

The Night the Epic Poem Died: Ends of Poetry in Giuseppe Parini's *La Notte*

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Volume 43, Number 1, 2022

Quel che resta del giorno. La notte nella letteratura italiana dal Settecento ai giorni nostri

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1097773ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v43i1.40176>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (print)

2293-7382 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Dule, G. (2022). The Night the Epic Poem Died: Ends of Poetry in Giuseppe Parini's *La Notte*. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 43(1), 13–36.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v43i1.40176>

Article abstract

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THE NIGHT THE EPIC POEM DIED:
ENDS OF POETRY IN GIUSEPPE PARINI'S *LA NOTTE*

GRISELDO DULE

Abstract: During the eighteenth century, the Italian peninsula witnessed many cultural changes coming from abroad, among which figured a new way of conceptualizing and experiencing the night. The dissemination of Enlightened ideas accelerated societal changes and solicited new literary endeavors. As the neoclassical season was burgeoning, there was an absence in the literary canon of acclaimed and national epic poems, a once-prestigious genre that elsewhere in Europe had already been replaced by the novel. This essay focuses on *Il Vespro* and *La Notte*, the last two unfinished sections of *Il Giorno*, Giuseppe Parini's epic and satirical poem, and investigates the ways in which the Milanese poet analyzes the changes in his representation of the night. Through textual and thematic analysis, the essay underlines the original aspects of Parini's antiphrastic depiction of the night.

Introduction

The eighteenth century represents for Europe a period of significant aesthetic, philosophical, and political change. The sequence of scientific discoveries and new philosophies brought forward different perspectives on reality, and the Age of Enlightenment became synonymous with a cultural season of revolutions in society and reinterpretations of the world. After its cultural monopoly waned during the seventeenth century, Italian literature needed new ways to overcome its historical setback and reaffirm itself as an international contender. The Enlightenment contributed to the dissemination of new ideas and promoted a lively cultural debate from which Italian literature benefited greatly, while the Grand Tours attracted many noble tourists from other European countries, who brought different cultural practices with them to Italy.¹

¹ For the cultural relevance of this phenomenon, see Findlen et al. 2009. Regarding Parini in particular, see Bizzocchi.

New perspectives allowed artists and intellectuals to shed new light on historical and social dynamics and modernized common aspects of life, such as the idea of time and ways of experiencing the day and, particularly, the night. Across Europe, artworks began to manifest a novel nocturnal sensibility; it would suffice to think of the rise of literary and pictorial tropes towards the second half of the century, between neoclassicism and Romanticism. The night became not only the subject of new artistic representations, but also a new social, intellectual, and political “space”: not exclusively an object of poetic contemplation but rather a space where the discussion of ideas and the stories of modern novels could take place. The soirees organized by sovereigns and aristocrats facilitated the exchange of ideas and led to “the development of a rich and varied nightlife rendered possible by the use of lavish lightning” (Forster 107). In the eighteenth century, one could argue, a new night did not only enter literature and the arts, but modernity itself became part of the night.

The idea of this essay arose from the fascinating implications of “ciò che resta del giorno” (“what remains of the day”) and how Italian literature represented the night in light of these cultural changes; its aim is to trace and analyze such transformations in the satirical work of Giuseppe Parini. Parini’s *oeuvre*, celebrated for its aesthetic and moral qualities during the nineteenth century,² presents many aspects worthy of a contemporary “rediscovery.”

The night plays a prominent role in the unfinished didactic-satirical poem *Il Giorno*,³ which represents the most original and, perhaps, the last attempt to produce an Italian epic poem. It is also a “tentative” poem, since it was never completed. Within the canon’s broad framework, the genre had experienced a profound crisis, starting with Giovan Battista Marino’s *Adone* (1623), without ever returning to the transnational prestige and cultural relevance it had achieved in

² Giuseppe Parini makes an appearance as a literary character on Ugo Foscolo’s *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802): Foscolo romanticizes the portrait of the late Parini as an old, disillusioned poet to highlight Jacopo’s historical pessimism. In addition, Foscolo mentions Parini in *Dei sepolcri* (1807) as an example of a great intellectual without a tomb. In post-1861 Italy, Giosuè Carducci offered a patriotic reading of his work in *Storia del “Giorno” di Giuseppe Parini*. On an international level, besides Raymond Dumas’s work that will be mentioned later, Parini is mentioned as a recurring subject of discussions in Milan by Stendhal in his *Rome, Naples et Florence*.

³ The English translation of *Il Giorno* employed in this article is that of Herbert M. Bower. All other translations are my own.

the Cinquecento. In light of coexisting classical and modern influences, *Il Giorno* provides—albeit its unfinished status—an interesting view on eighteenth-century cultural and social changes, of which Italy was a marginal but critical observer.

In this essay, I analyze Parini's *Il Vespro* and *La Notte*, the last two unfinished parts of *Il Giorno*, from a textual and thematic perspective.⁴ Starting from observations related to their editorial history and their narrative structure, I examine the representation of the night in Parini both as a material and a literary trope. By analyzing such nocturnal representation, I highlight elements of both modernity and crisis concerning the decreasing fortune of the epic genre, as well as the poem's incompleteness. Through the close reading of two markedly metaliterary passages, I propose an interpretation of Parini's night as a modern space of narration, discussion, and critique of ideas and social customs. I then highlight a possible disquieted vision, both narrative and personal, located among the lines of *Il Giorno*'s last verses; in my reading, I show how some aspects of the night resonate with the fall of the epic register, the role of satire, and the troubled composition of the final part of the poem.

***Il Giorno*: epic, satire and textual problems**

In the last edition of his *Scienza Nuova* (1744), Giambattista Vico optimistically professed that European nation states had reached the peak of their social and cultural development. According to the Neapolitan philosopher, this historical moment coincided with the cycle of the “age of men” (414–15), when humankind recognizes the constitutive equality of human beings. While the preceding “age of heroes” (338, 340) was characterized by a mythical and poetic language (that of the epic genre), the new age would be supported by the flourishing of writing in other fields, ranging from philosophy to the natural sciences, jurisprudence, and fictional forms like the novel. This pan-historical view may serve as a brief introduction to why in the Italian eighteenth century the epic genre seems to run dry of its enduring success. By the end of the century, indeed, most of the canonical works had moved to different forms and repertoires, and even Foscolo's

⁴ The following abbreviations will be used throughout the article to refer to the different parts of *Il Giorno*: *Ves.* for *Il Vespro*; *Not.* for *La Notte*; *Mat.* for *Il Mattino* (1763); and *Mez.* for *Il Mezzogiorno* (1795).

attempts to reinvigorate the epic genre were unsuccessful.⁵ As stated in the dedication “Alla Moda,” *Il Giorno* is testament to how Italy’s epic and chivalric works had found new outlets in the lower *poema didascalico*—more versatile, but also frivolous and fashionable. The poems’ main subjects were no longer the events of a heroic past, but relatively recent experiences, such as social satire, intellectual debates, or scientific discoveries.⁶ This evolution denotes a clear shift, as argued by Vico: current and mundane topics became part of a once conservative and strictly codified genre. The ancient courts and their aristocracy (the foundation of chivalrous values) had ceased to exist: new methods of ennoblement allowed for a gentrified nobility to replace the medieval and rural one (Lukowski 18–36), and literature’s celebrative role morphed accordingly.

Giuseppe Parini’s poetics, commonly known as *sensismo*, is a prime example of this transformation. Giuseppe Petronio identifies in the sensualist influence the founding principle of Parini’s *callida junctura* (“cunning juxtaposition”), that is his ability of extracting new meaning from traditional tropes (148–49) through unusual combinations. Dante Isella recognizes in Parini the merit of reading traditional authors in a critical and modern way (361). *Il Giorno* synthesizes Parini’s cultural influences and produces different levels of modern discourse (scientific, technical, and philosophical) within a language and set of literary forms derived from the classics. Not only does the subject matter of *Il Giorno* reflect reality, but Parini’s writing aspires to be a quasi-holistic representation of the real that embraces all the senses. The recourse to reason, a cardinal principle of the Enlightenment, represents the cornerstone of Parini’s egalitarianism, obliquely substantiated in his satire. This aspect was noted by Raymond Dumas, the author of a study on Parini in 1878. Dumas defined the poet of *Il Giorno* as a “Méphistophélès d’un nouveau genre” (“a Mephistopheles of a different kind”; 84), which epitomizes the union

⁵ Notably, Ugo Foscolo is the author of *Esperimento di traduzione dell’Iliade di Omero* (1807), a translation that would have been, in his view, more adherent to the original text compared to Monti’s version; the project ended with the translation of book 1. Another attempt at the genre is *Le Grazie* (1803), a mythological poem that remained unfinished at the time of Foscolo’s death in 1827.

⁶ There are several examples of canonical literary genres employed to divulgate modern ideas or technical knowledge, such as Francesco Algarotti’s *Newtonianesimo per le dame* (1737), which is a philosophical dialogue whose goal was to introduce Newton’s discoveries to a worldly community of readers; Giambattista Spolverini’s *La coltivazione del riso* (1758) and Vincenzo Monti’s *Feroniade* (1784), an unfinished poem on the reclamation of Agro Pontino’s swamp. Both Spolverini’s and Monti’s poems are stylistically modeled on Virgil’s *Georgics*.

between his radically modern egalitarianism and the literary tools of epic and satirical poetry. In his *Anatomy of Satire* (1962), Gilbert Highet too uses Parini as an example when he analyzes the relationship between satire and didactic poetry (128–29).

Il Giorno documents the typical day of a young, worthless Milanese aristocrat, and the narrator is a humble poet introduced as “precettor d’amabil rito” (“preceptor of pleasant rites”; *Mat.* 7), whose duty is to instruct and educate his aristocratic disciple, the *Giovin Signore*, on how to live every moment of his days and navigate the worldly environment. Through a subtle and erudite irony, Parini’s preceptor is the subject of a peculiar literary performance: he adopts “the Greco-Roman supernatural apparatus” (Highet 130) to lavish present-day, often trifling experiences with heroic and mythical elements. However, as pointed out by Roberto Vignolo, there are many instances when Parini’s irony shifts from an indirect judgement to a direct one, turning the distorting mirror from the characters to the narrator himself, with an “*intentio recta*, rather than *obliqua*” (246), which reveals new nuances in *Il Vespro* and *La Notte*.

This satirical ambivalence complicates Parini’s self-portrait for the modern reader, whereas it was not often problematized in the past.⁷ On this note, it is important to acknowledge the hermeneutical difficulties stemming from *Il Giorno*’s unfinished state. The poem’s ending was posthumously published in 1801 by Francesco Reina, Parini’s disciple, almost forty years after publication of the first installment. The philological and material studies of Parini’s manuscripts do not dispel all doubts on why he never completed what looked like a clear, well-thought out project.⁸ Despite allowing for a reliable material chronology to be built, the individual stages of the creative endeavor remain unclear, since there are many previous references to the existence of this final part, some as early as 1766.⁹

⁷ On Parini’s self-editing and his censorious inclinations, see Baragetti. The most recent and comprehensive account of his life and work can be found in Nicoletti.

⁸ Alberto Cadioli has summarized the dating of the manuscripts, putting forward some intriguing hypotheses; we can place the notebooks, with a certain degree of certainty, towards the end of the 1780s, during the age of Parini’s late maturity. Analysis of the notebooks and handwriting indicate an advanced state of composition, as the fragments are elegantly written, with little or no corrections.

⁹ These references have been thoroughly investigated by Amaturò (46–49). In his *Lettere*, Parini mentions *La Sera* in 1766 to Paolo Colombani, a Venetian editor: “Quanto alla mia Sera, io ne ho quasi dimesso il pensiero; non che non mi piaccia di compiere i tre Poemetti da me

Genesis and development of *La Notte*

I will now turn to how *La Sera* became a twofold section, and how it represents the night. Preliminarily, it is important to contextualize this part of the day within *Il Giorno*'s narrative framework. The two edited parts, *Il Mattino* (1763) and *Il Mezzogiorno* (1765), were respectively dedicated to the protagonist's *toilette* and to his duties as a *cicisbeo* at a late lunch with his dame. The poem's project entails an increasingly broad and more social perspective, with the afternoon portraying *promenades* and ritual visits, and the evening spent at a worldly salon or at the theater, as outlined in the first lines of *Il Mattino* (8–32).

Notably, each section of the poem begins by describing the defining moment of the day. Parini shows an attentive sensibility towards the Enlightenment's innovations, to which he applies—often in a contrastive way—a classical aesthetic. Although canonical and formally erudite, these descriptions are not merely manneristic: different stages of the day are first and foremost a contemporary space, a current environment where a modern discourse (or storytelling) is set. For instance, *Il Mattino* portrays the plebeians headed to work in a rural landscape (*Mat.* 33–60). However, this archetypical representation of the morning is promptly contrasted with that of the *Giovin Signore*, the new, modern hero of the poem (*Mat.* 61–89). The satirical opposition between idyllic labour and modern loftiness is not merely a literal exercise: it constitutes the first account of Parini's egalitarianism in so far as it undoes the aristocracy's biological determinism.

This technique applies to the rest of the day as well. Like its diurnal counterpart, Parini's nocturnal sphere reflects the reality of the time and its social dimension. It describes a fashionable night, a by-product of the new social customs acquired during the Enlightenment era, which would also explain why *Il Vespro* was conceived as a standalone part due to the relevance acquired by the vesper hour. The nighttime presents an aesthetic idealization on the surface but has realistic,

annunciati; ma perchè sono stomacato dell'avidità, e della cabala degli stampatori" ("As for my *Sera*, I have almost resigned the thought of it; not because I do not like to fulfill the three poems I previously announced, but rather because I am sickened by the greed, and the cabal of the printers"; 77). References to this part surface in letters from 1770 (Girolamo Passerini to conte Lucchesini di Ferrara) and 1780: Gian Rinaldo Carli writes to a cousin that "In questa casa ho dato un quartierino al Parini, il quale presto pubblicherà la *Sera* e la *Notte* unitamente al *Mattino* e *Mezzogiorno* riveduti e corretti" ("In this house, I hosted Parini, who will soon publish *La Sera* and *La Notte* all together with *Il Mattino* and *Il Mezzogiorno* revised and corrected"; 176). For another literary and thematic survey, see Leporatti.

concrete roots: it details an ironic description of the last part of the day—the most significant one—of the eighteenth-century aristocracy. For instance, *Il Vespro* begins with a resumption of a motif already introduced in *Il Mezzogiorno*, namely the description of the sunset:

Già sotto al guardo de la immensa luce
Sfugge l'un mondo: e a berne i vivi raggi
Cuba s'affretta e il Messico e l'altrice
Di molte perle California estrema:
E da' maggiori colli e dall'eccelse
Rocche il sol manda gli ultimi saluti
All'Italia fuggente; e par che brami
Rivederti o Signor prima che l'alpe
O l'appennino o il mar curvo ti celi
A gli occhi suoi. (*Ves.* 4–13)

Already
Beneath the gaze of the stupendous light
A world slips down, while Cuba rushes up
To drink its vivid rays, Mexico too,
And furthest California the nurse
Of many pearls. To flying Italy
The sun from highest hills and soaring crags
Sends his last greetings longing as it seems
To see thee once again my Lord, before
The Alp or Appennine [sic] or curve o' the sea
Shall hide thee from his eyes.

Parini's rendering is highly original: the vesper is described through a wide lens, in an astronomical perspective, rather than abiding by classical or pre-Romantic themes. What could have been the occasion for a traditional appreciation of the sunset becomes a moment of affirmation of new scientific knowledge and the beauty inherent in it. The poet describes the celestial trajectory of the Sun and the Earth with great virtuosity; his *sensismo* instills the idea of the planet's rotation by listing a series of geographical landmarks (instead of mythical lands) and the order in which the Sun progressively illuminates the American continent. In so doing,

Parini extols the progress of reason that has led to a more precise understanding of the physical world.

Furthermore, after the initial idea of movement, the description halts: for a few lines, the towering Sun becomes the subject of a pictorial representation as it waits to see the poem's hero and other aristocrats. However, the verses resume the spinning movement soon after, describing a waning Sun behind the Alps, the Apennines, and the "mar curvo" ("curved sea"; *Ves.* 12). From this aerial perspective, the Sun's field of vision narrows down until it rests on the only discernible humans, namely, the invisible, subordinate class working for the aristocracy's sustenance and the *Giovin Signore*—the same technique employed in *Mat.* 33–60.

Altro finor non vide
Che di falcato mietitore i fianchi
Su le campagne tue piegati e lassi (*Ves.* 13–15)

Until this hour
He's only seen the weary backs of reapers
Bending with sickles o'er thy fields

The long list of workers dubbed as "tutti ignobili aspetti" ("ignoble visions"; *Ves.* 24) highlights the subordinates' human condition, emphasizing its universality and immutability, since the Sun is preparing to witness the same, even worse spectacle on the other side of the world¹⁰—a condition that seems "irrational and against nature" (Carnazzi 292). The Sun's setting brings to light a humanity that until then was "invisible," which allows Parini to further develop his critique of society. These prolegomena do not only serve as a narrative introduction but are also the pillars of Parini's critical discourse. In fact, the first lines traditionally include an invocation to a Muse and a declaration of intent and poetics: in this case, the Muse is not specified (it is, as usual, "La Moda"), but the main inspiration is overtly critical, reflecting the intellectual developments of the time.

Despite being the shortest part of *Il Giorno*, with only 349 verses, *Il Vespro* introduces a more mundane and collective dimension through the description

¹⁰ Parini had already condemned colonialism in a memorable passage (*Mat.* 144–57), when he described the *Giovin Signore's* breakfast, in particular the dilemma between coffee and "brun cioccolato" (*Mat.* 134), a beverage that, according to Parini, comes at a hefty cost of human lives.

of *promenades* and other social rituals. These are the moments where the main protagonist becomes the Mephistophelic Parini, as the “precettor d’amabil rito” surgically examines the most cynical and petty behaviours. At the same time, this broadly social dimension poses a practical problem for the genre of satire, as it increases the chances for aristocratic readers to recognize themselves through dangerous overlaps with real-life events. This mundane issue is crucial: since *Il Vespro* is the poem’s shortest part (and somehow the least accomplished), the main difficulty in its continuation can be detected in the unstable mapping of Milan’s nobility. Indeed, the poem’s conclusion seems abrupt: if the ending of *Il Mattino* and *Il Mezzogiorno* were a crescendo in terms of satire and literary inventions, those of *Il Vespro* and *La Notte* are significantly drier and disillusioned. Consequently, with respect to the descriptive realism, Parini injects in the approaching night what could retrospectively be defined as a crepuscular symbolism.

This is observable in the final episode, which portrays the last of the many possible outcomes of a late aristocratic afternoon—in this case, the announcement of a new birth. The aristocratic circle, led by sycophantic poets, sets out for a visit, following the dictates of the current *etiquette*. These poets are also joined by the preceptor, who decides to fulfill his duty. Here, however, one can observe a different intellectual stance: the playfully aggressive satire of the early Parini disappears behind a more somber and downcast view. The final verses lack any aestheticization. The fictional poet approaches the newborn baby and pronounces a bitter sentence resembling a prophecy and a condemnation.

A tal clamore
Non ardi la mia Musa unir sue voci:
Ma del parto divino al molle orecchio
Appressò non veduta; e molto in poco
Strinse dicendo: Tu sarai simile
Al tuo gran genitore. (*Ves.* 344–49)

With all that acclamation
My muse adventur’d not her words to blend,
But she unseen approach’d the tender ear
O’ the child divine and much in little said:
Like thy great father shalt thou be.

The last verse is left unfinished, but the philosophical suggestion stemming from this conclusion is powerful, for a pessimistic view of the future collides with the beginning of life. With “gran genitore,” Parini alludes to the current nobility of which he observed the decline, but on an additional level of irony, the reference goes to the “inclit’avi” (“high ancestors”; *Not.* 30), thoroughly idealized across the poem (Parini’s nostalgia for the ancient aristocracy is partly a case of *déformation professionnelle*).¹¹ By regretting the aristocracy’s past virtues and exposing its current flaws, the preceptor removes his mask of *good* Mephistopheles, acknowledging the limits of his pedagogical literature and the impossibility of a change arising from his teachings. In the absence of further developments, the end of the poem represents an act of surrender before the evidence that, despite the preceptor’s efforts, the aristocracy’s decline is irreversible. So ends *Il Vespro*, striking a pessimistic note, both historical and intellectual—a pre-nocturnal representation that reflects a stage of societal decadence and the limits of Parini’s poetry.

Moving to *La Notte* (roughly twice as long), the representation of the last hours of the day manifests the same characteristics found in *Il Vespro*. From a narrative and stylistic perspective, the last chapter of the poem can be divided into two parts: the section preceding the party (*Not.* 1–224), and the soirée’s description (*Not.* 225–673), where the style undergoes a decisive change, becoming mostly descriptive and virtually devoid of direct commentary. Like *Il Vespro*, *La Notte* begins under the banner of fashion, reflecting the new busy night of the time. Indeed, this new space is a recent development coming from abroad, which, according to Koslofsky, not only was used to promote law and order but also to beautify and provide social amenity (131–39). The conquest of the night belongs to the Enlightenment and its cultural salons, and it reflects the widespread optimism towards knowledge and its capability of leading humankind towards the conquest of happiness. The night was gentrified through technological and social revolutions; to this, Parini opposes the past nobility, “dura e alpestre” (“hard and rugged”; *Not.* 32), devoted to feudal wars, but to him more righteous than the modern one. On another note, *La Notte*’s incipit has often been interpreted in alignment with new literary fashions, specifically the Gothic’s growing fortunes. This element is presented on a superficial level, but beneath the surface of the

¹¹ Higher’s opinion, as well as that of Parini’s early interpreters, is that Parini deeply despises the nobles. This judgement is partially true, especially if limited to *Il Giorno* and the local aristocracy of the time. In other works, however, like some of the *Odi*, Parini appears more accommodating towards the nobility.

literary exercise lies the same critical vision cyclically employed by Parini. Here is the night's evocation:

Già di tenebre involta e di perigli,
Sola squallida mesta alto sedevi
Su la timida terra. Il debil raggio
De le stelle remote e de' pianeti,
Che nel silenzio camminando vanno,
Rompea gli orrori tuoi sol quanto è duopo
A sentirli assai più. Terribil ombra
Giganteggiando si vedea salire
Su per le case e su per l'alte torri
Di teschi antiqui seminate al piede. (*Not.* 4–13)

Alone and sad 'twas once thy wont to brood,
Wrapp'd in a squalid robe of gloom and peril,
High o'er the timid earth. The feeble ray
Of stars and planets through the silence wending
Their way remote would pierce thy sable horror
But to appeal the more. A fearful shade
Was seen gigantic climbing o'er the roofs
And lofty tow'rs bestrewn about the feet
With ancient skulls.

Such a description resembles the cosmic vision of *Il Vespro* and contains an identical introductory formula (“Già...”). This time, the night's static nature (“alto sedevi”) and the bleak and sad solitude represent other literary tropes. Furthermore, they introduce to the night an inquietude that was missing in the relatively serene vesper. In this occasion, Parini adorns the description with a restlessness that derives from modern figurative elements, as shown by Michele Mari's comparison with Shakespearean-influenced styles (368). The “teschi antiqui,” the presence of nocturnal birds, and spectral landscapes illuminated by fatuous fires suggest a proximity with coeval nocturnal tropes.

Notwithstanding the traditional literary interpretation of the *notte medievale*, such a representation constitutes again a topical, cultural space, as the fiction inspired by old literary tools is replaced by one that stems from the modern

aristocracy and its social, philosophical, and technical accomplishments. It is not incidental that ordinary people do not make an appearance here, for they have a different experience of the day. The illumination of the night, the elimination of its dark and frightening nature, is attributed to a small fringe of society, which in the poem is guided by Eros and Venus. As noted by Barberi Squarotti, the Christian God is entirely absent in the world of *Il Giorno*. Once refining forces, Eros and Venus are now portrayed negatively throughout the poem: they are the nobles' patron deities, perpetrators of vices and libertinism, thus steering the aristocracy into moral corruption.¹² In *La Notte*, they make their appearance, together with the divinities of games and leisure, as the modern forces that illuminate the dark and medieval night:

Tutto davanti a lor tutto s'irradia
 Di nova luce. Le inimiche tenebre
 Fuggono riversate; e l'ali spandono
 Sopra i covili, ove le fere e gli uomini
 Da la fatica condannati dormono. (*Not.* 43–47)

Before them
 With a new brilliancy all things do shine,
 The hostile shadows fly away defeated
 To cover with their wings the weary beasts
 And spent humanity, fatigue's dull convicts
 Asleep with their dens.

From the luxurious Enlightenment comes a “nova luce” radiating the nocturnal atmosphere, pushing the “inimiche tenebre”—that is, all those forces hostile and critical of this change (including the so-called *pedanti*)—towards the “covili” hosting the lower life. In these miserable dwellings, beasts and humans alike expiate their eternal condemnation. In a subtle fashion, Parini exploits these two contrasting ways of living the night to introduce the recurring theme of the aristocracy's

¹² See the “Amore e Imene” episode in Parini's *Il Mattino* for an example of this. In *Mat.* 313–95, Parini's etiological tale explains the difference in romantic relationships of the time. Amore represents libertinism, a restless and capricious force that stirs marriages and lays the foundation for the *cicisbeismo*; Imene, on the other hand, is the brother who is supposed to counterbalance Amore's force. Amore acts by night, whereas Imene, associated with boredom and sleep, is active during the day.

arrogance, which, according to him, applies to the Age of Enlightenment as a whole. Parini presents the new night as a negative and exclusionary space that in the poem becomes, by contrast, a place of reaffirmation of his egalitarianism. This reading is corroborated by the personification of the Night, which is portrayed as “stupefatta” (“astonished”; *Not.* 48) and confused by the unusual spectacle. Such a peculiar sight shows an iniquity that the personified Night cannot grasp, for the pre-modern night, both in its physical and symbolic aspects, has always been conceptualized as universal and equal to all.

Stupefatta la Notte intorno vedesi
Riverberar più che dinanzi al sole
Auree cornici, e di cristalli e specchi
Pareti adorne, e vesti varie, e bianchi
Omeri e braccia, e pupillette mobili,
E tabacchiere preziose, e fulgide
Fibbie ed anella e mille cose e mille. (*Not.* 48–54)

Astonish'd Night
Beholds reflected from the gilded cornice
Her own bright gleams that far outshine the sun
And glint again on crystal-cruled walls,
On mirrors, varicolour'd robes, white arms,
Quick flashing eyes and precious snuffboxes,
Resplendent buckles, rings and yet a thousand
And thousand else.

Parini adheres to a deterministic view of the nocturnal sphere, traditionally thought to be a place of restlessness and fear, a symbol of death, a condition that united humanity across classes. By contrast, the last flash of Parini's *sensismo* depicts the new night through an abundance of lights, reverberations, and reflections emanating from the precious objects and semi-divine humanity that populate this space—a hubristic light brighter than the Sun.

Così l'eterno caos, allor che Amore
Sopra posovvi e il fomentò con l'ale,
Sentì il generator moto crearsi,
Sentì schiuder la luce; e sé medesimo

Vide meravigliando e i tanti aprirsi
Tesori di natura entro al suo grembo. (*Not.* 55–60)

E'en so eternal Chaos,
When Love stoop'd there and warm'd it with his wings,
Perceiv'd creative motion self-created,
Saw light appear, and wondering beheld
Itself and the vast store of nature's treasures
Unfolding manifold within its lap.

The clash between darkness and light is described as a big bang–like event, out of which stems a great variety of new heroes. Parini analyzes these new human types in the second portion of the poem, where he describes a worldly salon. In my reading, I have shown how Parini begins each section of *Il Giorno* with a description of different parts of the day, and how he essentializes his social critique in the incipits. These descriptions have complementary qualities in the poem: they are current and mundane. Current, as they reflect ideas, values, and events of the time, as well as Parini's intellectual formation; mundane because they reflect, while criticizing or ridiculing, the literary and social conventions of the epoch. However, *Il Vespro* and *La Notte* connote the night with a crepuscular dimension, both in terms of historical and personal pessimism. Considering the temporal distance between *Il Mattino* (1763) and the later attempts at a conclusion (1780s), *Il Vespro* and *La Notte* bring many innovative elements to the poem, like the new eighteenth-century conceptions of the night, as well as a broader portrait of society and an advanced discourse on its decadence, explored in the next section.

The last stand of epic poetry

To better understand Parini's discourse on the aristocracy's decadence and the reason why it becomes crucial in the representation of the night, I will now focus on the second section of *La Notte*. Here, Parini describes both the characters and events of a worldly salon in Milan. Like in *Il Vespro*, the ending seems abrupt, although the existence of various fragments seems to suggest an attempted continuation of the poem. The episode is nevertheless meaningful for its stylistic and thematic content. The passage describing the movement from an external setting to the indoor party scene opens a broader perspective to the preceptor. Once across this threshold, the poem describes the society of the time while the

preceptor's direct observation is hindered. In this section, Parini adopts a different strategy, and outlines a series of human types with poorly defined contours, as if he were afraid of offending a potential reader by providing too many details. Indeed, the social satire loses some of its incidence in the individual episodes, but it remains relevant in so far as it sketches a broader portrait of Milanese society.

The *canapé* fable inaugurates the discourse on decadence (*Not.* 276–346); Parini's latest etiological invention tells a story of decadence, which did not occur in other tales. In the fable, a *canapé*, once a prestigious sofa, has been downgraded from its dominant position by fashion's decrees. Indeed, it is demoted to serve people affected by "Puntiglio" and "Noia" ("Punctilio" and "Tedium"; *Not.* 327), leaving behind a past that represents an object of desire for libertines. The sight of the "matrona del loco" ("the hostess"; *Not.* 264)¹³ sitting on a *canapé* triggers a poetic invention that entails ideas such as the passing of time, an abrupt change of events, and a fall from grace. Compared to the fighting elderly of the "favola della cipria" ("face powder's tale"), the old woman seems too tired, outplayed, and unfit for the chair of love. In addition, Parini's fetishism for finely crafted objects is as strong as his reproach against aristocrats, yet the *canapé* does not benefit from his usual admiration. This parable may corroborate the hypothesis of a retrospective writing, as Parini may be describing what was a glorious specimen in his early years that later turned banal and bland.

After the *canapé* episode, the narration continues by describing the attendees and portraying scenes of games. The characters of the "sfilata degli imbecilli" ("parade of imbeciles" as dubbed by Attilio Momigliano) appear completely dominated by their obsessions, which are amplified by the nocturnal social context. Among other modern human types described in the scene, the *parfileur* is the one who stands out from all the others, as he is the final participant in the *sfilata* and the subject of a long and attentive description. The preceptor's wandering gaze

¹³ *La Notte* also reflects the advancement of noblewomen in high society and their centrality in the organization of these soirees. The old lady is negatively connoted during the party, specifically towards the ending scenes, where her thoughts swiftly move from private concerns to more frivolous matters. Such a noblewoman is portrayed while thinking about the guests' arrangement in the reception room, thus constituting an archetype that will often recur in later literature—an archetype that Parini seems reluctant and unable to treat adequately. One cannot help but notice a lesser feminine presence within the poem, especially in the latter part, which was supposed to be intrinsically more collective; these characters are generic and often mentioned in their male counterparts' functions. As a result, Parini's criticism in the "sfilata degli imbecilli," and generally throughout the poem, concerns primarily the male sphere.

catches this character in the act of unravelling a precious tapestry, a pastime he has allegedly cultivated for a decade.

Or vedi l'altro,
 Di cui più diligente o più costante
 Non fu mai damigella o a tesser nodi
 O d'aurei drappi a separar lo stame.
 A lui turgide ancora ambe le tasche
 Son d'ascose materie. Eran già queste
 Prezioso tapeto, in cui distinti
 D'oro e lucide lane i casi apparvero
 D'Ilio infelice: e il cavalier, sedendo
 Nel gabinetto de la dama, ormai
 Con ostinata man tutte divise
 In fili minutissimi le genti
 D'Argo e di Frigia. Un fianco solo avanza
 De la bella rapita; e poi l'eroe,
 Pur giunto al fin di sua decenne impresa,
 Andrà superbo al par d'ambo gli Atridi. (*Not.* 440–55)

Now mark another: never maid was seen
 More constant and more diligent to work
 A knotted web, or yet to separate
 The warp of golden cloths. His pockets both
 Still bulge with hidden stuffs that once display'd
 In precious tapestry, prick'd out with gold
 And gorgeous wools, the chances that befell
 Unhappy Troy. E'en now the cavalier
 Was sitting in the lady's cabinet,
 With tireless hand was picking out the throng
 Of Argos and of Phrygia, into threads
 The tiniest. One side alone remains
 Of her who from her Grecian home was torn;
 And, when the hero's ten years' task's achiev'd,
 He'll step as proudly as the two Atrides.

The accounts on *parfilage*, often confusing and discordant, have been thoroughly investigated by Gisela Schlüter in the article “Parfilage: Allegorische Auflösung des Epos in *La Notte* vv. 440–455.” Such a pastime emerged in France at Louis XVI’s court, and the verb *parfiler* appears in dictionaries starting in 1765. Other sources date the diffusion of the fashion around 1770 and consider it over in France by 1782. The same year, the trend transferred to the United Kingdom as “drizzling” and had already arrived earlier on in Austria. It is not simple to pinpoint when this hobby became popular in Milan, nor whether it arrived directly from France or under an Austrian influence; Parini, however, does not associate it to France nor to any other national culture,¹⁴ as he had done in other instances. The lack of a clear culprit could imply a critical discourse that, in its metaliterary aspect, affects every European aristocracy, but this scene also presupposes a certain temporal distance between the publication of *Il Mezzogiorno* in 1765 and the popularization of *parfilage*, as its rise seems to fall within Parini’s period of intense collaboration with the Milanese authorities.

Besides this historical hint, the figure of the *parfileur* is highly significant for the interpretation of *La Notte*. This scene is the poem’s last ekphrasis, ending a cycle that began in *Mat.* 829–928, where the preceptor had described the dressing of the *Giovin Signore*, his garments and accessories, echoing Homer’s ekphrastic description of shields and weapons. The episode is topical not only because it ends a thematic cycle, but also because ekphrasis always requires closer attention. In this case, the ekphrasis carries a negative connotation since there is little left to describe of the wholly destroyed Homeric tapestry. Therefore, the poet’s gaze does not dive into the work of art itself; instead, it proceeds around the edges, scrutinizes its destructor and suggests that the episode’s more profound meaning should be sought outside the tapestry’s visual subject.

Considering the episode’s centrality, I will explore possible interpretations hinting at the crisis of the genre as well as the poem’s incompleteness. Starting from Greco-Roman literature, the notion of the literary text as a tapestry is ubiquitous

¹⁴ French culture is often referenced in *Il Giorno*, mostly in terms of literary and linguistic prestige. Parini seems very critical towards the aristocrats who learn French (although it was de facto the international language of the time) and neglect their own idiom. Parini mostly abstains from foreign words, paraphrasing often in Italian. Since French culture was the subject of several critiques, it is interesting that here Parini does not use the French word nor refer to *parfilage* as something strictly French, perhaps due to his linguistic chauvinism, or perhaps because the trend was not imported directly from France. On Italian aristocrats’ devotion to French culture, to the point that they almost forget their native idiom, see *Not.* 544–48.

in Western culture and its influence is first and foremost etymological. Thus, the flagrant act of unravelling portrayed by Parini resonates with the unravelling of the text itself. One meaningful aspect in this reading is that an aristocrat *physically* unravels the textual tapestry, suggesting a causal connection between its decadence and its heroic, chivalrous repertoire. According to Parini's world view, the aristocracy ought to be accountable not only for political affairs but also for values underpinning the epic and heroic model, as well as of artistic activity *tout court*—an abandoned function that they had occupied in the past and that allowed the epic's development and survival in Italy during the Renaissance. These verses constitute a *j'accuse* against the nobility, responsible of its severe decline. Their inadequacy makes the epic unfeasible, thus affecting Parini's own writing.

Parini refers also to a specific version of *parfileur* that involved not so much the unravelling of any fabric per se but rather the extraction from carpets or garments of exclusively the most precious threads: “d'aurei drappi a separar lo stame” (“separating the warp of golden cloths; *Not.* 443). From this standpoint, the act of undoing could refer to the nobles' inclination, already widely exposed in the poem, towards a very superficial, greedy, and utilitarian knowledge.¹⁵ This shallow understanding of arts represents a crucial problem for Parini's satire. If social satire is not understood it does not achieve its desired effect (becoming, instead, the subject of a fashionable erudition), and it loses its very *raison d'être*. Moreover, the aristocracy's hypocrisy and frivolity hinder any critical effort aimed at society's improvement, neutralizing the pedagogical nature of the poem.

Finally, the duration of the unravelling, “sua decenne impresa” (*Not.* 454), suggests a broader meditation on the act of writing, which for *Il Giorno*, as I have shown, encompasses the second half of the eighteenth century. On the one hand, Parini refers to the subject depicted in this tapestry, hyperbolically comparing its length to the duration of the Trojan War. Beyond the literary connotation, the episode suggests the idea of a long and stubborn process of destruction. Furthermore, this habit shows a particular interest in the harvest's preciousness and a complete lack of respect towards labour, whether material or literary, amplifying the metaliterary discourse. Thus, the aristocracy's shortcomings become the culprits of

¹⁵ In *Il Mezzogiorno*, the nobles seem mostly dedicated to nit-picking passages from their readings—the “nuovi Sofi” (*Mez.* 941)—that were desirable due to their controversial nature. Thus, knowledge is reduced to a mere ornament, a precious matter to be referenced without fully understanding its real meaning (even when overtly contrary to aristocratic values), but for the sake of having “onor di filosofico talento” (“a reputation for philosophy”; *Mez.* 496).

the textual disintegration. Nonetheless, this undoing might also reflect the crisis of Parini's heroic model: throughout the poem, he has systematically exposed the emptiness and inapplicability of the epic, its characters, and its categories, to the point that there are no heroes left in the tapestry, just like in the poem. Thus, the "decenne impresa" resonates with his long, meticulous process of writing, alluding to the fact that, despite his efforts, the poetical project came to a halt. Just like Homer's Penelope, society is undoing by night what the artisans (like Parini himself) have done during their days.

Continuing the discourse on decadence, *parfilage* was considered mostly a women's hobby, and the *parfileur* is said to be more diligent than any "damigella" (*Not.* 442), even if there is evidence of sovereigns who devoted themselves to this pastime. The reversal of roles and the nobility's emasculation is a recurring element within the poem. More concretely, it can be understood as a tendency to grotesquely thematize the eighteenth century's refinement of manners by stressing the efforts required by these social performances. This aspect should be read within the broader framework of Parini's representation of nobility's decadence. Specifically, Parini adopts a representational model based on regression. The aristocrats in Parini's poem never seem to reach the expected maturity; their behaviour is always silly and (sometimes literally) childish: the *Giovin Signore's* awakening is described through exaggerated facial movements, as if he were a newborn. In fact, the *parfileur's* awareness is elided, either because *La Notte's* characters act like sleepwalkers in the grip of their manias, or because the long-term implications of their actions are overlooked. Parini theorizes this regression as a "bamboleggiare" ("playing like a little infant"), a return to a primitive age of innocence, as it had been theorized by Rousseau, even if, in this case, the negative dimension prevails. Towards the end of *Il Mattino*, Parini states:

Ma i vostri almi nipoti oggi si stanno
Ad agitar fra le tranquille dita
Dell'orologio i ciondoli vezzosi;
Ed opra è lor se all'innocenza antica
Torna pur anco, e bamboleggia il mondo. (*Mat.* 1049–53)

To-day your gracious grandsons' occupation
Is stirring the fair trinkets of the watch
With placid fingers; and to them 'tis due

If yet the world to antique innocence
Return and like a little infant play.

Mercantile values seem to be modernity's main driver for Parini's aristocracy and, by extension, the source of its corruption, be it psychological or behavioural. In *Il Giorno*, indeed, precious and ambivalent objects recur: they are admired for their formal qualities but always employed in a materialistic, sometimes unethical fashion. As a result, the *parfileur* epitomizes regression and decadence: the *parfileur* embodies a modern anti-hero that can no longer be described through an epic repertoire. In fact, he is symbolically undoing Homer's work and, by it, the whole genre. It is difficult, in the absence of textual evidence in the manuscripts, to unequivocally prove Parini's intentions, but, as argued by Schlüter, the length of the description, its positioning in the sequence of characters, and the epic theme make the *mise en abyme* a crucial passage to understand Parini's struggle, too, as his poetry does not seem capable of countering this destruction and providing *La Notte* with a proper ending.

Which end for *La Notte*?

In conclusion, the night's representation in *Il Giorno* reflects the changes occurring in society and literature, as well as more subtle changes on a personal, intellectual level. Reality had become so complex and treacherous that the instruments of Parini's literary genres proved to be no longer sufficient. On the one hand, a narrative ending is implied in *Il Mattino*, which is the continuation of what had happened the previous night. However, since epic and satirical aesthetic and moral foundations had disappeared, the narration comes to a standstill. What seems to have been lost through decades, beyond its completeness, is the very essence of Parini's poetry as it appeared in *Il Giorno*'s first half. The poem's best qualities laid in the renderings of moral indignation and relentless, aggressive attacks—although disguised as playful and literary in nature. However, his aggressiveness was not nihilistic nor resentful: it was made safer by some degree of anonymity and manifested a certain optimism in its means—that is to say, a hope of entering the cultural debate and actively contributing to society's improvement.

Such an environment decisively changed after the recognition of Parini's talent, allowing him to occupy key institutional positions, including academic and political ones. From this plinth, Parini reinvents his public persona, revealing a fascination for the high world and its rituals and admiration towards what it used

to represent. Parini's aggressiveness therefore mutates, becoming more prudent, less optimistic, and sometimes disillusioned. Nevertheless, the empathy towards the unprivileged persisted in Parini's poetry, coexisting with contradictions deriving from his own acquisition of privileges. One last aspect to be considered is the sustainability of the twisted, pedagogic performance of "good Mephistopheles": by giving advice on nefarious behaviours, the "preceptor d'amabil rito" may be misunderstood by the readers, paradoxically contributing to the decadence of aristocracy. Then, to recapitulate, I advocate that a fragile social status and a clear concern about the broad consequences of his poetry are some of the ethical questions that influenced Parini's representation of the night in *La Notte*.

A tentative ending for the poem can be found in one of the fragments that Parini wrote for *La Notte*, where he describes an episode of metamorphosis. Having fulfilled all his tasks, the narrator invites the *Giovin Signore* to descend to the Underworld with him, for as shown by the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Metamorphoses* and, later, the *Divina Commedia*, both epic poets and heroes must go through some form of katabasis. To do so, the preceptor morphs into a bat, of which we can read a thorough description:

Orrida giubba
Di negro velo anch'essa a me dal capo
Scende sul dorso e si dilata e cela
E mento e gola e petto. Ahimè il sembante
Sorge privo di labbra esangue freddo
E di squallore sepolcral coperto. (*Not.* Framm. 6.29–34)

A doublet too of horrible black crape
Spreads from my head wide o'er the back, and hides
Chin, throat and breast. Alas! Here stands a vision
Of one that's lipless, bloodless, shiv'ring cold,
And cover'd with the squalor of the tomb.

What matters here, in my opinion, is the symbolic meaning behind this specific choice regarding the bird-object of the metamorphosis. According to classical models, the swan is a source of poetic aspiration and identification, and as Cristiano Spila's reading of the symbol shows, Parini dubbed himself as an "Italian swan" in *Alla Musa* (408). Parini's last ode (1795) portrays an accomplished neoclassical

poet, whereas the metamorphosis into a bat shows the implicit demands of the satirical genre. The preceptor, Parini's alter ego, realizes the consequences of his journey through a world of transfiguration and ethical ambiguity: this descent into hell, although adorned with classical and Gothic elements,¹⁶ is, I argue, Dantesque in nature. The metamorphosis into an unpleasant, nocturnal animal symbolizes Parini's displeasure in writing and playing his role as "preceptor d'amabil rito," who appears trapped in a dark forest.

Such intellectual turmoil may be the reason why Parini never finished his project. Nevertheless, I believe that the novelty in Parini's rendering is the intuition of the night's vast literary potential when conjugated in a worldly and decadent perspective, a chronotope that indeed proved extremely successful in the nineteenth and twentieth century novel. In this regard, Parini seems more of a precursor, in the sense that, despite his intuition, he was not capable of separating the classical from the modern. In his night, the classical model is contrasted by a realistic one: the characters inhabiting this space work against an omnipresent epic model that nostalgically dwells in the gaze of the preceptor. To summarize my reading, I would echo Giorgio Barberi Squarotti's observation that *Il Giorno* is a space where "readers seem to explore their thoughts, rather than the poet's" (60), and this applies to *La Notte* as well. Therefore, the modern night portrayed in *La Notte* can be broadly interpreted as a space of intellectual and artistic meditation, a quasi-testamentary space, in light of the *parfilage* and metamorphosis episodes.

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¹⁶ It is interesting to note here how Parini's work starts with Arcadian imagery and ends under the influence of sepulchral poetry. Indeed, sepulchral imagery rose to popularity in the eighteenth century thanks to the so-called Graveyard School of Anglo-Saxon origin (see Blair, Keats, Gray, and others). These motives, nonetheless, can be found in the works of some Italian authors often considered as "minor," like Ippolito Pindemonte, Aurelio de' Giorgi Bertola, and Ambrogio Viale, whereas Ugo Foscolo's *Dei Sepolcri* (1807) is the first major canonical work imbued with sepulchral and pre-Romantic motives.

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