

Preface

Between 1974 and 1976 I met regularly in Paris with Italo Calvino and Claudio Rugafori to define the program of a review. The project was ambitious, and our conversations, which often were not entirely focused, followed the dominant motifs and muffled echoes of each of our interests. We were, however, in agreement about one thing: one section of the review was to be dedicated to the definition of what we called “Italian categories.” It was a matter of identifying nothing less than the categorial structures of Italian culture through a series of conjoined polar concepts. Claudio immediately suggested *architecture/vagueness* (that is, the domination of the mathematical-architectonic order alongside the perception of beauty as something vague). Italo had already been ordering images and themes along the coordinates of *speed/lightness*. Working on the essay on the title of the *Divine Comedy* that opens this collection, I proposed that we explore several oppositions: *tragedy/comedy*, *law/creature*, *biography/fable*.

For reasons that need not be clarified here, the project was never realized. Once we had returned to Italy, we all—if in different ways—confronted the political change that was already under way and that was to impress the 1980s with its dark seal. It was obviously a time not for programmatic definitions, but for resistance and flight. Echoes of our common project can be found in Italo’s *American Lectures*, as well as in a large notebook that has remained

among his papers. For my part, I attempted to establish the physiognomy of the project, before it was definitively canceled, in the "program for a review" published *in limine* in *Infancy and History*. (Those who are interested may look in those pages for the provisional list of categories in their original, problematic context.)

In their own way, the eight studies collected here (the first of which dates from the time of the project, the last of which was finished in 1995) remain faithful to this program. In the course of time, other categories came to be added to those rudimentary first ones (*mother tongue* / *grammatical language*; *living language* / *dead language*; *style* / *manner*). At the same time, the project of a definition of these categories gradually gave way to a study of the general problems in poetics that they implied. Each of the essays in this book thus seeks to define a general problem of poetics with respect to an exemplary case in the history of literature. The inquiry into the reasons for the title of Dante's *Comedy* makes it possible to cast new light on the comedy/tragedy opposition at the beginning of Romance poetry; a reading of *Hypnerotomachia Polifili* and Pascoli considers the problem of the relation between living language and dead language as a fundamental internal tension in the poetics of modernity; the introduction to the poetic work of a contemporary Italian writer, Antonio Delfini, functions as an occasion to reformulate the old problem of the relation between life and poetry and to define the principle of narrative in Romance literatures as an invention of lived experience on the basis of poetry; and, finally, an analysis of one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, Giorgio Caproni, defines the act of writing with respect to the dialectical tension of style and manner.

In "*Corn: From Anatomy to Poetics*" and "The End of the Poem," the subject of study shifts to the problem of the specific structure of the poem itself. These two essays are thus to be understood as a first contribution to a philosophy and criticism of meter that do not yet exist. The first of these essays, which examines Arnaut Daniel's obscene *sirventes*, develops Roman Jakobson's problem of the relation between sound and sense; the second, which lends its title to the book as a whole, considers the end of

the poem as a point of crisis that is in every sense fundamental to the structure of poetry.

The initial program of a systematic grid of the categories bearing on Italian culture nevertheless remains unfinished, and this book merely offers a torso of the idea of which we once tried to catch sight. It is therefore dedicated to the memory not only of companionship, but also of the one among us who is no longer present to bear witness to it.