

## 7 *Uomini e no*: Elio Vittorini's Dogs and Sacrificial Humanism

### Human

[Le bourreau] peut tuer un homme, mais il ne peut pas le changer en autre chose.<sup>1</sup>

But perhaps not every man is a man; and not all humanity is humanity (...). One persecutes and another is persecuted. You can kill a man and he will be all the more a man [*más hombre*]. And so a sick man, a starving man, is all the more a man; and humanity dying of hunger is humanity all the more.<sup>2</sup>

The most intriguing aspect of Vittorini's novel *Uomini e no*, in my view, is what seems an almost self-evident but, upon closer inspection, rather puzzling assumption this novel sets out to prove, namely that the victim, or the abused, is always more human than the perpetrator, or the abuser. This fundamentally Christian conviction – connected to a New Testament humanism of turning the other cheek, Jesus's identification with the 'lamb' facing the 'wolves', his promise of salvation for the weak – understands the sacrifices made and the suffering endured *by* but also *for* the other human as the ultimate sign of humility and humanity. It is a powerful and *sympathetic* stance that one might refer to as 'sacrificial humanism'.

This essay investigates the dialectic of de- and rehumanisation in Vittorini, and with him, a whole generation of writers and thinkers, for whom this dialectic is an integral element of a humanist world view. To declare my interest straight away, my own stance is that of a critical (i.e. 'deconstructive') *posthumanism* (CPH) aimed at working through 'our' (European) humanist legacy, which continues to haunt 'us' with the 'best' and 'worst' humans are capable of. This haunting is also part of what Rosario Forlenza describes as the "sacrificial memory" and "political legacy" in postwar Italy (and undoubtedly elsewhere).<sup>3</sup> Vittorini's moment, the context in which he wrote *Uomini e no*, is described by Forlenza as a "brutal civil war":

The dissolution of the social and institutional order brought about an unprecedented degree of existential uncertainty, turning the life of civilians into a front-line experience, destroying patterns of trust and social consensus and undermining faith in elites and political authority. The war had been experienced in very different ways by the various sectors of the population: soldiers, anti-fascist partisans, apolitical citizens, members of the Fascist Party, supporters of the Nazi collaborationist government, expellees from Istria – to name just a few. The role of Italy in the war was unclear, or at least complicated: the country was simultaneously loser, occupied, resister, victor.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* [1947] (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 241 ([The executioner] can kill a man, but he cannot change him into something else). My translation.

<sup>2</sup> Elio Vittorini, *Conversations in Sicily: A Novel*, trans. Alane Salierno Mason (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2003), pp. 110-11.

<sup>3</sup> Rosario Forlenza, "Sacrificial Memory and Political Legitimacy in Postwar Italy", *History and Memory* 24.2 (2012): 73-116.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

The period of 1943 to 1945, during which Vittorini came to join the resistance and write down his experience in fictionalised form in *Uomini e no*, according to Forlanza, should be “interpreted as one in which three wars were fought simultaneously: a patriotic war, a class war and a civil war”.<sup>5</sup> *Uomini e no* – even though not mentioned explicitly by Forlanza<sup>6</sup> – is one of many testimonials in which “victimization, suffering and sacrifice” constitute “the most significant memories and symbols”, while “the language of mourning provided the clearest expression of the desire for a meaningful existence”.<sup>7</sup> Vittorini’s novel perfectly illustrates this working-through process of extraordinary sacrifice, violence and trauma and the associated search for new solidarity, equality and community. It also intervenes within a dispute that has been raging ever since the human (and humanist) catastrophe of the Holocaust, namely about what the appropriate reaction to unspeakable atrocities inflicted by human beings on fellow human beings might be. Do human catastrophe, dehumanisation and victimisation call for a reinforcement or renewal of humanism in the form of an existentialist revolt à la Sartre or Camus, *malgré tout*? Or is humanism with its foundation on anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism condemned to repeat the very exclusions and dehumanisations it has always set out to combat and overcome? In other words, do we need more humanism or less? Is humanism the solution or part of the problem? These are questions that are at the heart of the philosophical discussion on posthumanism and the posthuman, as new challenges of a technological and environmental nature increasingly render the traditional (humanist) delimitation of what constitutes human ‘nature’ problematic. *Uomini e no*, with its sacrificial logic, as I will argue, goes to the heart of the matter in this respect.

While the central questions of the novel about what constitutes humanity and human(e)ness in the face of ‘bestiality’ and how to deal with violence (or, the question of activism that preoccupies the main protagonist, Enne 2, an intellectual turned resistance leader) arise out of the Nazi brutality against ordinary people, the status of the victim, especially in (post)Holocaust literature, has continued to haunt humanism more generally. Although Vittorini does not write about the Holocaust *per se*, his *Uomini e no* nevertheless has to be read as a part of ‘testimonial’ WWII literature by a community of left-wing international writers trying to come to terms with the human catastrophe the World Wars and genocide represent. Robert Antelme’s *L’espèce humaine* (1957) as well as Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) are other well-known examples in this respect. How to come to terms with surviving the ‘worst’: human inhumanity? How to deal with the cracks appearing within humanism’s idea of human perfectibility and optimism? How to remain human in the face of human abjection?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Forlanza instead mentions poetry by Quasimodo and Ungaretti and explains that “references to sacrifice, martyrdom and suffering pervaded other works in the postwar period, from Edoardo De Filippo’s theatre play *Napoli Gets Rich!* (1945) to Elsa Morante’s *History: A Novel* (1975), and from Roberto Rossellini’s movie *Rome Open City* (1945) to Alberto Moravia’s best-selling novel *La ciociara* (1957)” (Forlanza, p. 80).

<sup>7</sup> Forlanza, p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Post-WWII philosophy is of course also engaged in this grieving process, from Adorno to Lyotard and beyond.

As Martin Crowley explains, however, the notion of survival after the 'end' of humanity is itself divided: "On the one hand, we remain attached to a model of survival as heroic feat; on the other, we have also begun to conceive of survival as the fragile persistence of the surpassingly weak".<sup>9</sup> This division is what troubles Enne 2 in his swaying between a final act of heroism (to kill the personification of evil, *Cane Nero*) and a fatalistic *perdersi*, or in other words, his dilemma between fighting for survival or joining the (always more human) victims and seeking refuge in the idea that Albert Camus' Tarou so famously expressed, namely that what should be avoided at all cost is to be part of the *fléau* (the scourge, or the perpetrators).<sup>10</sup> How can humanity remain indivisible, how to preserve a humanism at least partially (if that is possible), based on essentialist and universalist values, in the face of the obvious rift between perpetrators and victims?

It is Crowley's main claim that Antelme's notion of a "residual humanity" manages to preserve "some configuration of human commonality". In doing so: "Antelme's humanity (...) exceeds its postwar moment by anticipating the commitment to exposure, finitude and vulnerability which marks contemporary efforts to think beyond the opposition of humanism and anti-humanism, while also retaining a kind of ontological 'bite' which helps it maintain a resisting specificity in relation to this contemporary move".<sup>11</sup> Antelme's strategy is that of insisting on an unbreakable unity of humanity grounded in a "biology beyond qualification" understood as a "kind of fragile solitude".<sup>12</sup> It is a humanity based on the indivisibility and frailty of the human species and its existential 'condition', or what Heidegger would call 'being-towards-death'.

The posthumanist critique of such a stance, however, would insist on the point that such a residual and indivisible humanity would always have to be safeguarded at the cost of human solidarity with nonhuman and animal others.<sup>13</sup> So, it seems that to safeguard the principle of humanity as indivisible and to include both the "violence of the executioner and the vulnerability of the victim", and thus to accept that "brutality constitutes part of what it means to be human",<sup>14</sup> Antelme, Vittorini and the postwar (sacrificial) humanism their entire generation stands for are willing, ultimately, to *sacrifice* human responsibility towards the nonhuman other. For them, the inclusiveness of the human species *must* produce an exclusion or at least a subordination of solidarity with nonhuman others. One might spell out this desperate, one might even say tragic, belief in humanity like this: even if protecting the principle of humanity might involve a "dialectic without transcendence", even if the only remaining avenue of saving humanism and a notion of humanity might lead to admitting its ultimate inhumanity, this stubborn insistence on an almost 'spectral', irreducible humanity, which fully embraces the victim-perpetrator spectrum within humanity, would somehow still manage to salvage human 'dignity' in the face of human violence and vulnerability. In doing

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Crowley, *Robert Antelme: Humanity, Community, Testimony* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> "Je dis seulement qu'il y a sur cette terre des fléaux et des victims et qu'il faut, autant qu'il est possible, refuser d'être avec le fléau." Albert Camus, *La peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 274.

<sup>11</sup> Crowley, *Robert Antelme*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8.

<sup>13</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (London: Verso, 2017) and the further discussion below.

<sup>14</sup> Crowley, *Robert Antelme*, pp. 9, 11.

so, it would provide some ultimate reassurance arising from tragic despair and produce some fundamental-ontological human solidarity to be carried forward by the survivors.

Antelme and Vittorini became good friends after the war,<sup>15</sup> and as Crowley writes, the affirmation of a common humanity, despite everything, in Antelme's view, was first formulated by Vittorini in his *Uomini e no*.<sup>16</sup> In France, as Virna Brigatti reminds us in her *Diacronia* of *Uomini e no*,<sup>17</sup> Vittorini was perceived as "l'un des chefs de file de l'antifascisme culturel", while *Uomini e no* (translated as *Les hommes et les autres*, in 1947)<sup>18</sup> was hailed as a "roman de la Résistance", as a "livre de l'engagement" and, most importantly, "une des oeuvres les plus importantes de l'humanisme révolutionnaire contemporaine".<sup>19</sup> In Italy, Vittorini's influence and image was of course more nuanced and complex. Guido Bonsaver's study of Vittorini's life and work, the most recent and comprehensive study of its kind in English, begins with the following assessment:

Elio Vittorini was undoubtedly a central figure in Italy's cultural arena from the 1930s to the mid-1960s. During the years of the fascist regime, his shift from enthusiastic support for Mussolini's fascist 'revolution', to disillusionment as a result of the Spanish Civil War and finally to active anti-fascism during the war years, is symbolic of – and to some degree influenced – the choices of an entire generation of young intellectuals.<sup>20</sup>

While Vittorini is probably best remembered for his novel *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1941) it was *Uomini e no* which, written during 1944 and published in June 1945, provided Italians with the first fictional account of the partisan war, and "caused him to be hailed as one of the 'fathers'

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<sup>15</sup> See Guido Bonsaver, *Elio Vittorini: The Writer and the Written* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2000), p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Crowley, *Robert Antelme*, pp. 12, and 26, note 8. Colin Davis groups Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* under what he calls a "conventional mid-century Marxist humanism" and places it alongside Marguerite Duras's *La Douleur* (1985) in which she "develops a possibility inherent in Antelme's position, but one which remains in the background of *L'Espèce humaine*: the unity of the human species has the consequence that SS and prisoners, torturers and victims, perpetrators and bystanders are disturbingly indistinguishable in nature" (see Davis, "Antelme and the Ethics of Writing", *Comparative Literature Studies* 34.2 (1997): 177; see also Bruno Chouat's critique of Davis in Chouat, "'La mort ne recèle pas tant de mystère': Robert Antelme's Defaced Humanism", *L'Esprit créateur* 40.1 (2000): 88-99; as well as Erin Tremblay Ponnou-Delaffon, "'Ni haine ni pardon': Gabriel Marcel and Robert Antelme on the Limits of the Human", *French Forum* 40.2-3 (2015): 33-46).

<sup>17</sup> Virna Brigatti, *Diacronia di un romanzo: Uomini e no de Elio Vittorini (1944-1966)* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Vittorini was unhappy with the French translation of the title, which he described as a "titre erroné" because it implies precisely the opposite of what Vittorini (and Antelme) held to be their most important insight: the indivisibility of humanity as a principle: "*Uomini e no*, le titre italien de ce roman, signifie exactement que nous, les hommes, pouvons aussi être des 'non hommes'. C'est-à-dire, ce titre vise à rappeler qu'il y a, en l'homme, de nombreuses possibilités inhumaines. Mais il ne divise pas l'humanité en deux parties: dont l'une serait tout humaine et l'autre tout inhumaine" (see Elio Vittorini, *Les hommes et les autres*, trans. Michel Arnaud, Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 8.). For the full quotation and its Italian original see Bonsaver, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Brigatti, pp. 373-374, who is here referring to and quoting from Olivier Forlin, *Les intellectuels français et l'Italie (1945-1955), Médiation culturelle, engagements et représentations* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Bonsaver, p. 1.

of neorealism".<sup>21</sup> Vittorini's life-long political *impegno* is underpinned by the principle of a "return to the human", as Cesare Pavese put it.<sup>22</sup> The search for a new humanism thus forms a continuity in Vittorini's work and spiritual development.<sup>23</sup> The encounter with the new human both at a social and a stylistic level is the main objective of Vittorini's work which aims to overcome human solitude in the solidarity of a new 'myth' of the human, a task, according to Pavese, that Vittorini understands as "discovering and celebrating the human beyond the solitude caused by pride and intellect".<sup>24</sup>

The main stylistic inspiration for the generation of neorealists (and Pavese and Vittorini, in particular) came from contemporary US-American literature (esp. Hemingway, Faulkner and Saroyan whom Vittorini translated) and the social myth of the American way of life as unhampered by the weight of "European history".<sup>25</sup> The utopian project Vittorini pursued in his life and work was the humanist moral and social transformation of the *mondo offeso*, the experience of human suffering and class struggle with an aim to overcome human solitude in a more solidary community, all captured in the injunction of the phrase "*essere più uomo*": "This concept of the community of experience is the connecting link, a tenuous and not very satisfactory one between Vittorini's aesthetics and politics", according to Donald Heiney.<sup>26</sup> Vittorini's search for a new style of a "*linguaggio profetico*" is closely related to his new humanist dream of a sublimated social reality, which, at the same time, he understands as a return to 'humanity', as he professes in his programmatic preface to *Il garofano rosso* (1933-1934).<sup>27</sup> As an intellectual and writer Vittorini's *impegno* and his engagement in the resistance movement cohere in the idea of a *letteratura impegnata* and in the role of the intellectual as a custodian of (humanist) culture, as exemplified in Vittorini's editing career as well as his cultural and political journalism in influential journals like *Solaria*, *Il Bargello*, *L'Unità* right up to *Il Politecnico*. As "*organizzatore culturale*" he advocated a politicisation of culture that was ideologically underpinned by a combination of 'social' communism and humanist morality:

His ideology of intellectual identity consists of a set of concentric rings. On the outside, at the most superficial level, he is a revolutionist and therefore a Marxist. At the next level down he is an artist interested in the commonality, the universality, of sensory experience. At a still deeper level is the most fundamental of his identities: the

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<sup>21</sup> Bonsaver, p. 104. On the somewhat problematic subsumption of Vittorini and *Uomini e no* under the label of 'neorealism' see Anthony Cinquemani, "Vittorini's *Uomini e no* and Neorealism", *Forum Italicum* 17.2 (1983): 152-163.

<sup>22</sup> Cesare Pavese, "Ritorno all'uomo", *L'Unità* (20 May 1945), reissued in 2010 by Pistoia: Petite plaisance, available online at: [http://www.petiteplaisance.it/ebooks/1101-1120/1119/el\\_1119.pdf](http://www.petiteplaisance.it/ebooks/1101-1120/1119/el_1119.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> This is also Italo Calvino's assessment in "Vittorini: progettazione e letteratura", in Calvino, *Una pietra sopra: Discorsi de letteratura e società* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), pp. 159-160.

<sup>24</sup> Pavese, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. for example Vittorini, *Diario in pubblico* [1957] (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), pp. 84-85.

<sup>26</sup> Donald Heiney, *Three Italian Novelists: Moravia, Pavese, Vittorini* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 152.

<sup>27</sup> Elio Vittorini, *Il garofano rosso* (first published in *Solaria* in 1933-1934; including the preface to the first edition) (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), pp. 202-207.

warmness and empathy that gropes for warmness and empathy in others (...). This is the true sense in which Vittorini is a 'collectivist'.<sup>28</sup>

The question that, for Heiney, arises from this collectivism directly informs *Uomini e no*, without, however, really receiving a satisfactory answer to the question of "how does the individual fit in this collective urge, what happens to the ego, to identity, in the surrender of personality to a common effort?".<sup>29</sup> In other words, how to combine the autobiographical and the political in a struggle for more humanity to achieve the ideal of a "*più uomo*" or "*más hombre*"<sup>30</sup> that preoccupies the intellectual turned resistance fighter, Enne 2.

In *Uomini e no* Vittorini uses a number of innovative structural and stylistic means to insist on the denunciation of evil and the *offesa* which leads him to experiment with a rapprochement between author, character and reader and to a foregrounding of his motivation of writing. The novel mixes historical, mythical and autobiographical elements (the resistance in Milan, an idealized Sicilian childhood, an unhappy romantic relationship with a married woman). The editorial history of the novel is complex and reveals Vittorini's dissatisfaction with his work even though it being a financial success. The first and second edition contained 143 short chapters, while the third edition was shortened to 117. In the definitive edition of 1965 the novel ended up with 136 chapters. The text is formally divided into two parts. 23 (originally 29) chapters are in italics and form 6 groups interrupting the account of the action set in 1944 Milan. They are dealing with 'private' revelations and reflections of a barely hidden autobiographical nature. As Bolsaver explains, the plot works on two different levels:

The first, relates in third person the events involving the protagonist, the partisan Enne 2. Interwoven with these chapters are a series of sections in italics where the narrator's voice comes to the fore, sometimes to surreal effect – as when we are presented with a conversation between narrator and protagonist – but more often in order to discuss various issues raised by the first level narration. The narrator's reflections about the nature of his writing constitute the new and most important ingredient in the novel.<sup>31</sup>

The novel thus contains elements of a historical narrative, reflections on the resistance and activism, as well as autobiographical-lyrical comments on the protagonist by a narrator who shows the complexity of Enne 2's motivations and his struggle between the engagement in violent action and the longing for "*semplicità*", the simple life of his rural childhood, as well as the resulting temptation of his suicidal "*perdersi*". The story of Enne 2 should thus be read from at least two angles: "it is the story of an intellectual who does not want to fight with weapons and does not want to kill, and it is the story of a man desperately in love with a married woman".<sup>32</sup> It is in the italicised chapters that the reader finds reflections of the narrator on the central philosophical question posed by the title, namely whether the dichotomy between "men" and "not men" (as the English translation goes)<sup>33</sup> can be upheld.

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<sup>28</sup> Heiney, p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> For the influence of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and the Spanish civil war on Vittorini's ideas on the "man of action", see Heiney, p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> Bolsaver, p. 104.

<sup>32</sup> Bolsaver, p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> Elio Vittorini, *Men and not men*, trans. Sarah Henry (Marlboro: The Marlboro Press, 1985).

The often quite ambivalent reception of the novel by literary critics, especially as far as the consistency between its stylistic innovation and its cultural political message is concerned, is due to the fact that, according to Brigatti, “literary criticism has read the novel according to two principal interpretive dimensions: in privileging the love story it consequently considered the death of the protagonist as a suicide driven by his sentimental delusion; alternatively, by privileging its testimonial value of the resistance it included the novel under the label of neorealism and thus considered the death of the protagonist as a sacrifice within the fight against Nazi fascism”.<sup>34</sup>

It is the presence of the narrator’s voice and his discussions with some of the characters that constitutes, according to Bonsaver, one of “the most innovative features in *Uomini e no*” (especially if compared with *Conversazione in Sicilia*).<sup>35</sup> The other innovation, which will be discussed in more detail below, is “the presence of a surreal dialogue between two dogs”.<sup>36</sup> In relation to the latter, while Bonsaver sees such “experimentation” as “not particularly convincing since it takes place in only one of the many episodes in which the dogs are present”, I will be insisting on the importance of this scene, which is part of a subplot in which Figlio-di-Dio (one of the few characters that have more than a purely ‘allegorical’ function, despite his ‘telling name’) tries to convert a dog to humanism.<sup>37</sup>

Despite all the stylistic and ideological criticisms levelled at Vittorini’s *Uomini e no* from various quarters it is fair to say that the novel also contains a number of eminently redeeming qualities. One is certainly its tone which exercises restraint and resists “rhetorical excess”, “glorification of the partisans’ actions”, “over-simplification” and “scathing demonization of the Nazi and fascist troops”.<sup>38</sup> Despite, or in fact, because of its humanist ethos it “reminds us that the capacity to do evil is inherent in all humankind” and that “fascism also grows out of our everyday relationship with other people”, as Bonsaver concludes. While *Uomini e no* thus avoids the “Manichean trap, dividing humanity into good and evil people”,<sup>39</sup> we might wonder, however, at what price the unity of humanity and the utopian, idealised classless solidarity in a reconciled “*nuovo mondo*” does come.

In terms of Vittorini’s *umanesimo*, *Uomini e no*, as mentioned at the beginning, develops a central idea that already appears in *Conversazione in Sicilia*, in which three types of humans exist: the persecutors, the persecuted and those who resist. It is in a key passage in chapter 27 that the narrator voices Vittorini’s central idea of the “*più uomo (más hombre)*”, which claims that the (human) victim is always more human than the perpetrator (see the second epigraph, above). The real problem for this core statement of sacrificial humanism, however, arises out of the status of the third group – not the perpetrators or victims, but the resistance fighters in *Uomini e no*, and the partisan Enne 2 more specifically, who, as a result, is torn

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<sup>34</sup> Brigatti, *Diacronia di un romanzo*, p. 12 (my translation).

<sup>35</sup> See Bonsaver, p. 111.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Valentino Orsini’s filmic adaptation of the novel in 1980 for RAI omits this ‘surreal’ subplot entirely, probably because it would have seemed incompatible with a ‘neorealist’ stance.

<sup>38</sup> Bonsaver, p. 112.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

between violence and self-effacement. Even clearer than the dichotomy between persecutors and victims, between lesser and more human humans in *Conversazione, Uomini e no* investigates the question of evil without dehumanising either victim or oppressor. The central ethical statement of the narrator concerning the question of humanity in the face of the human capacity for evil occurs in chapter 104:

Man, one says. And we think of someone fallen, or lost, of someone who cries and who is hungry, of him who is cold, sick, persecuted, of him who is put to death. We think of the wrong he is made to endure, and of his dignity. And of all in him that is offended, of the capacity he has for happiness. That is man.<sup>40</sup>

What follows, however, is the insistence of the question of evil committed by humans, the existence and persistence of the inhuman, the crime: "The crime? It is committed against mankind, against the world. By whom? And the blood that is shed? The persecution? The oppression?" (*MNM* 157/*UN* 174). The dichotomy is here redoubled in that the crime (the "*offesa*") concerns "mankind", the very humanity of humans, as opposed to the human victims, in the sense of 'blame the sin, not the sinner', because:

He who falls, rises also. Insulted, oppressed, a man can make arms of the very chains on his feet. This is because he wants freedom, not vindication. This is man. And the Gestapo too? Of course! Even the Gestapo, as we call it today, and whatever it has been called in the past. Even the Gestapo. Whatever it is in the way of insult and indignity that befalls the world, man fights it. Even if it be man. Today we have Hitler. And what is he? Is he not a man? We have his Germans, we have the Fascists. And what is all that? Can we claim it is something outside mankind? Can we say they do not belong to mankind? (*MNM* 157/*UN* 174)

Vittorini's dialectic aimed at overcoming the paradox of human evil, as well as avoiding the impasse of a tragic humanism *à la* Camus, for example, lies in the idea of the resistance fighter, who is to become a pure instrument of liberation. His aim is to bring about new hope for new humans reunited in Christian-communist solidarity, as the end of the novel seems to imply. Enne 2 impersonates the inner combat that leads to a progressive self-abandonment on the way towards "*resistere per resistere*". His final sacrificial, purifying, act of killing *Cane Nero* and (thus also the 'wolf' within) himself is a tortuous pseudo-Christian act of "*perdersi*" that is necessary for humanity to return to itself ("*trovarsi*"):

Perhaps that was the crux of it. That one could resist as if one had to resist forever, and as if there could never be anything besides resisting. Resist for as long as men might go down, for as long as they saw themselves going down, always being incapable of saving them, unable to help them, unable to do anything except fight or wish oneself lost and done for. And why fight? In order to resist. As if the doom that lay upon men could never end, and a liberation never come. Now to resist could be simple. Resist? Resist for the sake of resistance. It was very simple. (*MNM* 171/*UN* 190; chapter 114)

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<sup>40</sup> *Men and Not Men*, p. 156-157 (The original Italian is in Vittorini, *Uomini e no*, *Classici moderni* (Milan: Mondadori, 1965), p. 174). References to the English translation and this Italian edition will both subsequently be given in the text as *MNM* and *UN* respectively.



What Enne 2's yearning for *semplicità* amounts to, however, paradoxically, is nothing but a letting go of his 'humanity' one might argue: his love for Berta, his concern for the victims of the Piazza, his dead comrades, even the prospect of liberation, everything has to be jettisoned before he can become a pure instrument of resistance, outside any morality. This turns out to be the 'necessary evil' to kill all evil, to destroy *Cane Nero* and justify the kind of total *impegno* able to overcome "*lo Spettro*" (Berta's dress that Franco Fortini sees as the personified "*storico*" who speaks as "I" in the italicised sections).<sup>41</sup> Fortini, instead, sees Enne 2's death as the ultimate failure of his reconciling the "contrasto tra il pessimismo cristiano che vede il lupo nel cuore dell'uomo, e l'ottimismo della lotta che spera vedere vittoria".<sup>42</sup>

It is worth remembering here that Vittorini's humanism is part of an intricate system that seeks to regulate dehumanisation and rehumanisation in both victims and perpetrators. The victims are more human since their 'bestialisation' at the hands of the perpetrators' violence fails to take away their humanity. However, at the same time, the bestiality of the perpetrators is also not enough to negate their humanity. The result is a regulative system that, as one might argue, ironically, results in a movement in which, as bestialisation increases, humanity is being consolidated. No wonder that Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* just like *Uomini e no* is transfixed by the ambiguity of scepticism and hope that might arise out of this paradox of "humanity".<sup>43</sup> (Human) solidarity, it is hoped, will arise out of the failed attempt of the dehumanisation/bestialisation of the perpetrator. As Martin Crowley explains, the executioner has in fact no power over the 'project of dehumanisation'. Pushed to its extremes, "the attempt to impose divisions on the human species" will only ever manage to reaffirm the humanity the executioner sets out to deny his victims.<sup>44</sup>

This is where we, at last, are approaching the crux of sacrificial humanism, where the most 'naked', the most vulnerable, *homo sacer* and 'his' bare life, to use Agamben's terminology,<sup>45</sup> is invoked to bring about a new human solidarity in absolute divestment, founded on an irrepressible but ultimately ungraspable human core. It is also precisely here that something very strange happens in and to Vittorini's *Uomini e no*, something within the logic of sacrificial humanism that, involuntarily, opens up the question and possibility of a *posthumanist* notion of solidarity (a solidarity with the non/human), as I would argue.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Franco Fortini, *Saggi Italiani* (Bari: DeDonato, 1974), p. 252.

<sup>42</sup> Fortini, p. 252. Translated in Shirley W. Vinall as "Christian pessimism which sees the wolf in the human heart, and the optimism of the struggle which hopes to see victory" (cf. Vinall, "The Portrayal of Germans in Vittorini's *Uomini e no*", *Journal of European Studies* 16 (1986): p. 214).

<sup>43</sup> See Peter Arnds, "Bodies in Movement: On Humanity in Narratives about the Third Reich", in: Karin Sellber, Lena Wanggren and Kamillea Aghtan, eds., *Corporeality and Culture: Bodies in Movement* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 141-152.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Martin Crowley, *L'homme sans: Politiques de la finitude* (Paris: Lignes, 2009), p. 75. While Crowley here paraphrases Antelme he also refers, in footnote 2, to Elio Vittorini, "ami intime d'Antelme", and his famous "*più uomo*", in *Conversazione in Sicilia*.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Maybe a kind of "solidarity with nonhuman people" Timothy Morton also advocates in his *Humankind* (further discussed below).

## Animal

It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions (...). The core of European thought? Yes, there is one sentence, a short simple sentence, only a few words, summing up the history of our continent, our humanity, our biosphere, from Holocene to Holocaust: (...) "Exterminate all the brutes".<sup>47</sup> The idea of extermination lies no farther from the heart of humanism than Buchenwald lies from the Goethehaus in Weimar.<sup>48</sup>

[T]he animal is a paradigm of the victim.<sup>49</sup>

It is the logical conclusion of sacrificial humanism that the animal should be the victim *par excellence*.<sup>50</sup> The challenge, then for humanism becomes how to reintroduce a new and radical difference between the human and the animal, at this most compromising moment when animals might also become (ironically, perversely?) most 'human'. It is, in effect, the very bestialisation that produces the ultimate human 'remainder' on which a future solidarity of ('better') humans is to be built. This is where Vittorini's second major stylistic innovation Bonsaver referred to above comes in. Just this once in his work, Vittorini at a crucial moment in the narrative of *Uomini e no*, 'goes to the dogs', so to speak. In his search for *semplicità*, for the degree zero of humanity, Vittorini's narrator does in fact not focus on a human but on the dog Käptn Blut, who, as long as he is in the presence of his keeper, 'Son-of-God'/'Figlio-di-Dio', is "part of the human sphere" (MNM, 157/UN 175).

The build up to this passage comes after Giulaj, an innocent bystander at the Piazza massacre in which the Nazi soldiers execute innocent people including a little girl and a naked old man in reprisal of the assassination of a German officer by the resistance. Giulaj is torn to pieces by Captain Clemm's dogs – among them Käptn Blut – to avenge the killing of Greta (another dog) in self-defence (cf. chapter 85). Käptn Blut is taking part in Giulaj's 'execution' even though Son-of-God had previously pleaded with him and tried to 'persuade' him to leave Clemm's brutal services, and instead flee with him to become once more "man's friend". Son-of-God is a member of Enne 2's group of partisan fighters and works undercover as Captain Clemm's dog keeper. In his 'dialogue' with Blut, the dog 'agrees' to follow Son-of-God ("Uh! replied the dog" (124/140)).<sup>51</sup> However, tragically, as one might say, Son-of-God is too late to pick up Blut, who's been (presumably) forcefully recruited to take part in Giulaj's killing. Blut 'wanted' to go away with Son-of-God but, now that it is too late, Blut has a bad conscience and is "huddled on the floor" (158/175), his averted eyes "evoking abandonment, perdition, darkness, whatever hell there is for dogs in which man has no place" (158/176): "Blut, the dog,

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<sup>47</sup> These are Kurtz's words in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1902] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> Sven Lindqvist, *"Exterminate all the Brutes": One man's odyssey into the heart of darkness and the origins of European genocide* [1992], trans. Joan Tate (New York: The New Press, 2014), pp. 13, 14, 18, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Crowley, *L'homme sans*, p. 135.

<sup>51</sup> The Christian symbolism demonstrates the extent to which Vittorini's sacrificial humanism is ultimately underwritten by spirituality and religion.

knows that he cannot go away with Son-of-God after what he has done. He can no longer be a man's dog, a man's friend" (158/176).

Earlier on, Captain Clemm had admitted to Son-of-God that he prefers his dogs to all the people he knows (124/140-141) because "Dogs don't betray you. They're always faithful" (124/140). Son-of-God questions whether faithfulness in this sense is, in fact, a 'virtue':

"No, Captain. A man goes in a good direction, and his dog is faithful to him. A man goes in a bad one, and his dog is still faithful to him." (124/140)

Blut "may perhaps [have been] a good dog" (124/140)<sup>52</sup> and, as opposed to the third of Clemm's dogs, Gudrun, who in a dialogue amongst dogs (134-35/151) is characterised as evil and aggressive ("I want to eat you (...) *Ich will dich fressen*", 135/151), presumably because she's "in heat", should have made the right choice:

"Do you like filth? You'd be better off with chicken thieves, Blut. You must change (...). Don't you smell that smell of theirs? (...) It's hyena (...). It's vulture. They are vultures. And that's how you will smell if you stay with them. Like Captain Clemm and like Black Dog. You want to smell like Black Dog? (...) What you are doing is wrong." (136/153)

Blut seems to have made up his mind, barks approving interjections and wants to follow him there and then. So Blut's exemplary 'tragedy' is that he is forced to become a perpetrator or a 'hyena' despite himself. Blut's regret (expressed in his "whining") prompts the narrator to ask whether the other (human) perpetrators would also "whine"?

*Would they whine? However, the answer we are seeking lies elsewhere. Maybe they do whine. They are dogs. It is possible that they crawl under the bed and whine. But we want to know something else. Not whether the whining is human, or how it might be part of mankind. But if what they do, when they commit their crimes, is it part of mankind? (159/176)*

It is clear that Vittorini's dogs are anthropomorphic mirrors of the human plight of conscience. The question, however, is whether evil, crime, violence are 'part of mankind', whether they *compromise* humanity, as the narrator seems to imply, in what is a clear comparison between El Paso (a character who's plays a double game, a resistance fighter from the Spanish Civil War, a 'man of action', who has infiltrated the group of German SS and who plays a kind of jester role amongst them) and Enne 2, the dithering intellectual partisan in love:

*Perhaps he [El Paso] would be capable of giving one of them to our dogs. Could he? Perhaps he could. We too can employ their weapons. But it wouldn't be simple, that is what I want to say. To fight what they are, without being what we are any longer? Without being part of mankind? (161/179)*

What draws these deliberations on the humanity of the 'man in action' to a conclusion is the narrator's eventual return to inclusiveness – almost in the sense of Terence's *Homo sum*,

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<sup>52</sup> Son-of-God suggests to Blut to 'convert' to become an 'honourable dog': "You couldn't earn your living decently? There's still time, Blut. Escape, head out into the open spaces. Go keep watch over some peasant's fields. Go guard a flock of sheep. Or go into the circus, and walk on a tightrope. Or live with some old blind person and be his guide" (53/61).

*humani nihil a me alienum puto* (I am human, nothing human is alien to me). Human, ultimately, is 'the human condition' – "all that is to be wept over", "God inside ourselves", the "titan within us" (162/180): "But man can also get along without anything inside him, neither want nor expectation, neither hunger nor cold; but that, we say, is not human" (162/180). And here, finally, the narrator asks the crucial question regarding the "*più uomo*" of the "offended" and the (human) status of the perpetrator:

*We consider him. He is like unto a wolf. He attacks and ravages. And we say: This is no man. He acts in cold blood as does the wolf. But does this remove him from among mankind? We think only of the offended. No sooner is there offense than we side with the offended, and we say the offended are mankind (...). Behold mankind (...). And he who offends – what is he? We never think that he too is a man. Whatever else could he be? Wolf? (162/180)*

And as a kind of 'proof' of the inclusion of the perpetrators within humanity, all the while excluding their bestial deed, of course, the narrator adds:

*I would like to see Fascism without man. What would it be? What could it do? Could it do anything at all if it were not in man's power to do that thing? (162/180)*

It is, in fact, the second time that the 'wolf' is making 'his' appearance in *Uomini e no* (Humans and wolves, one might also read the title of the novel, as a reflection on the Hobbesian *homo homini lupus*). The first time, the wolf is evoked by Enne 2's friend Gracco deliberating on the victims of the German reprisal for the attacks carried out by Enne 2's men. The victims are exhibited on the Piazza, some of whom are 'especially innocent', namely an old man and a little girl:

The adversary could have chosen no better way to strike his target. In a little girl, in an old man, in two fifteen-year-old boys, in a woman, in another woman: that was the best way to strike a man. Strike him where he is weakest, in vulnerable childhood, in old age, slip the blow in between his ribs to where his heart lies: strike him where he is most man. The adversary who had struck this way had chosen to act the wolf, to frighten people (...). And the wolf believes that striking this way is the best way to strike fear. (91/103)

The wolf, in fact, is ever present in *Uomini e no*, namely in the guise of Black Dog, the mythical German executioner whose werewolf-like howl fills Milan with fear from the beginning (22-24, 72, 146/23-25, 82, 163) and who becomes Enne 2's personal nemesis, his obsession (163, 184-190/182, 204-211). In an ultimate self-sacrificial act Enne 2 reconciles himself<sup>53</sup> with doing the "simplest" thing, namely "kill Black Dog" (185/205), thus hoping to finally escape his existentialist "desert":

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<sup>53</sup> Even though, arguably, Enne 2 needs Barca Tartaro (the worker who, inspired by Enne 2, subsequently decides to enter the resistance and who has the final word of the novel, the famous "I'll learn better" (197/219)) to give him the idea of 'taking Cane Nero with him' in a kamikaze act. The promise to "learn better" is also echoed in the "Postscript" that Vittorini reinserted in the definitive edition and is thus given particular emphasis.

*He has his desert around him; and it isn't just his alone; it is everyone's as well. A desert of sand and rock, Africa, Australia, America; with that shouting voice resounding in every desert. Is it a beast's voice? A man's? Maybe it is just Black Dog, and nothing else. Yet it comes unto us like a cry of the city itself, of the whole world. (189/210)*

We thus return to the question that has long been exercising the literary critics of resistance literature and *Uomini e no* in particular: how to interpret this (self-)sacrifice by Enne 2?

### *Sacrifice*

In man an old greybeard father has been sleeping for ages. We remember him; he is our father who built the ark, the laborious father; he toiled and he wrought, and he drank and he got drunk, and he laughed as he slept naked down through the ages. (*MNM* 105/*UN* 118; chapter 73)

[Y]ou have nothing to lose than your anthropocentrism!<sup>54</sup>

How to 'resolve' these obvious contradictions within sacrificial humanism and the resulting feeling of inconclusiveness that a reading of *Uomini e no* inevitably leaves? How to make sense of human evil? How to judge the intuition of the greater humanity of the victim? How to accept the 'human condition'? How to face the bestiality – the wolf in man – without compromising (human) solidarity? The unresolved and unresolvable conundrum of (sacrificial) humanism is where posthumanism and the question of the (nonhuman) animal begin to productively haunt *Uomini e no*.

As Cary Wolfe explains, "the discourse of animality has historically served as a crucial strategy in the oppression of *humans* by other humans – a strategy whose legitimacy and force depend, however, on the prior taking for granted of the traditional ontological distinction, and consequent ethical divide, between human and nonhuman animals."<sup>55</sup> Timothy Morton makes a similar point in *Humankind* in which he argues for what might be called a posthumanist, postanthropocentric politics based on a new 'solidarity with nonhumans'. This politics might finally overcome the dialectic of racism and speciesism that has been characterising (liberal) humanism's dilemma, namely:

Which subtends the other, racism or speciesism? Does racism exist because we discriminate between humans and every other life form? Or does speciesism exist because we hold racist beliefs about people who don't look exactly like us?<sup>56</sup>

The decision (which comes first, speciesism or racism?), ultimately, proves to be irrelevant if viewed from postanthropocentric solidarity based on the idea of an "inter-animality" of human and nonhuman animals.<sup>57</sup> Vittorini's sacrificial humanism does indeed seem to be

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<sup>54</sup> Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*, p. 75.

<sup>55</sup> Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xx.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Morton, *Humankind*, p. 133.

<sup>57</sup> Crowley, in fact, evokes Merleau-Ponty's notion of "inter-animality" as part of a process of overcoming our repressed solidarity with nonhuman animals based on a shared experience of finitude

going somewhat into the direction of interanimal solidarity by showing that dehumanisation/bestialisation is an essential possibility of humanity, which leads him to resist the idea of a division between humanity and an (animalised) 'subhumanity'. However, from a posthumanist animal studies perspective Vittorini's treatment of dogs in *Uomini e no* nevertheless remains compromised. Not because of 'sentimentalism' or all too human anthropomorphism *vis-à-vis* Käptn Blut, Son-of-God's favourite,<sup>58</sup> but because of the janus-faced nature of the domesticated animal that a dog necessarily is. It is a 'nature' that dogs essentially share with humans. Dogs are quite special animals indeed in that they, in a humanist sense, coincide with and mirror the human species's own (self)domestication. The story that humanism tells itself is that of a *humanitas* to be achieved by leaving *animalitas* behind, without, however, ever being able to do so completely. It is a (Hobbesian) 'breeding' process aimed at overcoming the 'wolf' in 'man', mirrored in eradicating the 'wolf' (not to speak of the hyena) in 'dogs'. Dogs being 'man's best friend', are thus 'co-implicated' in the "subjugation and sacrifice of other animals".<sup>59</sup> In fact, Vittorini's stance in *Uomini e no*, and entertained by sacrificial humanism more generally, would not work, if the distinction between wolf and dog (or bad dog/good dog) did not exist. Vittorini's move, in *Uomini e no*, maybe unintentionally, pushes the sacrificial logic that the victim is always more 'human' to its animalist extreme, if not over the edge or into the abyss (namely, the one between humans and nohumans). Blut needs to decide, whether he is to be part of the wolves, or, whether he is on the side of Black Dog, who is the incarnation of the wolf, the beast that knows "the best way to strike a man" (*MNM* 91/*UN* 103). Whether he follows his orders/instincts to kill the 'innocent' or to become part of the (truly human) humans and thus to return to and remain within the 'human sphere'. The promise held out to Blut in this is that he might become (almost) human.<sup>60</sup> Once Blut has opted to be part of the killing machine, however, he is barred from humanity. As for the human perpetrator, however, he cannot (and must not) be granted the 'descent' into 'wolfness'. He cannot leave humanity behind: "Whatever else could he be? Wolf?", the narrator asks (162/180), quite obviously, rhetorically. One cannot help but wonder whether Enne 2's self-sacrifice in the run-up to which he has to 'unlearn' his most *humane*

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(cf. *L'Homme sans*, pp. 135-136). A similar point against human exceptionalism and for a politics of solidarity that recognises that "the world in which we live is gazed upon by other beings, that the visible is shared among creatures, and that a politics could be invented on this basis, if it is not too late", is also made by Jean-Christophe Bailly, in *The Animal Side*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 15. Matthew Callarco's call for a "jamming of the anthropological machine" (as articulated in Agamben's *The Open*) also starts from the assumption that "Inasmuch as humanism is founded on a separation of the *humanitas* from the *animalitas* within the human, no genuinely post-humanist politics can emerge without grappling with the logic and consequences of this division" (cf. Callarco and Steven DeCaroli, eds., *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 166).

<sup>58</sup> As Morton points out, in order to achieve new solidarity (between humans and nonhumans) "the actual enemy is not anthropomorphism, it is anthropocentrism, an entirely different beast that can express itself either by humanizing or indeed by totally dehumanizing it" (*Humankind*, p. 174).

<sup>59</sup> As Karalyn Kendall-Morwick rightly remarks in her reading of Samuel Beckett's and Emmanuel Levinas's dogs and their role within a "posthumanist ethics" (cf. Kendall-Morwick, "Dogging the Subject: Samuel Beckett, Emmanuel Levinas, and Posthumanist Ethics", *Journal of Modern Literature* 36.3 (2013): 100-119 (esp. p. 103)).

<sup>60</sup> Again, the parallels between speciesism, colonialism and racism should be emphasised here.

instincts in order to become a pure killing-machine (“Nothing else remains, in the room, but a death-dealing machine, two pistols in hand” (190-191/211)), in its sacrificial logic, does not also erase all remaining differences between him and Black Dog, between human and wolf, between human and dog, and between dog and wolf. This would indeed be a radical move to protect the sanctity of human life and the integrity of the victims. No wonder that Vittorini had such trouble embracing the idea of violence as a necessary evil for resistance, all the while insisting on the integrity of ‘mankind’. The end of *Uomini e no*, which in many ways is the most troubling part of the novel, deliberately ‘rehumanises’ the resistance movement. While the ‘worker’ in stepping into the intellectual Enne 2’s footsteps goes through a ‘learning process’ of becoming an unscrupulous instrument of ‘liberation’ (after killing his first German soldiers whom he refer to as “dogs” (193/214)), he cannot bring himself to shoot the ‘sad’ German with whom he identifies as a fellow member of the exploited class (i.e. a fellow ‘victim’). He promises to become better at (self)dehumanisation, supposedly, to “learn better” (197/219), maybe to become a kind of ‘sacrifice-machine’ (like Enne 2, but without the latter’s final scruples).

As the sacrificial logic of humanism thus continues to turn against itself – and this is ultimately what I would claim is playing itself out in *Uomini e no* – it may be worth recalling Derrida’s critique of both Heidegger and Levinas, arguably themselves the most ‘desperately’ humanist of humanism’s critics, namely that despite the “disruptions [Levinas and Heidegger] produce in traditional humanism, and despite the differences that separate them” (as Elisabeth de Fontenay explains),<sup>61</sup> both “remain profound humanisms to the extent that they do not sacrifice sacrifice”.<sup>62</sup> *Uomini e no*’s greatest achievement might thus be to show that sacrificing sacrifice remains posthumanism’s most difficult as well as its most urgent task.

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<sup>61</sup> Elisabeth de Fontenay, “Return to Sacrifice”, trans. Catherine Porter, *Yale French Studies* 127 (2015): 201.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well’, or the Calculation of the Subject”, in: *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 279.