In 1773 the Milanese intellectual Pietro Verri (1728–1797) anonymously published a treatise on the origins of human pleasure and pain entitled *Idee sull’indole del piacere e del dolore*. A few years later, in 1781, a significantly revised version appeared with the title *Discorso sull’indole del piacere e del dolore*, as part of a collection of philosophical works that included discourses on happiness and political economy. Verri’s research into the origins of the feelings of pleasure and pain situated itself within a field of enquiry dominated by two approaches: the empiricism of John Locke and David Hume and the sensationism of Étienne de Condillac, Claude Helvétius, and the writers of the *Encyclopédie*. His enquiry was stimulated not only by a declared dissatisfaction with the answers provided by the philosophical tradition that had preceded him but also by a desire for self-knowledge, rooted both in the humanistic ideal of defining the essence of human nature and in the Enlightenment assumption that the human mind is a stable point of departure for all knowledge. The *Discorso* develops a theory of negative hedonism, which explains pleasure as the rapid cessation of pain. Verri argues that pain is always an active emotion, and pleasure, as a response to the absence of pain, a negative one. The conclusion of his enquiry is that pain always exceeds pleasure in the life of human beings and that it is the principal motor of our actions, since we act to make pain cease, rather than to seek pleasure. By focussing on the dynamic of pain and pleasure, Verri sheds light on what Immanuel Kant would call the ‘economy of human life’: the reasons that stimulate us to act, the moral considerations affecting our choices, and the ethical dimensions of pain and pleasure.

The first paragraph of the Introduction, though, immediately reveals a tension in the essay between a rationalistic faith in the knowability of human passions and the elusiveness of the object of study. In the interpretation of human sensibility, defined as ‘il grande arcano’ [the great mystery], lies the key to self-knowledge. The workings of sensibility, however, which Verri calls ‘la parte preziosa dell’uomo’ [the precious part of human beings], are shrouded in ‘tenebre’ [darkness]. Relying on the commonality of human experience, Verri sets out to shed light on these hidden mechanisms of feeling and proposes to identify the common
features of both painful and pleasurable sensations through a process of decomposition, or reduction to the simplest elements, and comparison. Verri’s method was inspired by Condillac’s *esprit systématique* [systematic spirit]. This empiricist approach consisted in a combination of analysis and synthesis: after identifying and isolating the basic parts of the object under observation, each part was to be compared with another and the results were to be arranged in a scientific explanation. The method was based on principles of simplicity and obviousness, which were not only rational but also, in Condillac’s opinion, consonant with the way in which the human mind worked. Condillac, after all, was indebted to Descartes and underlying his method was the idea of a relative transparency of the mind. Over the course of Verri’s enquiry, however, the analytic rationalism of the *philosophes* is pushed to its limits on several occasions.

At the beginning of the *Discorso*, Verri presents direct self-observation as a reliable strategy to illustrate the mechanisms of sensibility. Ultimately, though, his investigation fails to shed full light either on the confused origins of passions or on the complex workings of memory. Memory, in particular, emerges as something that often functions not only independently of the will but also against it. Time and again, Verri makes clear that, against common opinion, we do not have immediate and certain access to our sensations or mental states. His account of human psychology highlights the self’s ultimate opaqueness to itself: the sense of a concealed dynamic of pleasure and pain, the unpredictability of memory, and sentiments whose origins are impervious to the rational mind. Each of these aspects will be central to later psychoanalytic theories and discourses about the unconscious. In this essay, I read Verri’s *Discorso* in the context of eighteenth-century theories of the mind and by placing it in dialogue with Verri’s accounts of his experiences in his autobiographical writings and letters. I aim to demonstrate how Verri, working within Enlightenment epistemological categories, sketches an account of the self and of the human mind that shows an awareness of unconscious mental processes. The inception of a concern with such processes has been connected with the emergence in Europe of new accounts of individual identity. During the eighteenth century, the perception that thinking and consciousness coincide and the idea that memory is an uncomplicated process of recollection begin to give way to new modes of conceiving of the self, according to which the self is not always a conscious and willing agent. My purpose, though, is not to trace lines of filiation with psychoanalysis, but rather to bring to light how, in his enquiry into human passions, Verri comes to confront problems that are similar to those that will define new theories of the mind in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Throughout the *Discorso*, Verri is in dialogue with the thinkers and philosophers who preceded him. His first interlocutor is John Locke who, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), asserted
that pleasure and pain are ‘the hinges on which our passions turn’.\(^9\) Verri frames his essay with a binary conception of the affections of the soul: pain and pleasure are the two pillars on which to found an analysis of human sensibility. In addition to Locke, Verri engages with major theorists of pleasure, such as René Descartes and Pierre-Louis de Maupertuis.\(^10\) His dialogue, in fact, also develops in response to the questions raised by Maupertuis’s arithmetic of pleasure.\(^11\) In his *Essai de Philosophie Morale* (1749), Maupertuis argued, from a sensationist perspective, that it should be possible to measure exactly both the duration and the intensity of pleasure and pain experienced by an individual.\(^12\) He specified that while the duration of pleasure or pain is objectively quantifiable, the intensity is subjective. Since both duration and intensity, however, depend on natural judgement, the calculation retains an objective validity.\(^13\) According to Maupertuis, then, the relative happiness or unhappiness of a person can be measured by multiplying the intensity of either pleasure or pain by its duration.\(^14\) By proceeding *more matematico*, Maupertuis linked pleasure and pain not only with the ideas of happiness and unhappiness but also with two other quantifiables, the good and the bad: ‘Le bien est une somme de moments heureux. Le mal est une somme semblable de moments malheureux’ [the good is a sum of happy moments. The bad is an analogous sum of unhappy moments].\(^15\) Maupertuis concluded that both in the case of the body and in that of the soul, the sum of evils surpasses the good in everyday life.\(^16\) He thought that both Epicureanism and Stoicism were ways of coping with this surplus of pain in human life: the former responded to the natural need of increasing pleasure, while the latter offered ways of managing pain. He concluded, though, that only Christianity, with its promise of a better life, could offer true happiness in the form of an escape from the evils of humankind. Verri agrees with Maupertuis that in the balance of pain and pleasure there is always an excess of pain. Unlike the French philosopher, however, he thinks that neither pleasure nor pain can be subjected to strict mathematical calculations. ‘La mente umana’, he writes, ‘non ha mezzi onde graduarli, né abbiamo veruna macchina che serva di misura, come i termometri, i pendoli, i palmi, le once ci fanno paragonare i gradi di calore, il tempo, l’estensione, i pesi, ec.’ [The human mind has no means to measure them, nor do we have any machine or scale that can do so, as thermometers, pendulums, palms, and ounces let us compare the degrees of heat, time, length, weight, etc.].\(^17\) Verri expresses a cautious scepticism about any claim to objective measurement of sensations. For him, the degrees of pain and pleasure cannot be gauged with certainty not only because they are intrinsically subjective but also because the human mind, as Verri sees it, is not a transparent mechanism.

After the introduction, Verri begins his enquiry by distinguishing between physical and moral pleasures and pains. If physical pain is caused
by a laceration or violent irritation of the body, the cause of moral pain 
is neither immediately evident nor can it be connected to what Verri calls 
‘una immediata azione sulla nostra macchina’ [an immediate action upon 
our machine]. Precisely because moral sensations, such as elation or melancholy, do not depend upon direct physical impulses, their origins 
are difficult to identify. Relying on self-analysis and on the universality 
of immediate experience, Verri empirically ascribes moral pleasures and 
pains to two principles, or ‘sentimenti motori’ [moving sentiments], fear 
and hope. Here the distance between Verri and Maupertuis is clear. 
If Verri agrees that the knowledge of physical phenomena can be easily 
translated into quantitative terms, he cannot say the same about the 
knowledge of moral or mental phenomena, where the qualitative aspect 
comes to the fore. The qualitative differences, in this case, derive not 
only from the differences in subjective perception but also from the fact 
that moral pain and pleasure are mediated, whereas physical pain and 
pleasure are experienced directly. Moral pain and pleasure depend, in 
fact, on the interplay of memory and imagination. It is the juxtaposition 
of past memories and images of the future – a crowd of ‘phantasms’ 
that constantly haunt the mind – that gives rise to feelings of pain or 
pleasure. As Verri himself explains, ‘Essi [dolori e piaceri morali] non 
si risentono se non in quel momento in cui l’animo, dimentico quasi del 
presente, si risovviene e prevede; e a misura che o teme o spera, sente o 
dolore o piacere’ [They [moral pains and pleasures] are not felt if not in 
that moment when the mind, as if forgetful of the present, remembers 
and anticipates; and to the extent that it either fears or hopes, it feels 
either pain or pleasure].

According to Verri, therefore, pain and pleasure are experienced in a 
moment of distraction, when the mind is almost ‘forgetful of the pres -
ent’ and wanders into the past and future. He explains that in such 
moments, when either pleasure or pain prevails, past events and future 
expectations are actively compared. This comparison implies a con-
scious rational process, which is very close to Maupertuis’s arithmetic 
and is based on a utilitarian logic. The way in which past experiences 
and future expectations surface in the mind, however, seems to suggest 
a mechanism that is not entirely conscious or wilful. In the example 
he gives of how the sensation of moral pleasure arises, for instance, 
Verri imagines what would happen if he received the announcement of 
a prestigious appointment. He begins by noting the impossibility of con-
trolling one’s memory and continues by describing how the recollections 
of injustice and indifference endured in the past spontaneously pre-
sent themselves to the mind: ‘Se io potessi dimenticarmi del passato […] 
la novella recatami riuscirebbe insipida e il mio animo non sentirebbe 
niuna sensazione piacevole. Ma si affacciano alla mia mente le ingiusti-
ze, l’orgoglio, la fredda indifferenza’ [If I could forget the past […] the 
news brought to me would seem insipid and my mind would not feel any
pleasing sensation. But injustices, pride, and cold indifference present themselves to my mind]. The language that Verri uses here, obliquely calls attention to mechanisms of memory that lie outside the control of the will and that are subject to laws that cannot be easily explained. The elusiveness of memory is addressed explicitly in the Discorso and is a central point of the discussion, since memory, according to Verri, not only defines who we are but is also at the origin of all our feelings of pain or pleasure.

Memory, Verri explains, is an ‘ignota parte di noi’ [unknown part of ourselves] that

agisce sopra di me, che tien luogo di oggetto esterno, che da sé eccita moti e passioni, che, essendo io paziente, opera in me, mio mal grado talvolta, e forma essa sola quel me, quell’io, che consiste nella coscienza delle mie idee; quest’enigma della mia propria essenza tanto umiliante, questa memoria è la produttrice di ogni mio piacere, o dolor morale.24

[acts upon me, that replaces external objects, that excites emotions and passions on its own, that, as I am subject to it, works in me, sometimes against my wishes, and it alone forms that ‘me’, that ‘I’, which consists in the consciousness of my ideas; this utterly humilitating mystery of my own being, this memory is the producer of all of my moral pleasures and pains]

In these few lines Verri describes the challenge of self-knowledge. Memory is constitutive of one’s sense of self, but it appears to be inaccessible to the rational mind. Thus, although it is a part of us, it remains a ‘humiliating mystery’. Silvia Contarini explains that Verri’s understanding of memory as the substitute for an external object is derived from Locke’s account in his Essay on Human Understanding. Locke describes remembrance as the capacity to evoke ideas in one’s mind without the direct action of an external object on our senses.25 His influence on Verri is clear. Throughout the Discorso, however, Verri emphasizes especially the instances in which memory seems to work, as in the passage above, against the individual’s will. The description of past injustices spontaneously resurfacing is, as we shall see, one of many such examples. In the Essay, Locke also describes specific instances of remembering in which the will of the subject is not actively involved. In Chapter X of book two, he likens remembering to the appearance of ‘dormant pictures’. These are ideas that were lost or seem to have been lost after apprehension, but which can either be actively evoked with a wilful act or can be made to surface by an intense passion. He writes, ‘The mind very often sets itself on work in search of some hidden idea […] though sometimes too they start up in our minds of their own accord, and offer themselves to the understanding; and very often are roused and tumbled out of their
dark cells, into open daylight, by some turbulent and tempestuous passion’. The end of this passage alludes to memories that arise without reflection and independently of one’s will. Reverie, which Locke lists as one of several forms of remembrance, is similarly involuntary: ‘When ideas float in our mind, without any reflection or regard of the understanding, it is that which the French call reverie’. For Locke, however, the mind is presented primarily as an active organ. It is always in control and acts more or less consciously on the train of ideas. Reverie, for instance, is still a degree of thinking and thus never entirely passive. Verri, instead, focuses on how the mind works passively and presents the subject not only as an active and self-conscious thinker but also as the passive recipient of ideas. The individual, for him, is first and foremost paziente – someone who, as the etymology suggests, undergoes the effects of memory and of the passions.

Accordingly, both in the Discorso and in Verri’s autobiographical writings, the resurgence of memories appears more unsettling and far more destabilizing than in Locke. Certain reminiscences or ideas can affect the individual so profoundly that they trouble the body as much as the mind. In the Discorso, Verri explains that the mere memory of a past negative experience can cause such upsetting somatic reactions as ‘il pallore, l’ansietà del respiro, il precipitoso battere delle arterie, il tremore delle membra’ [pallor, shortness of breath, hurried pulsation of the arteries, shaking of limbs]. Similar descriptions of physical turmoil accompanying the acts of remembering or imagining are also found in Verri’s personal correspondence. For example, in some of his letters from the battle lines, during the Seven Years’ War, Verri talks about his grief for Barbara Corbelli d’Adda’s death. The emotional and physiological symptoms he describes are analogous to those mentioned in the previous passage. After learning about her untimely death in August 1759, he is in shock, weeping hopelessly and unable to sleep for more than two hours each night. He also describes himself as feverish, waking for days, and sustaining ‘un abbattimento non ordinario di forze’ [an extraordinary physical dejection]. As elsewhere in his autobiographical writings, Verri is particularly alert to the ways in which an intense personal event can elicit conflicting responses. In such cases, involuntary and ungovernable impulses come into contrast with the dictates of reason. Here, in particular, he draws attention to the intrusions of involuntary memory. The description of his physical collapse in the letter of 16 September 1759, for example, is immediately followed by the resigned realization that his will is helpless: ‘Ma la mia povera Contessina non v’è rimedio che mi possa sortire dalla fantasia, mi pare d’averla sempre sotto gli occhi’ [But there is no way of removing my poor Countess from my memory; I seem to have her always before my eyes]. Throughout the different phases of his mourning, from utter despair to melancholy to resignation, Verri always casts himself as passive – as someone at the
mercy of his pain and memory. The experience of grief, which activates involuntary memory, also emerges in the *Discorso* as an example of the opaque processes of the human mind.

In the *Discorso*’s enquiry into passions, Verri seems to be more interested in the elusive and hidden sources of thinking than in the orderly processes of the active mind. In Chapter XIII, for example, in which he analyses the nature of pain and pleasure, he focusses his attention especially on extreme situations and on the appearance of violent emotions, the causes of which are not immediately evident. For example, he mentions the ‘libertina sfrenatezza’ [libertine dissoluteness] of a man who has survived a terrible catastrophe and the tears of a general after winning a battle.34 This latter example is also found in a slightly different form in one of the letters of his *Memorie sincere*,35 dated 15 April 1760:

> Il tumulto dell’anima nel tempo d’una battaglia è sommo e tale, che dopo la vittoria si vedono gli uomini più insensibili e induriti a versare abondanti lacrime di consolazione, le quali il volgo le attribuirà ad affetto per il suo Principe; ma il filosofo le conosce un effetto della cessazione d’un violento timore, unita alla idea de’ vantaggi personali che si sperano con questo nuovo grado di gloria acquistata.36

> [The soul’s turmoil during a battle is so great and such that after victory one sees the most insensitive and hardened men shed abundant tears of consolation, which common people will interpret as affection for their Prince. But the philosopher knows that they are an effect of the cessation of a violent fear, combined with the idea of the personal advantages that are hoped for with this new degree of glory that has been acquired]

Both here and in the *Discorso*, Verri’s interest in the intense display of emotions is due not only to its seemingly incongruous nature, but also to the fact that it is a reaction that is likely to be misinterpreted. The soldiers’ abundant tears, in Verri’s interpretation, demonstrate the validity of his theory of negative hedonism, or the idea that pleasure is to be understood as a rapid cessation of pain. Equally important, however, is the fact that they are the manifestation of psychological mechanisms that are not immediately intelligible. Interestingly, this passage also describes a reaction that is not the result of a conscious act of the will. The emotional response is explained rationally: the constant fear in which the soldiers have lived is suddenly lifted and the memory of past trials is overcome by the thought of the benefits to come. This response is not, however, presented as intentional nor does it appear to be mediated by reflection – in fact, we could call it *machinal*, or mechanical, to use a term dear to sensationists. In the *Encyclopédie*, Denis Diderot defines the adjective *machinal* as something that happens without reflection or the intervention of the will. It is an automatic movement of the
body – ‘la machine’ – that occurs as a response to external stimulation. Contarini observes, furthermore, that the passage above has some points of contact with Henry Lloyd’s analysis of the emotional predicaments of soldiers at war in his *Introduction à l’histoire de la guerre en Allemagne en 1756*. Lloyd devotes the second part of his book to what he calls a ‘philosophy of war’. This section is in fact an analysis of the psychology of soldiers, which, as Lloyd himself explains, presupposes ‘une profonde connaissance du coeur humain’ [a deep knowledge of the human heart]. A short chapter focusses on the ‘crainte machinale’ [mechanical fear] that can grip soldiers in times of great danger. Lloyd likens this fear to an animal instinct and describes it as ‘une impulsion irrésistible’ [an irresistible impulse] that involves both mind and body. In fact, in the eighteenth century the adjective ‘machinal’ already occupies a semantic field that is in flux and that concerns both physiology and psychology, including the uncertain realm of emotion. Verri’s ‘violent fear’ is no doubt reminiscent of Lloyd’s ‘mechanical fear’, as are the soldiers’ ‘tears of consolation’ after a victory, which appear as the result of a sudden internal impulse. Verri’s interest in these mechanical aspects of human behaviour, or seemingly automatic reactions, however, is not linked to the idea that human beings are predictable machines. Rather, Verri is drawn to them because they indicate something that is left un-thought or un-processed by the rational mind. In this respect, Verri might remind us of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for whom the origin of automatisms is to be found in the Pascalian ‘reasons of the heart’, or those deep motives of which we are not immediately conscious. For Verri, as for Rousseau, self-knowledge comes about through an enquiry into the passions and involves becoming acquainted with and confronting what lies beneath the surface of human consciousness, especially when it comes to actions and responses whose logic escapes reason.

Example after example, in the *Discorso* Verri revises the idea that the self and its motives and feelings are fully predictable and knowable. Not only are our sentiments never entirely subordinated to reason, but also the origins of our passions often remain beyond the reach of understanding. If our sentiments could be analysed through the ‘prisma della ragione’ [prism of reason], he explains, ‘una gran folla di dolori morali verrebbe ad annientarsi per noi’ [a great crowd of moral pains would be erased for us]. This is not possible, however, because ‘la previsione dei mali è talmente nebbiosa e tumultuaria nell’uomo appassionato, che non dà luogo sittosto a sminuzzarli uno ad uno; anzi […] ci rattristano per le tenebre medesime, che in parte li involgono, e questo sconoscimento accresce in noi la diffidenza di superarli’ [the anticipation of bad things is so foggy and tumultuous in the passionate man, that it makes it impossible to take them apart easily one by one; rather […] they sadden us with that very darkness which partly surrounds them, and this lack of knowledge increases our hopelessness in overcoming them]. The image
of darkness, recurrent throughout the Discorso, suggests that Verri is presenting his project in Enlightenment terms: the light of rational analysis should dispel the obscurity in which the psychology of the passions is shrouded. Reason, however, often proves to be an insufficient tool.

Verri’s enquiry, in fact, emphasizes those very mechanisms that influence us but that remain rationally inaccessible. For instance, in the passage following the words quoted above on the prism of reason, Verri describes the formation of sentiments as an accumulation of numerous disparate ideas that the human mind cannot quite grasp:

Un’altra difficoltà incontra l’uomo per uniformare ai dettami della tranquilla ragione tutt’i suoi sentimenti, ed è questa, che difficilmente possiamo noi stessi ritrovar l’origine e la genesi di molti de’ sentimenti nostri: è come un fiume, di cui propriamente non sai indicare qual sia la prima sorgente, poichè lo formano mille piccoli, divisi, e lontani ruscelletti, i quali si frammischiano col discendere; così i sentimenti sono conseguenze di tante, e si varie, e si mischiate idee in tempi diversi, e successivamente avute, sì che la mente umana si smarrisce, e si perde rintracciando i capi di tanti piccolissimi e intralciatissimi fili che ordiscono la massa d’una passione; e come d’un fiume non puoi toccare con sicurezza il punto onde comincia, così nemmeno esattamente puoi toccare il più delle volte l’idea primordiale da cui nasce un sentimento.46

[Human beings encounter another difficulty in bringing all of their sentiments under the calm control of reason. That is, only with difficulty can we find in ourselves the origin and genesis of many of our sentiments. It is like a river, of which one cannot properly indicate the original source, since it is formed by thousands of small, divided, and distant streams, which flow into one another downstream. In the same way, sentiments are consequences of so many, so varied, and such confused ideas, which we have had at different times one after the other, that the human mind strays and becomes lost, as it tries to find the ends of so many utterly minute and incredibly entangled threads that form the mass of a passion. In the same way that you cannot touch with certainty a river’s point of origin, so you cannot touch exactly, most of the time, the primordial idea from which a sentiment is born]

Through the double imagery of a river and of tangled threads, Verri explains how countless microscopic and confused ideas, which are not necessarily related and may originate at different moments in time, are all involved in shaping individual sentiments. This description is reminiscent of a key concept in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s theory of the mind, the often-discussed petites perceptions, or small perceptions. While for Locke, it is ‘impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving that he
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does perceive,47 Leibniz distinguishes different degrees of awareness or perception. At one end of the spectrum are apperceptions, which Leibniz equates with consciousness or a kind of ‘connaissance reflexive’ [reflective knowledge].48 While we are reflexively aware of apperceptions, we are not conscious of small perceptions, which are barely discernible and are indistinguishable from one another. ‘Il y a à tout moment une infinité de perceptions en nous’, Leibniz writes, ‘[…] dont nous ne nous appercevons pas, parce que ces impressions sont ou trop petites et en trop grand nombre, ou trop unies, en sorte qu’elles n’ont rien d’assez distinguant à part’ [there is in us an infinity of perceptions […] of which we are unaware because these impressions are either too minute and too numerous, or else too unvarying, so that they are not sufficiently distinctive on their own].49

It has been argued that for Leibniz, who is generally seen as one of the precursors of the conceptualization of the Freudian unconscious, these small perceptions are to be understood as something that takes place beneath consciousness, rather than as properly unconscious. In this sense they would be only a weaker form of apperception, something that might rise to consciousness given the right conditions.50 Leibniz, however, emphasizes how our actions – including thinking – are often the result of such perceptions, which continuously influence us without our awareness.51 In the passage above, Verri describes a similar phenomenon where an overwhelming multitude of minute ideas lie – one might say – beneath the threshold of consciousness. All of these ideas have a cumulative effect: they combine and coalesce until they make themselves known as a sentiment. Up until then, they are so confused and numerous that, the suggestion seems to be, they are not attended to or reflected upon – they are subliminal. Yet, this incoherent and magmatic mass of ideas is at the origin of our passions, and unbeknownst to us it determines what we feel. Verri also suggests how these ‘utterly minute and incredibly entangled threads’ represent a part of the mind that is inaccessible to reason and that will always elude full comprehension. The origin of feelings, then, remains impervious to Condillac’s analytic approach, inasmuch as the mass that forms a passion is a tangle that cannot be unravelled or démêlé, as the French philosopher would say.

Verri’s intuition of a mechanism that determines what we feel without our knowledge is related to the notion of dolori innominati, or ineffable pains, which he describes in his taxonomy of pain in Chapter VII of the Discorso. These are pains that ‘più o meno ogni uomo soffre senza esattamente distinguerne la cagione, e sono questi dolori innominati, dolori non forti, non decisi, ma che ci rendono addolorati senza darci una idea locale di dolore, e formano vagamente si, ma realmente il nostro mal essere, l’uneasiness conosciuta dal pensatore Giovanni Locke’ [more or less every human suffers without exactly distinguishing the cause, and these are ineffable pains, which are not severe or defined, but which make us
feel in pain without giving us a local idea of pain, and that, however vaguely, nevertheless truly form our malaise, that uneasiness recognized by the thinker John Locke]. When he first introduces the concept of dolori innominati, Verri gives the example of bodily ailments, such as a fleeting headache or a faint internal pain, that, while causing a vague discomfort, are not debilitating. Soon, however, he clarifies that dolori innominati are not only physical in origin, but may also depend on ‘sensazioni morali mal conosciute’ [hard-to-define moral sensations].

Boredom, ennui, and melancholy, he explains, are all dolori innominati, or states of mind involving a generalized malaise or a condition of mental unrest that we cannot define. If Verri’s dolori innominati of a physical nature could be related to an emerging idea of the unconscious operations of the body, the dolori innominati of a moral nature take on a more psychological dimension. As Verri delves deeper into his analysis of human passions, it becomes clearer that one of his main objects of interest is precisely that internal flow of ideas, sensations, and memories which is never fully comprehensible, clear, or distinct.

Locke’s uneasiness, which Verri invokes, is a painful feeling of lack, or a desire for something that we do not have and whose possession could make us happy. This sense of dissatisfaction, according to Locke, is not a hindrance. Rather, it functions as a spur for us to act, or even as the main motive for action. In his book on the European crisis of consciousness, Paul Hazard placed Locke’s notion of uneasiness at the origins of a ‘psychology of inquietude’ that would distinguish the mentalité, or way of thinking, of the modern intellectual. Locke’s disciples, such as Condillac and Helvétius, Hazard argued, would ‘take up this theme and [...] push it to its ultimate conclusion’. By stressing the ambivalent role of desire, they transformed uneasiness into what would eventually find expression in the ‘yearning spirit’ of the Romantics. Their re-elaboration of the Lockean notion was a step forward in the development of a psychology of desire that would be much more complex than the mechanics of passions allowed.

Verri participates in this re-elaboration and gives uneasiness a central psychological role in his theory of the mind. Similar to Locke, Verri conceives of this feeling of malaise as a dynamic force, which pushes us to action or acts as a drive for us to seek something. With Condillac and Helvétius in mind, though, he complicates the notion by making uneasiness take the form of a specific kind of pain, which is weak in intensity and has no apparent cause. In certain respects, his appropriation of Locke’s concept is reminiscent of Leibniz’s reinterpretation, which transformed uneasiness into the more diffuse semi-pains, or demies douleurs, which are qualitatively and quantitatively different from the original Lockean concept. For Leibniz, uneasiness is experienced principally outside of our rational awareness. Verri comes quite close to Leibniz. In particular, he focusses both on the idea of a generalized sense of distress
and on the vague nature of these pains, which, he emphasizes, cannot be individuated by reflection. Ineffable pains, he explains, are ‘alcune affezioni dolorose sordamente, le quali fanno un mal essere in noi, senza che la riflessione nostra ne abbia analizzata e riconosciuta esattamente la cagione’ [some affections of dull pain, which create a malaise in us, without our reflection having analysed or recognized the exact cause].

Dolori innominati are not intense and clearly localized, but rather they are experienced as a diffuse discomfort or malaise. Whether in urging us to act, or, as we shall see, in predisposing us to enjoy the aesthetic experience, these pains are at work, we could say, just beneath the threshold of conscious perception.

Verri’s Memorie sincere offer an interesting piece of literary evidence that shows the author himself caught in an uncanny moment of self-opacity. The incident centres on a thick fog that overcomes him and forces him to stop as he is traveling on horseback. The fog metaphor is repeatedly used in the Discorso to convey the challenge of investigating the origins and nature of passions and to denote the fact that they are ultimately impervious to reason and shrouded in mystery. An ‘impenetrabile nebbia’ [impenetrable fog] surrounds feelings of physical pain and pleasure, while fear and hope, the two principles that move us, are barely discernible through ‘la nebbia sacra del nostro essere’ [the sacred fog of our being]. The anecdote, which is as simple as it is revelatory, is told in a letter from Dresden dated 20 December 1759. Seven months earlier Verri had enlisted as a volunteer in the Austrian Army and had left for Vienna to fight in the Seven Years’ War. The experience was a disappointing one and the letters up to this moment record a progressive disillusionment with war and military life. Now in Dresden, Verri writes that he has been stationed in the city for the past month after participating in the battle of Maxen, in which the Austrians defeated the Prussian troops. More than three-quarters of the letter is devoted to the minute facts of his daily life and to the beauty of the place. Towards the end, though, Verri mentions the tensions between the local population and the Austrians and explains that, despite his attempts to act civilly towards the Saxons, he has often had to endure ‘l’odio nazionale’ [the native hatred]. As an example of the hostility encountered, he tells of having been abandoned in the midst of a thick fog by a local farmer:

Una mattina singolarmente voleva prima del giorno essere al quartiere del Sig. Maresciallo per unirmi alla marcia. Posto tutto in ordine vedo una nebbia così densa che non ho veduto cosa simile; figuratevi che stando a cavallo non vedeva il terreno in nessuna guisa. I fuochi dell’Armata mi facevano come una aurora all’orizzonte senza distinguergli quantunque fossero vicini. Ho regalato, pregato, accarezizzato il villano, perché mi guissasse, egli mi ha condotto pochi passi fuori di casa poi ho avuto bello chiamarlo, promettergli nuovi regali
On a certain morning I wanted to be at the Marshall’s quarters before daylight to join the march. After preparing myself, I see a fog so thick the likes of which I have never seen. Just imagine, on horseback I could not see the ground at all. The fires of the Army seemed like the light of dawn on the horizon, but I could not distinguish them even if they were close by. I tipped, beseeched, and flattered the farmer, so that he would guide me. He led me a few steps beyond the doorway, but then however much I called him and promised him more money, I was left isolated, hearing the voices of my servants but unable to distinguish them. I would have needed a compass to avoid bumping into the house with my horse. I had to wait immobile on horseback for the sun to rise and only then did the fog lift, like the fog of Moses in Egypt. But my letter is too long. Hugs, etc.

The descriptive intensity of the passage and its almost aphoristic quality point to the symbolic significance of the episode. Verri describes himself engulfed in a dense fog, which makes it impossible for him to distinguish the landscape that surrounds him. Left to his own devices by those who are supposed to help him, and deprived of any external points of reference that may help him make sense of where he is, he is seized by a sort of *horror vacui* that paralyses him. He remains immobile on his horse until sunrise, when the fog lifts. One would expect a few words of comment, but the letter is abruptly brought to a close immediately after the conclusion of the anecdote and the reader is left with the sense of something unsaid, of an unresolved tension related to an inner unease.

In his analysis of Verri’s autobiographical writing, Bartolo Anglani recognizes the emblematic value of the episode and wonders whether it may indicate a weakening of reason faced with the madness of the world. Anglani leaves the question unanswered but notices how this letter is immediately followed by another, written thirteen days later, in which Verri announces his decision to leave the battlefield and the military life for good. According to Anglani, the incident in the fog foreshadows Verri’s return to his initial position of historical Pyrrhonism after the parenthesis of the war. Anglani is right to suggest a connection between the two moments, even if he does not offer a proper explanation of their relationship. As I see it, the fog episode discloses its full meaning only when it is juxtaposed with Verri’s announcement, which is communicated abruptly halfway through the following letter, dated 2 January 1760: ‘Io adunque domani ho destinato di partire e verosimilmente darò
un addio per sempre a questo mestiere che [...] è un mestiere da dispe-
ratoto’ [So tomorrow I decided to leave and probably I will say farewell
forever to this career which [...] is a career for desperate men].65 What
surfaces here points back to the unsaid in the previous episode. The
initial sense of disorientation that Verri experiences in the midst of the
fog coincides with the loss of the objective world, as Anglani seems to
suggest, but the paralysis is the result of a horror vacui turned inward.
Unable to read himself, the subject is powerless to move or to act. Either
an inner conflict or contradictory thoughts block him. The fog, then,
becomes a metaphor of Verri’s confrontation with unconscious feelings
and thoughts – that is, with those opaque mental processes that will
culminate in his decision to abandon the army. The fog in this episode is
but another instantiation of that figurative fog which, in the Discorso,
is associated with the self and with internal processes that Verri repeatedly
declares to be unable to explain fully.

The dolori innominati, however, are not only the cypher of an inner
obscurity. Verri explains that they are also the source of all aesthetic
pleasures, or ‘i piaceri più delicati della vita’ [the most delicate pleasures
in life].66 They are the reason why human beings enjoy the fine arts and
why they derive pleasure both from engaging with them and from practic-
ing them. Verri explains how ‘non solamente ogni piacere che
risvegliano le scienze e le belle arti nasca dai dolori principalmente innominati, ma
dai dolori nasca ogni spinta a conoscerci, a coltivarle, a ridurle a perfezi-
one’ [not only are all pleasures awakened by the sciences and fine arts
born from principally ineffable pains, but every drive to know them,
cultivate them, and perfect them is born from pain].67 Verri associates
dolori innominati, some irreducible core of the self that is ever in pain,
with inner emotional and physiological elements that draw us towards
the work of art and that make aesthetic pleasure possible. If we are sad,
for example, ‘la melodia d’un bel concerto’ [the melody of a beautiful
concert] will release us from the ‘dolore innominato da cui nasceva la tristezza’
[ineffable pain from which that sadness was born] and lead us
to feel pleasure. Suffering, then, or what Verri calls ‘un modo di esistere
doloroso’ [a way of existing in pain] is the precondition to aesthetic en-
joyment.68 Thus the aesthetic experience presupposes an inclination of
the subject to pleasure – an uneasy pain that stirs us to seek relief – and
the presence of something within the object that can soothe our painful
uneasiness. In other words, Verri identifies a disposition of the human
psyche that is fundamental to aesthetic responsiveness and establishes a
correlation between mental states and art. This is why he is especially
interested in ways of responding to and engaging with a work of art
that do not rely exclusively on the intellect. He emphasizes, for instance,
the role of the imagination in shaping and intensifying the effects of the
aesthetic experience, and pays particular attention to imaginative asso-
ciations, thanks to which the subject can not only add to the object of
aesthetic contemplation, but also establish direct correspondences with
his own mental states. Hence, rather than focussing on the question of taste or on the issue of aesthetic judgement, which were central concerns to eighteenth-century aesthetics, Verri turns to the psychology of the aesthetic experience.

The mere presentation of the object of art, thus, is not enough to elicit an aesthetic response. The first requisite is that the subject be in a state of discomfort, prey to one of the many dolori innominati that can vex us. Second, the subject should be willing to engage with the object through the imagination. One specific experience analysed in the Discorso is particularly indicative of Verri’s approach. Verri describes his reactions when looking at a painting of the Roman commander Atilius Regulus:

I felt an extremely vivid pleasure in admiring for the first time a painting that represented the departure of Atilius Regulus from Rome. The hero stands in the middle, wearing a toga and a laticlave. The ancient facial features express a placid and firm virtue, but as I reflected, it seemed to me that he was forcefully repressing a profound pain. [...] a daughter covers her face with her father’s hand as if to kiss it and, grasping it between her own tender hands, she hides her tears and her desperation. [...] The entire painting conforms exactly to custom, and inspires majesty, greatness, and sentiment. The pleasure that I felt was not brief. I felt moved as if by a tragedy. I produced the illusion that the subjects existed. I imagined their feelings and words in action. Sadness, compassion, respect, admiration, stupor were the various affects that shook my mind one after the other.

As Stefano Ferrari has pointed out in his analysis of this passage, Verri’s description is much more than a traditional ekphrasis, inasmuch as it is a complex critical reflection on the purposes and effects of the artistic object. Ferrari highlights how, in describing the painting, Verri places the emphasis not so much on the painter’s use of hypotyposis, but rather
on how the painting relies for its effect on the active involvement of the spectator’s imagination. With hypotyposis, the vividness of imitation blurs the line separating the real from the reproduction. According to Ferrari, though, Verri’s intention is to convey how the painting appeals to the emotional imagination. Thanks to the imagination, the observer can not only grasp but also ‘interiorize’ those aspects of reality, such as feelings and words, that cannot be represented directly in a painting.73

More precisely, I think that Verri pushes the limits of conventional ekphrasis by giving a thorough account of his psychological reactions to the work of art. He focusses on the mental impression that the painting has on him and carefully records each phase of his emotional response, starting with the intuition of Atilius Regulus’s profound pain. He draws attention both to the deception of illusion, whereby he experiences the portrayed action as reality, and to the work of the imagination, whereby he conjures up feelings and words that contribute to the realism of the scene. This process moves him so intensely that he feels both the very emotions experienced by the characters on the canvas and those elicited by their tragedy. In part, the free play of the imagination is possible, as Contarini suggests, because of what is left ‘unsaid’ in the painting. The rhetoric of reticence, which is symbolized by Regulus’s daughter covering her face with her father’s hand, invites the viewer to engage with the painting by filling the gaps in the visual narrative.74 But as Contarini notices, the intense response is possible because the scene depicted on the canvas stirs the memory of a past experience in the observer’s mind.75 Faced by the work of art, Verri describes himself as experiencing a re-awakening of vague memories stored away in his mind, but which are not present to him. The moment of aesthetic appreciation, then, which is neither fully natural nor fully mechanistic, is defined as a powerful experience that gives rise to the awareness of something else in oneself, something ungraspable and never directly accessible. Something that is only available through free association and the encounter with the movingly beautiful.

The analysis of aesthetic phenomena gives Verri the opportunity to examine once again psychological and physical responses whose sources the rational self cannot locate. The eighteenth-century discourse of aesthetic experience, an experience that Verri connects with the self’s pained core, is a fundamental step in re-thinking not only the perceptions of pleasure and pain, but also the very notion of human subjectivity. As is the case with aesthetics, Verri’s account of the thinking- and feeling-self leads him to confront issues that are central to the emergence of new categories of individuality: the position of the self in history, the relationship between will and corporality, and a new concern with memory. In the Discorso, there is a revealing disjunction between method, object of study, and concrete results. While Verri endorses a rational approach to the study of the mechanisms of the mind, his analysis shows that neither
can passions be reduced to a mathematical formula nor can they be entirely penetrated by reason. The enquiry ultimately evidences layers of the mind and of feeling that remain hidden and that nonetheless have the power to influence moods, thoughts, and even one’s disposition to the aesthetic experience. In coming to terms with the powers and limits of the rational mind, Verri finds himself dealing with a philosophical problem that he had not anticipated – that of making sense of the obscure components and phenomena of mental life, which twentieth-century theories of the mind would conceptualize as the unconscious. Verri’s investigation finds its limit in the opaqueness and ineffability of these processes, but it is able to bring to the fore their fundamental importance. The painful state or malaise that pushes us towards pleasure remains indefinable and ungraspable, but is recognized as a powerful drive – a form of energy that drives us even though it continuously eludes us.

Notes


2 Kant’s reading of Verri’s Discorso marked a turning point in his philosophical thought and influenced the way in which he understood both the concept of happiness and the relationship between nature and history. See Susan Meld Shell, ‘Kant’s “True Economy of Human Nature”: Rousseau, Count Verri, and the Problem of Happiness’, in Essays on Kant’s Anthropology, ed. by Brian Jacobs and Patrick Kain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 194–229.

3 Verri, Discorso, p. 53.

4 Ibid., p. 55.

5 Ibid., p. 54.

6 See ibid., p. 68.

7 See Contarini’s note in ibid., p. 68, n. 14.


10 See Verri, Discorso, p. 67, where Verri quickly reviews and dismisses as imprecise the definitions of pleasure given by Descartes, Christian Wolff, Johann Georg Sulzer, and Maupertuis. For Verri, pleasure is not an awareness (Descartes) or a feeling (Wolff) of perfection, nor is it an activity of the soul dependent on the faculty of desire (Sulzer). Maupertuis’s definition, that pleasure is what we would rather experience than not, is also set aside as redundant.


Locke distinguishes different types of remembrance (reminiscence), depending on the degree of involvement of the mind. Some, such as recollection, contemplation, and study, are fully intentional, others, such as reverie, are more passive activities of the mind, but not entirely so. See ibid., pp. 214–215 (2.19.3).

Verri, Discorso, p. 98.

In May 1759, Verri left Lombardy to serve in the Seven Years’ War as an officer of the Austrian Army. Before leaving for the war, he had a relationship with Barbara Corbelli d’Adda, who died in August 1759 while he was away. He talks about his grief both in the letters to his friend Ilario Corte and in those to his uncle, in which understandably he is much more sober.


The Memorie sincere are a collection of letters without addressee in which Verri recounts his experiences as an officer during the Seven Years’ War and his experience as a public servant in Milan in the years immediately after the war. Based on Verri’s actual correspondence with his uncle, the letters were almost certainly re-elaborated fifteen years after the episodes they narrate. Many have noticed their distinct literary quality and novel-like traits, especially as far as the section on the war experience is concerned. For the text of the Memorie, I have used the critical edition produced for the national edition of Verri’s works: Pietro Verri, Memorie sincere del modo col quale servii nel militare e dei miei primi progressi nel servigio politico (ca. 1764–1775), in Scritti di argomento familiare e autobiografico, ed. by Gennaro Barbarisi (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003), pp. 1–156. On the Memorie...

36 Verri, Memorie sincere, p. 95.

37 The Encyclopédie specifies that ‘machinal’ refers to what the ‘machine’ performs without any intervention of the will. See Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc., ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Autumn 2017 Edition), http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/, s.v. ‘machinal’ [21 November 2018].

38 See Contarini’s note in Verri, Discorso, p. 148, n. 214. Among Verri’s few friends on the front was in fact the Welsh army officer Henry Lloyd. Both the Introduction and the Essais philosophiques sur les gouvernements (ca. 1766), another of Lloyd’s works, were important for Verri’s elaboration of a theory of pleasure as release from pain.


40 Ibid., pp. 98–99.

41 Ibid., p. 98.


43 On automatism in the thought of Rousseau, see Masano Yamashita, ‘Rousseau and “The Mechanical Life”’, in Rousseau between Nature and Culture: Philosophy, Literature, and Culture, ed. by Anne Deneyes-Tunney and Yves Charles Zarka (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), pp. 67–81. Yamashita, who has paid particular attention to Rousseau’s reflection on mechanical behaviours, argues that for him ‘the analysis of the mechanical holds the key to self-knowledge’ (p. 79). Yamashita also observes that Rousseau’s interests in automatisms show him to have anticipated in some respects Freud.

44 Verri, Discorso, p. 95.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., pp. 95–96.

47 Locke, Essay, p. 302 (2.27.9).

48 See Gottfried W. Leibniz, ‘Principes de la nature et de la grâce, fondés en raison’, in Id., Principes de la nature et de la grâce, fondés en raison; Principes de la philosophie ou Monadologie, ed. by André Robinet (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), pp. 25–65 (pp. 35 and 37): ‘Ainsi il est bon de faire distinction entre la PERCEPTION qui est l’état interieur de la Monade représentant les choses externes; et l’APPERCEPTION, qui est la CONSCIENCE ou la connaissance reflexive de cet état interieur’ [Thus it is good to distinguish between perception, which is the internal state of the monad representing external things, and apperception, which is consciousness, or the reflective knowledge of this internal state]. English translation in Leibniz, Philosophical Essays, ed. and transl. by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), p. 208.


50 See Nicholls and Liebscher, ‘Introduction: Thinking the Unconscious’, pp. 7 and 20.

51 See, for instance, Alfred Schutz’s account of small perceptions in ‘Choice and the Social Sciences’, in Collected Papers V. Phenomenology and the
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Social Sciences, ed. by Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), pp. 75–92 (pp. 81–83).

52 Verri, Discorso, p. 107.
53 Ibid., p. 114.
54 See ibid., p. 106.
55 See Locke, Essay, p. 217 (2.20.6): ‘The uneasiness a man finds in himself upon the absence of anything, whose present enjoyment carries the idea of delight with it, is that we call desire, which is greater or less, as that uneasiness is more or less vehement. Where, by the by, it may perhaps be of some use to remark, that the chief if not only spur to human industry and action, is uneasiness’.
57 See Verri, Discorso, p. 112.
58 Leibniz believes that pleasure is a ‘continual victory’ over demies douleurs: ‘Et dans le fonds sans ces demies douleurs il n’y auriot point de plaisir, et il n’y auroit pas moyen de s’appercevoir, que quelque chose nous aide et nous soulage, en otant quelques obstacles qui nous empechent de nous mettre à notre aise’ (Leibniz, Nouveaux essais, p. 165 [In fact, without these semi-sufferings there would be no pleasure at all, nor any way of being aware, that something is helping and relieving us by removing obstacles which stand between us and our ease], Leibniz, New Essays on Human Understanding, p. 165).
59 Verri, Discorso, p. 115.
60 Verri, Discorso, pp. 104 and 148.
61 After less than a month on the battlefield, in a letter dated 2 August 1759, Verri writes that instead of finding conviviality and camaraderie on the front, he was confronted with human sorrow. See Verri, Memorie sincere, p. 37.
62 Ibid., p. 80.
63 Ibid.
64 Anglani, ‘L’uomo non si muta’, p. 131.
65 Verri, Memorie sincere, p. 83.
66 Verri, Discorso, p. 108.
67 Ibid., pp. 113–114.
68 Ibid., p. 108.
69 See ibid., p. 108. While Verri recognizes that the civilized man is more inclined to be affected by the work of art, he also admits here that anyone just barely capable of enthusiasm will be able to use the imagination to add to the work of art.
71 Verri, Discorso, pp. 110–111.
72 Ferrari, Ut pictura philosophia’, p. 279.
73 See ibid., p. 289.
74 Contarini, ‘Figure della reticenza’, pp. 149–151.
75 Ibid., p. 143.