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**“Towards a poet(h)ics of *technē*. Primo Levi and Daniele Del Giudice
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Towards a poet(h)ics of *technē*. Primo Levi and Daniele Del Giudice¹

1. “Questions concerning technology”

“I hope to die before I live in a world that will only speak reason” (Serres 4). With this wish, formulated almost half a century after C.P. Snow’s seminal essay on *The two cultures*, Michel Serres does not only confirm that the cleavage between the literary and the scientific world is still wide open. It also acknowledges the allegedly “social, discursive, and [...] ideological victory” (19) of rationality and exactitude over metaphors and dreams, which, Serres claims, have been reduced to “the return of what has been repressed, the language of defeat” (19).

To be sure, the death that Serres expresses as a hypothesis, conjuring up a scenario that in his view is imminent but against which it is still possible to act before the exact sciences wipe out the endangered heritage of humanistic culture (3), was for its part already realized by John the Savage in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, who preferred death to a survival in an existence condensing all the aberrations of an absolute rational control. Yet despite the extreme solution that his character chooses as the only way out of the inexorable tyranny of cold *ratio* made *praxis*, Huxley himself, in his essay *Literature and science*, continues to hope in a collaboration between “men of letters and men of science” (118). Convinced that, if taken separately, the “world of concepts and the multitudinous abyss of immediate experience” (39), the “simplified, jargonized purity of scientific discourse and the magical, many-meaning purity of literature” (38-9), are equally inadequate to cope with “the ever-expanding regions of the unknown” (118), Huxley ultimately urges for a union of the rational and the aesthetic that resonates in Serres’s argument. Serres’s own way of dissipating the specter of the dystopian Huxleyan *brave new world* is precisely an integration of “the new world of scientists” (Serres 34) with “the storytelling of time immemorial” (34)

through a “third approach to knowledge” (34) that, instead of leaving “algorithmic ratiocination and literary relashings completely segregated” (34), rather combines “the poem and the theorem [...], experimentation and experience” (34).

Yet, if—as Serres claims—science has “stolen reason” (19), assimilated enlightenment itself, usurped “the metaphors of religious revelation [and] of mystical discourse” (19), it has succeeded in driving back other cognitive domains into obscurity and irrationality by making reason operational through an alliance with technology, that is, by transforming its abstract principles in techniques that adopt science’s objectivity and factual rightness to impose order and control over human reality. Therefore, it is not possible to account for and to overcome the cleavage between science and non-science without considering the nature and the role played by technology as the practical implementation of reason in science’s allegedly successful imposition of its singular cultural type.

Nevertheless Heidegger reminds us that, despite the mutual dependence of modern technology and modern science and their joint objectification, ordering and mastering of reality, “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological,” (“Question” 4), that is, it has nothing to do, according to Heidegger, with the rational, instrumental or mechanical underpinnings that we usually associate with it. Springing from the Greek *technē*, technology preserves a link with the technical skills of craftsmanship but also, according to Heidegger, with “the arts of the mind and the fine arts” (13), that is, with a making that will ultimately lose the servile implications of simple manufacturing and rather designate the activity of art as *poiesis*, as “the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful” (34). At the same time, Heidegger, drawing from Aristotle (*Ethics* 207-8), calls attention to the closeness of *technē* to *epistēmē*, hence to a form of knowledge and understanding distinguished from the pure and simple empirical ability, and corresponding to “opening up” and “revealing” (13). It is this double link with creativity and reasoning beyond mere functionality that leads

Heidegger to conclude that technology is the revelation of truth not as exactness but as *aletheia*, as the mystery of unconcealment (13).

Can the Heideggerian idea of technology as *technē*, partaking of both art and science, of the poetical and the cognitive, of beauty and truth, constitute that third approach, that middle ground which, from Snow to Serres, seems to be invoked as a way out of the Manichean disciplinary reality of our time? The fracture that Heidegger emphasizes between the ancient roots of technology in *poiesis* and its modern development as a “machine-powered” (13) activity that threatens the energy of nature seems to render this hypothesis not feasible within the perspective of a present in which the only form of revealing that technology can promote is that of “[r]egulating and securing” (16). This control and entrapment of nature and of things do not only eliminate the possibility of *technē* as human handiwork (18). More subtly, modern technology cannot even be considered a “human doing” (19) according to Heidegger because it “gathers man into ordering” (19), that is, it absorbs and manipulates man by making him part of the very mechanism of order and objectification that “reveals the real as standing reserve” (21).² Sustained by a false illusion of domination and control, man in fact loses himself precisely in the revealing of technology as ordering imposed by the machine: today “*nowhere does man any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence*” (27).

Within the framework of the question of the role of technology in the “two cultures” debate, Primo Levi’s *La chiave a stella* and Daniele Del Giudice’s *Atlante Occidentale* are particularly significant. At the apex of the modern civilization of machines and industries, they do not simply show us, in line with Heidegger, that technology is far from being “something neutral” (4), that is, a self-referential object that can be approachable and explainable through an instrumental and functional analysis. More subtly, by representing technology not merely as a practical transposition of science’s rational effectiveness but also

as the “productive unconscious” (Serres 19) of science, its imaginative and poetical side, they also support Heidegger’s speculation that precisely in the all-encompassing technological dimension of the present world, the “poetic revealing” (35) of art as *poiesis* may revive the essence of technology inherent to the Greek *technē*. Precisely starting from the premise that technology does not simply designate an instrumental, functional and pragmatic order (Miquel and Menard 17), independent of other domains of experience, Levi’s and Del Giudice’s novels approach technology as a veritable symbolic system, hence originally endowed with, and in its turn producing, meaning and value, instead of being determined by purely technical criteria.

While these two works are obviously not the first ones in which technology affirms itself not so much outside the realm of value but rather as value itself (Miquel and Menard 12), their paramount importance and originality lies in the way in which they codify technology, that is, in the specific symbolic universe and value system that technology embodies and implements. To be sure, already at the outset of the 20th century, Italian literature had eloquently shown how technology as a symbolic system can turn into a veritable myth. The Futurist cult of the machine, and, even earlier, Mario Morasso’s celebration of the alliance of beauty and speed in the automobile, had triumphantly promoted a marriage of science and art that, as it generated this new weapon (*La nuova arma*), it also made the individual a victim of two opposite yet coinciding extremes, namely, the dehumanizing self-empowerment of Morasso’s superhuman “egoarchia” (*Uomini e idee*) and the total abolition of human qualities in Marinetti’s mechanical man.³ And if Pirandello nostalgically mourns art as *poiesis* exposing through an alienated Serafino Gubbio how the machine has now reduced the creative faculty to mere *technē* in its most detrimental sense of instrumental activity, and annihilated individuality altogether, it could be argued that even the more recent debate on literature and industry, despite its commitment to a constructive

integration of the technological world within the aesthetic realm, has not completely transcended the standpoint of a denunciation of the loss of creativity and of human alienation caused by the industrial reality (Scalia, “Dalla natura all’industria”).

For their part, *La chiave a stella* and *Atlante Occidentale*, written after the wave of defensive attempts at unmasking and demythifying the Futurist myth of mechanization, and set in a technological world that has by now accepted the Benjaminian loss of the aura (Benjamin, “Work of Art”) as an ordinary, everyday reality, reformulate the question of the machine in a less polemical and more positive way, reintroducing the ethical question of otherness *in* and *through* the technological object. Not only do they underscore the ethical implications of the phenomenon of the machine. They also treat the machine as an ethical device itself, that is, as an instrument and a mechanism for the creation of an ethical subject and an ethical space. Their endorsement of technology as *technē* in the Heideggerian sense hence recuperates the essence of the individual allegedly eclipsed by modern technology, yet furthermore also leads them beyond the Heideggerian ontological perspective of being as sameness and singularity. In different ways and to different extents, as we will see, Levi and Del Giudice underscore the need for a dialogic, interhuman dynamics consubstantial to the practical domain of acting and making conceived as the meeting point of functionality and aestheticization.

2. “ogni lavoro è come il primo amore” : the crafting of Levi’s passionate Ulysses.

In the Homeric Odysseus, bound impotently to the mast of his ship, while the Sirens sing their alluring promise of happiness and pleasure, unheard by his ear-plugged oarsmen, Horkheimer and Adorno find an allegorical prefiguration of what for them constitutes “the dialectic of enlightenment” (*Dialectic* 34), namely, an entanglement of “myth, domination, and labor” (32) that makes the Western bourgeois cult of progress inseparable from a

regression to a barbaric stage of civilization. Odysseus is the “technically enlightened man” (59), dominator and self-dominating, who recognizes the enthralling call of desire and of the aesthetic but outwits it by controlling the senses with the power of the intellect, and by imposing to his subaltern the same renunciation. For Horkheimer and Adorno he hence embodies the impoverishment and the delusive mythology brought about by the victory of *ratio* and practice over physical nature at the price of the sacrifice--be it imposed or self-imposed--of desire and dreams. As the extreme result of the power of bourgeois progress--hence, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the most sophisticated instrument of domination and self-deception--the machine represses instincts and atrophies imagination while it eases life (35), yet, significantly, this obliteration of the experience of the senses does not so much translate into a refinement of the intellect as, rather, into alienation of thought itself.

What tightens even more the tangle of enlightenment and myth, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is the all-encompassing nature of the impoverishment and disablement of the individual and of individuality in the self-deceiving civilization of the machine --the conversion of human qualities into functions (36), the “total schematization” (35) of men and their reduction to “mere species beings, exactly like one another through isolation in the forcibly united collectivity” (36), the “total” (36) quality of this manipulating and leveling society “which embraces all relations and emotions” (36) in all social conditions and domains of experience. Precisely this generalized impotence of both worker and ruler in industrial society seems to reproduce the inevitability of the ancient Fate (37), the *deus-ex-machina* of the mythological world that the enlightenment believes it has surpassed but which in fact it reinstates with its “abandonment of thought” (41) and its reification through “mathematics, machines and organization” (41).

However, precisely by starting from the premises denounced by *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and by reformulating motifs that originally sustained the Futurist

technological myth, the modern Ulysses in Levi's *La chiave a stella* tries to offer an answer to the disenchantment of the civilization of the machine. With an ironic twist of the bourgeois enlightenment condition as exposed in the Adornian critique, in the technical world of *La chiave a stella* the wish *can* be and indeed *is* "the father to the thought" (Horkheimer and Adorno 57), and both converge into *praxis*, in a re-humanizing coincidence of reason and myth, of work and work of art. The adventurous wanderings told to an anonymous narrator in this "sort of contemporary Odyssey" (Stajano 183), as Levi's novel has been defined, are those of the technician Faussonne, a rigger who with his wrench does not only assemble cranes and metal towers diffusing instrumental knowledge to the remotest places on earth but also infuses beauty and an affective dimension into that technical and allegedly disaffected world.

Despite his "faccia seria, poco mobile e poco espressiva" (Levi *Chiave* 3), it is not so much the spirit of rigor and functionality as the appeal of pleasure and happiness that is embedded in his first name, Liberto, a reference not only to freedom (as his father had originally meant, when he tried to call him Libero in defiance of the Fascist regime) but above all to a sort of hedonism and sensuousness, although he denies it is his specialty or his aim (82). Liberto Faussonne is indeed not only "uno di quelli che il suo mestiere gli piace" (142), as he proclaims with his faulty Italian, but one who jealously defends and proudly extols his "gusto del lavoro" (40), and who treats the day of the inspection of a crane "un po' come una festa" (143), for which he prepares with a nice clean shave, brilliantine on his hair, and an elegant jacket. And, significantly, precisely with his *nomen* which is also an *omen* of his emotional approach to the technological object, Levi's character reconfigures the alienating experience of his Pirandellian antecedent, condemned to "girar la manovella" (*Quaderni* 5) as a servant to a monstrous and voracious machine that devours human life. Liberto, whose name mimetically alludes to Pirandello's "Serafino", not accidentally repeats the gesture of the cinematographic operator when, still a child, he spends his

afternoons in his father's workshop "a girargli la manovella della forgia" (*Chiave* 83). Yet he transforms Gubbio's seraphic passivity into a revivifying and passionate bond with the mechanical domain that in his case rather saves him from alienation.

Indeed, the novel as a whole exposes a wide range of feelings and sensual experiences that Libertino cultivates in his relationship between body and machine, from childlike fondness to parental love to romantic passion. Hence a metal tower about to be assembled instills in him the emotion of seeing it grow day by day, like "un bambino ancora da nascere, quando è ancora nella pancia di sua mamma" (11). With a sort of parental tenderness that shades off into boyish affection made more naive by his simple and incorrect Italian, he avows the pleasure of paying a visit to a job he has completed, "come si fa con i parenti di età, e come faceva mio padre con i suoi lambicchi; così, se una festa non ho niente di meglio da fare, prendo su e vado" (132). And the same emotional bond makes him empathize with a pipe which "doveva essere ben malata" (17), suffer for the malfunctioning of a crane "come una donna incinta che le nasca un figlio storto o deficiente" (145), or mourn for the collapse of a bridge "come quando muore una persona" (121). Every new job for Faussonne is "come il primo amore" (116) and each negative outcome like a failed love-story, "come quando vuoi bene a una ragazza, e lei ti pianta da un giorno all'altro e tu non sai perché, e soffri, non solo perché hai perso la ragazza, ma anche la fiducia" (125). And, to be sure, Faussonne's attraction to the aesthetic side of the job is no less evident: it is the beauty of perfection, as a result of a precision in the observation of the rules of the job, that makes the final product a work of art on which Faussonne claims authorship and paternity. Just as "l'inossidabile è un gran bel materiale" (14) and a metal tower hanging from a crane offers him a "bello spettacolo" (13), any material work well planned and accomplished with style, to which Faussonne is unflinchingly committed (73), seems to possess an internal force that makes it come out "bella per conto suo" (121), endowing it with a sort of aesthetic

purposiveness that assimilates the shaping of mechanical matter to an artefact, a unique piece created by an independent *faber*, who puts his signature on it upon completion (66).

It is precisely by leading technology back to its aesthetic and poetical roots that *La Chiave a stella* can be said to transcend the aggressively heroic vision of the machine offered by Futurism. Significantly, it is Marinetti's "amore crescente per la materia" (qtd. in Tessari 233) in an industrial present—a love that is simultaneously a challenge to matter—that resonates in Faussonne's first love for his material accomplishments and for the strife with iron as a chance to "conoscere la materia ed a tenerle testa" (Levi *Chiave* 52). However, the eroticization that propels the Futurist will to penetrate and know the "bella macchina d'acciaio" (De Maria ed. 298) "dal cuore ardente e pronto" (298), glowing with "voluttà" beneath the man's "carezza lubrificante" (298), and the "bellezza meccanica" (298) generated by the physical intercourse with the engine after severing the link between "*Donna e [...]* Bellezza" (297), turn into a sentimental attachment to the mechanical creation in the framework of a recuperation of the natural and biological over the artificial. On the one hand, to be sure, no less than in *La chiave a stella* the Futurist manifestoes dramatize "i capricci, le impazienze e le malattie dell'acciaio e del rame" (De Maria ed. 99), metals which seem to have "una personalità, un'anima, una volontà" (298) just like Faussonne's steel and copper. And Faussonne's paternal care for his iron creature is already present in Marinetti's reference to the builder of the machine as "suo padre" (298). On the other hand, however, Marinetti's anthropomorphization of matter and of the machine goes hand in hand with, and is even functional to, the ultimate mechanization of the individual, through the "entusiastica imitazione dell'elettricità e della macchina" (99) while, through Faussonne, Levi rather humanizes technology. Faussonne overturns the Futurist dream of an integral antihumanism (Tessari 254)—embodied by the "tipo non umano e meccanico" (De Maria ed. 299) made of interchangeable components, not simply alienated by the machine but becoming machine

itself--into the pathetic fallacy of bridges and cranes endowed with a body and a soul, sometimes happy, sometimes sick, in a sort of pan-humanism.

The same hypostatization of iron that inspires Marinetti to extol "la precisione felice degl'ingranaggi e dei pensieri bene oliati" (99) and Faussone confidently to claim--apparently in the same vein--that everything goes wrong whenever "le cose di ferro diventano cose di carta" (147) thus leads in fact to two quite divergent, if not opposite, standpoints. The Futurist aspiration to freedom through abolition of work becomes, in *La chiave a stella*, freedom through the exercise of work, and even freedom as work, an equation authenticated by the rigger himself. Faussone's independence protects him precisely from the Futurist standardization of the "operaio", who in Marinetti's writings appears far less as a concrete individual with needs and feelings than as a violent automaton programmed to exert violence against tradition so as to instate the reign of the city-factory.

The most effective way in which *La chiave a stella* offsets this absolute alienation of the worker as a mechanical apparatus, harmoniously participating in the pulsating "solidarietà dei motori preoccupati, zelanti e ordinati" (De Maria ed. 100) is through a veritable thought of the hand, as a noble and creative activity that, born of technology itself, turns technology into craftsmanship. The hand detaches technology from the cold exactness of abstract scientific rules as much as from the industrial truth through which the intellectuals of *Il Menabò* wanted to highlight the difference "tra l'uomo *produttore* e l'uomo *nella* produzione, tra l'*homo faber* e l'uomo legato al finalismo produttivistico" (Scalia 105) and denounce the "falsa 'umanizzazione' del macchinismo" (106) and the "falsa 'formalizzazione' scientifico-tecnica dell'umanità produttiva" (106).

Levi's attention to the almost sacred role of the hand can acquire further light if considered in relation with Heidegger's discussion of the work of the hand as a way of opposing a technological reduction of human dealings and expressions to "empty busywork" (*What is*

called thinking 15), just as it transcends the profanity of a notion of thought as conceptual grasping and manipulation, of knowledge as technical productivity in its modern, objectifying sense. For its part, the thought of the hand attempts to restore humanism by eluding the yoke of intellectual serviceability through a recuperation of a cognitive transmission that does not “comprehend” in the sense of “taking hold”. Precisely within the framework of the hand and of handicraft Heidegger sees the possibility of a dialogue between thinking and poetry. As he detaches thinking from the mechanical intellectual work of modern science and technology, Heidegger brings its essence closer to that “fateful gift of truth” (*Thinking* 19), namely, beauty. Beauty—for Heidegger the truth of the poetic word—offers a kind of non-alienated dimension prior to the cleavage between a speculative and rational *logos* and the imagination and emotion of *pathos*—a dimension that thinking and poetry share, as manifestations of the word as craft, hence as *technē*.

If, along the same line, in his *Dialogo* with Tullio Regge, Levi himself praises the activity of the hand as a noble return to origins neglected by an excessive attention to the brain (25), the characters in *La chiave a stella* are no less charmed by and committed to manual activity as a way of recuperating the human substratum of everyday life. Just as the cables of Faussone’s metal towers “a vederli dal basso sembrano fili da cucire” (134), the chemist-writer defines both his jobs through the metaphor of sewing—his task being that of “cucire insieme lunghe molecole” (148-49) as well as of “cucire insieme parole e idee” (149). The human hand that Futurism triumphantly merges with the metal of the machine to which it is subdued, and that Pirandello renders tragically mechanical, is here revitalized and revitalizing in its turn. Indeed, through Faussone’s “mani d’oro [...] lunghe, solide, veloci, molto più espressive del suo viso” (*Chiave* 162), the narrator validates what for him is the Darwinian hypothesis “sulla mano dell’artefice che, fabbricando strumenti e curvando la materia, ha tratto dal torpore il cervello umano, e che ancora lo guida stimola e tira come fa il

cane col padrone cieco” (163). In the conversations between Faussonne and the narrator this intellectual stimulation through thinking “con le mani” (52) translates into veritable *poiesis*, establishing a relationship between *artigianato* and *arte* that functions in both directions: the artisan is an artist, and the artist is an artisan.

The fact that the narrator is both a writer and a chemist (an obvious *alter ego* of Levi himself) hence results particularly significant in this context. In his exchanges with Faussonne, the narrator not only emphasizes the imaginative side of the *mestiere* of rigger and chemist: he also talks about his aesthetic activity as a *mestiere*, hence bringing the three realms of technology, science, and art under the aegis of a manual activity that infuses an almost magical spirituality to the act of making. In Faussonne’s declaration “io l’anima ce la metto in tutti i lavori” (40) as well as in the narrator’s description of enamels as “una razza permalosa” (176) and in their resemblance to human beings for their tricks and pretences (171) we can hence see signs of a re-fetishization of work and of technology that the novel as a whole expresses through a mythopoietic and animistic impulse once again no less pervasive in the Futurist mechanical vitalism. Here, however, it aims at teaching “a essere interi” (52), at “dare la pienezza” (52) to the individual.

Nevertheless, how can *La chiave a stella* save itself from the risk of a reversed ideology with respect to an isolated, standardized and de-humanized *homo technologicus*? Cannot Levi’s almost idyllic recuperation of an unmediated relationship between *humanitas* and *technē* result in an equally totalizing manifesto? With the resurrection of the “I” that the Futurist machine murdered together with the moonshine, and that Pirandello mourned with his mute and impassive cinematographic operator, Levi also reintroduces the unavoidable presence of the “you”, of an "other" who shares the experience of technology and who, by acting as an interlocutor, empathizes with the protagonist but also relativizes his conquests. It

is precisely in the dialogical dimension that *La chiave a stella* deploys the ethical implications of the connection between *ratio* and *aisthesis*, technology and art.

Just as Levi the chemist-writer looks for “ponti che uniscono (o dovrebbero unire) la cultura scientifica con quella letteraria scavalcando un crepaccio che mi è sempre sembrato assurdo” (*L'altrui mestiere* 585), Faussonne the technician reiterates in a more down-to-earth and idealistic way that

i ponti è il piu bel lavoro che sia: perchè si è sicuri che non ne viene del male a nessuno, anzi del bene, perchè sui ponti passano le strade e senza le strade saremmo ancora come i selvaggi; insomma perchè i ponti sono come l'incontrario delle frontiere e le frontiere è dove nascono le guerre” (Levi, *Chiave* 106-107).

Faussonne's guileless pronouncement in favor of peaceful encounters and connections echoes the need, that the novel articulates with its dialogical structure, to put an end to the standardization and abstract universalization of the individual, and to recuperate not only the specificity of the self but also the uniqueness and singularity of “the other”. The dialogue between the scientific and the literary world that the two characters set up through their exchanges while preserving the autonomy of each domain conveys the parallel attempt to conceive of, and to represent, a relationship between Same and Other able to respect the irreducible nature of the alterity to which each one is exposed. In this way Levi goes beyond the Heideggerian ontological perspective, precisely because he does not accept a mode of existence that revolves exclusively around a self-reflexive concept of being, only responsible to and for itself, and rather endorses an ethics of responsibility founded upon an unavoidable relationship with the other.

While the narrator seems to endorse the rigger's assimilation of know-how, reason, pleasure, freedom, and love, he also tries to expose Faussonne to the dynamics of a realm like that of art where, unlike in rigging, the process of making, of *poiesis*, cannot be monitored by “un equivalente affidabile della squadra e del filo a piombo” (47), nor is it possible to

establish that its product is “in bolla d’aria” (47). Therefore, the apparent higher freedom that the literary *faber* seems to enjoy with respect to the material constraints of Faussone’s technical activity entails in fact equally higher risks for the production as well as for the reception of the artifact. If an author writes silly or useless things, either intentionally or unwittingly, “se ne accorge chi legge, quando ormai è troppo tardi, e allora si mette male: anche perchè quella pagina è opera tua e solo tua, non hai scuse nè pretesti, ne rispondi appieno” (47).⁴ While, in and of itself, Faussone’s fantasy of signing his mechanical product may seem dictated by self-complacency for the beauty of the technician’s output, once we connect it with the narrator’s caveats it acquires a different value. Both the iron and the paper product call their respective makers to the duty (and not only to the pride) of authorship as paternity. Contrary to Barthes’s conception of the *text* as an anonymous and orphan production (“From work to text”), what *La chiave a stella* upholds here is rather the *accountability* of the manufacturer--of the technician of metal structures as well as of chains of words--for the *work*, taken precisely as an activity and an object that maintain a bond with the origin of its generating process.

This bond, to be sure, is nourished by the maker’s fondness for his creature, as the narrator claims, supporting Faussone’s own feelings:

dopo finita, la riguardi e pensi che forse vivrà più a lungo di te, e forse servirà a qualcuno che tu non conosci e che non ti conosce. Magari potrai tornare a guardarla da vecchio, e ti sembra bella, e non importa poi tanto se sembra bella solo a te, e puoi dire a te stesso ‘forse un altro non ci sarebbe riuscito’ (12).

Yet it is also based upon the maker’s *answerability* for his manipulation of matter. The intervention of the narrator as writer hence opens up the precision of the mechanical world to the question of ethics by subsuming the category of “work” as “labor” under the category of “work” as “work of art” considered in Emmanuel Levinas’s sense of *ethical*

work, namely, a gesture or event that structures the subject as always already responsible to the Other, prior to logic, moral duty, and intentionality:

The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a “prior to every memory,” an “ulterior to every accomplishment,” from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. (*Otherwise* 10).

We could say that the relationship between Faussone and the narrator determines a shift from the principle of totality, guaranteed by a knowledge resulting from thought as “*adequation* with the object” (*Totality* 27) to that of infinity, in the sense given to it by Levinas, namely, the openness to a notion of subjectivity as hospitality (27), as a reception of Otherness that preserves its character of exteriority, that is not accompanied by the violent hermeneutical attempt to throw full light upon or disclose the Other (28).

It is indeed ethics as the Levinasian response to infinity--as *demésure* and rupture embedded in subjectivity, beyond reification of essence as comprehension, presence, logic--that constitutes the fundamental, originary condition of being. We could say that the practice of literature in *La chiave a stella* is ethical by definition precisely *because* (and not *although*) it does not and cannot rely on the self-identity of an absolute, univocal, universal truth authenticated by the principle of validation as in science. Unlike the materials used by the rigger, which do not allow mistakes, paper “*non protesta mai*” (47), yet its flexibility does not grant larger freedom. Rather, it is its being “*un materiale troppo tollerante*” (47) that renders the artisan of words responsible towards and for the other in a relation that, as in Levinas, precedes individual freedom.

Precisely as he underscores the maker’s ethical condition of radical answerability, the narrator of *La chiave a stella* can also be said to endorse the irreducibility of the Levinasian Other. His warning to Faussone to be cautious with similes (78) is an instance of the caution he himself adopts in his exchanges with his interlocutor, sensitive to his uniqueness, beyond

abstractions and generalizations. By emphasizing the need to refrain from evaluating or interfering with Faussone's personality or choices, the narrator conceives of an interpersonal relationship founded upon "un'arte dell'ascoltare" (33) rather than simply upon that of narrating as a centripetal and intentional movement that conveys meaning to the other without questioning the solidity of the self. The passivity implied by the art of listening does not only confirm the form of writing as bearing witness that characterizes much of Levi's works. It also evokes the passivity of Levinas's communication as exposition of a vulnerable subjectivity, as patience, as inadequacy of the self to itself (*Otherwise* 53-54) and hence simultaneously erases the passivity of Adorno's Odysseus, namely, the imposed or self-imposed impotence of the cunning individual aiming at self-preservation. Where the adventures of the Homeric rationalizing archetype trace an itinerary from Sameness to Sameness, the voyage of reason and of a totalizing self back to itself (*Totality* 27), the responsibility towards the other that the narrator of *La chiave a stella* advocates implies an exodus from oneself without return, the explosion of the originary and absolute unit of the self.

Ultimately, the narrator recognizes not only the impossibility of the attempt to speak of the other on behalf of the other, but above all the unethical quality of such a move. And, symptomatically, he resorts to the scientific paradigm not so much to reinstate the universal power of its conceptual tools but rather to show the limits of its agency upon human matter, its inability to account for the alterity of the "you", and the need to abstain:

È già difficile per il chimico antivedere, all'infuori dell'esperienza, l'interazione fra due molecole semplici; del tutto impossibile predire cosa avverrà all'incontro di due molecole moderatamente complesse. Che predire sull'incontro di due esseri umani? [...] Nulla: nulla di sicuro, nulla di probabile, nulla di onesto. Meglio sbagliare per omissione che per commissione: meglio astenersi dal governare il destino degli altri, dal momento che è già così difficile ed incerto pilotare il proprio (Levi 167).

We are hence asked to accept that the recognition and the respect of the other cannot but come from the recognition of the inadequacy of *logos*, of the language of identity and of identification, of the powerlessness of speculative reason and of its practical application, of verbal technology, to represent the other.

From the abstract standardization of the Futurist myth of the mechanized individual that still conceals underneath its metal case the imperialism of subjectivity, *La chiave a stella* takes us to the opposite asymmetry, that of the Levinasian ethical subject, hostage of an irreducible alterity that interrogates the subject while defying disclosure and knowledge. In Levi the thought of the hand rehumanizes technology, recuperates its relationship with the individual, but does not consolidate an intersubjective dimension founded upon mutual verbal and emotional exchange. Significantly, the dialogues between Faussone and the narrator remain at the level of the "lei", the more distant courtesy form.

How to go beyond this radically singular Other that resists both assimilation to and exclusion from the self? Can technology offer the possibility of an approach to the other that reestablishes reciprocity? A positive answer can be found in *Atlante Occidentale* by Daniele Del Giudice, the story of a fortuitous encounter between an elderly German writer--Ira Epstein-- and a young Italian physicist--Pietro Brahe--who share a passion for flying and who gradually develop a friendship based upon exchanges about the challenges they face in their respective professions. Through the machine, Del Giudice gradually establishes a symmetrical ethical relationship, mapping on his atlas the coordinates of a voyage towards alterity that he constructs as intersubjective, interdiscursive, and interemotional.⁵

2. “*Atlante occidentale*: Daniele Del Giudice’s vision machine”

The Futurist intoxicating experience of speed and energy--absent from the technological world of *La chiave a stella*—resonates at the opening of Del Giudice's novel, when Pietro Brahe is getting ready for take-off “aspettando che l'hangar, la pompa di benzina e l'ufficio del noleggio scivolassero sempre più veloci ai lati” (3) and when he perceives as “pura velocità contro di lui” (3) the approaching of Epstein's plane that will almost hit him, and force him to an emergency landing. And it is the echo of the “ampio petto” (De Maria ed. 11) of Marinetti's locomotives or of the “volo scivolante degli aeroplani, la cui elica garrisce al vento come una bandiera e sembra applaudire come una folla entusiasta” (11) that we can hear in Del Giudice's planes with a “pancia bianca” (*Atlante* 3) and endowed with personalities and voices (3; 11). However, what may seem at first a return of the technological myth of the Futurist machine conceals in fact a crucial difference. If in flight Marinetti feels “il petto aprirsi come un gran buco ove tutto l'orizzonte del cielo deliziosamente s'ingolfava liscio fresco e torrenziale” (De Maria ed. 136), for his part, Pietro Brahe, sitting in his plane at the opening of the novel, thinks that his position “era in realtà l'adeguamento a tutto quanto, dall'aereo e da fuori, gli veniva incontro, compresa la sua faccia, resa anamorfica dal sole sulla curvatura del plexiglas” (*Atlante* 3). In Marinetti's chest swallowing the whole environment while relishing the “massaggio feroce e colorante del vento impazzito” (De Maria ed. 136) as a sign of the “Vittoria del nostro io sui perfidi complotti del nostro Peso, che vuole assassinare a tradimento la nostra velocità trascinandola in un buco d'immobilità” (136), we can recognize the Futurist voluptuousness inseparable from the magnification of an aggressive and all-encompassing “I.” For his part, Brahe's body adapting to and merging with the environment, rather than greedily devouring its surrounding, is in many ways symbolic of the ethical message of the novel.

If, as Paul Virilio insistently observes, the dynamic performances of the Futurist inhuman metallic type represent the point of arrival of a “dromological evolutionism” (*Speed*

and Politics 62) that conceals the disablement of the individual's body and intellect behind the apparent super-empowerment of the "bellicose dandy" (62), Del Giudice's own way of reducing distances and negating space through the machine is, for its part, in the service of unification rather than of "penetration and destruction" (*Speed* 133). It is precisely the initial failed collision between Brahe and Epstein, the *non-occurrence* of a violent impact, that opens up the space for a different role of speed and technology. Be it the plane that accidentally favors the encounter between the two protagonists and soon-to-be friends, or the underground accelerating ring that creates interactions among sub-atomic particles, or the mechanisms of Epstein's imagination and writing that strive to keep a link between words and things in a complex reality, the machine in Del Giudice's text is a catalyst for promoting and multiplying intersections, encounters, exchanges animated by attraction, seduction, emotional and aesthetic affinities.

Above all, on a more general level, we have the interaction and convergence of science and literature--embodied by the friendship of Brahe and Epstein, and founded upon their communal recognition of the new conception of matter coming from quantum physics. It is neither Marinetti's sensuous and malleable steel, nor the tangible and more or less tolerant elements of *La chiave a stella*—iron and paper--but rather "una materia infinitesimale e virtuale" (46), an entity like light--itself simultaneously matter and action--"non circoscritta, senza solidità" (156), "la cosa più comune che ci sia, molto più comune del legno e del metallo, eppure [...] la più privata" (157). Yet Del Giudice builds more than a rational alliance between the two characters: the fellowship that binds Brahe and Epstein through the machine is a friendship of two minds as much as a mutual sharing of personalities, experiences, and emotions, that leads *Atlante Occidentale* beyond the imbalance of *La chiave a stella* in terms of intellectual sophistication, openness to crossing of disciplinary borders, and readiness to be exposed to and defamiliarized by the other. The

challenge of *Atlante Occidentale* is that of constructing, through the experience of technology, an ethical dimension based not so much upon the cleavage between the self and an absolute alterity but rather upon communication, yet without simultaneously falling back into the universalising power of *logos* as reason and identity.⁶

Both the writer's effort to go beyond form as a way of changing his "rapporto tra l'etica e la forma" (32) and the physicist's investigation within the realm of quantum mechanics, that erases the difference between ontology and epistemology (Antonello 129-46), suggest a connection with the Levinasian ethical movement beyond essences, which, significantly, Del Giudice seems to reinforce even further with his characters' insistence on the experience of vision. Yet, this apparent *rapprochement* with Levinas also allows us to grasp the divergence between the two ethical positions.

Although for Levinas the self's unity can be lacerated and penetrated by the Other's radical alterity only through a "Saying" that is "Exposure to Another" (*Otherwise* 48), "being at the question before any interrogation" (49), and prior to any "said [...] as a noema of an intentional act [...] supported by a subject" (46), ultimately the foundation of the ethical relation according to Levinas does not lie in expression as discursivity. Rather, what for him is the "primordial *expression*" (*Totality* 199) consists of the revelation of the face, "the epiphany of the face as a face" (75) whose gaze directed towards the self establishes "a relation between me and the other beyond rhetoric" (75), a non-verbal bond that is based upon sensitivity. This non-discursive ethical relation is a "*proximité* entre Moi et l'interlocuteur" [a proximity between Myself and my interlocutor] ("Langage et proximité", *En Découvrant* 224. Transl. mine), an immediate contact with the Other in terms of "tendresse et responsabilité" (225) [tenderness and responsibility], the approach of subjectivity to a singularity that defies thematization and representation, and that manifests itself as "peau et visage humain" (225) [human skin and face] piercing the individual

conscience. This ethical dimension for Levinas is in itself signification, “langage originel, fondement de l’autre” (225) [original language, foundation of the other] yet at the same time it has to be considered “une relation avec une singularité placée hors du thème du discours et qui, par le discours, n’est pas thématisée, mais est approchée” (224) [a relationship with a singularity placed outside the theme of discourse, and that is not thematized by discourse but rather approached].

The privileged ethical significance of the non-verbal, and, in particular, of the visual and of the tactile, is also the foundation of the relationship between Epstein and Brahe. However, in his own way of going beyond essences through vision and contact Del Giudice offers the possibility of suturing the wounds of the Levinasian vulnerable self, exposed--naked, passive, and *patients*—to the Other. For this purpose, Del Giudice makes seeing and saying work together. Accompanied by words, vision creates a form of proximity between self and other as feeling together and sharing experiences.

Still in the airfield, right after the risk of collision, Epstein envisions the positions and gestures of the people around him as “una serie istantanea di idee di sè e immagini dell’altro che scorrevano del tutto invisibili” (14) underneath the sentences and the perceptions that made up that network of interpersonal exchanges. Likewise, at the accelerating ring, Brahe monitors “una materia infinitesimale e virtuale” (46), the impact, bouncing, exchange and transformation of “entità piccole e invisibili come un’idea” (46). It is this imperceptible and immediate quality that characterizes the material and human reality of the novel. Objects, people, actions manifests themselves in micro-situations, as occasional and discrete moments of vision and expression that recall the undetectable twitching of Nathalie Sarraute’s “tropismes”,⁷ and that are presented as efforts and tests, as “un esperimento” (76) rather than already extant data or unproblematic accomplishments. The whole novel, we could say, is a macro-tropism representing the minute perceptive and

emotional turnings and stirrings that mark the birth and development of Brahe's and Epstein's friendship, based upon the sharing of this sort of visual, communicative and ethical experiment in which rationality and imagination cooperate and converge.

If we refer once again to the apocalyptic dromological forecast of Paul Virilio, based upon the Futurist technological evolutionism, we can say that Del Giudice's novel hence presents the opposite of what Virilio defines as "the new technology of 'visionics'" ("Vision Machine" 134), namely an industrialization of vision, the automation of perception, sightless, synthetic vision created by the machine for the machine itself. Although *Atlante Occidentale* belongs to the latest phase of a technological world, and thematizes it in its narration, it could not be more removed from the prospect of the "automatic-perception prosthesis" (135) in Virilio's scenario, functioning "like a kind of mechanized imaginary" (135) from which the living subject is excluded. Rather, it is as though the attraction of both characters for matter and visibility grew proportionally to their disappearance, and even stimulated the writer and the physicist to create objects of vision to compensate for their absence, because, as another character in the novel—Wang-- observes, "per vedere bisogna avere la forza di produrre ciò che si vuol vedere. [...] ci vuole una grande intenzione e una grande energia" (43).

Precisely through intention and energy Brahe and Epstein can be said to overturn the passivity and the lack of intentionality that characterize the Levinasian ethical subject *subjected to* the infinity and transcendence of the Other. Yet, at the same time, they establish a relationship between Same and Other that passes--as in Levinas--through a relationship with things, in which things are not objects of knowledge nor merchandise but rather elements that, in the act of being donated to the other, abolish self-identity and separation, insofar as they become catalysts for a communifying bond.⁸

After thirty years of literary activity in which he has traversed writing in all its forms, Epstein acknowledges he begins "appena a vedere" (31), precisely when things are beginning

to turn into "*non cose*" (77). His passion for objects led him to perceive and feel each of them as endowed with "una sua vita; non solo quella della materia, lavorata in forma, la sua vita era il pensiero che c'era dietro il comportamento in cui si prolungava" (66-67). Therefore, perceiving and feeling lead Epstein beyond the animism of the Futurist technological world as well as beyond its re-humanizing revision by the characters of *La chiave a stella*. For Epstein they also highlight, and ultimately accomplish, the "possibilità di amicizia" (67) between people *through* the making and the circulation of objects that Faussonne and his interlocutor had contemplated theoretically in their exchanges on matter and *technē* as the work of the hand or realized individually, in their respective activities, but not really experienced together. Epstein, whose task has always been that of *relating* (in the sense of both narrating and connecting) things to people and people to things, can hear a voice even in a mass produced object, a voice that hence creates a privileged bond with him, and shows him how, similarly, "esisteva una relazione con gli altri, con molti altri, attraverso le cose che ci sono nel proprio tempo, attraverso il fare che non era soltanto fare gli oggetti ma molto di più" (67).⁹ Yet how can this emotional attachment to objects as the embodiments of an infinite variety of actions, behaviors, and personalities-- hence as an ethical carrier-- survive in a reality in which "le cose stanno scomparendo" (70)?

If making, and the machine in the service of making, are the tools for building up interpersonal relationships, with the disappearance of matter it is *seeing* that replaces the ethical work *of* matter and *on* matter. But significantly, this seeing is not the equivalent of "understanding" as the triumph of rationality, of "enlightenment" as acquisition of knowledge, nor a know-how as an instrumental use or violent appropriation of things. Rather, once light is no longer "sfondo di un'azione" (55), "contorno delle cose" (55) but actually at once thing and action itself, and in constant change, it is only possible to see indirectly, precisely *to believe to have seen* quantities, energies and movements, "intuire e immaginare"

(80). Indeed, Brahe strives to “trattenere le forme che ha appena visto, o creduto di vedere; [...], vorrebbe che avessero la solidità di un punto esterno contro cui rimbalzare, vorrebbe isolarle una per una, disporle con un certo ordine, toccarle” (154). Yet within the accelerating ring this order and solidity can only be found in the machines to be used for the experiments—“ordinate e disponibili, come un vocabolario” (81)-- but not in their object of inquiry, constantly shifting “dall’onda alla forma all’onda, da un nome a un altro nome” (86).

It is through *poiesis* that this indirect vision compensates for the inadequacy of technology to grant access to the concreteness of matter—through a creative faculty that provides “un’immagine mentale” (86) of that which “si era generato per trasformarsi subito in tutt’altro” (80), and which hence cannot be seized through the criterion of truth but rather through that of probability. The law of probability that governs Brahe’s subatomic world “non proibisce quello che può accadere, nè indica un modo unico in cui può accadere, ma riconosce che può accadere tutto ciò che accade, tranne quello che è vietato” (86). Beyond the context of quantum physics, this sort of tautological statement that points at rules and constraints without defining them a priori, but only after they have been validated by praxis, that is, by the events that they are supposed to regulate in a specific context, can also be taken as the ethical law of the novel. Indeed, probability in *Atlante Occidentale* defines a contingent, cautious and almost bashful approach to otherness that, as Epstein claims, “è una grande forma di rispetto” (104) precisely because it does not abandon models *tout court* but rather remains “vicina a ciò che accade fino alla coincidenza, eppure separata” (104). Significantly Del Giudice himself privileges probability over mere certainty in the domain of literary creation because it takes “il sentimento” (Borsari ed. 9) as the only possible verification to the detriment of abstract theoretical conventions. And it is precisely by accepting probability as a synthesis of “precisione” and “stupore” (*Atlante* 108) that Epstein persists in his efforts at building a model of reality through description, since in the inability

to describe something to somebody “c’è qualcosa di amorale, come del resto c’è qualcosa di assolutamente morale in una buona descrizione. Non aver bisogno di raccontare è l’unica cosa che incrina la felicità del vedere oltre la forma” (77-78).

Indeed, just as Brahe deals with a condition of matter in which, despite the impossibility of a direct access to the object of study, nor of defining it univocally, “un’idea o un modello non vengono mai abbandonati del tutto” (104), the novel does not simply nullify the viability of graphs and codes but rather modifies their nature and function. From descriptions of methodologies for the acquisition of knowledge about an observable reality, it transforms them into the incarnation of shared emotions, the manifestation of an urge for empathy, cohesion, togetherness.¹⁰ Thus, Epstein would like to divide up space with even more time zones but not before turning them into “linee di azione” (16) connecting “tutti quelli che in questo istante bevono succo di lampone da Tokyo a Buenos Aires [...]; o tutti quelli che si sfiorano una guancia con la mano, o tutti quelli che guardano l’orologio pensando che altrove è un’altra ora” (15).

The intense “desiderio di complicità” (16) that for Epstein instills in people an attraction for other people’s actions, is precisely what pushes Brahe to picture the accelerating ring less as a technological device with a practical scientific function than as a connector of human gestures and intentions, surmising that, “*probabilmente*” (22. My emphasis) also the researchers in the other sections of the ring “si appoggiavano alle spalliere delle sedie, passavano le braccia dietro lo schienale, stiravano le spalle, si stropicciavano gli occhi o la faccia con le mani” (22). Brahe’s imaginative visions condense the ethical import of “probability” highlighted throughout the novel insofar as they infuse affection into his projection towards others, against all the odds of divisions generated by competition, linguistic barriers, and logistic constraints: “pensava all’amicizia, a quello strano tipo di solidarietà nel fare che nasceva in posti come questi, in notti come queste, nel silenzio di hall

smisuratamente grandi come queste, soli tra machine smisuratamente grandi isolate talvolta da blocchi di beton per le radiazioni” (23). Similarly, the design of the machine under construction on the blueprint that Brahe submits to Wang does not simply trace the distribution of tasks and of parts of the projects among research teams of different countries. It also outlines the communal thought and work of an international collaboration, “punti di collimazione” (46) that are above all the graphic sign of a scientific and technological activity providing unity despite the diversity of each researcher.

To this “comunanza di gesti ed emozioni” (164) there responds the ultimate unification of different forces that manifests itself in the “simmetria così radicale e sorprendente” (164) of the traces left by the particles in collision. The successful, final experiment with “una macchina così grande, e una geometria così raffinata, e una matematica tanto complessa” (167) in which Brahe can *see* for the first time and find a proof of “una legge simultanea della differenza e dell’identità” (164) able to subsume phenomena that so far appeared as “manifestazioni di forze diverse e separate” (164) becomes also the seal of friendship, an occasion for elevating the value of emotional communication, for treasuring the significance of “una collettività insonne e stupefatta, nella quale ciascuno rinunciava alla propria lingua per scambiare semplicemente occhiate e sorrisi e piccoli scuotimenti di testa, più comunicativi di ogni parola” (165).

This communicability that abolishes the division of each individuality as much as of each physical force comes from an event that is not only radical and surprising but, significantly, also “[c]osì incredibilmente bello” (164). Be it in the domain of nature, where “la vera bellezza” (168) translates the solidarity and coherence of phenomena, or in the field of human relations, where for instance—as Gilda observes—the simple fact of Epstein’s existence provides people with “un piccolo sentimento di comunità [...] con tutto quello che c’è oggi, e con gli altri” (132-33), the foundation for the sense of kinship that the novel

pursues lies precisely in the purposeless cohesion offered by the aesthetic dimension, by the Kantian notion of the beautiful as *sensus communis*, the very disposition towards aestheticization as disinterestedness that makes Epstein happy “che anche l’utile stesse diventando a colori” (97) or that pushes him to construct the elements of his stories “senza finalit ” (34).

The total synthesis offered by Brahe’s vision, therefore, also completes the work of harmonization between the scientific and the aesthetic realm, and in so doing, it definitively authenticates the communion between the two protagonists that had already been symbolically announced by a flight together, in the same aircraft--which is, of course, also a way of erasing their initial risk of collision with one another. The novel significantly closes on the symmetry and the simultaneity of their respective actions and visions, arguably a trace of the Futurist “simultaneit  dinamica”. Yet here simultaneity emphasizes the absolute reciprocity that binds the two characters, reiterating the naturalization of mechanical perception, rather than, as in the Futurists, the mechanization of natural perception. The "protesi gigantesca" (166)--the detector--with which the researcher can now see and deal with the new, unrepresentable, dimensions of matter does play the role of what "un tempo era destinato a un organo percettore come l'orecchio o la bocca o i polpastrelli o l'occhio o il naso" (166). However Del Giudice does not present this substitution of physical senses with technical functions as a source of factitious and instrumental virtual images, nor does he locate in the "splitting of viewpoint" (“Virilio “Vision” 134) between living subject and the seeing machine a cause of de-sensitization. Far from yielding to the automation of feeling and perception, the eye, the mouth and the heart rather accept new challenges, new experiments: if, as Epstein claims, "la lettera non   irriducibile" (147), the new experiment will be precisely to capture and share the energy behind it, that leads to the production of an image, a gesture, a verbal tense, or "un sentimento" (147).

The novel, we could say, wants to avoid the danger of an "industrialization of the non-gaze" (Virilio "Vision" 147) through a coincidence of reality principle and reality effect through a vision of the invisible which is at the same time a visionary approach to the visible. Significantly, Epstein defines himself as "un visionario di ciò che esiste, un visionario di quello che c'è" (67). Indeed, if after the death of the "classical intervals of space and time" (Virilio "Vision" 148)--already announced by the Futurist founding manifesto--the "new *absolute*" ("Vision" 148) of the speed of light annuls the delay entailed by the "principle of *communication*" (148) and replaces it with "the principle of instantaneous emission and reception *change-over*" (148), Brahe declares his love for this absolute speed (*Atlante* 53), to be sure, but concurrently recognizes that "c'è un tempo delle emozioni che non va assolutamente con questo tempo, e senza emozione mi pare che una cosa non sia intera, che non si fissi nella memoria" (52). And it is precisely with this uncharted, perhaps unchartable (and yet probable hence authentic) territory of emotions and communication that we are left in the final scene, where for the first time the two protagonists address each other with the "tu"--a "punto di non ritorno" (110) in their friendship, as it had been defined earlier in the novel. Of the outcome of this ethical conquest promoted through the machine the novel does not say anything else. It simply records its occurrence, as the detector has done with the subatomic particles in collision. Nobody will write a follow-up, as Epstein claims, but this does not mean that the event is negligible. On the contrary, precisely because the letter is not irreducible, and precisely to protect this ultimate and total communion between the two protagonists from a reduction to interpretation,¹¹ it is the *pathos*, the empathy of the occurrence that matters most: the important thing --we read--is not to write its story, but rather, "provarne un sentimento" (173).

4. Poet(h)ics: the making of otherness

“La matière, investie comme objet et outil dans le monde, c’est aussi, par l’humain, la matière qui m’obsède par sa proximité. La poésie du monde n’est pas séparable de la proximité par excellence ou de la proximité du prochain par excellence” (Levinas, “Langage et proximité” 228).

From the Futurist myth of the seductive and worshipped steel alcove, with its dark side of violence and domination of the other, we have seen technology transmute into the revitalizing and domesticated technical fetishes of *La chiave a stella*, and ultimately generate the radical and beautiful symmetry and simultaneity produced by the relation-building machines of *Atlante Occidentale*. In this trajectory, what is generally taken as the desacralizing operation with which a profane and self-referential technology invades and vanquishes the world of symbol has rather emerged as a resacralization of the world by a technology that is itself intrinsically and overtly symbolic.¹²

Indeed, the effect of Levi’s and Del Giudice’s own way of overcoming the cleavage between science and literature as has emerged from *La chiave a stella* and *Atlante occidentale* is neither that of debunking the mythical character of the rational and the operational altogether, nor that of unmasking the allegedly false neutrality of technology. In an age of mechanical reproduction that seems systematically to break illusions and stifle originality and inspiration in favor of the practical and instrumental, their challenge is, rather, to show that it is possible to reenchant the world through technology itself, without either falling back into the snares of the master narratives or indicting the allegiance of myth and machine as the cause of a mass deception that deprives the individual of both reason and aesthetics.¹³ As wary of the stultifying influence of the mechanical over the physical, emotional and intellectual spheres, as of its reversed double, namely, the unlimited power and hubris of a dehumanized being devoted to the cult of unlimited progress, their bridge over the

chasm of the two cultures is the idea of a material and cultural output able to reconcile means and ends, to conceive of a productive knowledge that is also aesthetic and ethical.

Put in the service of the everyday and of the imperceptible, the work of the mechanical and human matter in Levi and Del Giudice has led us gradually to what I would define as a *poet(h)ics* of technology, that is, an alliance of *poiesis*, poetics, and ethics.¹⁴ *Technē* returns through a concrete relationship with matter that is regulated by the law of exactness but that is simultaneously a making as a form of creative labor, therefore founded upon aesthetic principles, and delimiting not simply the locus of the human but an arena for the survival or the resurrection of the interhuman—beyond the response to otherness and the answerability for otherness as obsessive proximity, and towards the proximity of the other as sympathy, sharing, symmetry.

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NOTES

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²Heidegger further emphasizes the gap between “making” in modern technology and in art, while simultaneously underlining a certain affinity in terminology, by calling attention to the difference between *Ge-stellen*—“enframing” as the technological mode of producing and presenting, based on a cause and effect logic that “entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces” (21)—and *Dar-stellen*—“representation” as the *poietic* form of production and presentation in terms of creation and bringing forth. Technological “enframing”, according to Heidegger, blocks representation and hence destroys “the mystery of all revealing, i.e. of truth” (33) as *aletheia*.

³For an exhaustive treatment of the myth of the machine in early 20th-century Italian literature see Tessari.

⁴ For a discussion of the literary author’s responsibility and answerability see Attridge. For a treatment of the communicative value of the act of writing and of its rules in *La chiave a stella* see Segre and Verdenelli.

⁵As I hope to show, no less than in *La chiave a stella*, the dialogical and empathic dimension of *Atlante occidentale* does not aim at eliminating the specificity of each character or of the discipline it represents. Del Giudice, as he himself declared in an interview soon after the publication of his novel, is not interested in transforming literature into science (“non credo che la letteratura debba essere come la scienza. Non credo che la letteratura debba essere come nessun’altra cosa” “Il tempo del visibile” 70). He even opposes readings of *Atlante occidentale* in terms of the “two cultures” debate, if this amounts to a discussion of a theoretical or gnoseological question treating science as mere culture. Rather, Del Giudice wants to tackle “un problema di tipo esistenziale e comportamentale” (70) This is why he represents “*scienza e tecnologia in atto*” (70), as elements of everyday life, a life in which the nature of things has changed, inducing “un diverso sentimento delle cose” (70) and, consequently, “un sentimento di sé nuovo” (70). For its part, my emphasis on the status and role of the technological object would like to show how, precisely in the realm of *praxis* this new perception of the self entailed by the new reality also implies a certain way of relating to the other. It is in this sense that, through technology, the interaction of science and literature in *Atlante occidentale* takes on an ethical value.

⁶Significantly, Epstein refuses to choose suicide as the conclusion of one of his plots because for him “il suicidio è un’improvvisa impennata dell’io, un’inspiegabile uscita dalla relazione” (69).

⁷As Sarraute herself explains in an interview, what she means by “tropismes” “c’est un certain ordre de sensations, de mouvements intérieurs qui n’existent que dans le subconscient, dans une sorte d’obscurité et qu’il faut recréer...pas ‘exprimer’” (Sarraute in De Rambures *Comment travaillent* 149). The writer’s challenge is to give a form to

this invisible and indiscernible dimension—to transform tropisms into language, to translate sensations into concrete images, without recurring to “une forme préexistante” (151).

In addition to Del Giudice’s peculiar use of the present perfect, which records and reproduces the immediacy, the taking place of occurrences that do not exist prior to the narrative act, *Atlante occidentale* seems to reproduce Sarraute’s “frottement continué” (151) through which tropisms relate sensation to the search for a form and to writing. Very often, indeed, Del Giudice concentrates on imperceptible and unprecedented occurrences and sensations that take shape under the narrator’s eye as the narrator himself translates them into narrative form, as, for instance, in the following passage: “Parlando, poi, non badava tanto alle parole, ma a una serie di segnali invisibili di posizione, piccolissimi mutamenti nella tensione del corpo, nella direzione delle spalle, sue e di Gilda, a un flusso che gli sembrava di perdere e di ritrovare continuamente” (132). Or, again “Ci sono piccoli rumori delle sedie, sullo sfondo di piccoli rumori del giardino, o anche semplici rumori dell’accavallare e disaccavallare le gambe, o rumori del respiro, dai quali ciascuno di loro due, nel buio, percepisce la sospensione dell’altro” (148).

⁸ For Levinas, “[t]he generality of the Object is correlative with the generosity of the subject going to the Other, beyond the egoist and solitary enjoyment, and hence making the community of the goods of this world break forth from the exclusive property of enjoyment” (*Totality* 76). Therefore, it is “across the world of possessed things” (76), through giving instead of simple construction of things, that it is possible to “recognize the Other” (76), and hence to pass “from the individual to the general” (76), to “establish community and universality” (76).

⁹ Del Giudice himself seems to corroborate Epstein’s treatment of objects, as he observes: “Il mondo delle cose è importante perché le cose sono oggetti di proiezioni e di desiderio, sono molto più legate al sentire che non al mondo economico-materiale” (Borsari ed. 11). For his part, Epstein is perplexed each time that he comes across objects “astratti dal comportamento, sopravvissuti ai gesti, ai sentimenti” (*Atlante* 96).

¹⁰ Precisely in a “diagram of feeling independent of event” (in Baranski and Pertile eds. 97) Anna Dolfi locates “the form beyond form [...], the meaning behind things” (97) that animates Del Giudice’s search.

¹¹ As Ricci observes, communication is reduced to “interpretation only when there is an active resistance to non-sense” (Ricci 50).

¹² Miquel and Ménard propose to subsume these two apparently opposite movements of desacralization and resacralization traced by the technical object under the term *dissacralisation* (338). Although, as they recognize, the term had already been introduced by S. Aquaviva, Miquel and Menard adopt it to designate technology as the coexistence and simultaneity (instead of the mutual exclusion or parallelism) of a rational and operational thought—on the one hand—and of an aesthetic, mythical, symbolic process, on the other.

¹³ The mechanism of “stupore” (“I tempi” 88), as Del Giudice clarifies, allows him precisely to avoid the extremes of faith and disenchantment, of absolute irrationality and of total rationality, of a progressive horizon and of a nostalgic sense of radical loss. As Del Giudice claims in a more recent occasion, “di disincanto siamo tutti capaci, il

problema è di produrre reincanto. Come produrre reincanto oggi?” (Borsari ed. 15). Even though the Barthesian phase of the myths of the present is by now outdated, according to Del Giudice, what one must not forget is that in the pervasiveness of things and references of our daily life there is mystery, as well. “Il mistero dell’oggetto è il mistero del perché, nonostante le intenzioni, nonostante la forma, nonostante tutto, quella cosa ha un carattere particolare. [...] Il mistero ad esempio del mondo delle macchine è che conservano qualche cosa del mito tutto prosaicizzato, qualche cosa del nostro mitico rapporto col mondo animale” (Borsari ed. 15).

It is in this very perspective that also Levi’s *La chiave a stella* transcends, for instance, the standpoints on literature and industry in *Il Menabò*: Levi shows that it is possible to humanize technology without either sublimating it by reinstating “un *regnum hominis* ‘umanistico’, contemplativo” (Scalia 106), or spiritualizing and aestheticizing the mechanical reality depriving it of a new and creative human dimension. For Scalia, both outcome would “sottrarre allo scrittore la responsabilità di una conoscenza drammatica e *positiva* della realtà, constringerlo a una nostalgia delle origini ‘naturali’” (106) rather than opening up to the new human landscape, to the new technological dimension of our reality.

¹⁴In Eskin’s *Ethics and dialogue*, the term “poethics” is adopted to define the dialogical dimension intrinsic to Celan’s poetic performance as a reception of Mandel’stham’s own poetry, and the critic’s own attitude *vis-à-vis* his object of inquiry (Eskin 162). Before Eskin, “poethics” appeared in Weisberg’s *Poethics* to account for the “deeply ethical aspects” (Weisberg 34) of the “poetic substance” (34) of literature, seen as a substantive source of learning for legal studies. However, its French equivalent, “poétique”, had been introduced as early as 1979 in the journal *Dérives* by the Québécois poet Philippe Haeck. In his article “Poétique des *Herbes Rouges*” Haeck underscores the need for a poetics able to step out of authoritarian and normative languages which, like uniforms, “font disparaître l’être humain, au profit de son rôle social” (Haeck 103) and stifle “une vie intense, sentie” (104).

While partially overlapping with these definitions of “poet(h)ics”, which to a greater or lesser extent, all emphasize the connection between ethics and poetics or aesthetics, my own way of conceiving the term would like to insist on the fundamental role of *poiesis* as *making* in this intersection. Although obviously contained in “poetics” itself, in the present discussion of the role of technology as *technē* in Levi and Del Giudice, *poiesis* becomes a fundamental aspect that needs to be made explicit.