A Discursive Construct of XXI Century: The New Italian Epic

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A Narrative Discourse of the XXI Century: The New Italian Epic

Introduction

During the winter of 2008, Italian author Wu Ming 1 (nom de plume of Roberto Bui) of the collective author Wu Ming, was traveling to deliver a few lectures in North America, at McGill University, Middlebury College and, finally, MIT in Boston. Shortly after returning home, he published a ‘memorandum’ in which he laid out his own interpretation concerning one section of Italian literature that spans from 1993 to the present, and he labeled that peculiar movement ‘New Italian Epic.’ There are now three versions of the publication. The first one was published online in April 2008, and followed by an update in September. Both are available at www.carmillaonline.com under the entry “New Italian Epic.” The updated versions of the memorandum by Wu Ming 1 (including the essay “Sentimiento Nuevo,” which is an expansion of the comments he made in the second version), a paper delivered in London in October 2008 by the same author, “Noi dobbiamo essere i genitori,” and an essay by Wu Ming 2 (Giovanni Cattabriga), “La salvezza di Euridice,” are now collected in a volume titled New Italian Epic. Narrativa, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro, and published in January 2009 by Einaudi (in a later comment, Wu Ming 1 has stated that the volume must be intended as a collective work, as any other novel of theirs. Hence, from now on I will not single out the individual members of the collective, unless absolutely necessary, and will unfailingly refer to them as Wu Ming).¹ My article concerns with a number of questions raised by the memorandum: in the first section, titled “NIE discourse and context,” I will point out the main features of this interpretative theory through the analysis of one NIE
work, Giuseppe Genna’s *Italia De Profundis*. In the next section, titled “The question of the form,” I will scrutinize some of the literary issues that Wu Ming treats in his essay. In particular, I will delve into the relationships between the narrative forms analyzed, namely epic and novel, as I will connect them with current studies concerning those forms. Finally, a section titled “The question of the subjects” will deal with the role that agency takes on in this new wave of works, where historical characters regain a role that was eclipsed, or, in the best case, quite diminished, in postmodern age and writings. My point is that customary epic hero, who has always been a single entity in spite of the fact that he embodies the fate of his entire community, has often turned into ‘multitude’ in neoepic texts, and, as such, has acquired different heroic features. Unlike a fierce warrior, neoepic multitude relies on memory and tradition rather than brutal strength.

Throughout the article, Hayden White’s theory that narrativity endows with meaning every recollection of events, historical or fictional, has been paramount, as I attempted to show that the memorandum is more than just literary theory, it is also the acknowledgement that writers have embraced an ethical stand in front of collapsing cultural and social apparatuses.

**NIE discourse and context**

Since his first draft of *NIE*, Wu Ming was adamant in emphasizing that the label subsumes works rather than a number of writers, because these authors have also written books which do not fit under that umbrella. In this section, we will linger over some forms and aspects of the works the memorandum has defined as neoepic. Also, we will
provide the theoretical context wherein the memorandum fits, and what it provides to critical discourse.

One basic condition (‘don’t keep it cool-and-dry’) and a number of essential features, which refer to either form or content of the works, were listed and analyzed in the memorandum.¹ It is fundamental, according to the author, that a “narrative ethics” and “a belief in [the power of] the word” has returned and overcome the abuse of tópoi and cliché which were abundant in postmodern playful writings (Nie, 24). The cool-and-dry irony and detachment typical of postmodern writings, symbolized by Umberto Eco’s Il nome della rosa, have lost their function and meaning, Wu Ming claims. Possibly, the most famous example of such a detached stance is epitomized by Eco in his “Postille al Nome della rosa,” when he states: “Volevo che il lettore si divertisse. Almeno quanto mi stavo divertendo io. Questo è un punto molto importante, che sembra contrastare con le idee più penose che crediamo di avere circa il romanzo,” (U. Eco, “Postille a Il nome della rosa,” Bompiani 1986, 525). This divertissement for divertissement’s sake is not to be found in NIE. By contrast, neoepic works have resorted to “Ardore civile, collera, dolore per la morte del padre, amor fou ed empatia” (NIE, 25), mostly unknown to their close predecessors, in order to convey their message. A compelling example of NIE work that deals with most of the features just listed is Giuseppe Genna’s Italia De Profundis (IDP henceforth). After defining Italy as “Paese di poltiglia fangosa, paludos, gremito da forme di vita che perfino gli entomologi ignorano perché prive di interesse (IDP, 15), Genna the character, in the very next chapters titled “La fine è all’inizio” and “Italia De Profundis,” tells us about his discovery of his father’s corpse, on January 1, 2006 (20-21), an event which will deepen his chronic illness (“Erano dunque due anni che stavo male,
avendo sofferto tutta la vita precedente, per cause materiali e psichiche e affettive.” 36).

In parallel, Italy’s condition has been decaying as well:

Gli italiani stanno raggiungendo il culmine dell’idiozia [...]
Nemmeno la morbosità, nemmeno la rassegnazione, nemmeno
l’indignazione hanno più presa su questo popolo diviso in due
caste sommarie, la ricca e la povera che vive nella finzione di una
ricchezza elusiva [...]. Sono raddoppiate le procedure di
pignoramento. [...] Una marea di merda ricopre l’Italia. [...] La
lotta di classe non esiste più, la lotta tra caste stenta a vedersi
all’orizzonte di questo stivale di terra congestionato da ecomostri,
percorsa da ecomafie, bucherellato da discariche abusive, popolato
da formiche ciarliere che, nella spazzatura, sognano il lindore che,
da Dallas in poi, gli lucida i crani dall’interno. (55, 57, 60)

At the end of a long and disgusted ascertainment of Italy’s appalling social condition
(“Tutto ciò che è stato scritto è sconcertantemente banale. Non è neppure un’analisi,
poiché è una constatazione,” 70), the next chapter turns back to the character’s personal
life, also abysmal, an alternation that will soon give way to the mix of the two as “the
story” (this is the title of the second part of the novel, the first being “the narration”) develops. In the crucial episode (“L’episodio sgradevole, odioso, ossessionante del
villaggio turistico, che doveva essere tutto il libro [...] la città malata di Tebe, traslata nel
tempo indegno e verminoso che contribuisco a testimoniare ma anche a fare” 338), the
two stories merge into one, and the journey, from the Linate airport to the destination and back, becomes the report of this interconnectedness: “Sono nello spazio templare dove si recita senza saperlo il De Profundis italiano. Il De Profundis per me” (IDP, 237). In a salient moment, where the spectacle of the glittering but spurious secluded village mirrors society, Genna the character reports nonchalantly the conflation between his story and that of Italy:

E di colpo ecco la voce che sembra uscita da un programma di Simona Ventura. E infatti è un sosia del figlio di Facchinetti dei Pooh, che si è innalzato su un podio da comizio politico, […] ed è munito di auricolare e microfono. La sua voce da entusiasta aspirante protagonista di Radio Deejay incita la folla seminuda, sfondata o rattrappita nelle sua strutture corporee, prole compresa, a «Danzare! Danzare! Danzare!», tre volte, come Borrelli con il suo slogan antiberlusconiano. (269)

The impersonator, who is metonymically linked to Simona Ventura, a successful starlet, and to the son of pop star Facchinetti, appears to stand as an icon of Italy’s socio-cultural regress, in juxtaposition to Francesco Saverio Borrelli, the chief figure in the legal battle against political corruption that occurred during the early ‘90s named ‘Clean Hands,’ which beheaded the so-called First Italian Republic. The fall of the First Republic paved the way to the coming on the stage of Silvio Berlusconi, whose first steps in the political arena occurred under Craxi’s influence. In depicting Borrelli as ‘antiberlusconiano’
(instead of ‘anticraxiano,’ as one might expect), Genna is referring obliquely to a statement that the *Procuratore Aggiunto* released some ten years after the ‘Clean hands’ trials against corrupted politicians as well as entrepreneurs had begun. In that circumstance, Borrelli was celebrating his nomination as General Attorney (*Procuratore Generale*), hence effectively ending the ‘Clean Hands’ investigation. His words are an uplifting summary of his own ethics, the history of Italy, and current despicable social and political situation:

> Ai guasti di un pericoloso sgretolamento della volontà generale, al naufragio della coscienza civica nella perdita del senso del diritto, ultimo, estremo baluardo della questione morale, è dovere della collettività resistere, resistere, resistere come su una irrinunciabile linea del Piave. (Francesco Saverio Borrelli, January 12, 2002)

As it hints to the relevance of the ‘moral question’ and praises civic consciousness throughout, *IDP* takes on Borrelli’s ‘ardore civile’ and spirit of resistance against the decaying of modern Italy under the heel of ‘berlusconismo,’ an epic stance that, nonetheless, does not need an epic hero to be acted: all it takes is somebody with historical memory, personal dignity, and belief in the power of the word. After leaving the tourist village beforehand, when a corpse is discovered inside one of the residences while the tourists carry on indifferently, Genna the character *decides* that the village must be destroyed: “faccio come Houellebeck in *Piattaforma*, il villaggio turistico esplode.”
poiché è vero che il villaggio è esploso, la nazione è esplosa, il collante sociale si è
disciolto come tempera nel mare […]. Così ho deciso. Perché la tragedia incombe ed esige
nemesi” (340). And nemesis does come: the village is set in flame by some pyromaniacs,
he reads, bewildered, on the newspaper. In *IDP*, ethical resistance combines with the
power of the words to ward off or, at the very least, denounce the collapse of the civil
society, as Wu Ming’s *NIE* has theorized.

After listing the basic condition of NIE works, Wu Ming has sought to single out
a fundamental unit that might represent both aesthetical potentiality and possible
symbolic function: he has called it allegoritmo, a neologism formed by the conjunction of
allegory and algorithm. To explain the new term, he writes: “«Allegoritmo» è un
neologismo che ho preso in prestito da Alex Galloway e McKenzie Wark […] ma
l’utilizzo che ne faccio in questo testo è diverso” (*NIE*, 53). The allegoritmo is an
allegory that does not lag behind and does not age, as opposed to the rigidity of allegory à
clef. It is a path (‘sentiero’) that may rapidly vanish and disappear, and one that leads to a
metahistorical representation that does not subtend a single work, rather an array of
works considered a consistent cluster here under the tag NIE (*NIE*, 53-54). Wu Ming’s
memorandum ends with statements about how fluid is the subject matter described and
interpreted; a subject which faithfully mirrors the instability of the current ‘real’ world,
and Italy in particular, while it emphasizes the one and only leading principle of NIE, one
that maintains that every return to order is delusional and unrealistic. As a result, Wu
Ming suggested that only obtuse anthropocentrism could fail to acknowledge that these
are times in which war never ceases. The challenge is, thus, to tell the story that looms
ahead, right before, and slightly after, the end of humankind:
Per troppo tempo l’arte e la letteratura hanno vissuto nella fantasmagoria, condividendo le pericolose illusioni dello specismo, dell’antropocentrismo, del primato occidentale […]. Oggi arte e letteratura non possono limitarsi a suonare allarmi tardivi: devono aiutarci ad immaginare vie d’uscita. (NIE, 59-60)

In other words, one might say that, according to Wu Ming, art and literature today, more than ever, should entertain by means of attrition, should lead by means of challenging the existent, rather than please their audiences while toying with the world. In many of the works enclosed by Wu Ming in the nebula of NIE, narrative is produced merging creative writing and non-fictional documents, such as letters, journalistic reports, judiciary transcriptions, and so on. This diverse material coalesces to give new form to old content. For example, historical novels such as Manituana by Wu Ming, contain authentic historical documents (chapter 39 opens with an authentic letter by George Washington to John Sullivan, written in May 31, 1779). Similarly, in his Avvertenza per il lettore placed as a foreword to his novel Nelle mani giuste (NMG, henceforth), Giancarlo De Cataldo states: “Il lavoro di ricostruzione si basa prevalentemente sulla lettura di atti giudiziari […]. Quanto al « frasario» e al modus operandi dei mafiosi, essi sono tratti in massima parte da trascrizioni di intercettazioni” (NMG, 2). Investigative novels, thanks to their extensive use of verisimilitude and realistic details, such as Gomorrah by Roberto Saviano, assume a form that is unprecedented. Docu-fiction or UNO (Unidentified Narrative Object), these works have blurred the genres and have defied a more accurate
categorization, thus far. Yet, without a doubt, these very unalike literary products share at least one common trait: they have again taken on the socially symbolic role which was instead neglected by Italian postmodern novels. As such, NIE appears to touch on a broader cultural and ideological frame, and on its current crisis, as my analysis of Genna’s *IDP* has shown.

As he closed in on the differences and “zones of contact” between epic and novel, the great Russian scholar M. M. Bakhtin acknowledged the inherent potentiality of literary forms that could not be fully foreseen ahead of time. Because “Epic material is transposed into novelistic material, into precisely that zone of contact that passes through the intermediate stages of familiarization and laughter” (DI, 15), it appears that at least some of the works included in the NIE embody one of those unpredictable twists of literary production as they represent ‘belief systems’ (DI, 334) that may contribute, if analyzed critically, to the understanding of the past and the construction of a collective memory of recent Italy. Doubtless, NIE is no Classical epic. However, this assessment tells only part of the story. As Joseph Farrell reminded,

> The idea that epic is a closed, authoritative genre, objective in its regard of the heroic past, and so on is a significant discursive construct that evidently answers some deep-seated cultural longing on the part of readers brought up on European literature. But a discursive construct it is… (Farrell, 283)
Farrell mentions relatively recent critical works by David Quint (Epic and the Empire, 1993) and Suzanne Wofford (The Choice of Achilles, 1992) as leading examples of such a modern interpretation of European epic. Quint and Wofford, he maintains, “argue convincingly that the genre can be understood only in dialectical terms” (284). Although in different ways, both scholars intend epic as the literary battlefield where political power is the prize to be won. As a result, the aptitude to account for the dialectic, “disjunctive relationships” (Farrell, 284) between the hero and his opponent grants epic alterity and invention. Seen from this angle, the discussion concerning whether NIE works are epic shifts from the literary to the social and political. In fact, literature is not the only discourse that exposes ‘belief systems,’ to quote Bakhtin, literary interpretation and historical representation do it as well, as Hayden White has shown. In particular, White’s work shows how the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses tends to blur as they share the “common aspect as semiological apparatuses that produce meanings by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) for the extra-discursive entities that serve as their referents” (H. White, The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, x). Whether it is Fredric Jameson’s Marxist interpretation of narrative, or Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of history, White shows that when cultural and historical events are narrativized, an entire set of actors comes upon stage, not merely the voice of the narrator. Quite the contrary,

To conceive of narrative discourse [as semiological apparatuses] permits us to account for its universality as a cultural fact and for the interest that dominant social groups have […] in controlling
what will pass for the authoritative myths of a given cultural formation [...] . Myths and the ideologies based in them presuppose the adequacy of stories to the representation of the reality whose meaning they purport to reveal. When belief in this adequacy begins to wane, the entire cultural edifice of a society enters into crisis (White, x).

According to White, the waxing and waning of myths (stories, that is), belief, and authority concur to raise or pull down cultural institutions, caught in a mutual relationships which none of the single elements controls completely. However, it is undeniable that the foremost reason undermining the social edifice is disbelief in the power of the words, the acknowledgement of their futility. That is how cultural, and then social, crisis comes into the picture. It appears hardly deniable that we were, in the last decades, and still are now, at a point of social and cultural crisis, in which the lack of Great Narrations can no longer be filled with fragmented stories and facsimile events rather than new worlds, as Jameson famously put it in his *Postmodernism* (1991). In this alarming context, symbolized by Genna’s tourist village, what NIE does is trying to fill the void by means of narrations that endow new meaning in old words.

The NIE works deserve painstaking attention in so far as they constitute a theoretical and aesthetic challenge for literary scholars and critics. It is my opinion that the nebula that Wu Ming has described in his memoranda is worth our while, and that the memoranda themselves, similarly to Quint’s and Wofford’s analyses, “mark an important stage in theoretical work on the epic and a signal that in this field theory has finally
begun to catch up with practice” (Farrell, 284). To return to the discursive construct that NIE conveys and allows, Stefano Jossa has recently stated that, “Questo è l’orizzonte con cui dovremmo porci di fronte al New Italian Epic: né liquidarlo né osannarlo, ma verificarne le potenzialità sul piano poetico.” An open-ended contest, the NIE nebula calls for critical answers, not emotional ones. It summons up scholars and literary critics alike because it expects—and deserves, I argue—to be scrutinized, probed, and assessed by them. After all, this is their self-appointed mission.

Therefore, not only are Wu Ming’s essays engaging but they also elicit questions that are undeniably compelling and far-reaching. Even more enthralling than what they claim, the fact that the essays do make aesthetical and theoretical claims is what catches attention and criticism. In addition, another captivating subject to be analyzed is who made those claims and who has engagingly intervened in the debate. It is quite striking not only that many authors set out to revive a defunct (or seriously depressed) literary genre—notably one with a significant political content, epic—but also that these same authors have become involved in self-conscious criticism of their own literary works in a way that is hardly matched in the cultural history of modern Italy (Eco’s “Postille,” published in 1983, stands as the exception to the rule). That the writers Wu Ming, Guglielmo Pispisa (member of collective Kai Zen), Girolamo De Michele, Valerio Evangelisti, Giuseppe Genna and others are now theorizing about their own writings included in the nebula NIE is an intellectual practice that has long been absent from Italian literary culture, and it is significant that it would emerge in conjunction with the revival of a genre so central to Italian literary history overall.
As a matter of fact, these authors are filling a long-standing gap in Italian literary theory. In an article published a few years ago, R. Ceserani and P. Pellini speak of “the belated development of a theory of the novel in Italian literary culture,” adding that:

Few Italian writers systematically tackled the theoretical problem of the novel as a literary genre. Few Italian novelists (except for Italo Calvino or Umberto Eco) managed either to write high-level literary criticism of the novel or to explore its technical and rhetorical problems in the same manner as such writers as Henry James, Marcel Proust, or E. M. Forster have done. All too often, Italian writers do not consider such problems as worthy of serious attention.\(^{13}\)

With the publication of *NIE*, the split between authors and critics has begun to wither. Wu Ming and the others correctly acknowledge the novelty of the NIE, yet its originality extends further. As I demonstrated in my analysis of *IDP*, these novelties concern not only literary form and content but also, perhaps more intriguingly, the current state of Italian culture and society. NIE works concern multitude as character, and are – some of them, not all of them – written by multiple authors. That is why the subjects of NIE are a compelling case study. Taken together, the deliberate recourse to this distant and heroic genre, its theorization by the authors themselves, and the complexities presented by their collective and even web-based authorship suggests that the NIE represents a true advance beyond the literary postmodernism which has dominated the scene in recent decades. In
the next sections I will discuss what I consider to be the NIE’s most remarkable symbolic
issues: first, the question of the form; and second, multitude, as the collective character in
the works.

The question of the form

Setting aside, for the time being, the opinion of those who refuse to consider the NIE
worth their while, I will focus on whether this recent literature may be defined as epic,
and why.

The christening of these works as ‘epic’ appears to be considered a literary sin
perpetrated by Wu Ming before the eyes of his detractors, and without a doubt it
constitutes a controversial point of the entire memorandum. Some say (Vittorio
Spinazzola) that the works of NIE are not epic ones; some say (Tiziano Scarpa) that the
list drawn by Wu Ming is flawed because it does not account for epic books written or
published before 1993; others maintain that the list is missing the real epic works
written during that time (Carla Benedetti). Moreover, and quite predictably, both the
qualifying adjectives ‘new’ and ‘Italian’ make the subject more intricate. Here, at any
rate, I will focus only on the first objection (“NIE is not epic”) because of its political
implications not only for the Italian literary society – a relatively small environment – but
also for the public sphere. Epic, in fact, is a far-reaching and loaded literary term, it
evokes events of absolute magnitude, it summons up teleology and cosmology, chaos and
order. Ostensibly in dialogue with the classical definition of the genre, Wu Ming has
defined epic and the reason for the utilization in his essay thus:
L'uso dell'aggettivo “epico”, in questo contesto, non ha nulla a che vedere con il “teatro epico” del Novecento o con la denotazione di “oggettività” che il termine ha assunto in certa teoria letteraria.

Queste narrazioni sono epiche perché riguardano imprese storiche o mitiche, eroiche o comunque avventurose: guerre, anabasi, viaggi iniziatici, lotte per la sopravvivenza, sempre all'interno di conflitti più vasti che decidono le sorti di classi, popoli, nazioni o addirittura dell'intera umanità, sugli sfondi di crisi storiche, catastrofi, formazioni sociali al collasso. Spesso il racconto fonde elementi storici e leggendari (Wu Ming, 14).

Later on, in his ‘Sentimiento Nuevo’ (chapter 2 of NIE), Wu Ming partially corrected his statement, writing: “Ho scritto che il mio uso dell’aggettivo «epico» non ha nulla a che vedere con il cosiddetto «teatro epico». Secondo Girolamo De Michele l’affermazione è troppo drastica, e ha ragione” (76). In order to better define his concept of epic, Wu Ming added that “L’epica è un «di piú», il risultato di un particolare lavoro sulle connotazioni del racconto” (72). In my opinion, Wu Ming correctly uses the label ‘epic’ despite his somewhat less convincing theoretical explanation. In any case, as we will soon see, Farrell too makes a strong case for the existence of epic as a still living genre in current literature, and I will leave the task of solving rapidly this rather secondary dilemma to his words, as they go straight to the foremost, crucial point. In his analysis of Derek Walcott’s Omeros, the American scholar maintains that:
The problem of literary categorization is [...] merely a special case of one of the poem’s central themes; but it gains point from the fact that epic has been perceived—particularly European epic in the classical tradition—as, to use Bakhtin’s term, the “monologic” genre par excellence and as the antithesis of the most thoroughly open and dialogic genre, which Bakhtin terms the novel. (Farrell, 273)

Hence, if one continues to use the strictly classical definition of epic, which contemplates only one vision of the world, time, space, and event, one ignores, according to Farrell, “the European epic’s capacity for self-questioning and for radical reinterpretation of its own generic roots” (274). Granted, unlike Omeros the NIE works are not written in verse, another constraint belonging to the classical epic definition that one may consider narrow, out-of-date, and therefore a characteristic that needs to be decisively challenged by twentieth-century literary criticism.17 Commenting on Omeros’ style, Farrell wrote, “Its tone is seldom elevated, nor is much of its matter especially dignified. The narrative voice, though sure in a technical sense, is personal […], uncomfortable with the mantle of authority” (Farrell, 280). Furthermore, unlike classical epic Omeros is not an imperialist celebration, quite the contrary. Hence, Farrell went on saying that: “If the European epic is what the theorists tell us it should be, then clearly Omeros is no epic. But those theorists are wrong.” (283) As a matter of fact, works like Omeros force contemporary critics to unearth the
counter tradition of reading epic as more open to pluralities of interpretation than the conventional view of the genre would seem to allow [...]. From ancient allegoresis of the Homeric epics, which refuses to take the poem at face value, to romantic readings of Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*, to New Critical readings of the *Aeneid* as a deeply divided, grimly brooding meditation on the costs of empire, practical critics have always shown great acuity and resourcefulness at reading behind the objectivity and transcendence that we have all been taught to find in epic … (283)

Interpreted against the grain, these epic works exemplify the bridge between the classical and contemporary genre through the hybridization of both form and content. As a result modern epic “reinvents itself through inversion, opposition to epic predecessors” (283), yet making extensive use of the figure of lineage or paternity in order to claim its belonging to that very same tradition. As Farrell stated, “It is difficult not to see in the career of the European epic an ideal instantiation of the Oedipal warfare” (287). Within their own historical domain (1993-2008), the NIE works stage time and again descendants or disciples struggling to deal with the death of a patriarchal, foundational figure, whose loss represents the first step towards the downfall of the clan, family, or group. In his second version of the essay, Wu Ming added a note (which later became a section in the book) that is titled ‘La morte del Vecchio,’ in which he stated that: “Accorgersi della ricorrenza del «Vecchio» come personaggio-assenza è un passo lungo il sentiero di lettura che ho chiamato “allegoritmo”. [...] Si può dire che la morte del
Vecchio sia il *mitologema* di molte opere NIE” (Wu Ming, 75). Giancarlo De Cataldo’s *Nelle mani giuste* and Wu Ming’s *Manituana* are arguably the most compelling examples of the role that the *mitologema* “la morte del Vecchio” plays in NIE works. The reader will find not one but two of them in each work. In *NMG*, the characters named ‘il Vecchio’ and ‘il Fondatore’ cast not only apotropaically their shadows over their respective ‘oblique orphans’ (the only actual orphan, Maya Donatoni, daughter of ‘il Fondatore’, is at first only a secondary actor in the political game in place). Il Vecchio is an obscure figure who emerged from World War II in a strategically solid position, and spent the next forty years to build his status:


Il Vecchio was a man of state who operated scrupleless and undercover to protect the State and his institutions. One subplot in *NMG* tells the story of his legacy, of the conflicts and fights it has generated among his worthless heirs, another recurrent feature of the *mitologema* being his inadequate followers. Ilio Donatoni, for example, who took
over the company owned and founded by il Fondatore through the marriage with Maya, acknowledges his own inadequacy when confronting Mafia attempts to dispossess him:


Consequently, Donatoni will give up the fight, will commit suicide, and Maya will regain control over her life and what is left of her father’s business.

The death of imposing founding figures is also in Manituana, Wu Ming’s u-chronic novel concerning the Independence war in the American colonies of the British crown. Both Hendrick and William Johnson, chiefs of the Mohawk and Irish tribes respectively, die at the beginning of the novel, leaving behind them an unhinged social system with increasing troubles for their survivors. The deaths of the leaders mark the end of the world as it was known and call for new heroes to fill the vacant roles. However, their world will not be saved, and their followers will turn out to be mostly inadequate. The American rebels will win their war for political and economic independence, and, consequently, the Six Indian Nations will split and leave room to the first nucleus of the United States of America. The “morte del Vecchio” stands once more at the crossroad of
the plot, but also as a significant meta-narrative nexus. As a matter of fact, this mythologem appears to perform a crucial double function: not only does it create a symbolic correlation between synchronic NIE works; as a long-standing theme, it also enlivens the connection with classical epic. Moreover, the revitalization of the mythologem operated by NIE also allows its symbolic transformation and re-invention, precisely how Farrell suggested: while the occurrence of the classical mythologem (the death of Oedipus’s father) does not undermine the political order (Thebes resists, Oedipus’s departure notwithstanding), its contemporary form is characterized by the unfailing collapse of the world within which it takes place. In *NMG* all the co-opted heirs die as well, giving way to even lesser actors. In *Manituana* the Mohawk are forced out of the former colonies and into Canada. They survive the war, however their dream has died forever. The death of the Patriarch brings about a crisis impossible to be overcome, and the order will not be restored. A new beginning is needed.

**The question of the subject(s)**

The NIE’s subjects that I mentioned in the previous section, in both embodiments (as authors and characters, that is), show that their functional and thematic discourse is ultimately related to a shared representation of current crises that affect both the individual as agency and the world in which this agency operates. The NIE, in other words, signals a ‘poetry of crisis’ and the ‘frantumazione’ of a political and poetical system, among else.¹⁹ The NIE hero, as we will see in this section, is fighting for a world that appears to collapse in spite of his effort to defer the loss. Ordinary and beleaguered, only if it comes as a multitude it really embodies the fate of his community.
Moreover, Wu Ming’s categorization is compelling because it represents the return in the Italian landscape of the figure of the author who does not shy away from literary interpretation of his own or others’ work. This long-established figure (from Dante to Italo Calvino via Torquato Tasso, Giacomo Leopardi, Luigi Pirandello, Umberto Eco, the list of Italian writers who also wrote theoretical essays is quite long) had disappeared in recent Italian culture, as Ceserani and Pellini have underscored in the passage mentioned earlier. The fact that it has now returned should neither surprise theorists nor draw alarmed disapproval—disapproval whose apparent purpose is to claim the necessity of keeping authors and theorists apart. Indeed, the re-appropriation of the critical viewpoint on the author’s end, as well as the emergence of collective authorship and collective characters (in this article customarily named ‘multitude’) mark the most powerful, deeply political, and potentially fruitful, feature of the NIE.

Current Italian history manifests itself in the NIE, especially in its new attention to the bridging of past and present. However, the main character fails to embody a commanding aura, wisdom, or strength. The NIE literary movement portrays a subject who seems to awaken from the postmodern slumber of the last three decades; nevertheless, the return to the previous, crucial, status can never be complete. The subject’s displacement through the postmodern habits of spatial thinking prevents a complete return to the affirmation of the intellectual’s leading role in the defining and shaping of history. Unlike the hero of traditional epic, in NIE the hero only obliquely interacts with history. In the first place, the military hero of traditional epic is replaced either by a host of alternative protagonists such as animals, objects, or quasi-powerless multitude characters. Anonymous soldiers of the Italian army dispatched in Ethiopia to
fighter (and lose) for Francesco Crispi’s dream of colonial power are at the center of Carlo Lucarelli’s *L’ottava vibrazione* (Einaudi, 2008), a work that tells the story of the infamous – for Italy – battle of Adua, occurred in 1896:


*L’ottava vibrazione* reminds the reader of those anti-rhetoric works concerning the 
Resistenza movement during World War II, like Beppe Fenoglio’s *Il partigiano Johnny* or Luigi Meneghello’s *I piccoli maestri*, works devoid of overbearing heroes and invincible warriors. Rather than making history, these characters are dragged by it. As such, they are removed from the center of history, and therefore it is necessary to understand and view NIE’s main characters as peripheral. They are still heroes, but they are vanquished and neglected. Jameson’s analysis of Ragtime by E. L. Doctorow (lauded as “the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past”22) now appears inadequate: in NIE, the past is an influential presence, as for example in such epoch-marking declarations as “nulla sarà più come prima,” and, in regard to the individual: “Voglio farti conoscere l’abisso della mia nostalgia per quella che ero prima e non sarò mai più,” which return with the regularity of a mantra.23 My hypothesis is that while subjectivity, or agency, has regained the philosophical spotlight in recent years – and the
historical functions that comes with it – it has also undergone a radical change that suggests it may be more accurately portrayed in terms of a multitude, a collectivity rather than an individuality.\textsuperscript{24} It is fairly evident that the myths present in NIE works no longer revolve around one dominant hero who carries the fate of the world on his shoulders, as did previous epic model. Yet, the new epic \textit{remains} an epic because, absent the dominant hero, its fate is taken on by multiple related if diminished characters, as in \textit{L’ottava vibrazione}. Another example may be seen in Wu Ming 4’s \textit{Stella del mattino} (Einaudi 2008). One of the epical moment and place in the book sees Ronald (the ‘real’ J.R. Tolkien) in the trenches during World War I. He is surrounded by scared, dumbfounded soldiers; but also by mine workers, and trench-diggers, all of them dazed and confused. Ronald urinates in his pants, yet this is not what mortifies him, rather it is the general shock and impotence that overwhelms everybody:

\begin{quote}
Tra una cannonata e l’altra Ronald ripete le disposizioni. Devono lanciare ancora razzi luminosi per chi si perde nella Terra di Nessuno. Riceve in risposta uno sguardo perplesso. L’imbecille non capisce piú quello che gli dice. Nessuno ci riesce. È piú imbarazzante della macchia scura che si allarga sui pantaloni. Il senso d’impotenza aumenta fino ad ammutolirlo.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Eventually, J. R. Tolkien and his army of nondescript shocked soldiers and workers will survive, and the episode will become a source of inspiration for the future writer. Yet, the reader is not provided with the deeds of a single epic hero in an epic moment, rather s/he
encounters an undistinguished doom; the general tone is unassuming and the entire picture is leveled. Helplessness rules, but it is communal. As Claudia Boscolo underlines, the absence of the epic hero creates a void that calls for a replacement:

[L]a funzione dell’eroe epico è principalmente quella di incarnare una causa. Quando Orlando abbandona il campo di Carlo Magno, o si distrae, o impazzisce, insomma non c’è, il suo spirito resta, la moltitudine, o chi c’è, porta avanti quello che lui rappresenta.  

This is the spirit that, at times maddened and awed, is represented in Stella del mattino. Now, the fragmentary postmodern subject appears to be replaced by a consistent subjectivity whose experience is shared and an understanding filtered through the community in which he/she lives. No longer the chosen one, the subject of the NIE may naturally accept his marginality as long as the community supports him and bonds with him. Although it borders on History with a capital ‘H,’ this communitarian effort towards knowledge and accomplishment nonetheless takes up, once again, the committed political function that individual postmodern subjects had forsaken.

One last political feature of the NIE’s multitude that I shall analyze in my essay is its critical partisanship with the broad political scenario. Similar to the world epic analyzed by Farrell, the NIE does not advocate imperialism. On the contrary, it reverberates with the feelings and deeds of those who sided, or at the very least sympathized, with the wretched and oppressed of the world. When they are in the right place at the right time, as is the case of the Indian nation during the American War of
Independence in Wu Ming’s *Manituana*, and Errico the anarchist in Alessandro Bertante’s *Al diavul*, they stand on the ‘wrong’ side. They bear witness of history as experienced on the side of the losers, as Benjamin would say.

Some of the NIE works (*Black flag, 54, Al diavul, Stella del mattino, Manituana, L’ottava vibrazione, Controinsurrezioni, La presa di Macallè*) deal with events of a large magnitude. World wars, wars of liberation and independence, which turn out to be colonizing wars when seen from the ‘other’ side, are their common background, both in Europe, the Middle East, and North America. In these texts, the viewpoint of the narrator is often peripheral as the main characters stroll on the sidelines of the main fields of action, slightly lagging behind history in the making. Invariably, as the story develops, the multitude realizes its derivative role in the execution of the historical grand plan. Yet, the characters are present at the time in which history is made, and they are present under the guise of the multitude. While their individual roles might seem secondary and clan-related, their collective efforts belong to a larger tradition, culture, and folklore. It is a local wisdom that the multitude also helps to renovate effectively through its actions, and which eventually connects to the broader scenario. One part of this narrated tradition will soon turn in national identity because, as Ezio Raimondi has stated, “Una memoria comune ha tanti istituti che la ravvivano e la fecondano. Tra questi si deve introdurre la letteratura, quella istituzione che conserva il passato attraverso la parola,” while the other part will do it only after the end of the historical period that the NIE novels cover. In the first case, as in *Stella del mattino*, wandering native tribes become the core of the newly founded free state of Iraq, a political entity born after the war against the Turks; similarly, in *Black flag*, a shaman sides with the Northern army in the American civil war, reluctant
though he is. Among the works which represent the second model, in *Manituana* the six Iroquois nations, which are allied to the British crown, lose the war and their territory. The remnants move north, to the mouth of the Saint Lawrence river, currently in Canada, led by Mohawk Molly Brant. Although the reader might be under the impression that this defeat would weaken the Native Americans’ identity and cause their disappearance, the story ends differently. Molly Brant is in fact considered a traditional heroine in Canada, as she helped in building a new community on the islands and shores of the Lake Ontario, a legacy that is well-preserved. This further development of the story is not part of *Manituana*’s plot, however. Regardless of that, as a neoepic heroine, Molly Brant and the multitude gathered around her embody the spirit of the hero that survives the madness of the war and lays the foundation for a forthcoming national identity. Accordingly, this narrative becomes national as its individual characters turn into multitude. The weak individual power strengthens within the community, which is facing the tough task to find new hope while embattled. The resort to ethical responsibility and the belief in the power of its tradition will help the multitude to find a way to the promised land.

**Conclusion: Emplotments**

A few months ago, Alberto Asor Rosa has defined the New Italian Epic interpretative theory thus: “l’unico tentativo recente di sistemazione teorico-letteraria […] degno di questo nome […] altamente meritorio per il solo fatto, — raro, ripeto – di entrare nel merito” (*La Repubblica*, December 15, 2009, p. 60). Wu Ming’s *NIE* is undoubtedly a discursive construct, as Farrell would put it, yet it has the invaluable merit to coalesce a number of known, scattered elements that were disjointed hitherto. In so doing, Wu Ming
has recognized the emplotment (“Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind,” H. White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 7) that a number of contemporary Italian writers have adopted and applied to their stories. Detected and unearthed, the neoepic narrativization has rapidly become a useful – and used – analytical tool and a benchmark for literary criticism. Since “it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning” (White, *The Content of the Form*, 44), one may say that Wu Ming’s memorandum is not only an attempt to systematize a section of contemporary Italian literature, but also a discourse concerning Italian contemporary history and society. It portrays a whole where others have only seen parts, if anything at all. It connects dots that others could not or do not see as connected. In so doing, *NIE* has created a cosmos where it was supposed to be chaos. How powerful and sophisticated this cosmos is remains yet to be seen, of course. As I have shown, the *NIE* is both an interpretative theory and a space open for exploration and experimentation. It includes novels in its more traditional fashion (historical novels), hybrid writings (*docu/fiction*) that display a wide array of sources and take on manifold shapes (as in *Gomorrah* or *Nelle mani giuste*) under an overarching ethical mood that holds them together as a coherent body. While the label *NIE*, whose function is mainly to explicit political consciousness and ethical responsibility vis-à-vis the world inside and outside the works involved, might be debatable, its subject matter is worth our while and has already made an encouraging impact on some cultural apparatuses of literary Italy. In pointing to an unnoticed guest hitherto, namely the nebula *NIE*, Wu Ming’s memorandum has shaken a distracted audience and revitalized a sluggish and
standardized critical theory scenario, providing the readers as well as the authors with an opportunity to reinvent their roles and engage in social and political understanding. Quite a feat, in today’s time and age, I argue.
Notes

1 All further references to the volume are abbreviated to NIE and are to this edition. The italicized abbreviation refers to the book, the non-italicized one to the literary movement.

2 Published in October 2008, Italia De Profundis (Rome: Minimum Fax) is not included in the memorandum, unlike Dies Irae (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006), Medium (lulu.com, 2007) and Hitler (Milan: Mondadori, March 2008), by the same author. However, without a doubt IDP is a NIE work. From the first page, Genna makes clear that his work has a debt with what has to be considered the ancestor of the group of NIE works named UNO (Unidentified Narrative Object, hybrid writings such as docufiction): Petrolio, by Pier Paolo Pasolini. For more on this, see E. Patti, “Petrolio, a model of UNO in Giuseppe Genna’s Italia De Profundis,” in Journal of Romance Studies, vol. 10, 1, Spring 2010: 83-95.

3 On this point see section “La nebulosa” in NIE (10-14).

4 Rather than listing all of them here, I will deal with the most significant to my point as my essay develops.

5 Borrelli is the Procuratore Aggiunto who signed the first of a long list of subpoenas (in December 15, 1992), against former Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, an act that determined the latter’s end of political career.

6 Along this line appears to stand Genna as well, whose IDP keeps deconstructing semantically beginnings and ends. Side by side with chapters entitled “Non inizio,” or “La fine è all’inizio,” one of the most regular mantra in IDP is, in many different versions: “Non finisce mai, inizia sempre” (IDP, 341).

7 M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Translated by Michael Holquist; Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. All further references are abbreviated to DI and are to this edition.

8 Collective, here, simply means shared by a relevant number of individuals, without expectation of being synonymic of absolute and uncontested knowledge. Later on, I will delve into the concept when coupled with “author.”

9 In his study of Walcott’s Omeros (Walcott’s Omeros: The Classical Epic in a Postmodern World, in M. H. Bessinger, J. Tylus, S. Wofford (eds), Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World, University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1999, pp. 270-296), Farrell has pointed out that some scholars tend to use the term “national narrative” instead of epic, to emphasize the difference between modern epic and Classical works. In particular, the American scholar has written that the European and Classical scholars have an “absurdly one-dimensional idea of the epic genre” (279).

10 A one-dimensional epic theory would hardly be able to justify the presence of works such as Don Quixote, War and Peace, or Orlando Furioso in its canon.


12 Lately, Wu Ming 1 has been busy answering most of the invectives received. In the most traditional Italian fashion, he has published two pieces titled “New Italian Epic; reazioni de panza” part 1 and 2, in which he has classified his censors’ arguments, and meticulously answered all of them. In so doing, he allows those of us who are concerned with his writings to tackle other issues.


14 Vittorio Spinazzola wrote: “Recentemente si sono fatti più espliciti i propositi di un rinnovamento energetico che investa le attività sia di scrittura sia di lettura. Ma a catalizzarli è stata soprattutto una parola d’ordine singolarmente ambigua e disorientante: la New Italian Epic. Dal punto di vista promozionale la locuzione è una trovata sagace: il ricorso alla lingua inglese le dà un’efficacia suggestiva che nella versione italiana svasisce subito, la Nuova Epica Italiana fa soltanto sorridere. Il punto è che per quanto ci si sforzi di ampliare la portata del termine, nel mondo d’oggi non c’è nulla che richiami il carattere costitutivo dell’epos classico, o cavalleresco.” (V. Spinazzola, Tirature 2010, pp.11-12).

15 Tiziano Scarpa wrote that: “Nel 1990 viene pubblicato Insciallah di Oriana Fallaci, notevole esempio di ”Italian Epic”, per nulla ascrivibile all’ironia postmoderna: l’unica sua pecca per non essere ”new” è che è un romanzo pubblicato prima del fatidico 1993, anno sancito per decreto storicistico da Wu Ming 1.” (“L’epica-popular, gli anni Novanta, la parresia,” article available at www.ilprimoamore.com/testo_1361.html).
See, for example, Carla Benedetti, “Free Italian Epic,” available at www.ilprimoamore.com/testo_1376.html.

Yet, some of the NIE works make use of poetry too. As Wu Ming wrote: “Il romanzo, oggi e soprattutto in Italia, è mutante e mutageno […]. Diversi romanzi odierni «aberrano» e diventano strani oggetti narrativi, e in alcune parti — parti significative — sono scritti in versi.” (NIE, 84). He then listed a few examples from Sappiano le mie parole di sangue (Babsi Jones, Milan: Rizzoli, 2007), Il diavolo custode (Luigi Balocchi, Rome: Meridiano Zero, 2008) and La visione del cieco (G. De Michele, Turin: Einaudi, 2008).

Among the works which feature “La morte del Vecchio” one can name Manituana (Wu Ming, Turin: Einaudi 2007), Nelle mani giuste (G. De Cataldo, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007), L’uomo che volle essere Perón (G. M. Bellu, Milan: Bompiani, 2008), Sappiano le mie parole di sangue, Medium (Genna).

“The Poetry of Crisis” (in Ariosto’s Bitter Harmony) and “Frantumazione” (in L’ombra del Tasso) are terms that Albert Ascoli and Stefano Zatti, respectively, have used to describe some political features of Ludovico Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso.


Many works are set in Republican Italy and concern with issues left after the end of Fascism and the disappointment that followed when Italy showed her gattopardesca attitude. De Cataldo’s NMG and its very successful predecessor Romanzo criminale, Girolamo Di Michele’s trilogy Tre uomini paradossali, Scirocco, and La visione del cieco (published respectively in 2004, 2005, and 2008 by Einaudi), Simone Sarasso’s Confine di Stato (Orbetello: Editrice effequ, 2006) and Settanta (Venezia: Marsilio, 2009), Marco Philopat’s La banda Bellini (Turin: Einaudi, 2007) are only a few examples that come to mind.


In political terms, one may say that Giorgio Agamben’s singularity (as described in his La comunità che viene, Turin: Einaudi 1990) has given way to collective subject, portrayed in both Empire and in Multitude by Hardt-Negri, or by Paolo Virno in his Grammatica della moltitudine (Catanzaro, Rubbettino, 2001). At least, this is the philosophy of history the NIE tells.

Wu Ming 4, Stella del mattino, Turin: Einaudi, p. 51.


Concerning Omeros, Farrell writes: “It is also clear that the nationalism of this epic is far from embracing the imperialist ideology of previous epics. Walcott’s St. Lucia is consistently represented as a remnant and a victim of empire” (280).


A museum and its archives that belong to The Brant Historical Society, devoted to “illustrate the founding, settlement, diversity, and development of Brantford and Brant County” may be visited in Brantford, Ontario, Canada (http://www.brantmuseum.ca/brant-museum-and-archives/home).