes us humble towards life. Ultimately, this embodies an ethical problem: the question of how we should live, of *come fare* – and the distinction between good and evil.

The latter distinction emerges when we consider further passages. We then realize that humans and polar camels have far more in common than it may seem at first glance. While the camels describe themselves as completely indifferent to everything

("indifferenti a tutto", D 27, 50), they finally concede that they are not without fault. Even worse, they gradually reveal that they are downright evil: it turns out that they would prefer not to be polar camels at all, but rather solar camels ('Cammelli Solari', D 54). They confess that although they admire the sun-bright solar camels more than anything else, they long to kill them out of sheer envy. 'Like all mortal beings', they 'would like to be the murderers of light and bringers of final darkness': "Noi vorremmo infine essere, al pari di tutti gli esseri finiti, gli assassini della luce e i latori del buio definitivo" (D 57). It is the insight into the evilness of the polar camels which causes the writer's despair because it simultaneously reveals the evilness of humans to him. The evilness of humans is evoked several times: in the story of the killing of a supposedly 'extraterrestrial baby' in Mexico in 2007 (cf. D 20), in the long footnote that addresses the colonization of Africa (cf. D 18-21, note) and through the final mention of human 'guilt' ("specie [...] colpevolissima", D 58).²⁰ It is this insight into both guilt and evil that provides illness and healing alike.

In light of the polar camels' malice, it seems no coincidence that the camels allude to their own potential 'dissolution' right before they reveal their envy towards the solar camels:

Così, se anche uno di noi, immediatamente, fosse ammesso alla presenza dei Cammelli Solari [...], noi finalmente, i suppostamente serenissimi Cammelli Polari [...], ecco *ci discioglieremmo* come voi [i.e. gli uomini] entrate nel sonno, [...] oramai privi di voce, questo tremendo sibilo che emettiamo senza posa... (D 56; italics are mine).

The quoted passage is significant because it evokes the dissolution of language. This brings us to the question of what role language, literature and writers might play in the transition from the Anthropocene to a Post-Anthropocene age. The text proves to be ambivalent in this respect.

On the one hand, the polar camels state that the time of writing and writers is over. Even writers, they say, had become a symptom of the aforementioned nervous illness and thus the decline.²¹ Yet this did not prevent them from clinging to the old, obsolete writerly dream of power. Many writers, they complain, still fantasize about impossible worlds in which they were the uncrowned rulers.²² The future, however, will be without language, the camels predict: within four centuries, people will abandon language, that is *if* they still physically exist at all. The frame speech of the *Discorso*

seems to confirm this prediction. The *disciolti* not only situate themselves beyond language, but the *uomo che scrive* is also said to have given up writing long before – “Egli scrisse, un tempo; ora non più” (D 43) – and ends up becoming “molto zitto” (‘very quiet’, D 61) before his ‘dissolution’. On the other hand (and despite man’s proclaimed phylogenetic aphasia), language, writing and reading still appear to be essential in Genna’s representation in order to generate the world to come. The speech of the polar camels would remain completely unknown if the writer had not written it down for us. Similarly, the speech of the *disciolti* (who are said to exist beyond language) would not exist if it were not transmitted in a verbalized form. It would be impossible for Genna’s text to warn humans about extinction without language.

So, we should take seriously the *Discorso*’s overall quality as a written text. Without the (fictional) text, no one, let alone the *disciolti*, would ‘speak’ to us from a speechless future. Furthermore, it is the written quality that, together with the setting in 2010, points to the real author who metaleptically inscribes himself into the text (just as the ‘writer’ inscribes himself into the speech of the polar camels). The *uomo che scrive* becomes recognizable as an alter ego of the actual author.²³ The reference to the external communication system (i.e. the author-reader communication) is important because it shifts the time frames by situating the text (and its production) into our present, i.e. in the early 21st century. The speech, which supposedly comes from the future, is thereby marked as invented, created and written by the writer Giuseppe Genna in 2010 – a man who obviously still believes in the power of speech and writing and who probably even assumes that the text will spread its message before it is ‘too late’.

Genna’s literary warning coincides with the wake-up call of a new kind of committed literature that has recently emerged in Italy. The protagonists of this movement, like Giorgio Vasta and Wu Ming 1,²⁴ claim that they want to stimulate action: in view of both our threatening and threatened future on earth, their literature wants to ‘produce consequences’. Let us have a closer look at this. Vasta, for example, in his foreword to the edited volume *Anteprima nazionale. Nove visioni del nostro futuro invisibile* (2009), states that in the face of the imminent decline of human civilization, action is lacking: “Quello che ci manca è il fare.” (VASTA 2009: 11). For him, action also means literary action: i.e. words (“parole”) and narratives (“narrazioni”) that ‘claim to

produce consequences': "le narrazioni sono azioni (sono un fare), e in quanto tali pretendono di produrre delle conseguenze" (VASTA 2009: 11). In his *Memorandum on New Italian Epic* (2009), Wu Ming 1 equally regards storytelling as a means of calling attention to humanity's gradual self-destruction.²⁵ The latter, he says, is progressing because the majority of people still refuse to accept the idea of a 'future without us' ("futuro [...] *senza di noi*", NIE 56; italics in original). Yet, he continues, it is only a matter of time before the human species dies out, and that the task of literature is to question the 'absurd idea that man is the center of the universe, the Chosen Species':

Eppure l'antropocentrismo è vivo e vegeto, e lotta contro di noi. Scoperte scientifiche, prove oggettive, crisi del Soggetto, crolli di vecchie ideologie... Nulla pare aver distolto il genere umano dall'assurda idea di essere al centro dell'universo, la Specie Eletta [...]. (NIE 58)

In questioning the ever-prevailing anthropocentrism, literature should show us our responsibility for the future.²⁶ We must, Wu Ming 1 explains, begin to act, here and now, and create the future ourselves; or, as he says, 'we must be the parents of the future': "Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori" (WU MING 1 2009b: 101). Like Vasta, Wu Ming 1 believes that the writers' task is to take *literary* action: writers should restore trust in the word ("*fiducia nella parola*") and establish a new ethics of storytelling ("*un'etica del narrare*") in which passions such as 'civic ardor, anger, grief, *amour fou*, and empathy with those who suffer' ("*ardore civile, collera, dolore [...], amour fou ed empatia con chi soffre*") may be valid motives for writing (NIE 24-25). In this context, Wu Ming 1 considers the "sguardo obliquo" ('oblique gaze') to be an important literary means of questioning anthropocentrism (NIE 26). Such an 'oblique gaze' makes use of 'unusual' points of view, e.g. the perspectives of marginalized historical persons, anonymous characters and also non-human points of view (like that of animals, places or objects, e.g. a bar or a TV) (cf. NIE 27-28). It may also be realized as an 'overloaded' point of view ("*punto di vista 'sovraccarico'*", NIE 29), in which different gazes are merged. Finally, a 'disincarnate gaze' ("*sguardo disincarnato*") is also possible: a point of view which is no longer bound to an entity but refers to "una non-entità" (NIE 31). The latter, Wu Ming 1 says, could be found in Giuseppe Genna's 2004 novel, *Grande madre rossa* (cf. NIE 30).

The idea of disincarnation brings us back to Genna's *Discorso*, which, as we have seen, ends with the 'disincarnation' of the writer and his detachment from space, time and matter. Yet, the example of the writer himself demonstrates that, despite the swansong of writing, the *Discorso* is essentially about the power of writing and reading. The writer, after his failed suicide attempt, is convinced of his obligation to live, and he does so through a re-reading of his text: "Rilesse. Fu obbligato alla vita" (D 61). If he had not written the camels' speech down, he himself would not have been able to read it again. Obviously, the written text serves as a medium of reflection and self-reflection that has real consequences. At the same time, the camels' assessment proves to be correct: if writing down their speech had incited the writer's desire for death, it had also brought him healing.

Of course, the question of how *exactly* he should cope with life, i.e. the question of "come fare", remains open-ended: "non sapeva come fare" (D 61). The only 'solution' that was given was that of an ill-defined 'dissolution'. The message to the reader, then, might be this: literature does not provide simple answers or recipes. Only the overall goal is clear: people should live together in peace, and we must distinguish between good and evil. And the good, according to the text, can be felt directly, without mediation: "Il bene si sente senza mediazioni" (D 58).

That this does not mean that language and literature (as mediators) are no longer needed, is revealed in an allegorical passage in which the polar camels illustrate the power of writing and reading. In this allegory, writers and readers create a new world together: two drops of foul, smelly oil flow out of an old oak tree; through two metal cables they run to a new, young trunk, on the bark of which they coagulate into two fragrant drops of resin. These drops are 'the man who writes and the man who reads' ("l'umano che scrive e l'umano che legge", D 50), while the young trunk symbolizes 'the new world, which is about to emerge instantaneously' ("il mondo nuovo, che sta per apparire istantaneo", D 50). Taken separately, the three elements – writer, reader and future world – have no meaning: "ognuno degli elementi, preso a sé, non significava nulla" (D 50). They acquire significance only in the triad, in collaboration. This does not only mean that writers and readers must collaborate in order to create a new and better world, but also that this world would not exist without *l'umano che scrive* and *l'umano che legge*, i.e. without written language. We seem far from the idea

of a world without speech and language here: as long as humans exist and dispose of language, there will be people who write and read. And even if the writerly dream of power may be outdated, it can be replaced by a new writerly project. This is what the allegory suggests.

If we take Genna's *Discorso* as a whole, we realize that we are confronted with a 'new world' as well: a posthuman future with the *disciolti* as a new species. Apart from such a view of the future, the *Discorso* also contains a critical diagnosis of the Anthropocene, i.e. our present and past, and, significantly, it does so from the perspective of a writer who, although marked by the symptoms of decline, has not yet abandoned the role of the *poeta vates*. Indeed, he redefines this role by giving literature the power to 'make a difference' and support us in our decisions. As the example of the *uomo che scrive* demonstrates, literature may put an end to our helpless lingering and open up the possibility of departing for new shores. In short, it may lay the groundwork for a new era.

This idea relates to today's trend towards new forms of committed literature (cf. LORENZI/PERRONE 2015; PALUMBO MOSCA 2017). Among other texts of contemporary Italian literature, Genna's *Discorso* testifies to the fact that writers must reemphasize the *fiducia nella parola*, as Wu Ming 1 argues, and have a strong belief that words and narratives can – and must – have consequences in the real world. From this perspective, literature should rebel against its (supposedly) sealed fate of meaninglessness and rise from its deathbed. Literary texts, like the *uomo che scrive*, seem to be 'obliged to live on'.

4. From T.S. Eliot and Leopardi to Genna

To sum up, in Genna's *Discorso*, it is the re-empowered literary language that makes the difference. It transforms a pessimistic diagnosis for human culture and civilization into an optimistic plea for a new kind of literary commitment. Genna also pursues his project of imagining an alternative future on the planet in his later publications. In *Pianetica* (2020), a book co-authored with Pino Tripodi, for example, he explores the idea of transforming 'politics' ("politica"), i.e. the 'techniques of ruling the polis' into 'planetics' ("pianetica"), i.e. the 'art of governing the planet': "Pianetica annuncia un

salto di specie singolare. Dalla politica alla pianetica. Dalle tecniche di dominio della polis all'arte di governarsi del pianeta."²⁷

Let me conclude by returning to Genna's references to T.S. Eliot and Giacomo Leopardi. As we have seen, the terms "shanti" and "pace", which both mean 'peace', not only form the link between the *Discorso* and *Italia De Profundis*, but also refer to Eliot's modernist poetry and to ancient Hindu spirituality. At this point, we should remember that the polar camels only whirr and whizz in ultrasound; like the *uomo che scrive*, they exceed language in their final dissolution. The idea of transcending language and physical existence, however, is closely linked to the spiritual Hindu term *Om*; the same is true of the term *shanti*. Yet, as Cleo McNelly Kearns observed with reference to T.S. Eliot, "Om" is also fundamentally logocentric: "Om represents Hindu tradition at its most logocentric; in Indie terms it is, if not 'the word made flesh,' at least 'the word made sound'" (MCNELLY KEARNS 1987: 229). Let us consider that "The word made sound" also applies to the whirring of the polar camels. But we have to realize that, like in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the *Om* is omitted from the formula in Genna's text. This might be due to the fact that the modernist doubts about *logos* are incredibly strong, as McNelly Kearns notes with reference to *The Waste Land* (cf. MCNELLY KEARNS 1987: 228). Since the *Om* is missing in the *Discorso*, too, we might say that Genna's text refers to Eliot's form of modernism and its (modernist) doubts about words, speech, and language. That being said, we must state that nowadays, more than a hundred years after the first publication of *The Waste Land*, *logos* seems to be experiencing a revival – at least in terms of new forms of committed literature that have been emerging in Italy as well as in other European literatures over the last two decades.

There is another important Italian author, however, to whom Genna owes a great deal: Giacomo Leopardi. Genna borrows from Leopardi not only by staging the figure of the suffering *poeta*, but he also quotes from Leopardi's *Zibaldone di pensieri* I.8 in the epigraph situated at the beginning of the *Discorso* (cf. D [5]):

Provatevi a respirare artificialmente, e a fare pensatamente qualcuno di quei moltissimi atti che si fanno per natura; non potrete, se non a grande stento e men bene. Così la tropp'arte nuoce a noi: e quello che Omero diceva ottimamente per natura, noi pensatamente e con infinito artificio non possiamo dirlo se non mediocrementemente, e in modo che lo stento più o meno quasi sempre si scopra (LEOPARDI 1961: 11).

This quotation emphasizes both the power of nature and the progressive decline of human art and civilization. Equally important is Genna's reference to the *Operette morali* (1827/34), Leopardi's collection of philosophical prose: Leopardi's opening piece, "Storia del genere umano", which presents the 'History of the Human Species' in a mythological form, corresponds to Genna's concept of a 'diorama of human history' (cf. LEOPARDI 2000: 579-601). In the final passage of the *Discorso*, Genna revisits another important piece of Leopardi's collection, i.e. the "Cantico del gallo silvestre" ('Song of the Wild Cock'). In Leopardi's epilogue to the first version of the *Operette morali*, the mythological figure of a wild cock directly addresses humans: by declaring their eternal pursuit of happiness to be completely vain, the wild cock finally examines the deep future. He predicts a time in which both the universe and nature will be extinguished. Of the 'marvelous and frightening mystery of universal existence' ("arcano mirabile e spaventoso dell'esistenza universale"), the wild cock says, nothing will remain but 'a naked silence and a very great calm which will fill the infinite space' ("un silenzio nudo, e una quiete altissima, empieranno lo spazio immenso", LEOPARDI 2000: 830). Certainly, this reminds us of the final passage of the *Discorso* in which everything dissolves and rests in peace and silence. To conclude, the whole *Discorso* turns out to be a rewriting of Leopardi's *Operette morali*, especially the prologue and the epilogue: the whirring polar camels are the descendants of the prophetic wild cock; Genna's autofictional *uomo che scrive*, who deciphers the camels' speech, is a reincarnation of Leopardi's textual alter ego who pretends to be only the 'translator' of the wild cock's speech (written by 'some Jewish teachers and writers', "alcuni maestri e scrittori ebrei", Leopardi 2000: 826).

Obviously, both Genna and Leopardi use the oblique gazes of strange animals in order to remind humans of the transience of all things. And both of them do so by emphasizing not only the bitterness and vanity of life, but also the healing function of writing that protects us from falling into absolute despair. Genna shares Leopardi's rejection of suicide. In the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi notes that after feeling a strong desire to commit suicide, he realized that humans should never face the 'absolute and necessary unhappiness of their life' since this would 'drive them to suicide, the most unnatural thing one could imagine':

E vidi come sia vero ed evidente che [...] l'uomo non doveva per nessun conto accorgersi della sua assoluta e necessaria infelicità in questa vita, ma solamente delle accidentali (come i fanciulli e le bestie): e l'essersene accorto è contro natura, [...] spinge infatti al suicidio, la cosa più contro natura che si possa immaginare. (LEOPARDI 1961: 96-97)

Genna certainly follows Leopardi's sentiment, but he takes it a step further. His *uomo che scrive* puts into practice what the wild cock has prophesized. By anticipating his own final dissolution in the 'we' of the *disciolti*, he demonstrates both the re-empowerment of the word and his awareness of the problems of the Anthropocene. Part of this is his decision to take the polar camels' advice seriously and, before the time for dissolution comes, to simply go on living. This 'going on', however, has to be understood on two levels: it does not only mean one must carry on for one's own sake, but also for the sake of society. As the camels said, people should go home and live peacefully with each other: "tornate alla casa. Siete amiche e amici" (D 58). In the case of the *uomo che scrive*, becoming aware of his social function also means realizing that he has a writerly 'mission': he is the one to write down and spread the camels' message, a message that he pretends to have decrypted, but (like Leopardi) has probably invented. At this point, we recognize Genna's special form of 'commitment' again: in order to spread the wake-up call to the humans of the Anthropocene, he has composed his *Discorso* as a parable that plays with elements of animal fables, science fiction, postcolonial literature, autofictional narratives and intertextual references to modern (i.e. 19th- and 20th-century) authors. By using the means of literary fiction, he gives a voice to both an extinct and a posthuman species: the 'oblique gazes' of the polar camels and the *disciolti* cause us to reflect on the problems of the Anthropocene and provide a vision of the (im)possible worlds to come. The hopeful idea behind this is that these visions might give us the power to take action, or, as Genna's polar camels put it, to create a new world together.

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¹ As central posthumanist and postanthropocentric thinkers, we might cite Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway. Cf. BRAIDOTTI 2013; HARAWAY 1991; HARAWAY 2016. Neohumanist positions call for a new anthropocentrism (or a humanism) that makes humans responsible for the nature they have shaped. In contrast to posthumanist positions, neohumanists (like Roy Scranton) defend the exceptional position of humans on the earth. Cf. BAJOHR 2020: 5.

² Crutzen and Stoermer introduced the term as a warning against an imminent catastrophe (cf. CRUTZEN/STOERMER 2000; CRUTZEN 2002).

³ Wu Ming 1 is a member of the Italian writers collective Wu Ming. Cf. WU MING FOUNDATION [2023].

⁴ For an interpretation of *Arzètula* cf. SCHAEFER 2015.

⁵ Horn and Bergthaller refer to Timothy Clark’s concept of scales developed in CLARK 2015.

⁶ I quote from the original edition (GENNA 2010; cited as ‘D’). Genna published the text again on 29 January 2016 as a Facebook post which reproduced the original print version from 2010 entirely. The only difference is that the footnote on Duarte Lopes (cf. D 18-21) is missing. Cf. GENNA 2016.

⁷ “Questo antiumano non è una possibilità di futuro. Porta con sé lo spettro dell’emergenza e della fine di specie, ma non come la doglia che precede il parto. L’antiumano mira all’estinzione dell’umano in senso antispirituale, cioè abolendo il fenomeno coscienziale dell’autoconsapevolezza.” (IDP 69).

⁸ Eliot’s *The Waste Land* ends on: “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. Shantih shantih shantih” (ELIOT 2022: 60). The first three words represent the “Three Great Disciplines”, “self-control, giving, and mercy”, taught in the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad: they translate as “Control yourselves”, “Give”, and “Have compassion” (ELIOT 2022: 104-105).

⁹ For Eliot’s references to Hindu spirituality, cf. MCNELLY KEARNS 1987: 195-229.

¹⁰ References to Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (French original: *L'Innommable*, 1953) might come to mind. In this novel, an ill-defined first-person narrator ("the Unnamable"), formless and impossible to locate in space and time, examines (or rather creates) his own existence in one long, single monologue (Beckett 2006). The fact that Genna's narrator belongs to the 'dissolved', fits in with the Beckettian setting. Like Genna and Eliot, Beckett also refers to Far Eastern philosophies. Cf. FOSTER 1989: 203-230.

¹¹ The account of his destiny must have been written down by the writer himself, since he is the *uomo che scrive*. That fact that he tells his own story in the third person singular hints to the fact that the writer has already been absorbed into the *disciolti*.

¹² The concept of the poet-prophet ("veggente") is also addressed in Wu Ming 1's *Arzèstula*. The most famous *poeta vates* in Italian literature is undoubtedly to be found in Dante's *Commedia*. On the more recent tradition in which the poet-seer is charged with political meaning (esp. in D'Annunzio), cf. PERDICHIZZI 2018.

¹³ Use of the term "accelerare" seems no coincidence: it hints to the radical left-wing philosophy of Accelerationism which promotes acceleration as a means to escape today's capitalism and prepare an egalitarian future. Although the ideas draw back on older (partly Marxist) theories, the term 'Accelerationism' itself was only coined in 2010 (by Benjamin Noys in his book, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, 2010), the exact year in which Genna composed the *Discorso*. The term has received much attention, e.g. through the "#Accelerate Manifesto" by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek (WILLIAMS/SRNICEK 2013).

¹⁴ Cf. RYBCZYNSKI et al. 2013.

¹⁵ This is the title of the camels' discourse (cf. D 19). Furthermore, it is signed: "L'impermanente specie dei Cammelli Polari" (D 59). And as we know, the title of the book refers to the "specie impermanente dei cammelli polari" (cf. book cover).

¹⁶ "[...] poiché alcuni esemplari umani ci scorgono appena, transitori e impermanenti, verrebbe da pensare che noi siamo una specie impermanente: e invece siete voi gli impermanenti, che soltanto raramente riuscite ad affacciarvi al di fuori di quel carcere in cui vi siete infilati e a togliervi quelle spesse lenti affumicate che vi ottundono la vista [...]" (D 33).

¹⁷ Vaguely situated 'at the beginning of a century no more cursed and ruinous than others' ("all'inizio di un secolo non più maledetto e rovinoso di altri", D 37), it becomes clear that the episode must have happened in the 21st century because the writer (i.e. the *poeta*) completes the *Discorso* on 14 March 2010 (cf. D 59).

¹⁸ See, for example, the reference to the "umani alla loro fine" (D 48).

¹⁹ Here, it becomes evident that the *poeta* is identical with the writer (*uomo che scrive*), because both gaze at one another and then coincide in a similarly schizoid vision: „l'effetto che ebbe su chi scrive questa visione fu un movimento a spirale e a imbuto, che attrae in questo istante il suo sguardo dentro lo sguardo acquoso del poeta che osservava la scena, ed entrambi gli sguardi, fattisi uno, finiscono a spirale verso il bavero del soprabito dell'uomo" ("the effect on the writer of this vision was a spiral and funnel-like movement, which attracts in this moment his gaze within the watery gaze of the poet who was observing the scene, and both gazes, made one, end in a spiral toward the lapel of the man's overcoat", D 41-42).

²⁰ The footnote quotes a 1591 description of the Central African population by the Portuguese Duarte Lopes. This description is said to be no less astonishing than the speech of the polar camels (cf. D 18, note). Such a comparison insinuates that the exploitation and subjugation of the indigenous African population by the northern colonizers is comparable to the polar camels' desire to kill the solar camels. Lopes' work was originally published in Italian. Cf. LOPES 1591.

²¹ "Lo scrittore è diventato un sintomo stesso, e minore, della patologia." (D 47).

²² "Il vecchio sogno di potere dello scrittore è stato smascherato da moltissimi anni, e ancora gli uomini persistono nell'abusata lamentazione: lo scrittore desidera un mondo impossibile nel quale egli sia il governante senza corona." (D 49).

²³ The autofictional element strongly characterizes Genna's writing in general. Autofictional author-narrators appear in many of his texts and are sometimes even referred to as 'Giuseppe Genna'. This is the case, for example, in *Italia De Profundis* (2008) and *Medium* (GENNA 2007).

²⁴ Vasta is a writer and editor. Together with Dario Voltolini, he curates the series "zoo | scritture animali" by *duepunti edizioni* in Palermo, in which also Genna's *Discorso* has been published.

²⁵ The full title of the Memorandum, first published online in 2008, then reedited and published one year later by Einaudi, is: *New Italian Epic 3.0. Memorandum 1993-2008*; cited as NIE. On human self-destruction see: "La vera guerra è il conflitto senza fine tra noi, la specie umana, e la nostra tendenza all'auto-annichilimento" (NIE 55).

²⁶ According to the Wu Ming collective, the new committed literature should have a 'strong sense of responsibility' ("*forte senso di responsabilità*") (WU MING 2009: IX, italics in original).

²⁷ This is the description on the website of the publishing house, cf. MILIEU EDIZIONI (2023).