Why Saba Today? Why Saba in the United States?

Elena Grazioli

Umberto Saba (1883–1957) occupies a paradoxical place in twentieth-century Italian poetry: for decades he was perceived as a marginal, even "anachronistic" voice, faithful to traditional meters and to an apparently simple, narrative diction, in sharp contrast with the experimental modernism of Eugenio Montale or Giuseppe Ungaretti. Yet precisely this stance – his refusal of hermetic obscurity, his loyalty to what he called *poesia onesta* ("honest poetry") – has made him a poet of enduring relevance. To read Saba today is to encounter a writer who consistently sought truth rather than rhetorical brilliance, who confronted his own biography without disguises, and who turned psychological depth and fragility into a shared human experience. Recent criticism has shown that Saba was profoundly ambivalent, rooted in tradition yet attuned to modern anxieties. His *Canzoniere* (1921) thus becomes both a monument to autobiographical writing and a laboratory for modernity, where questions of identity, memory, sexuality, and history are tested against poetic form. In an age marked by a renewed search for authenticity and for literature capable of crossing the boundaries between private and collective life, Saba's voice resonates with unexpected force. Introducing Saba to American readers also means broadening and enriching the spectrum of Italian poetry as it is usually perceived abroad: the canonical image of the twentieth century is often dominated by Montale's hermeticism or Ungaretti's lyricism. Saba, by contrast, offers a different model: less visionary and more narrative, less elitist and more closely tied to everyday life — emblematically so in "Città Vecchia". His poems speak in a plain yet intensely charged language, able to reach readers far beyond the boundaries of the national tradition. Moreover, Saba embodies a crossroads of cultural conversations that resonate in American intellectual contexts. His ongoing engagement with Freud and psychoanalysis places him in dialogue with modernism as a whole. His reflections on the "civic" role of poetry, especially in the prose fragments of *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, echo transatlantic debates on

Textual Cultures 18.2 (2025): 78–82. DOI 10.14434/tc.v18i2.42352

the relationship between art and politics. His engagement with popular culture, evident in the lasting influence of "Città Vecchia" on Italian singer-songwriters, invites connections with American traditions of folk and protest song. In this sense, Saba is not only an Italian poet to rediscover but also a European figure whose themes — identity, marginality, the search for truth — can be read productively within a global framework.

The essays in this issue illustrate the many ways in which Saba's work continues to generate critical discussion and new interpretations. Federico Carrera revisits the decisive postwar years, tracing his encounters with young writers such as Vittorio Sereni and Giovanni Giudici. Through letters, poems, and testimonies, Carrera shows how Saba's lesson — his insistence on life as the substance of poetry — helped shape two of the most important voices in Italian literature after 1945. Alessia Vecchi shifts the focus to Saba's influence beyond literature, exploring the possible dialogue between his "Città Vecchia" and Fabrizio De André's song of the same title. In doing so, she opens a broader reflection on the relationship between poetry and popular music, showing how Saba's vision of urban life and marginal figures resonates in Italian songwriting, and how such intertextuality can enrich cultural study across disciplinary boundaries. Michele Paragliola tackles the crucial issue of Saba's position between modernism and anti-modernism. While he has often been described as a conservative poet bound to tradition, Paragliola demonstrates how psychoanalysis, autobiographical experimentation, and linguistic innovation bring him closer to modernist sensibilities. This perspective dismantles the entrenched image of a purely "regressive" Saba, highlighting instead his oscillation between fidelity to tradition and openness to new literary paths. Finally, Pietro Tabarroni examines *Scorciatoie e raccontini* as a unique record of Saba's civic thought during and after fascism. Through psychoanalytic categories and literary analogies — above all the Shakespearean vision of Mussolini's downfall in Piazzale Loreto — Tabarroni shows how Saba constructs a tragic interpretation of history while redefining the civic role of poetry. Taken together, these essays confirm Saba's centrality as a poet at once deeply rooted in his time and strikingly capable of speaking to ours. This framework also includes Stefano Carrai's recently published book *L'autografo di 'A mia moglie' e altri studi di filologia e critica sabiana* (Edizioni della Normale, 2025), which brings together studies on Saba's poetry united by a philological and historically erudite approach. The volume opens with the precious discovery of the autograph manuscript — until now unknown — of "A mia moglie", one of Saba's most famous poems. The following essays highlight specific aspects of Saba's path

through comparison with figures such as Italo Svevo and Virgilio Giotti, friends and interlocutors who served as critical reagents. The final study retraces Saba's friendship with Giacomo Debenedetti, shedding light on a decisive critical experience for his recognition within the Italian literary landscape.

Beyond their thematic variety, the essays collected here also foreground the textual and editorial dimension of Saba's work, in ways that resonate with the methodological concerns of *Textual Cultures*. Vecchi highlights Saba's original conception of "Città Vecchia" and its later reshaping in the 1962 edition of the *Canzoniere*, revealing how questions of revision and republication alter the poem's meaning and reception. Carrera reconstructs the complex composition and publication history of *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, a work that embodies Saba's civic and autobiographical poetics while also demanding to be read as a document of textual experimentation. Paragliola revisits the "redesign" of the *Poesie dell'adolescenza e giovanili* for the 1921 *Canzoniere*, underscoring Saba's persistent reconfiguration of his corpus. Even Tabarroni's essay, while focused on historical and intertextual resonances, relies on the close reading of textual detail to illuminate Saba's civic imagination. This attention to textual transmission, which cuts across the different essays, situates the cluster in close dialogue with the journal's methodological focus. This textual emphasis is further reinforced by Stefano Carrai's recent *L'autografo di 'A mia moglie'*, which both exemplifies and extends the philological approach underpinning this cluster. The discovery of the autograph manuscript of "A mia moglie" — a poem central to Saba's canon — reminds us that his work is still an open archive, where new materials continue to reshape interpretation. Taken together, these studies show how philology, editorial history, and textual criticism remain indispensable to understanding Saba's poetry, while also situating his voice within broader cultural debates. In this sense, the cluster aligns with the mission of *Textual Cultures*: to interrogate what constitutes a "text" and how its transmission, revision, and reception affect meaning across time and contexts.

To ask *Why Saba today?* means recognizing in him a poet of authenticity, who transformed his vulnerability into a form of truth able to reach readers across time. His work embodies a rare balance between tradition and innovation, biography and art, individual memory and collective history. In an age searching for sincerity and for literature unafraid to confront pain, desire, and fragility, his "poesia onesta" remains more necessary than ever. To ask *Why Saba in the United States?* means opening the Italian canon to a figure who resists stereotypes and broadens our understanding of twentieth-

century poetry. Saba's attention to psychoanalysis links him to transatlantic modernist networks; his vision of the city and its marginal inhabitants anticipates themes that resonate in American literature and music; his civic prose offers a perspective on fascism and history that transcends national boundaries. Presenting Saba to American readers means discovering a poet who is both profoundly Italian and unmistakably universal.

This monographic section does not aim to close the question but to reopen it: to show how Saba's layered and contradictory voice continues to provoke reflection and invite dialogue. Today, and across cultures.

Università degli Studi di Milano

"Città Vecchia"

Spesso, per ritornare alla mia casa
prendo un'oscura via di città vecchia.
Giallo in qualche pozzanghera si specchia
qualche fanale, e affollata è la strada.

Qui tra la gente che viene che va
dall'osteria alla casa o al lupanare,
dove son merci ed uomini il detrito
di un gran porto di mare,
io ritrovo, passando, l'infinito
nell'umiltà.

Qui prostituta e marinaio, il vecchio
che bestemmia, la femmina che bega,
il dragone che siede alla bottega
del friggitore,
la tumultuante giovane impazzita
d'amore,
sono tutte creature della vita
e del dolore;
s'agita in esse, come in me, il Signore.

Qui degli umili sento in compagnia
il mio pensiero farsi
più puro dove più turpe è la via.

"Old town"

Often, to make my way back home,
I choose a dark street of the old town.
In some puddle a lantern shivers,
and the road is crowded with life.

Here, among those drifting –
from tavern to house or brothel –
where men and wares are the cast-off scraps
of a vast seaport,
I glimpse again, in passing,
the infinite in humility.

Here the prostitute and the sailor,
the old man swearing, the nagging wife,
the soldier idling by the fryer's stall,
the young girl wild with love —
all are creatures of life and sorrow;
and in them, as in me,
the Lord is stirring.

Here, in the fellowship of the humble,
my thought grows clearer,
purer where the street is most defiled.