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ORIGINS ONCE AGAIN*Introduction*

Although in the Gilbert schema for *Ulysses* James Joyce pointed to no organ in association with the three episodes of the ‘Telemachia’ section, there is indeed one body part that seems to be referable to ‘Proteus’, as Enrico Terrinoni suggests in his recent introduction to the newest Italian translation of the now centenary masterpiece. The *navel* is in fact a central symbol of an episode which, at first glance, appears as a chaotic layering of literary and cultural references, both overt and covert, intermingled with Stephen Dedalus’s own musings. The strongly symbolic power of the *navel* is connected with the practices of the mystical tradition of contemplative prayer in Orthodox Christianity, which included navel-gazing as one of the paths to attain the reunion with God. “‘Will you be as gods?’ Gaze in your omphalos” (Joyce 2022: 72). As Maud Ellmann claims, Joyce’s interest in the *navel* is to be related to a deep fascination with the myth of origins, especially crucial for an Irish writer, whose “writing in the English language could be seen as the classic navelcord that ties him to the past while also ostracizing him from Ireland” (2010: 7).

Joyce has not been chosen haphazardly to introduce this issue of *CoSMo*, dedicated to the topic of the origins. Such an archetype is of paramount importance for literary Modernism, as the many contributions on capital protagonists of this period, from Joyce himself to Montale, as well as the re-evaluation of modern Latvian writers or the aesthetical value of *Star Wars* do testify. Our prime aim in collecting these essays was that of offering a range of case studies possessing a twofold value: besides being interesting in themselves as innovative readings, they all subscribe to the most thought-provoking attitude of contemporary Modernist studies, that is expanding the traditional borders of this literary phase. This tendency, which dates back to Maria DiBattista’s edited volume *High and Low Moderns: Literature and Culture, 1889-1939* (1996), was canonized by Douglas Mao, who coined the fortunate label “bad modernisms” in his eponymous edited collection (2006). This desire to broaden the scope of Modernism has had a series of vital consequences, for instance the deflagration of the canonical time range 1910-1939 and the subsequent inclusion of fundamental *fin-de siècle* precursors, as happens in Vincent Sherry’s *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015). Another noteworthy inclusive move is the admission of mid-20th-century acolytes to the pantheon of Modernist authors, which has also entailed a much-needed overcoming of Eurocentric limitations, as *The Oxford Handbook to Global Modernism* (2012) witnesses. Modernism

has thus become a literary period institutionally marked by a continuous reference to the concept of alterity – whether human or nonhuman¹ –, a drive that has also entailed a specific integration of the tools of cultural studies² to the study of what is now a more multifaceted entity.

In that, the idea of choosing the image of the origin has been particularly apt, as the act of reflecting on the origins of the universe, of human beings, and of the divine is one of the most fascinating intellectual activities. If science has now provided us with convincing cosmological theories, mythology, philosophy, religion, literature, and the arts too have been questioning the concept of ‘origin’ for millennia, contributing with fascinating stories and critical questions to an issue whose hermeneutical potential was and still is considered fundamental. Unsurprisingly, these diverse approaches end up revealing the existence of recurring archetypes and cultural patterns, which show how poetic, fictional, and artistic experimentations at a global level intersect and are inevitably interrelated.³ James Joyce’s fictionalization of ‘navel gazing’ is one of the most iconic, but far from the sole aesthetic outcomes of such a practice in literature, which due to Modernism’s great innovative charge, was particularly significant at the beginning of the 20th century.

This issue of *CoSMo* takes its cue from the scholarly context outlined in the section above, with a view to showing how new approaches to and interpretative perspectives on the topic of the ‘origin’ (often provided by looking at its inextricable opposite, the ‘end’) are proposed by modern writers and artists.

Two contributions in the *Headlines* section introduce readers to crucial issues and relevant figures who have approached the theme from different points of view.

Francesco Remotti focuses on Ernesto De Martino and anticipates a scholarly debate which will be further developed in one of the 2025 *CoSMo* issues. Remotti illustrates De Martino’s reflections on the *end* of the world and shows their being perfectly organic to the present-day ‘culture of the Anthropocene’, concerned as it is with the sense of its own ending. While first presenting the end of the world as a physiological cultural theme, which appears in every culture based on either a cyclical or a linear conception of time,

¹ There has been a huge amount of scholarly work on Modernism and animal studies, yet the most comprehensive accounts remain the two monographic works by Carrie Rohman 2009, 2018.

² Just for reference to this interesting debate over Modernism(s) vs. Modernity see Friedman 2001. On the specific subject of the integration of critical imports from cultural studies to Modernist Studies see Felski 2003. Also, on the widening of the scope in Modernist studies, see again Friedman 2006. All these pronouncements are taken from the journal *Modernism/Modernity*, which has established itself as the privileged site for the debate in the anglophone world.

³ A scholarly debate on the meaning and imagery of the ‘beginnings’ as produced in literature and the arts over the centuries, with an eye to its more explicitly scientific underpinnings, was the focus of the International ESCL Conference *Narrations of Origins in World Cultures and the Arts*, organized at the University of Turin by Chiara Lombardi and Cristiano Ragni in 2021. A selection of contributions exploring this cross-cultural and interdisciplinary fascination for the ‘sense of a beginning’ was recently published in a Lombardi 2022, a special issue of *CompLit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society*.

as Remotti explains, De Martino later came to a more dramatic interpretation, reading the end of the world as an upsetting anthropological risk. To overcome it, he ideated the concept of ‘ethical time’, which allowed to envisage a new kind of history, no longer linked to a particular society or culture, but concerning the whole humanity.

Joseph Cermatori concludes the section with a homage to Dr. Hans-Thies Lehmann’s major contributions to contemporary debates on theatre aesthetics upon the scholar’s recent death. Besides reviewing Lehmann’s influence on Theatre Studies in the English-speaking world and on theatre production at a global level, Cermatori devotes much deserved attention to the influence exercised by the scholar’s *original* concept of ‘postdramatic theatre’—a theatre, that is, in which dramatic texts are decentred from their previously central position—and thus acknowledges the intellectual legacy that Lehmann left to future generations.

From the analysis of the connections between the origins and the sublime to discussions on the European cultural trends permeating the origins of modern Latvian culture and the role played by myths of origins in the contemporary transmedial universes, the *Focus* section collects twelve contributions, which put forward evidence of the fruitful habit of reflecting on the ‘beginning’ (and the ‘end’), and consider the manifold developments of what can be defined as an irresistible attraction for the origins.

Chiara Lombardi’s essay provides an interesting discussion on how much the “ineffable condition of the origin, immense in its mystery” (p. 39) has always shown connections with the expressive forms of the sublime. This relationship has proved particularly relevant, from an aesthetic point of view, in both contemporary literature and art. In all the variety of its functions, uses, and effects, the sublime does indeed seem to have contributed to the development of what Lombardi defines as the *morphology of the unrepresentable*, a concept which perfectly adapts to the archetype of the origin.

Joanna Orzeł goes back to the origin myths of Poland and Lithuania, and considers how much they drew from Greek and Roman mythology in terms of characters and motifs. After analysing the connections between the countries’ founding fathers, Lech and Palemon, with the Roman Remus and Romulus among others, the scholar particularly focuses on the classical echoes which can be detected both in Polish-Lithuanian epic (i.e. Jan Skorski’s *Lech*) and heraldry. In so doing, she shows the exceptional influence that ancient mythology had in the self-fashioning of the modern cultural identity of the two countries.

Pauls Daija and Benedikts Kalnačs’ essay revisits the main cultural changes which led to the origin of modern Latvian literary culture. Together with the secularization of literature and the growing interest in writing which spread among ethnic Latvians, the authors underscore the role played by Romantic nationalism, which is shown to have been instrumental in recognizing the significance of folk poetry and oral culture and thus in the subsequent development of Latvian literature. It was the spread of the realistic trend between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, however, that eventually marked the participation of Latvian culture in modern European literary trends.

Anna-Katharina Gisbertz, Eva-Tabea Meineke, and Stephanie Neu-Wendel focus on the production of three women writers – Sibilla Aleramo, Colette, and Mela Hartwig – and argue that they paved the way for the creation of the experimental forms of self-awareness and identity that would characterise Modernism and twentieth-century female writing at large. Despite their common destiny of exile, silence, and marginalization, Aleramo, Colette, and Hartwig contributed greatly, as the authors maintain, to the articulation of female subjectivity, and should therefore be fully integrated into the literary canon of European Modernisms.

Three male exponents of Modernism – J. M. Synge, James Joyce, and W. B. Yeats – are instead the object of Ilaria Natali's contribution, which focuses on the visions and representations of Hell in their works. Moving with ease among the literary productions of the three writers, Natali highlights how the peculiar ways in which they represent Hell have their origins in a deft fusion of the stories belonging to their shared Irish cultural background with their knowledge of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Valentina Monateri deals with another pivotal author of Euro-American Modernism, T. S. Eliot, and examines the presence of the Biblical book of *Qohelet* in his *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Monateri uses the research strand of the *Narrations of Origins* as a filter, a critical tool which allows her to read the evolution of the poetic and narrative morphologies of the first thirty years of the twentieth century, and to make sense of the creative act that is behind a modern tradition of formal experimentation.

Building upon the scholarly work on anthropogenesis and the motif of animals locked in a cage—a recurrent one when talking about the origin of humans as cultural beings—

Jelena Ulrike Reinhardt's essay centres on Kafka's short story *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* and a chapter of Elias Canetti's novel *Die Blendung*. By presenting these two texts as reinterpretations of the myth of the origin of culture, Reinhardt sheds lights on the ways in which both reflect on the power dynamics at the basis of civilization.

Eugenio Montale's interest in the origin and end of the universe as it appears especially in the so-called poetry of his "second season" is the focus of Stefano Maria Casella's essay. Casella analyses the original way in which Montale makes deft use of issues pertaining to science, religion, and ancient mythology which, in the light of the poet's Stoicism, anti-dogmatism, and (self-)irony, ends up producing effects ranging from de-mythization to explicit mockery.

Ugo Fracassa focuses instead on the role that the themes of origins and the end of times played in poet, translator, and art critic Emilio Villa's output. Fracassa explains that Villa's intellectual engagement with such themes revealed itself not only in his translations of pivotal texts such as the book of *Genesis*, the entire *Odyssey*, and a fragment of the *Enūma eliš*, but also in his enthusiasm for the contemporary Informal movement, and his scientific contribution to John Huston's film *The Bible: in the Beginning...* (1966).

Francesco Capello starts with a discussion of the relevant similarities between Sigmund Freud's insight in relation to a mysterious "need to restore an earlier state of things" and Cesare Pavese's considerations on the concept of the 'primeval', while clearly highlighting the main differences between the two. He then goes on to focus on Italo

Calvino's *Cosmicomics*, and concludes that the latter's implicit critique of Pavese's 'myth of return' did actually draw from assumptions compatible with Freud's 'attraction' for the origins.

Federica Rocchi sheds lights on the literary output of Emine Sevgi Özdamar, a writer of Turkish origins, who emigrated in Germany. In underscoring how Özdamar approaches the concepts of origin and dislocation in her works, and her *Mutterzunge* (1991) in particular, Rocchi puts forward evidence of the ways in which the writer manages to weave together fragments of different cultures, and to establish a dialogue between Turkey, her homeland, and Germany, the country in whose language she has chosen to write.

The section is closed by Francesca Medaglia's contribution on the myths of origins as an innovative form of storytelling. Building on the scholarly works on the amplified experiences offered by the multiple expanded universes emerging through transmediality, Medaglia focuses on the rewarding insights that these universes provide into creation myths as patterns of fruitful narrative action. Particularly, she analyses *Star Wars* as a perfect example of storytelling in which myths are used not only as a more traditional form of literary creation, but also as a source of novel narrative structures of the metamodern sphere.

The *Percorsi* section comprises three contributions. Giacomo De Fusco sets the phenomenon of authorial *posture* against the background of our contemporary society, in which authors construct their own character both through public appearances and through their works. By looking at autofictional texts, in particular, De Fusco underscores how authors end up creating extreme versions, almost caricatures, of themselves that not only sometimes resemble their mediatized author-character, but also create interpretative problems to the readers.

In their essay, Stefano Candellieri and Davide Favero discuss how the mentalizing abilities of modern men and women have changed along with the development of modern digital media. In particular, they show that the specific structure of social media influences our psychosocial processes, and contributes to a horizontal superficiality with neither past nor future. Set against this background, they argue, the aim of psychotherapeutic work should be to stimulate a vital 'psycho-semio-narrative' capacity, and thus present narration as a profoundly mental and dreamlike tool to originate a future never before imagined.

Monica Venturi Delponte concludes the section with a contribution which considers the iconographic, technical, and symbolic ways in which contemporary artists as diverse as Orlan, Neil Harbisson, and the Fronte Vacuo's artists translate transhumanism in their works. The scholar analyses how their hybrid artistic forms, which involve plastic surgery, cyborgs, and artificial intelligence, and blur the boundaries separating sculpture, performance, dance, biotechnology, and information technology, respond to the transhumanist ideal of re-creating the Promethean man; a man, that is, who overcomes the evils that, according to the classical myth, Pandora released in the world.

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