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From *Kohelet/Ecclesiastes* to *Montedidio*: The Rest of the Story

Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg

Spreco di sprechi ha detto Kohelet,
spreco di sprechi il tutto è spreco.
(*Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*, 21)¹

“Sal va to re e!” In the first story of Erri De Luca’s *I colpi dei sensi*, the staggered syllables are cried out by a white-haired woman dressed in black as the ship carrying her son to the new world leaves the harbor. The pain in that voice points to a universal curse: “Contro il mare, la nave, gli uomini strappati e nominati in vano, quel grido torna alla sua origine di bestemmia generale” (“Against the sea, the ship, the men who were snatched away and whose names were cried out in vain, that scream returns to its origins: a universal curse”).² Imitating that sound in a manner as faithful to the original as possible is imperative to the story’s first-person narrator, for whom this scream, like a seed, should not be wasted—all the more since “the scream is older than any of us, older than seed,” as Edmond Jabès, a writer dear to De Luca, claims in *Le livre des questions*.³ Quoting from the Book of Proverbs, “Non sciupare il seme” (“Don’t waste the seed”), De Luca explains, “Raccoglierne qualcuno è una piú accessibile consegna contro il fitto spreco del vivere” (“Gather only a few precious ones, for they make a gift that is more valuable than the many seeds wasted in the course of a lifetime”).⁴ Collecting seeds is a remedy against “spreco,” against waste.

A similar scream ends De Luca’s 2001 novel, *Montedidio*, whose pages cleverly conceal a discourse on the act of writing as a remedy against this same waste (“spreco”), resulting in the book as a leftover, as residue of the story that precedes it, aspiring to write itself in what Walter Benjamin would call a “reine Sprache” (“pure language”) worthy of a scroll. “Spreco” is also the subject of the book of *Kohelet*, that part of the Bible better known in the Christian world as *Ecclesiastes*, which constitutes, I will argue, *Montedidio*’s biblical subtext. As a receptacle, a kind of “volume del mondo,” the book of *Ecclesiastes*, alias *Kohelet* in De Luca’s translation and interpretation, also sheds light on the writing of *Montedidio* through the lens of a biblical exegete interested in Ancient Hebrew’s unique vowel-consonant relationship. De Luca’s manipulation of the Neapolitan dialect and the Yiddish language alike, as well as his predilection for stylistic choices and even editorial directions aimed at creating a spatial-textual game of compactness and airiness, betrays the author’s awareness of the metaphorical nature of language itself and the

¹ Aspects of this article were first presented as conference papers in 1998, 2003, and 2011 at the AAIS conferences in Chicago, Washington, and Pittsburgh, respectively. All citations are from Erri De Luca’s Italian edition and translation of the Book of *Ecclesiastes*, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996). All English translations from the Italian are mine.

² Erri De Luca, *I colpi dei sensi* (Rome: Fahrenheit 451, 1993), 12; from here on, abbreviated as *I Colpi*. For the English translation of the five stories see *The Senses of Memory* by Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg in *Chelsea* 66 (1999): 44-57. For an in-depth reading, see Marina Spunta, “Struck by Silence: A Reading of *I colpi dei sensi* by Erri De Luca,” *Italica* 78, no. 3 (2001): 367-82.

³ Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963).

⁴ De Luca, *I colpi*, 11 (my emphasis).

sacred nature of its origin. Like *Kohelet/Ecclesiastes*, *Montedidio*, in the hand of its writer-creator, morphs into a compact container for a Benjaminian pure language of creation, a “point” of departure for the book.

The attraction of Erri De Luca—as bible translator-exegete, novelist, essayist, poet, and, more recently, screen writer—is too great to resist in a century that follows what Yuri Slezkine calls “the Jewish century” that in its earlier years gave us Sholem, Benjamin, and Kafka, and in the postwar years featured writers and critics of exile such as Celan, Jabès, or Derrida;⁵ that saw the emergence of rabbinic interpretation in modern literary theory as Susan A. Handelman has shown in *The Slayers of Moses*;⁶ that produced a body of translation theory and practice in the West informed by Jewish-Christian relationships—a thought that Naomi Seidman has invited us to ponder and that finds confirmation in the writings of, for instance, George Steiner;⁷ a century, moreover, that confronted us with our “postmodern condition,” including the one inside the hyphenated space between Judaism and Christianity, as Lyotard suggests;⁸ an epoch that attempted to bridge the distance between Athens and Jerusalem, to borrow a metaphor used by De Luca on the topic of biblical translation from the Hebrew rather than from the Greek in *Una nuvola come tappeto*.⁹ This lands us at the shore of the writings of De Luca, who embodies both the modern and postmodern discourses that the Jewish century has mapped. In this centennial choir, one hitherto muffled voice on this side of the Atlantic that nevertheless could play a fundamental role in our re-reading of that era’s literary production, is, in fact, De Luca. This Naples-born writer’s literary and essayistic production is not only characterized by the presence of Jewish themes and characters but is also informed by readings of those voices that prompted the aforementioned Slezkine to define the twentieth century as the Jewish century. Also remarkable is De Luca’s knowledge of linguistic-philosophical thinking inherently present in Ancient Hebrew, which constitutes one of the major influences on this multifaceted author’s writing.¹⁰ His 2001 novel *Montedidio* is a unique occasion to consider his literary production from this Jewish intellectual and linguistic-philosophical perspective that places him squarely between modernity and postmodernity.¹¹

Through his fascination with what he affectionately calls the “nonna-lingua saputa in infanzia e poi scordata” (“a granny language known during childhood and then forgotten”),¹² De Luca is worthy of a seat among biblical translators such as Robert Alter, Everett Fox, or the already

⁵ Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁶ Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982).

⁷ Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). See also George Steiner, whose hermeneutical approach to translation and to text in general seems firmly rooted in his (secular) Jewish identity. See especially chapter 5 of his *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 283-84, where he identifies Judaism as the moral and intellectual tradition most informed by the authority of the Word.

⁸ See Jean-François Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber, *The Hyphen between Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Haas (New York: Humanities Books, 1999).

⁹ Erri De Luca, *Una nuvola come tappeto* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991).

¹⁰ This thought was first articulated in Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg, “Erri De Luca, il Libro e la Lingua,” *Il Veltro* 3-4 (May-August 1996): 311-15.

¹¹ Erri De Luca, *Montedidio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001). All further citations are from this edition.

¹² With this circumlocution De Luca first describes the Ancient Hebrew language in *Una nuvola come tappeto*, 14.

mentioned Naomi Seidman, albeit as one who remains loyal to the conviction that the sacred nature of this language demands nothing less than a direct, word-for-word translation. Such a task is much complicated by Hebrew's metaphorical power, stemming from its polysemous nature, a quality which De Luca perhaps best illustrates quoting a Talmudic interpretation of Jeremiah 23:29: "Come un martello frantuma la roccia [...]: significa che come il martello frantuma la roccia in una moltitudine di frammenti, così un solo passo della Scrittura ha molti significati" ("just like a hammer breaks up a rock [...]: this means that just like a hammer breaks up a rock in many fragments, so too does one passage from the Scriptures have many meanings").¹³ Indeed, meaning is conveyed when the unwritten vowels are spoken into or imagined inside interconsonantic spaces.¹⁴ One significant result is that the three consonants written to designate "thing" (daled [ד], beth [ב] resh [ר] to form the word "davar") coincide with those used for the "spoken" ("daber"), thus effacing the Saussurean distinction between "signifiant" and "signifié" and even that between "signum" and "res": meaning is conveyed by filling, "voweling," interconsonantic spaces. Hebrew is, therefore, "compact," "skinny," "lean," or "essential," adjectives that have been used for De Luca's prose.¹⁵ The coincidence of the word for the notion "word" and the word for the notion "thing" through the identical consonants for speaking and doing has obviously not escaped the attention of Biblical scholars, such as Susan Handelman, who reconcile literature and rabbinic interpretation of the Bible: "It was precisely this original unity of word and thing, speech and thought, discourse and truth that the Greek Enlightenment disrupted."¹⁶ Creation in Genesis, then, seems to confirm this unity: the very first words of Genesis, "Iehi or" ("Let there be light") coincide with the "thing" called light, "vajehi or" ("and there was light"). This divine speech that speaks the world into being is what De Luca claims prompted him to undertake the study of the Bible in the original: "God speaks, and the world happens, and the combination of that immensity and that language happens, and it happens through that spoken and written word. Hebrew establishes the ultimate encounter, the ultimate coincidence of word and creation."¹⁷ For all intents and purposes, the Word makes the world. God creates text. He also creates the obsolescence of his creation, I would argue: God's creation

¹³ De Luca, *Una nuvola*, 78. For a study of the English translation of figurative language, including polysemy, in *Montedidio*, see Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg, "Translation as Desecration: From *Montedidio* to *God's Mountain*," in *Tradurre figure/Translating Figurative Language*, ed. Donna R. Miller and Enrico Monti: Atti del Convegno CeSLiC 3 (Bologna: Quaderni del CeSLiC, 2014), 215-25.

¹⁴ Robert Alter clarifies, in his introduction to *Genesis*, that these vowel points were added by the Masoretes: "the Hebrew scholars of sixth- to tenth-century Tiberias who fixed the text of the Bible, with full punctuation, standard since then" (37).

¹⁵ Silvio Perrella "La Bibbia: una cura dimagrante," *L'indice dei libri del mese* (11 December 1992), 7, is a case in point. This core concept has been explained in terms of liquidity and aridity, as desiccating winds and life-giving waters are frequently used as metaphors for this vowel-consonant relationship. See Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg, "Dal mare di Giona alle macerie di Babele: La scrittura disidratante di Erri De Luca," in *Scrivere nella polvere*, ed. Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2004), 13-22, and Id., "'Eccomi' sulla spiaggia.confine di *Tu, Mio*: Erri De Luca, il mare e l'asciutto," *Narrativa* 20, no. 21 (2001): 169-80, in which the author provides a "voweled" reading of De Luca's novel, *Tu, Mio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998).

¹⁶ Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, 4. The author also clarifies that *thing* did not have the Greek connotations of *substance* (32).

¹⁷ Francesca Pedrollo, Giampiero Seneri, and Antonella Serandrea, eds., "Parole all'altezza del cuore," *Cous Cous: bimestrale di suoni, arti e parole* 10 (February-March 2000): 43 (my translation).

is immediately past. This happens grammatically in the Hebrew language that creates the past tense by adding a **vav** in front of the letters that form the future tense: with the first word of Genesis, the verb “to be”—which in Hebrew lacks a present tense—the prospect, God’s intention, for light (“*iehi*”/“there will be”) is immediately created as past (“*vajehi*”/“and there was”).¹⁸ If this argument is valid, then one could argue that creation through the Word is potentially “wasted.”¹⁹ The divine seed has been scattered. It must be picked up. This is the task of the writer. All writing is indeed hermeneutic, and it calls for silence, the silence that closes the interconsonantic space, the space of an elsewhere beyond place and another time beyond time (a “*non ora, non qui*”).²⁰ The writer De Luca speaks only when spoken to, chooses to write only when writing has chosen him, and then writes of what he has seen and that by which he is seen: “*Sotto la corteccia di un essere umano c’è un occhio segreto. Io sono stato visto da quell’occhio e messo a nudo*” (“Underneath a human’s bark there is a secret eye. I was seen by that eye and denuded”).²¹ The prophet-like writer who thus surfaces is one whose pen betrays his awareness of language’s distance from that first divine speech expressing a future intention, “Let there be.” Sharing postmodernism’s fascination with the act of writing as a discourse of separation, the former *Lotta continua* activist, day-time bricklayer and night-time writer/Ancient Hebrew scholar, and today’s sought-after novelist, poet, screen writer, and cultural critic, claims to know nothing and to merely write.²² And in the process he picks up seeds, obeying the commandment that no seed shall be wasted. The writings of De Luca, then, are about the shrinking of language, about language’s inevitable “exodus” from itself in search of itself. They are, in fact, about waste, “*spreco*,” “*hevel*,” in their original; they are about finding seeds in the dust of Adam.

If a postmodern reading is thus possible, so is a modern one: from the moment that we enter into a non-space and a non-time and contemplate the notion of divine speech in relation to writing as residue of a divine Language, perceived as Intention, contained inside a seedpod of sorts, Walter Benjamin’s theories on language, in fact, impose themselves.

In “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” Benjamin argues for a self-referential language, one that “communicates the mental being corresponding to it,” further explaining that “this mental being communicates itself in language and not through language,” that “mental being is identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is *capable of* communication,” and that “this *capacity* for communication is language itself.”²³ This completely self-referential “mental being” that only communicates itself in and through itself lies beyond the realm of the human, as potential, or “intention.” Continuing this line of thought in “The Role of the Translator,” in establishing what makes languages translatable, Benjamin proposes the existence of kinship among all languages, supra-historic kinship that therefore precedes the notion of time, a kinship that relates them to the one original language before the Fall: “All suprahistorical kinship

¹⁸ On the use of the letter “vav” in Hebrew, see Robert Alter, *Genesis*, XVII.

¹⁹ In *Tu, Mio*, in order for the narrative “I” to exist, it must be given a temporal dimension; he must be given a past.

²⁰ “*Non ora, non qui*” is the title of De Luca’s first novel (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1989).

²¹ Erri De Luca, *Aceto Arcobaleno* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992), 31. A similar thought was expressed by Mary Ann Caws in “Edmond Jabès: Sill and Sand,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 32 (1992): 14.

²² I borrow the term “discourse of separation” from Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

²³ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1996), 63-64 (my emphasis).

between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language, but only by the totality of their *intentions* supplementing each other: pure language.”²⁴ Back to “On Language as Such and the Language of Man”: in the realm of the human, then, “the linguistic being of man is his language. Which signifies man communicates his own mental being *in* his language, [...] by *naming* all other things.”²⁵ Human language communicates in its purest form through naming, it is a naming language. At this point Benjamin clarifies that “to identify naming language with language as such is to rob linguistic theory of its deepest insights—it is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things.”²⁶ However, naming by man of another man would imply the use of words, i.e. of verbal language, whereas the naming Benjamin has in mind rests on the premise that another conception of language is possible whereby “in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God.”²⁷ The mental being of man is moreover “communicable without *residue*,” and “man [‘adam’], is the namer [...] through him pure language speaks.”²⁸ Pure language is thus not a language at all, but rather the idea of language, realized as the pure language of creation. The word “residue” strikes me therefore as significant, as it links purity of language to the absence of “residue,” before language leaves traces (the rest) as engraved, material language, as divine leftover (cfr. the law of the Covenant) of divine speech. It confirms divine language as “intention.” To clarify matters, pure language is for Benjamin “the first of three stages in the development of human language, before it deteriorates over time into ‘multiple, fallen languages,’” to subsequently persist in “special forms of language, especially sacred texts.”²⁹ The Bible as a written repository is therefore a narrative of loss, “the self-obscuring and self-effacing text behind the theories of language and history,”³⁰ as well as a “paradigmatic archive of pure language.”³¹ Paraphrasing Brian Britt, in its purest form, human language mimics divine language, remaining pure and creative, until it becomes historicized and distant from that divine source as humans gather knowledge, which is essentially “creativity, relieved of its divine actuality.”³² Britt’s reading is in line with Noemi Seidman’s. Commenting on Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator,” Seidman focuses, albeit in a context of biblical translation, on Benjamin’s image of translation as “the careful fitting together of ‘fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together’ [...] and which thus must ‘follow one another in the smallest detail, although they need not to be like one another’;” she thereby draws attention to the image as reminiscent of a concept “in the Lurianic doctrine of *Tiqqun* in which the mystic ‘repairs’ a broken cosmos by piecing together the shards—including the language shards—of God’s creation.”³³ The formation in Benjamin’s mind of a link between pure language and a

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1:1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1996), 257 (my emphasis).

²⁵ Benjamin, “On Language as Such,” 64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁸ *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

²⁹ Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (New York: Continuum Press, 1996), 41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

³² *Ibid.*, 95.

³³ Seidman, *Faithful Renderings*, 188 (my emphasis). See also Rabbi Elliot N. Dorf, *The Way into Tikkun Olam:*

repository for divine language (which he borrows from a mystical-theological discourse, as Seidman demonstrates) is striking. Moreover, it is gathered inside a container of sorts—“Gefäß” in German, which connotes density. History breaks this vessel, scatters its pieces into multiplicity, into difference and repetition. It is the beginning of the beginning, a moving away from an origin.

At this point, we might also call in the authority Edward Said, who, in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, claims that “a beginning is essentially a return, a regression, and not just the point of departure for a linear progression. Beginning and beginning again are a historical matter, while origin belongs to the realm of the divine [...] Every single beginning comprises an intention. Every beginning is unique, but is also intertwined with what exists.”³⁴ Said’s distinction between “beginning” and “origin” is in line with Benjamin’s notion of divine language and “reine Sprache”: the latter is the beginning of the creative process as a process of creating waste, i.e. of allegorization,³⁵ whereas the former being the container, so to speak, of divine thought before it becomes language, i.e. divine Language as “intention.”³⁶

This brings us to De Luca’s translation of and commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes, published as *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*.³⁷ Intrigued by the connotations of the term “hevel hevelim,” better known in Jerome’s Latin *mistranslation* as “vanitas vanitatis,” De Luca suggests—not without creating a lot of controversy in Italy upon publication—correcting Jerome, “spreco di sprechi.” And I, translating the translator—a further “distancing” yet—here translate it as “waste of waste.”³⁸

Kohelet is commonly known as a self-portrait of a world weary man, by some believed to be King Solomon, who has lived every experience humanly possible, yet concludes that all humans’ deeds, pleasures, or sorrows, are pointless, in vain, or “futile,” since death and oblivion ultimately await the fool and the wise, the rich and the poor alike. Everything is preordained,

Repairing the World (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Light Publishing, 2005).

³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention & Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

³⁵ The reference is to Benjamin’s treatise on “The Origin of German Tragic Drama” trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998) <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/ockman/pdfs/week2/benjamin.pdf>. Access date: March 22, 2015

³⁶ One cannot help but wonder at this point if, in fact, similar theological-linguistic concerns inform Benjamin’s thinking either directly or indirectly in his formulation of the notion of the collector in the Arcades project. Here, the collector is “the true resident of the interior,” where things are being divested of their value and are thus “freed from the drudgery of being useful.” Furthermore, the collector “takes up the struggle against dispersion” in contrast to the allegorist who “dislodges things from their context.” Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press, 2002), 9. In view of the symbiotic relationship Benjamin establishes throughout his work between architecture and human interaction, this theory might have merit.

³⁷ The Book of *Kohelet* is part of the *Hagiographa*, known as the Five Scrolls, or Megillot. When we say that there is nothing new under the sun, we are quoting from Kohelet: Elie Wiesel’s “All Rivers Flow to the Sea” borrows its title from a verse in Kohelet, even the lyrics of the Byrds’ Sixties hit, “Turn! Turn! Turn!” finds its origin in this sacred text.

³⁸ Upon publication, De Luca’s translation was immediately attacked by S. Ronchey in her article “La Bibbia di De Luca stravolta dagli errori: intervista a Carlo Zaccagnini,” *La Stampa*, September 22, 1996, 13. Here, an authority on Semitic languages (Carlo Zaccagnini) is quoted with unflattering critique of De Luca’s general knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet and grammatical structures. De Luca himself presents a rebuttal in “De Luca difende la sua Bibbia; ‘Se un barone mi stronca, buon segno,’” *Corriere della sera*, September 23, 1996, 27.

even desire that can never be satisfied (3:10-11). According to traditional rabbinic interpretation, for Kohelet there is no afterlife in which to reap a reward for this hopeless existence or to undergo punishment for evils done. The God of Kohelet seems indifferent to his creation's ill fate. What is left for him, Kohelet, is to eat, drink, and live life with the means he has gathered, while being haunted by his own scream: "Hevel, Hevelim, hakol hevel." As a result of this rather gloomy standard interpretation, rabbinic scholars have called it "the Bible's most pessimistic [book], for its predominant theme is that life is futile."³⁹ Discussion stops at the point of resignation. Not so for De Luca, whose literal translation of this line as "spreco di sprechi, il tutto è spreco" and of this enigmatic text which he calls a "piccola biografia della parola" ("a short autobiography of the word") has significant consequences for our interpretation of De Luca's literary production, of which *Montedidio* is a case "in point," quite literally.⁴⁰

Kohelet begins by attributing the book to himself and circumscribing himself as the son of David, King of Jerusalem, supposedly King Solomon: "Parole di Kohelet, figlio di David, re in Gerusalemme" ("words of Kohelet, son of David, King in Jerusalem"). Kohelet is both the book and its "editor," rather than its author, for "si è solo redattori di un pensiero già innumerevoli volte pensato, di un narrare già tutto svolto" ("we are only editors of a thought that has been thought numerous times before, of a telling already fully laid out") as De Luca writes in his introduction.⁴¹ This thought is repeated in *Alzaia*: "Si è redattori di varianti, mai più autori" ("we are editors of variants, no longer authors").⁴² Kohelet's/Solomon's wisdom, he writes, has been that of listening and of writing what he heard, the voice of the "ruah Elohim" ("the breath of God"). In fact, Kohelet's first words, "Spreco di sprechi [...] il tutto è spreco,"—a sentence that recurs twenty three times—is frequently completed with "e compagna di vento" ("and a companion to the wind"). Kohelet's writing is propelled by wind, the breath of God. It is a wind that blows from the east, from "kedem." "Kedem," De Luca points out elsewhere, means both "East" and "first;" it is a desiccating wind that reduces every living thing to dust.⁴³ Dust and "Kedem" are inseparable in De Luca's writings; together they "in-spire" stories. In fact, the "ruah Elohim" in the Bible is much like the *scirocco* of Naples, De Luca confesses: "Attraverso Isaia i rabbini hanno saputo che la voce di Dio viaggia nello scirocco [...] Lo scirocco di Bibbia arriva in Palestina dal deserto arabo, è arido, magro, assetato e asciuga ogni goccia che incontra. Viene da oriente, la voce di Dio" ("from Isaiah the rabbis learned that the voice of God travels inside the *scirocco* [...] the Bible's *scirocco* reaches Palestine from the Arabian desert; it is dry,

³⁹ Zlotowitz, *Koheles: Ecclesiastes*, 51. The new JPS translation by Michael V. Fox has kept the term "futility." For other translations and translators, see Fox's introduction to *Kohelet* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), ix-xxxv. Robert Alter's English translation of the verse as "Merest breath, said Quohelet, merest breath. All is mere breath" is so far the most tantalizing. See Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: Norton, 2010).

⁴⁰ For the use of the term "spreco" in De Luca's writings as relating to the generation of '68 as a "wasted" generation, see Attilio Scuderi in his portrait of Erri De Luca, *Erri De Luca* (Fiesole: Edizioni Cadmo, 2001) for the series "Scritture in corso," notably the chapter "Lo Spreco e il Tuttaltro: storia di un campo semantico," 40-41.

⁴¹ De Luca, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*, 9.

⁴² De Luca, "Diritti d'autore," in *Alzaia* (Milan: Feltrinelli: 1997), 34.

⁴³ Erri De Luca, *Prove di risposta* (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 1994), 22. See also Swennen Ruthenberg, "Dal mare di Giona alle macerie di Babele" 13.

emaciated, thirsty, and it dries every drop in its path. It comes from the East, God's voice").⁴⁴ Looking at a map in the Bologna train station, and seeing that he is traveling in the direction of the *scirocco*, he notices that his trip leads him in the direction of "il vento della voce, il mio vento maestro" ("the wind of my voice, my master-wind").⁴⁵ In the same pages this experience is one he shares with Kohelet:

Kohelet, uomo e libro che i greci hanno riformato col nome Ecclesiaste, scrive ossessionato dal vento. In ognuno dei suoi capitoli soffia un "ruah" desolato che non riguarda alcuna vanità, come pure si legge nelle traduzioni, ma l'invano. Kohelet fu affaticato dal vento, io ne sono cullato. Ho potuto abitare lontano dal mare, non dal vento.⁴⁶

(Kohelet, a man and a book that the Greeks gave new meaning to by naming it Ecclesiastes, writes obsessed by wind. A desolate "ruah" blows through every chapter, and it is unrelated to vanity of any sort, as translations want it, but rather to what is in vain. Kohelet grew weary by the wind; I was rocked by it. I was able to live far from Athens but never far from the wind).

With Kohelet, besides the company of an inspiring wind, he also shares the editorship of his own writings: "uno scrittore deve ascoltare voci, chi non le sente è spento. Chi scrive dipende da un'acustica simile a quella dei profeti, anche se non scaturita dalla stessa perentoria fonte" ("a writer must listen to voices; those who don't hear them are not alive. Those who write depend on an acoustic similar to the prophets' though it does not spring from the same peremptory source").⁴⁷ Furthermore, in one of De Luca's "pearls," a short story entitled "Voci," (Voices) we learn: "Le voci per uno che scrive sono quanto le visioni per un santo [...] Vengono da un prima e non sono rivolte a nessuno. Sono il *residuo* delle storie, dei racconti che hanno intrattenuto le comunità dopo il tramonto, sera dopo sera" ("The voices for one who writes are what visions are for saints. They are the residue of stories, of tales that entertained communities after sunset, night after night").⁴⁸ The voices are residue; stories pre-exist inside the "ruah elohim." The voice does the writing, leaves the traces. The writer is a mere editor. The stories are not "spreco," "hevel," but residue, the rest, a leftover of something that was, that pre-existed in a pure form.

The verse immediately following explains the difference: "Cos'è di *avanzo* per l'Adàm: in tutto il suo affanno per cui si affannerà sotto il sole?" What is left over ("di avanzo"-*itron* in Hebrew) for Adam (the man)? De Luca defines the Hebrew word *itron* as "un di più, un residuo contabile dello spreco appena nominato. È avanzo" ("a more of something, a residue of the barely named waste that can be accounted for. It is what's left over"), and a leftover, a rest, is something that Kohelet "nega che ce ne sia nella sua partita" ("denies any of it is part of who he

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23 (my emphasis).

is”).⁴⁹ What seems a rhetorical question is indirectly answered by what the unwritten vowels conceal: what is left over (“di avanzo”) for Adam—“adam” is Hebrew for man/earth, and also the name of the first man, though not named as such by God, as Walter Benjamin reminds us—is to be the progenitor of waste. Through the coincidence of the consonants for “hevel” and those for “Abel,” Adam’s offspring is a wasted seed.⁵⁰ In an interview, De Luca clarifies that Adam’s first-born child is both a rest after that first, pure, divine seed, Adam, but also “spreco” because his life was ended before it had been used, and he continues:

Se abbiamo fornito un soccorso una volta nella vita a chi ne aveva bisogno, abbiamo in mano un resto, non tutto di noi è andato in spreco. Se abbiamo avuto tenerezza per il mondo, noi non siamo stati interamente Hevel. Siamo Hevel, ma con una contabilità aperta, con un diritto di riscatto di una parte della dissipazione. Kohelet dichiara una verità che a ognuno di noi tocca di smentire, o anche solo un po’ di correggerla. Allora teniamoci stretto anche un altro verso: "Manda il tuo pane sul volto delle acque perchè in molti giorni lo ritroverai"(11.1): la nostra offerta anche insensata, come pane alla corrente, ci verrà ricompensata molte volte in molti giorni.⁵¹

(If only once in a lifetime we offered help to someone in need, we hold a leftover; not everything of us went to waste. If we felt tenderness towards the world, we have not been totally Hevel. We are Hevel, but with an open accountability, that is, with the right to retrieve part of the dissipation. Kohelet declares a truth that each of us has the duty to belie, or even just to correct. So let us hold on to another verse: “Send your bread over the face of the waters so that over many days you will be able to retrieve it” (11.1): our offerings, no matter how nonsensical, like bread thrown to the current, will be compensated for over many days).

If Adam’s creation is a leftover turned to waste, the writer must learn from this, if indeed writing is creating leftovers. The voices from beyond space and time must find a receptacle in the book, for they themselves are the rest. In *Prove di Risposta*, De Luca declares, in fact, that

non indietreggiamo nel nulla, ma ci spargiamo in una consistenza irriducibile, restiamo nel per sempre di un pulviscolo. Il Dio che mise il suo fiato nella polvere del suolo a fabbricare Adamo lo compose di due eternità, non di una sola. Come ognuno ha un resto nella polvere, così le storie hanno un resto nelle voci. Insieme abitano il mondo.⁵²

(we do not regress into nothingness, but we scatter ourselves into a consistency that

⁴⁹ De Luca, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*, 14 (my emphasis).

⁵⁰ “The making of man did not take place through the word: God spoke—and there was. But this man, who is not created from the word, is now invested with the gift of language and is elevated above nature.” Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such,” 62-74.

⁵¹ See Myriam Swennen Ruthenberg, “Prove di domanda: intervista silenziosa con Erri De Luca,” *Gradiva* 2nd ser. vol. 17 (1999): 51-63.

⁵² Erri De Luca, *Prove di risposta*, 24.

cannot be further reduced; we remain in the forever of a speck of dust. The same God who placed his breath in the dust to make Adam gave him two eternities, not just one. In the same way that everyone has a leftover in dust, so too do stories have a leftover in the voices. Together they inhabit the world).

Kohelet's refrain "Spreco di sprechi" refers first and foremost to Abel, scattered unused residue of Adam's seed, but the notion also extends to every experience, to everything Kohelet has collected, gathered in his life time, everything that was "intended" literally at one "point;" the Hebrew word for "point" is "et," as De Luca explains in a footnote.⁵³ "Et" is not a point in time, for which there is the Hebrew word "zman;" "et," instead, contains the very notions of time and space, in restless motion in search of dimension before being catapulted into the monotony of existence, into difference and repetition. "Et" is a relentless, violent becoming: "È un luogo d'impatto, tra fiocina e pesce, tra biglietto e vincita, asteroide e pianeta, punto in cui il divenire urta con l'improvvisa emergenza dell'inevitabile [...] Forse il 'momentum' latino, che viene da 'movimentum' è più vicino a 'et'" ("[it is] a place of impact, between the harpoon and the fish, between the ticket and winning it, between asteroid and planet, a point in which becoming clashes with the sudden emergency of the inevitable [...] Perhaps the Latin 'momentum', which derives from 'movimentum' comes closest to 'et'").⁵⁴ "Et" moves, it connotes a violent bursting out of and into, as, perhaps, the sudden raffle of twenty six successive infinitives and two nouns is meant to formally convey: "Everything has its season, and there is a time for everything under the heaven" reads the Zlotowitz translation;⁵⁵ for everything there is a "data," a date (with the temporal dimensions of the Hebrew "zman") and for everything, or, to use De Luca's translation, "per ogni intento" ("for every intention") under the heavens, there is a "punto".⁵⁶

Punto per nascere e punto per morire. Punto per piantare e punto per sradicare una pianta. Punto per uccidere e punto per sanare. Punto per rompere e punto per costruire. Punto per piangere e punto per ridere. Punto per far lutto e punto per ballare. Punto per gettare pietre e punto per ammassare pietre. Punto per abbracciare e punto per allontanarsi dall'abbracciare. Punto per cercare e punto per perdere. Punto per custodire e punto per gettare. Punto per stracciare e punto per cucire. Punto per tacere e punto per parlare. Punto per amare e punto per odiare. Punto di guerra e punto di pace (3:1-8)⁵⁷

⁵³ For the sake of giving credit where credit is due, De Luca is not unique in translating "et" as "point;" he is, albeit unknowingly, echoing a sixteenth-century rabbinical source, Rav Almosnino, as cited in Zlotowitz, *Koheles: Ecclesiastes*, 82 n.X: "Rav Almosnino differentiates between 'zman' and 'et': 'et' is the point in time' during which every event is *destined* to take place; and 'zman' refers to the *duration*, from beginning to end, of that particular event (my emphasis).

⁵⁴ Erri De Luca, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*, 33 n. 54.

⁵⁵ Zlotowitz, *Koheles: Ecclesiastes*, 83.

⁵⁶ Erri De Luca, *Koheles/Ecclesiastes*, 32.

⁵⁷ De Luca, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*. 34. It is impossible not to be reminded of Dante's "punto" in the last cantos of *Paradiso*, notably XXVI-XXX, or, for that matter, a Dante-inspired Jorge Luis Borges in *El Aleph* where the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is defined as a point in space that contains all other points (161) and where vision is a simultaneous vision of everything in one point (164-167).

(A point to be born and a point to die. A point to plant and a point to uproot a plant. A point to kill and a point to heal. A point to break and a point to build. A point to cry and a point to laugh. A point to mourn and a point to dance. A point to throw stones and a point to amass stones. A point to embrace and a point to shun an embrace. A point to search and a point to lose. A point to hold guard and a point to toss. A point to tear and a point to sow. A point to keep silent and a point to speak. A point to love and a point to hate. A point for war and a point for peace [3:1-8]).

De Luca explains his choice of the Italian “punto” as the best equivalent for the Hebrew “et” as “un luogo grammaticale e geometrico. Sta tra due frasi e sta nell’ intersezione di almeno due linee che si incontrano” (“a grammatical and geometric place. It lies between two sentences and at the intersection of at least two lines that meet”).⁵⁸ Every experience expressed by the verb has preexisted in a “punto,” in “et,” where it was contained as an “intention” (“and for that matter, in the infinitive, the “pure” grammatical form that precedes the shards of gendered and numbered conjugation”) before being catapulted into the monotony of existence, violently, with the force and the noise that accompanies all creation in De Luca’s writings, including that of Adam, or of Jonah as he is being vomited out on shore from the bowels of the “dag gadol” or “big fish.”⁵⁹

The implications of the meaning conveyed in the interconsonantic spaces of the Hebrew name “Kohelet” now become highly significant, for the very word “Kohelet” is derived from the Hebrew “kahal,” stem of the verb for “to gather” or “to congregate,” of which it is the present participle, in the feminine; as such Kohelet is a written receptacle containing the sum of everything and its opposite, including its own name as a contraction of male and female gender. To underscore that the latter is not a coincidence, it is noteworthy that the very Kohelet as third-person subject of “his” own book uses a third-person conjugated verb with a feminine ending for referring to “his” own speech: “amra” Kohelet.⁶⁰ The attraction of the Book of Kohelet for De Luca becomes more evident as it can now be read as a self-referential guide to writing, an “autobiografia della parola, vita e opera di un utensile divino” (“autobiography of the word, life and work of a divine utensil”) perhaps with an undercurrent of Benjaminian thought about language, notably “the pure language of naming associated with Adam’s completion of the divine word of creation in Genesis.”⁶¹

If Kohelet had been just a short autobiography of a word, it now starts to resemble the autobiography of The Word, an “intention” before a “big bang” of sorts that strew seeds into the universe. Hence, “Ciò che è stato quello è ciò che sarà, e ciò che è stato fatto quello è ciò che

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Erri De Luca, *Giona/Ionà* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995).

⁶⁰ The masculine singular ending for the third person present tense would have been “amar.” The oddity occurs in chapter 7. De Luca accompanies his translation with a note to that effect adding that “non potendo correggere il testo, posso solo pensare che K. indagando sulle donne, una a una, abbia fatto parlare un suo suggeritore femminile’ come nei Proverbi avviene a Lemuel (capitolo 31) che parla della donna con la voce di sua madre che lo istruisce” (De Luca, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*, 55 n. 143). Exhaustive rabbinic commentary on this issue can be read under the heading “Ecclesiastes” in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd, 1972), 349-355.

⁶¹ Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*, 41. For De Luca’s definition of Kohelet, see De Luca, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*, 15.

sarà fatto. E non c'è niente di nuovo sotto il sole” (“that which was is that which will be, and that which was done is that which shall be done. And there is nothing new under the sun”). Present and past collide, as they do on the shore of Creation as God speaks the universe into being and as the writing builds the past grammatically on top of the present, as shown earlier: it is the beginning, the rest of divine language, to which writing wishes to return.⁶² Kohelet’s words now reverberate in the echo chamber of our postmodern sensibilities as we bridge gaps “between,” for “Like the universe, the book engenders space in its gaps. It is the spaces which make it legible. For we can get a glimpse of the inconceivable Totality only in mastered expanse, in the fragment.”⁶³ There is no distinction between past and future. Not even speech, sight, and hearing are exempt from this law: “Tutte le parole stancano, non potrà un uomo parlare. Non si sazierà un occhio a vedere e non sarà riempito un orecchio dall'ascoltare” (“All words are tiring, not will a man be able to speak. Not will an eye tire of seeing and not will an ear be filled by hearing”).⁶⁴ For “all intents and purposes,” speaking has spoken, seeing has seen and hearing has heard. And writing has written. In the *ruah elohim*, the voice does the writing, the writer “edits” it, creating residue, leaving a rest. *Montedidio* is such a rest, and it tells the rest of the story.

Montedidio reads like a fable. In deceptively simple prose and against the background of a lively, noisy, colorful Neapolitan neighborhood named after God’s mountain in Jerusalem, a thirteen-year old boy-narrator writes (in Italian) his story from boyhood to puberty on a left-over scroll of paper, a present from a printer in Montedidio. The young boy—who is never named—is the apprentice of a carpenter and avid fisherman, Mast’Errico, or Erri for short, who knows only Neapolitan. The boy owns a boomerang of acacia wood, a gift from his father on his thirteenth birthday, who in turn received it from an old sailor. He practices gripping his boomerang, short of throwing it out in full force, on the highest rooftop terrace in Montedidio that overlooks the sea below and Mount Vesuvius in the background. On this same terrace, the budding adolescent-narrator practices making love to Maria, prostituted by her mother to the landlord. The young man frequents a shoemaker, Don Rafaniello, nicknamed “Ravanello,” but originally “Rav Daniel,” a short, red-haired, freckled former-rabbi-turned-cobbler, a Holocaust survivor who on his way to Palestine got stranded in Naples, where he vowed to stay until all children had shoes to wear. Although his native language is Yiddish, he learned to speak an impeccable Italian. Rafaniello has a hunch back, and from his hump he is growing a pair of wings. On New Year’s eve, on top of the lovers’ terrace in Montedidio, while the Naples below them explodes in typical Neapolitan New Year’s eve celebrations, the winged Rafaniello flies off to Jerusalem while the boy, now a man with a manly voice, finally throws his boomerang before making love to Maria and letting out a scream.⁶⁵

⁶² Erri De Luca, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*, 1: 9, 23.

⁶³ “The Book Belongs to the Reader” trans. Rosemary Waldrop. *Sulfur* 8 (1983): 77.

⁶⁴ Erri De Luca, *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste*, 1: 8, 23. The hyper-literal translation obeys De Luca’s Italian translation from the Hebrew.

⁶⁵ In view of the aforementioned Benjaminian echoes regarding language, especially a language that in its allegorical itinerary, away from the divine, becomes historicized, the winged rabbi-turned-cobbler might be De Luca’s literary response to Benjamin’s reading of Paul Klee’s 1920 painting “Angelus Novus,” to which Benjamin dedicated the ninth of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written in 1940. Here, on the eve of Nazi-led deportations from Vichy, France, Benjamin writes: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and

A brief plot summary immediately alerts the reader to the unique nature of this novel, beginning with the polysemous title: “Montedidio” refers to both a neighborhood in Naples and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem after which Naples’s colorful popular neighborhood was named.⁶⁶ This holiest of sites in Jerusalem is also the place for the construction and destruction of two temples, with the Western wall remaining as a leftover of the second, and today supporting the Dome of the Rock, history turned to stone, “allegorized” in Benjaminian terms, emptied of its original content and replaced with a void for prayer and the ruin of a ruin for writings in the cracks of history. This other God’s mountain is mentioned in the Book of Psalms (Psalm 24:3) that Rafaniello quotes: “‘Chi salirà nel Monte di Dio?’ E la risposta dice ‘Chi ha le mani innocenti e il cuore puro’” (“‘Who shall ascend God’s Mountain?’ And the answer says ‘He who has innocent hands and a pure heart’”),⁶⁷ verses that lie at the heart of this fairy-tale like “romanzo d’amore.”⁶⁸ Montedidio is located in a city, Naples, that is likened to Jerusalem as a “city of blood,” and, in my reading of De Luca’s work, a holy city that, much like Kohelet, is an origin able to generate beginnings. Naples becomes a world rolled into a scroll;⁶⁹ the dialect of Naples through its comparison to Yiddish (a consonant-driven, “dry” language, belonging to an oral tradition) allows the Partenopean writer the linguistic tools for an artistic flight of return to that “point” where writing begins. *Montedidio* is the rest of the story, about the rest of the story. The justifications for this mysterious argument rest in that text that sheds light on De Luca’s prose in general and *Montedidio* in particular, the Book of Kohelet.

An obvious meta-literary discourse lies on the surface of the text: the narrator writes his story of “becoming” as it unfolds on a left-over piece of scroll. The surface for writing is the rest of a previous text that was erased, forgotten, or disappeared, but which for the narrative “I” becomes a beginning. As his pen moves vertically down the scroll, his own story is immediately invisible and past, like the book that nevertheless takes shape horizontally through the writing from left to right. Time scrolls up in the process, “Il rotolo gira e già vedo scritte le cose passate, che subito si arrotolano” (“the scroll rolls up, and I can already see things past written as they scroll up right

make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (Quoted in Pericles Lewis, *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* [New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007], 32). Twenty years after Klee, Benjamin interprets the “angelus novus” as the angel of history who is looking at the past as a storm caught in his wings that hurls him forward into a future he ignores. In Pericles Lewis’s interpretation of Benjamin’s reading, history is the attempt to make sense of the passage of time, but is defeated by the same force, thereby making it impossible to fulfill our dreams for the future (ibid.). Rafaniello’s flight is history in reverse: as the novel’s sole representative of the history of the Holocaust, he is regressing to the point of departure of the totality of his people after having made whole what was smashed, an act of “tikun olam,” rebuilding a generation of children by metaphorically making shoes for little feet who walked barefoot through the rubble of World War II.

⁶⁶ On polysemy, see note 13.

⁶⁷ De Luca, *Montedidio*, 64.

⁶⁸ The English translation of *Montedidio, God’s Mountain*, trans. Michael Moore (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002) fails to capture this deliberately polysemous title. A “romanzo d’amore” is how De Luca described his book as it was about to be published in a personal conversation.

⁶⁹ I borrow the idea from Eric Gould who writes that Jabès’s writing “rolls the universe into a ball,” see “Godtalk: Edmond Jabès,” *Denver Quarterly* 15 (1980): 36.

away”),⁷⁰ or “Ieri è il pezzo di bobina già scritto e arrotolato” (“yesterday is the piece of the scroll that’s already been written and scrolled up”),⁷¹ and as his adolescence takes the form of story, the writing accelerates and becomes more compact and heavier: “il rotolo gira più svelto, tirato dal peso della parte scritta” (“the scroll is rolling up faster as it is pulled by the weight of the part already written”),⁷² whereas the boomerang becomes lighter, “il legno perde peso” (“the wood loses weight”).⁷³ The past weighs on the present of his writing.

The boomerang has a previous story as well, and although its origins are unknown, other than that it became a boomerang in Australia and traveled the seas, the reader is told it is made from acacia wood and might well be a piece of the Ark of the Covenant.⁷⁴ It is, for all intents and purposes, a leftover from a previous story, the story of a container, namely the Ark that carried the Law of the Covenant as revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai—the pure language on the stone tablets—through the desert. It finds, metaphorically, a second life in the boomerang of acacia. Its importance is underscored by Rafaniello’s reaction when the boy informs him what kind of wood the boomerang is made of: “Gli scappa un singhiozzo, una tosse forte, sputa pure qualche friarello e poi si calma e muove da seduto il corpo avanti e indietro e ripete ‘acacia, acacia’, con le lacrime, la faccia rossa come i capelli e un rumore di ossa dietro la schiena” (“a hiccup escapes from his mouth, then a loud cough, he spits up some *friarelli*, and then he calms down rocking his body back and forth in his chair while repeating the words ‘acacia, acacia’ with tears in his eyes, his face as red as his hair, the sound of crunching bones behind his back”).⁷⁵ The semantic link to the Ark of the Covenant is made explicit when Rafaniello shares with the young boy that an angel has told him that his wings shall be ready to fly him to Jerusalem at the same time as the wood of the Ark of the Alliance shall fly: “Quando volerà il legno dell’arca dell’alleanza [...] Uno di loro butterà senza saperlo un pezzo di legno dell’arca. [...] lo butterà perchè dentro l’arca non ci sono più tavole della legge, niente comandamenti” (“When the wood of the Ark of the Covenant flies off [...] one of them will by mistake throw out a piece of the Ark [...] He will just toss it because inside there are no more tablets of the law, no more commandments”).⁷⁶ It shall contain the alliance of the narrative “I” with Maria: “L’ammore [sic] nostro è un’alleanza, una forza di combattimento.’ Le nostre chiacchiere strette scappano nel vento che ce le scippa dalle bocche” (“our ‘ammore’[sic] is a strong alliance, an alliance of combat.’ Our close chats escape in the wind that snatches it from our lips”).⁷⁷ Theirs is an alliance whose “chiacchiere strette,” densely packed words of love, are one with the wind. This verbal bond accompanies a carnal alliance tying the body directly to the boomerang as a piece of the Ark of the Covenant, for the boy’s new toy is alive, it throbs and burns, as it loads itself with the energy needed for flight on New Year’s Eve, and in its “becoming,” it stays physically on his

⁷⁰ De Luca, *Montedidio*, 33.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷⁴ The etymology of “Australia” as originally “terra australis incognita,” with later interpretations as both East and “hot South” might be relevant. See <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Australia> (accessed March 22, 2015).

⁷⁵ De Luca, *Montedidio*, 89.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

body, like an extra limb, a constant companion concealed under his coat, and in fact following the same horizontal and vertical coordinates that accompany the youth's growth into adolescence. Lovemaking with Maria is expressed as highs and lows, forward and backward movements. It is twice called an alliance "l'ammore [sic.] nostro e un'alleanza" ("our "ammore" is a strong alliance"),⁷⁸ an alliance that is a closure, "la mia alleanza con Maria è una chiusura" ("my alliance with Maria is a closure").⁷⁹ All the while the boomerang pulsates with the same rhythm: "è un'altra carne uscita da me incontro alle sue mosse che impastano col liscio delle dita [...] Poi Maria non guarda più la sua mano [...] vengono dei colpi in fondo all'intestino, una tosse dentro la carne, un tiro di bumeràn che se n'è scappato di mano e mi svuota" ("it is another flesh that grows out of me and stretches towards her to meet her smooth hands' kneading [...]. Maria stops looking at her hands [...] a force escapes from the innermost part of my gut, a cough from inside my flesh, a boomerang that escaped from my hand and empties me").⁸⁰ Like the boomerang, the young narrator can also fly, or pretend he can: by simultaneously looking upward with one good, fast eye and downward with the other, lazy eye, he claims to be able to take off and land.⁸¹

The contrapuntal movement of the writing thus far seems to coincide with that of both the boomerang and the narrative "I" as lover spilling his seed from what he calls his "punto" on or into his female companion, a "femmina appunto."⁸² Explicit references to the boomerang's origins from the Ark invite us to look at the connections between the receptacle for the Covenant between God and Israel as the commandments, and the book *Montedidio* as repository for the narrative "I"'s scroll written at the "point" where horizontal and vertical coordinates intersect.⁸³

It is hardly a coincidence then that the place for amorous encounters and practicing boomerang throwing is the highest rooftop terrace of Montedidio, where laundry is hung to dry, denoting verticality. The flight of "return" of the boy's boomerang and his Jewish friend's prospective voyage of return to his Jewish origins are articulated horizontally. The clean, windswept space where the lovers enjoy each other's quiet communion is then not surprisingly associated with the act of writing: when looking up, the couple sees a sky lined by the clothes lines: "Sopra di noi fili del bucato fanno a strisce il cielo del mese di agosto" ("Above us the clothes lines draw stripes in the August sky").⁸⁴ The pattern thus created in the airy space above is reminiscent of a writing surface, of the lined pages in a notebook.

The corporeality of De Luca's writings has been noticed before, as has the relationship between the body's mineral qualities and those of Ancient Hebrew as a language carved in stone

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁸¹ Ibid., 14.

⁸² Ibid., 46.

⁸³ Ibid: "lei mi piglia in un punto e io fatico a tenere gli occhi aperti [...] lei muove la mano nel mio punto" (she grabs me in a point and I try to keep my eyes open [...] she moves her hand in my point," 37; "Mi viene il piscitiello appuntito e lo sputo in bocca," (my *piscitiello* starts to point and spit starts to fill my mouth) 69; and "poi sento un caricamento in punta al corpo, mi pare che se ne scappa il bumeràn da dentro il piscitiello" (then I feel a load at the tip of my body, it feels as though the boomerang is escaping from inside my *piscitiello*) 99.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 38.

that excavates itself in search of meaning.⁸⁵ This novel is no exception, but the connection between the body and the act of writing is moreover articulated in combustible terms: for the duration of the novel, the boy and the old man are trapped inside energy-laden bodies that release their contents, at first slowly throughout the pages of the book, then violently, in the last chapter. At first, Raffaniello's hump grows ever larger before breaking open like a hatching egg; subsequently, the wings start pushing through, and as they grow, his hump gives him a burning sensation ("gli brucia la gobba") so much so that, looking over the Bay of Naples and seeing Mount Vesuvius in the background, he notices the volcano too has a "gobba" (*Montedidio*, 65).⁸⁶ Rafaniello is furthermore described as combustible; the color of his eyes is the same green color of the sulfur in Pozzuoli's mines: "Quando un vulcano muore, sfiata per ultimo calore il sale verde dello zolfo. E' il colore degli occhi di Raffaniello" ("when a volcano dies, its last warm breath is the green salt of sulfur").⁸⁷ The winged rabbi confirms: "Zolfo e fuoco, piocono zolfo e fuoco nel giorno di Sodoma e Gomorra. Occhi verdi, capelli rossi, il padreterno mi ha fatto come un tizzone d'incendio" ("Sulfur and fire, it's raining sulfur and fire on the day of Sodom and Gomorrah. Green eyes, red hair, the Almighty made me to look like a lit torch").⁸⁸ Similarly the young narrator's boomerang contains an energy all its own: it gives off an electric shock when it passes from the hands of mast'Errico into the narrator's: "[m]entre me lo rende gli brucia al passaggio di mano una scossa elettrica" ("as he hands it back to me he feels the burning sensation of an electric shock");⁸⁹ it beats and pulsates at the rate of a heartbeat under his clothes; it releases heat as it burns its owner's hand and singes his fingers before it pierces the sky leaving a trail of fire like a rocket "con la coda in fiamme."⁹⁰

The energy that charges the pages of *Montedidio* also takes on a liquid form as Naples opens its pores.⁹¹ Like lava erupting from the mouth of a volcano, so bodily fluids push through the pages of the book: the narrator spills semen on a regular basis; his sick mother vomits during a visit to Pozzuoli, nauseated by the odor of sulfur; Maria loses menstrual blood; children's bleeding wounds are cleaned on the rooftop terraces; Rafaniello sheds tears, because "sono le lacrime che permettono di vedere" ("it's tears that allow us to see"); like most Neapolitans, he

⁸⁵ See Roberta Tabanelli's "Corpo d'operaio e d'assassino: la narrativa dei sensi di Erri De Luca" in *Scrivere nella polvere*, 63-81. See also Swennen Ruthenberg, *Erri De Luca, il Libro e la Lingua, Il Veltro* 3-4 (May-August 1996): 311-15.

⁸⁶ De Luca, *Montedidio*, 65.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁹¹ The reference is obviously to Walter Benjamin's essay "Naples," written with Asja Lacis in 1920. Here the porosity of Naples refers not only to its tufa stone, but also to an architecture that allows for penetration by its inhabitants via unexpected openings. Porosity allows an osmotic relationship between "building and action," between "courtyards, arcades, and stairways" populated by people who turn them into "a theater of new, unforeseen constellations" (Bullock and Jennings, *Selected Writings*, 416). The streetscape of Naples seems to be articulated along similarly vertical and horizontal coordinates. For a reading of Naples's porosity in relation to the interpenetration of architecture and society from art historical and media theoretical perspectives, see Benjamin Fellman, *Durchdringung und Porosität: Walter Benjamins Neapel* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014), especially chapter 3.2.2, "Neapel und die Passagen."

and the narrator are often found mouth rinsing and spitting.⁹² Blood and saliva constitute, however, the most obvious semantic connection between Naples and Jerusalem, as a point of departure for a boomerang's voyage of return and a rabbi-cobbler's flight to Jerusalem's Western wall.

De Luca calls Naples a "città dei sangui" first in an acknowledgement, but it is the Yiddish-speaking Jew, Raffaniello, who explicitly articulates the similarities between the two cities: besides jokingly suggesting that the Neapolitans have biblical roots as one of the ten lost tribes,⁹³ he also remarks that "questa è una città dei sangui [...] come Gerusalemme" ("this is a city of bloods [...] like Jerusalem").⁹⁴ He reaches this conclusion after a long narrative detour with regards to his neighborhood's double identity that starts with Raffaniello's story about his hoped-for but unsuccessful emigration to Palestine due to the English blockade:

'Tientelo il tuo monte, tieniti gli inglesi a Gerusalemme, pigliati quello per popolo'. Così lui ci ripensa, leva gli inglesi, e a me dà un castigo sotto la specie della presa in giro: Monte di Dio, sì, ma a Napoli' [...] Hanno voluto chiamare questa collina Montedidio e già che c'erano, quella vicina la vanno a chiamare Montecalvario, e così fa due."⁹⁵

('You can keep your mountain; and you can keep your Englishmen in Jerusalem; take them as your chosen people.' So he thinks about it for a second, he takes away the Englishmen, and me, he punishes me in the form of a practical joke: Montedidio, alright, but in Naples [...] they have tried to call this hill Montedidio and while they were at it, the one close to it they called Montecalvario, Mount Calvary, so that's two of them).

And he continues: "Con il dovuto rispetto, la terrasanta non ha succursali. Intanto io sono rimasto qua, sulla salita di un altro Montedidio, come un turista che ha sbagliato prenotazione" ("with all due respect, the Holy land does not have any franchises. In the meantime I stayed here, on the slopes of another Montedidio, like a tourist who booked the wrong place to stay").⁹⁶ The comparison with Jerusalem then turns to the similar itineraries of Raffaniello and Saint Patrice, who, according to legend, was thrown onto the shores of Naples by a tempest that shipwrecked on her way to Jerusalem, and later died in Naples, leaving behind miraculous blood that since then has liquefied and coagulated continuously, even more so than that of San Gennaro. What ensues is a conversation about Naples's obsession with blood: "qua sono fissati col sangue, la gente lo mette dentro le bestemmie, dentro gli insulti, se lo mangia pure cotto e poi va a venerare dentro le chiese. Specialmente le donne tengono la frenesia di nominarlo 'o sang'. E pure il sugo della domenica è così scuro, spesso, che gli rassomiglia" ("here they are fixated on blood: people mix it in with their curses, their insults, they eat it cooked and then they go and venerate it in churches. Women in particular seem to be obsessed by blood and they call it 'o sang'. The sauce

⁹² Erri De Luca, *Montedidio*, 35.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 68. The reference is to Ezechiel 9:9. The city of Nineveh in the Book of Job earned the same name.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

on a Sunday meal is so dark and thick that it often resembles it”).⁹⁷ Blood bridges the Jewish holy city of Jerusalem and the “holy” city of Naples through the vicinity of Jewish and Christian iconography (the Temple Mount on the one hand, and Mount Calvary, the site of the Crucifixion, and blood shedding saints on the other), an alliance that will be reinforced linguistically, as the slowly dehydrating city is held together by saliva.

Spitting is a Neapolitan characteristic, we learn. Montedidio in particular is said to be so crowded that there is hardly any space between one’s feet for spitting;⁹⁸ the carpenter Mast’Errico, who speaks only Neapolitan, uses saliva to shine wood, including the boomerang; the narrator, moreover, spits before touching the boomerang, writing on the scroll, or making love to Maria. The emphasis on saliva as holding together language rapidly confirms that a discourse on language is associated with notions of the sacred. For Rafaniello, spitting is cleansing: he cleanses his mouth after pronouncing sad thoughts and after having mumbled a Neapolitan curse word. But for the wise winged rabbi-turned-cobbler, it is especially an action that precedes prayer or tackling holy subjects: “si sciacqua la bocca, sputa, fa così quando viene a dire di cose sante” (“he rinses his mouth, he spits; that’s what he does when he is about to say holy things”),⁹⁹ including the important words quoted from the book of Psalms that give the novel its ambiguous title, “Chi salirà nel monte di Dio? Chi ha le mani innocenti e il cuore puro” (“Who shall ascend God’s mountain? He who has clean hands and a pure heart”). Indeed, after telling the young man his story of survival and suffering, he concludes: “La guerra mi ha pulito il cuore e lavato le mani con la calce. Quand’ è finita ero pronto a salire nel monte di Dio” (“The war cleansed my heart and washed my hands with lime. When it was over, I was ready to climb God’s mountain”).¹⁰⁰

If saliva and spitting are related to the sacred in language, the next passage might clarify the abundant use of Neapolitan dialect in similar terms. In question is a carefully crafted comparison between Neapolitan and Yiddish, allowing a linguistic bond between Naples and Jerusalem as repositories of a sacred language, a relationship that becomes nevertheless problematized when Italian enters the context:

Raffaniello sa il napoletano, dice che somiglia alla sua lingua. L’italiano gli sembra una stoffa, un vestito sopra il corpo nudo del dialetto. Dice pure: “L’italiano è una lingua senza saliva, il napoletano invece tiene uno sputo in bocca e fa attaccare bene le parole. Attaccata con lo sputo: per una suola va bene, ma per il dialetto è una buona colla. Anche nella mia lingua si dice la stessa cosa: *zigheclept mit shpaiecz*, incollato con la sputazza.”¹⁰¹

(Rafaniello knows Neapolitan, he says it resembles his own language. Italian seems like fabric to him, like a cloth draped over the nude body of dialect. He goes as far as to say: “Italian is a language without spit, but Neapolitan holds spit inside its mouth and makes

⁹⁷ Ibid., 68

⁹⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 95.

the words stick together tightly. Stuck together with spit: for the sole of a shoe that works, but for a dialect it's a very good glue. In my language we say the same thing: *zigheclept mit shpaiecz*, glued together with spit”).

The juxtaposition is worthy of attention—both Neapolitan and Yiddish belong to oral traditions. As such, they are like naked bodies, hidden underneath the cloak of Italian. In that oral tradition, saliva is what holds words together, like Maria's when she utters a determined “‘ntz’[...] uno sputo di no” (‘ntz’ [...] a spit that’s ‘no’”), with which she wards off her landlord's advances.¹⁰² Italian, on the other hand, is a language reserved for writing: “[s]o l’italiano, una lingua quieta che se ne sta buona dentro i libri” (“I know Italian, it’s a quiet language that sits well behaved inside books”).¹⁰³ Italian is the language *Montedidio*'s narrator must resort to in order to tell the story on the scroll, and the quiet language for reading and writing, in sharp contrast to the loud Neapolitan: “[i]o lo conosco perchè leggo i libri della biblioteca, ma non lo parlo. Scrivo in italiano perchè è zitto e ci posso mettere i fatti del giorno, riposati dal chiasso napoletano” (“I know it, because I read books from the library, but I don’t speak it. I write in Italian, because it’s quiet and I can put all the day’s events inside it, away from the noise of Neapolitan”),¹⁰⁴ a thought repeated later—“[s]ento strilli e voci napoletane, parlo napoletano, però scrivo italiano” (“I hear shrieks and Neapolitan voices. I speak Neapolitan, but I write in Italian”).¹⁰⁵ Italian is an artifice that distances dialect users from their origins, as is the case for the narrator's father who is not even able to conjugate verbs: “‘Io e mamma tua no, noi nun pu, nun po, nuie nun putimmo.’ Vuole dire non possiamo, ma non gli esce il verbo” (“I and your mom, we cannot. We *non pu, nun po. Nuie nun putimmo*, but he can’t get the verb out”).¹⁰⁶ Encrypted in this statement about a father's linguistic shortcomings hides, we suspect, a reference to the “impurity” of language that depends on conjugation in order to convey meaning.

If Italian—the language for writing *Montedidio* on a scroll—is quiet, the narrator's voice amplifies and strengthens as the novel grows. At age thirteen, he informs the reader that his voice is still raspy and lacks volume, it is still “sotto la cenere della voce di prima” (“under the ashes of the voice from before”).¹⁰⁷ In other words, it has not quite grown completely out of the dust of a previous voice. Rafaniello, however, reassures him with the story about a donkey's voice, the memory of an ear piercing scream of the animal being beaten, a sound that has been seared on the membrane of his soul and made him cry with the very eyes that had stayed dry all through the war years in spite of pain and persecution:

sento alle spalle uno strillo terribile, uno strazio di grido, un’implorazione scatenata, da far sanguinare le orecchie [...] La bestia allungava il collo e con le corde tese e il morso in bocca lanciava il più lontano possibile la sua protesta di dolore. Sapessi io pregare così. Nella scrittura sacra si trovano molte notizie sull’asino, una bestia stimata, utile. Il

¹⁰² Ibid., 48.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 45.

suo grido, invece, è inutile, gigantesco, riguarda solo lui e Dio, l'uomo è escluso [...] Quando uscirà la tua voce avrà la forza di quella dell'asino.”¹⁰⁸

(Behind me I hear a terrifying shriek, an ear piercing scream, a heart wrenching imploring cry that could made your ears bleed [...] The animal stuck its neck out as far as possible and with its vocal cords stretched to the limit and the bite in its mouth, it pushed out its protest of pain as far as it could reach. If only I could pray like that. In sacred writings there are many references to donkeys, they are most respected and useful animals. But its scream is useless, gigantic, and it is between him alone and God, man has no part in this [...] As soon as your voice comes through, it will have the force of the donkey's).

The scream that seals the book *Montedidio* is, in fact, “un raglio d'asino” (“a donkey's bray”) that follows spitting, and—as Rafaniello had predicted—it happens on New Year's Eve, at midnight, at a moment when old is new, and new is old, when future and past collide. The scream that rises from the narrator's throat coincides with an orgasmic climax of spilling bodily fluids, explosions of sound and light, shattering of objects, discarded along with the useless landlord reduced to “ombra” and, reminiscent of the rapid succession of twenty six successive verbs in *Kohelet*, in a raffle of sentences without the interruption of periods to finally conclude with “[è] la mia voce, un raglio d'asino che mi strappa i polmoni, io grido e per per il mio grido non c'è posto sopra il rotolo e sopra Montedidio” (“[it's] my voice, it's the bray of a donkey, tearing my lungs, I scream, and for my scream there is no space on the scroll and on Montedidio”).¹⁰⁹ *Montedidio* has burst and its contents have been spilled; its pressure released, beginning has begun.

If *Kohelet/Ecclesiaste* was a “piccola biografia della parola, vita e opera di un utensile divino” (“a short biography of the word, life and works of a divine utensil”), so is *Montedidio*. It is a tightly packed receptacle whose contents of things and words is held together by slowly evaporating and spilling liquids, contributing to its increased compactness. Language works in similar fashion: both Neapolitan and Yiddish are, compared to the Italian on the scroll, “dry” languages with closed vowels as opposed to the more open-voweled Italian. A word such as “zigeklapt” (“closed shut”) is almost its own metaphor. It is therefore not surprising that they are De Luca's languages of choice for a game of linguistic purification of sorts that ends in language's purest, most primordial manifestation: the scream.

To underscore the importance of this “novel” as a “sacred” book then, we note that *Montedidio*'s architecture is repeatedly articulated along horizontal and vertical coordinates, at the intersection of which, by his own admission, De Luca considers the “point” or “the intention” both grammatically and geometrically. *Montedidio* strives towards that point which in both Benjaminian and Saidian terms seems to coincide with a liminal space, between “origin” and “beginning” for Said, and between divine language before it spoke the world into being and the pure language of divine speech at the moment of naming for Benjamin. But before getting there,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 117.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 142.

it must pass through the desert, like the Ark of the Covenant, the Container of Alliances which in the pages of *Montedidio* is established between Maria and the unnamed first-person narrator, between Yiddish and Neapolitan, between Christianity and Judaism, between consonants on each side of a vowel, between divine speech and Adam. We now understand the book named “Montedidio”’s physical presentation: a succession of short pieces of prose interrupted by long empty spaces—not an editorial choice, but a deliberate request by its writer, for in that void lies meaning, in the same way that in the language of Scripture, meaning lies between the consonants, spoken or imagined. Who, then, shall climb the book Montedidio? The answer must be the same as that in the Book of Psalms: “Chi ha le mani innocenti e il cuore puro” (“he who has a pure heart and clean hands”) willing to roll in the leftovers of writing lest it turn to “spreco,” a condition for finding seeds in the dust of Adam.

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