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**Construction and Disruption: an Analysis of the
Thematic Contribution of Extraordinary Children and
Animals in the Works by Paola Masino and Anna
Maria Ortese.**

by

Elisabetta Tondello

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Italian

University of Warwick, Department of Italian

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Dedico questa tesi ai miei
splendidi e coraggiosi
genitori che hanno saputo
sempre capire e sostenere le
mie scelte e la mia
propensione al sogno, al
viaggio e alla scoperta
dell'Altro.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

This thesis sets out to examine the thematic function of extraordinary children and animals (characters who possess a metamorphic nature, magical traits or supernatural powers) in the works of two Italian women writers of the twentieth century, Paola Masino and Anna Maria Ortese. Drawing on a range of theoretical and critical works (on the literary representation of childhood and the animal world, on women writers, on the fantastic), I argue that these characters, thanks to their Otherness, have both a constructive as well as disruptive function. On the one hand, they enable the authors to construct and develop themes, arguments, statements of poetics and references to other works and, on the other hand, they allow them to ‘disrupt’, challenge and unmask a society trapped in its *perbenismo* and dehumanising rules and ideals. Carrying out a literary reading in a historical context, the thesis explores thematic areas, such as the victimisation of weaker beings, the portrayal of a reality not perceivable by the senses, the conflicting relationship between mankind and nature and the hidden truths of modern society. The thesis will also highlight how these characters contribute to the building of a thick web of intertextual references, unconscious or voluntary echoes to other literary and artistic works, as well as of the folkloric tradition. Despite a rediscovery of Masino’s writing, previous critical studies have not focused on the representation of childhood or the animal world. The more consistent critical apparatus on Ortese’s oeuvre has also not looked at the contribution of extraordinary children and animals as a category, examining them individually and in isolation. This thesis is the first study to look at the two authors’ extraordinary children and animals as an instrumental cohort of characters to build on themes, convey criticism and create a dialogical dimension with other works.

Chapter 1

Masino and Ortese uncovered

Introduction

Introduction

This first chapter aims to serve as a framework to facilitate access to the content of my analysis and explain the approaches adopted and the conclusions drawn. Given its introductory function, it is shorter than the four chapters following which develop the discussion. The chapter is divided into four main sections: subject of research, method of analysis, historical contextualisation and literary contextualisation. The first section offers an explanation for the topic of my thesis and the reasons for the selection of the texts. The second presents the approaches adopted for my study and considers how the methodology used is reflected in the structure and content of the thesis. The third section provides a historical perspective for the authors, with a consideration of their social context and relevant biographical information. Finally, the fourth section will present a literary review of the works consulted for the analysis. An explanation of what contribution my study hopes to make to scholarly research and literary criticism closes this chapter.

1.1 Unravelling the title: construction, disruption, characters and works

As the title of this thesis suggests, the aim of my research is to analyse the thematic function of extraordinary children and animals in the works of two Italian women writers of the twentieth century, Paola Masino and Anna Maria Ortese. This opening section examines and gives an explanation of the various elements of the title of the thesis in order to better clarify the subject and explain the reasons for my choice.

My interest in the literature of twentieth-century women writers, on the one hand, and in fantastic, magical-realist fiction, on the other, have brought me to the narrative worlds of Masino and Ortese. While reading some of their works for pleasure, I noticed the very marked presence of child and animal characters. On closer investigation, I realised that only some of the creatures portrayed were recognisably realistic ones, while many others possessed a metamorphic nature, magical traits or supernatural powers. This stimulated my curiosity so I decided to discover why such figures recur so often in the works of these authors, and to explore the extraordinary nature and function of these figures. The aim of my research, therefore, became to study the function and meaning that Masino and Ortese attach to their extraordinary children and animals, and to highlight the contribution that these characters make to the development of themes and perspectives.

As a first step, it is important to define more precisely the type of character which caught my attention and spurred me to a wider investigation into the authors' predilection for them. As I have said, the characters are children and animals with rather uncommon traits: they have supernatural powers, such as the ability to fly or to not grow old; they are metamorphic and, in other cases, visionary; some of them have an angelic mien, others appear similar to dwarves or elves, some are reversions of folkloric characters like the *monaciello* of Neapolitan tradition. Finding an 'umbrella' term to cover all these beings proved no easy task for, whatever term I chose, a loss or an excess of meaning was implied. Among possible terms, I considered 'fantastic', 'supernatural', 'unrealistic', 'non-mimetic'. Some of these, 'non-mimetic' or 'unrealistic', for example, would easily have taken me down the road to endless ontological discussion, outside the scope of my thesis, while others such as 'fantastic' or 'supernatural', would have hinted at a specific literary genre,

when a definition of Masino's and Ortese's works is itself a controversial issue. I opted, therefore, for the more general term 'extraordinary' as I believe this choice, without too much side-tracking, succeeds in highlighting the fact that these figures possess certain characteristics that readers do not recognise in their daily lives and which do not correspond to the general concept of 'child' or 'animal'. Occasionally, the analysis will take in ordinary, everyday children and animals when their contribution is as essential as that of their extraordinary counterparts to the development of an argument.

The study of these extraordinary characters led me to realise that Masino and Ortese deliberately chose to depict such figures because, thanks to the element of Otherness they introduce, they allowed the authors to structure their content, develop themes and programmatic issues much better than they would have been able to do with ordinary children and animals only. The extraordinary traits are thus a sort of 'added value' which gave the authors a further element to play with, to make their discourse sharper and stronger. I have identified four main thematic areas in which the contribution of extraordinary children and animals is particularly evident. These correspond to the four main chapters of my thesis (Chapter 2-5).

Before giving an overview of the content of each of the four chapters, I would like to mention the works I have selected and on which my analysis will be focused. I decided to concentrate on narrative work only, excluding both poetry and journalistic writing. The selection of the narrative works followed very straightforward criteria: the presence and particularly important contribution of extraordinary children and animals. For Masino I have chosen: *Monte Ignoso* (1931),¹ *Periferia* (1933),²

¹ Paola Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 1994).

² Paola Masino, *Periferia*, 2nd edn (Milan: Bompiani, 1933). This novel does not have extraordinary characters, but, with only children as protagonists, is key to my analysis.

Racconto Grosso e altri (1941),³ *Nascita e morte della massaia* (1945)⁴ and *Colloquio di notte: racconti* (1994).⁵ For Ortese: *Angelici dolori e altri racconti* (1937),⁶ *Il monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma* (published in magazines for the first time, respectively in 1940 and 1941/1942),⁷ ‘La casa del gatto’ (1942),⁸ *L’infanta sepolta* (1950),⁹ *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (1953),¹⁰ *In sonno e in veglia* (1987),¹¹ *L’Iguana* (1965),¹² *Il cardillo addolorato* (1993)¹³ and *Alonso e i visionari* (1996).¹⁴

1.1.1 An overview of the four chapters

The first thematic area, to be explored in Chapter 2, is the victimisation of children and animals. In this chapter I will also include ordinary children and animals as they contribute to the development of this particular theme as much as extraordinary ones. The term ‘victimisation’ is used to refer to any form of physical or psychological violence or abuse that any weaker being (children and animals, here) is subjected to by mankind in general, specific individuals, modern society or fate. I believe Ortese’s definition of *male* coincides with my definition of victimisation as in the following quotation we could easily replace the word *male* with *vittimizzazione*:

Il male è prima di tutto il dolore che infliggiamo a un altro – all’*altro*
bestia, bambino, vecchio, malato, straniero, povero –, sicuri che debba
e possa accettarlo solo perché noi possiamo, tramite il suo dolore,

³ Paola Masino, *Racconto grosso e altri* (Milan: Bompiani, 1941).

⁴ Paola Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, 2nd edn (Milan: Bompiani, 1970). I will concentrate mainly on the first part of this novel, when the Massaia is still a child, and a rather extraordinary one. I will then analyse different aspects of the novel (nature, landscape), but not the role of women which is beyond the scope of my analysis.

⁵ Paola Masino, *Colloquio di notte: racconti*, ed. by Maria Vittoria Vittori (Palermo: La Luna, 1994).

⁶ Anna Maria Ortese, *Angelici dolori e altri racconti* (Milan: Adelphi, 2006).

⁷ Anna Maria Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma* (Milan: Adelphi, 2001).

⁸ Anna Maria Ortese, ‘La casa del gatto’, *Domus: le arti nella casa*, 175 (1942), 1-3.

⁹ Anna Maria Ortese, *L’infanta sepolta* (Milan: Adelphi, 2000).

¹⁰ Anna Maria Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, 9th edn (Milan: Adelphi, 2005). This collection of short stories does not have extraordinary children and animal characters, but the key presence of ordinary children qualifies it for inclusion in my analysis.

¹¹ Anna Maria Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, 4th edn (Milan: Adelphi, 2007).

¹² Anna Maria Ortese, *L’Iguana*, 7th edn (Milan: Adelphi, 2003).

¹³ Anna Maria Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, 5th edn (Milan: Adelphi, 2003).

¹⁴ Anna Maria Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari* (Milan: Adelphi, 1996).

sentirci più liberi, più viventi, felici e sicuri della nostra vita. (*Corpo celeste*, p. 129)

The chapter will also consider Masino's and Ortese's representation of different forms of victimisation such as child labour, which I will also discuss from a historical perspective since this is a painful page in late nineteenth-century and the first half of twentieth-century Italian history. I will then analyse different representations of psychological or physical abuse, which occur in the domestic environment. These include violence within the home, a painful form of rejection by parental figures and an excursus into infanticide, which Masino sees as a positive act. I shall also study two specific types of victims: the victims of distorted and oppressive social conventions who suffer from the rigidity, hypocrisy or discriminatory nature of the society of the time and the victims of a tragic, fatal destiny which condemns extraordinary children to a premature death. Finally, I shall consider the consequences of victimisation which are often identifiable in precocious growth, disability and illness.

Chapter 3 looks in detail at those themes or programmatic choices for which the extraordinary nature of children and animals plays a vital role: it is the chapter where I will look closely at aspects of magic, the supernatural and the fantastic. Here, Ortese's poetics will be explored in detail. In particular, I will draw a parallel with the American Transcendentalists¹⁵ with regard to the relationship between reality and imagination and that between sight and belief. I will also look at her concept of sight

¹⁵ Ortese was a passionate reader of British and American literature and often mentions the New England Transcendentalists (such as, Ralph, Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson) among her favourite authors. See Ortese, *Corpo Celeste* (Milan: Adelphi, 1997), pp. 26-27: 'America! Mi sembrò a volte di essere nata laggiù, aver vissuto laggiù una vita, cento, duecento anni fa: a Boston o in qualche altra illustre città. Così come amo l'America, di un amore antico, senza barriere, amo altri luoghi della medesima lingua; la Gran Bretagna specialmente. [...] L'America, la mia America, quella lingua, quella grandezza e severità, la patria di Hawthorne e Melville, di Poe e altri figli della luce, non vidi mai'.

comparing it to the Leopardian *doppia vista*.¹⁶ I shall then analyse how Ortese's extraordinary children and animals permit explicit intertextual links, conscious or unconscious literary echoes, and novel re-interpretations of themes and elements from the literary tradition. Finally, I will focus on Masino's representation of reality and extraordinary children and animals. I will explore the intertextual dimension of her short story 'Famiglia' and show how particular types of extraordinary children, identified as the divine, the visionary and the unborn child, become powerful instruments for an exploration of universal themes, such as the brutality and absurdity of war, the unavailability of destiny, madness, the ineluctable law of procreation and the reconciliation of essence and form. This part will focus mainly on Masino.

In Chapter 4 I shall discuss how extraordinary characters contribute to the complex depiction the two authors present of nature and of the turbulent relationship between nature and mankind. Firstly, I will analyse the representation of metamorphic children and their animal-child nature. Subsequently, I shall study the two different views of nature presented by the two authors: Ortese's view of a friendly, defenceless natural world mistreated by mankind and Masino's view of nature as a destructive, ancestral and inevitable force rich in symbolic meanings. Finally, I shall look at the natural landscapes where extraordinary characters live and act; in particular, I will analyse the interior, surrealist, industrial, fairy-tale and colonial landscape.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the final thematic area I have identified, which is more prominent in Masino than in Ortese. I will show how, through children and animals,

¹⁶ Leopardi was also one of Ortese's favourite authors. See Luca Clerici, ed., 'Per Anna Maria Ortese', *Il Giannone: semestrale di cultura e letteratura*, 7-8 (2006), p. 41: 'Ho letto solo i *Promessi Sposi* e tutte le opere del Leopardi, fra le quali preferisco lo *Zibaldone*...'

the authors expose the hypocrisy of the society of their times, subjecting it to harsh criticism and ridicule. By including ordinary children once again in my analysis, as in Chapter 2, I intend to show the authors' uncovering of the reality behind the mask of the traditional middle class *famiglia per bene* exposing violence, abuse, indifference, betrayal, lack of communication and the hardship of motherhood. I go on to explore the world of games, an area rich in suggestion and developments, to demonstrate the authors' belief that children do not live in a happy world of their own, but are affected by adults and their behaviour. I will show how Masino and Ortese defy the romantic view of childhood as the age of innocence and purity, portraying children who can be ambiguous and even evil beings. The world of games will also give me the opportunity to reveal another form of childhood present in Masino's works, which is that of adults who behave, think and play like children. I will then move on to discuss the authors' mockery of social conventions amongst the upper classes and, finally, their attack on the *superuomo dannunziano*, ridiculed and replaced by weak, absent, childish or even mad male models.

To go back to the terms 'construction' and 'disruption' used in the title, my analysis of the four thematic areas outlined above will show the constructive role of extraordinary children and animals in expressing views on poetics and in dealing with themes at the heart of the authors' thoughts. At the same time, the deconstructive or disruptive role the children play in the unmasking of a society made up of hypocrisy, violence and abuse will be highlighted.

It is also important to mention that my analysis will not be focused purely on themes, but also on two other specific aspects of the narrative. In the first place, the language and the linguistic strategies used to give substance to extraordinary characters and make them tangible and easy to visualise for the reader; secondly, the

discourse with authors and artists of the past and of the present. Furthermore, throughout the thesis, I shall also refer to the depiction of children and animals made by another twentieth-century Italian woman writer, Elsa Morante.¹⁷ The reason I chose to include comparisons with Morante's works, characters and views on a regular basis, is the fact that her poetics as well as her way of representing children and animals is at times strikingly similar to that of the two authors. Morante, their contemporary, was acquainted with both Ortese and Masino.¹⁸ It might be argued that I could have given Morante the same space in the thesis. My choice was dictated by the following reasons: to start with, the extraordinary dimension in Morante is not as extensive as it is in Masino and Ortese. In addition, as I will show in the third section of this chapter, Morante's representation of children and animals has already been widely studied and therefore, while a comparison with Ortese and Masino could have added a new perspective to the research on Morante, a further analysis of children and animals in her oeuvre would have been redundant. In the interest of consistency with the works chosen from Masino and Ortese, as far as Morante is concerned, I shall take her prose only into consideration, particularly the collection of short stories *Lo scialle andaluso* (1963),¹⁹ the novels *La Storia* (1974)²⁰ and, to a lesser extent, *L'isola di Arturo* (1957)²¹ and *Aracoeli* (1982).²²

¹⁷ Another important link, initially contemplated, was that with Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*. There would have been, in fact, several common points: an extraordinary child protagonist, extraordinary animals and landscapes, a political message. Eventually, I decided upon Morante given her personal relations with Ortese and Masino. Furthermore, Morante's work offered a vast corpus of study on her representation of children and animals which were useful and, in some cases, applicable to the study of similar characters in the works by the two authors being discussed.

¹⁸ See section 1.3 below for further details.

¹⁹ Elsa Morante, *Lo scialle andaluso*, 6th edn (Turin: Einaudi, 1994).

²⁰ Elsa Morante, 'La Storia', *Opere*, ed. by Carlo Cecchi and Cesare Garboli, vol. II, pp. 261-1031 (Milan: Mondadori, 1990).

²¹ Elsa Morante, *L'isola di Arturo*, 12th edn (Turin: Einaudi, 1995).

²² Elsa Morante, *Aracoeli* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982).

1.2 Method of analysis: from characters to themes

The structure of my thesis reflects my approach to the research topic: exploring the themes and arguments favoured by the two authors through the analysis of the extraordinary children and animals represented. I started my investigation from the characters, and proceeded from the micro to the macro. First of all, I scanned Masino's and Ortese's production isolating extraordinary characters; then, I studied each single one of these animals and children looking for recurrent and common traits, patterns of behaviour, powers, destiny. In this particular phase of my analysis, I found a work by Reinhard Khun entitled *Corruption in Paradise: the Child in Western Literature*²³ very useful. Here, Khun analyses the representation of children in Western literature by dividing them into different categories such as, among others, the enigmatic child, the menacing child and the redemptive child. I found this approach suitable for the initial stages of my character analysis during which, following Khun's example, I tried to group the extraordinary children and animals depicted by Masino and Ortese into categories. Some of the groups I identified were victimised children-animals, metamorphic children-animals, children with supernatural powers, visionary children, and divine children. This taxonomic approach proved very helpful in the identification of features and traits which then led to the pinpointing of themes. However, I immediately realised that it was also rather reductive as it did not take into account overlapping between categories and their nuances. This is why I decided not to refer to the categories systematically across the thesis. On the basis of the features of the various categories, I then identified the themes and topoi they had a role in, reconstructing the full picture of

²³ Reinhard Clifford Kuhn, *Corruption in Paradise: the Child in Western Literature* (Hanover; London: published for Brown University Press by University Press of New England, 1982).

the contribution that extraordinary children and animals make to our understanding of the two writers' poetics and views.

1.2.1 The choice of a literary reading

My analysis of these extraordinary children and animals, and of related themes, was carried out from a literary perspective which also takes into account the historical context of the authors' time. I looked at each figure and theme within a wider literary scenario highlighting the links between the two writers and other authors, movements and artists, contextualising specific aspects, issues and themes within the historical background. I deliberately chose not to use a psychoanalytical perspective in the analysis of the characters as I believe, that, despite its being a useful and pertinent approach, it would have over-shadowed and relegated into the background two aspects of Masino's and Ortese's production which I wanted to highlight: the web of references and the relationship the authors have with their times. I should, however, stress the valuable importance of a future psychoanalytical study of the contribution of extraordinary children and animals in Masino and Ortese, which could be based on my work in terms of the characters and thematic areas I have identified. I believe Masino's works, considerably understudied compared to Ortese's, would particularly benefit from this kind of reading which could include such aspects as that of the theme of the double in 'Figlio',²⁴ madness in *Monte Ignoso*, the psychoanalytical interpretation of *Periferia*'s children and the grotesque but painful images of childish adults.

Despite my reading being a literary one, I have looked at characters and themes outside the boundaries of literary genres, once again a deliberate choice. While some of Masino's and Ortese's works are clearly realistic fiction, others, where

²⁴ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 109-145.

extraordinary characters are prominent, are extremely hard to categorise and seem to fluctuate among genres. Monica Farnetti presents Ortese's fiction as an example of what she defines 'female fantastic'.²⁵ However, according to Amaryll Beatrice Chanady's definition of magic realism reported in Maggie Ann Bowers' *Magic(al) realism*,²⁶ it is clear that Ortese's non realistic works also match this reading:

In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist.²⁷

Likewise, Masino's style has been defined as *novecentista, surrealista, fantastico*. So is Ortese's non-realistic fiction an example of female fantastic or of magical realism? Does it belong to another genre? Is Masino a surrealist or a fantastic writer? Does she mix different genres in a sort of pastiche? For the purposes of this study, which is mostly concerned with themes and characters, a discussion on genre would take me off in a completely different direction.²⁸ However, more in-depth research

²⁵ Monica Farnetti, 'Anxiety-Free: Rereadings of the Freudian "Uncanny"', in Francesca Billiani and Gigliola Sulis, eds., *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic. Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions* (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), pp. 46-56.

²⁶ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).

If we interpret Ortese's mode of representation as magical realism rather than female fantastic, it is important to stress that her magical realism is different from that of her friend Massimo Bontempelli. In fact, he intends to seek 'the mysterious and fantastic quality of reality' (Bowers, p. 13) and through literature he wishes to create a collective consciousness by 'opening new mythical and magical perspectives on reality' (Bowers, p. 14). Ortese's magical realism is closer to the Latin American stream of *lo real maravilloso*, introduced by the Cuban Alejo Carpentier in the 1940s, which flourished with late twentieth-century writers such as the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez and the Chilean Isabel Allende. In their works, magic is an integral part of reality, the supernatural element is assumed to really occur or exist, there being no extraordinariness about it. In her words 'the ordinariness of magical realism's magic relies on its accepted and unquestioned position in tangible and material reality' (Bowers, p. 24).

²⁷ Bowers, p. 26.

²⁸ The choice of not entering into a discussion of genre for both Masino's and Ortese's 'non realistic fiction' was an informed and considered decision. When foregrounding preparation for my thesis, in fact, I became familiar with several major scholarly works on the fantastic as a genre: Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1975); Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

concentrating on the contribution of Masino's and Ortese's extraordinary children and animals to the definition (or lack of definition) of genre, would be of great interest. A few studies have been carried out into the determining role played by Ortesian extraordinary characters in shaping the fluctuating genre of the author's non realistic works. This is particularly the case for Estrellita in *L'Iguana* and the other metamorphic children and animals of the trilogy.²⁹ However, in this respect, very little has been written on Masino. This is an area which needs addressing and that presents a white canvas for a comparison between the two authors.

1.3 Historical contextualisation

The objective of this section of the introductory chapter is not to give a detailed biographical account of Masino's and Ortese's lives, nor present and comment on historical events. What I wish to do here is to contextualise the two authors in their time, to see how they related to the society and historical moment in which they lived and to explore their relationship with each other in a more discursive way. I believe it is important to stress the fact that the two authors were not only contemporaries but also that they knew each other very well, which, despite their extremely different personalities, could account for some common points in their thought or work. It is, in fact, Massimo Bontempelli, Masino's partner of a life-time, who helped Ortese

Press, 1981); Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1988); Remo Ceserani and others, *La narrazione fantastica* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1983) and on the fantastic genre in Italy Monica Farnetti, *L'irruzione del vedere nel pensare: saggi sul fantastico* (Pisano di Prato: Campanotto, 1997). In 2009 I also reviewed the collection of essays *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic*. See: Elisabetta Tondello, *Review: The Italian Gothic and Fantastic. Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions*, ed. by Francesca Billiani and Gigliola Sulis (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), *Modern Language Review*, 104 (2009), 888-889.

²⁹ Good examples are: Daniela La Penna, 'An Inquiry into Modality and Genre: Reconsidering *L'Iguana* by Anna Maria Ortese' in *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic*, pp. 160-187 and Ferdinando Amigoni, 'I rottami del niente: il fantastico nell'opera di Anna Maria Ortese', *Strumenti Critici: rivista quadrimestrale di cultura e critica letteraria*, 17 (2002), 207-237.

publish her first collection of short stories *Angelici dolori* in 1937.³⁰ The two women first met at the Fiera del Libro in Rome in 1937³¹ and then started an intense exchange of correspondence. Ortese was a regular visitor at the Masino-Bontempelli residence, particularly in Venice in 1939. In her letters to her parents Masino described Ortese as a rather difficult guest, full of obsessions, fears and unconventional habits.³² Masino and Ortese had, in fact, completely different personalities: Ortese was reserved, fearsome, mistrustful, introverted.³³ Masino, on

³⁰ See Luca Clerici, *Apparizione e visione: vita e opere di Anna Maria Ortese* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 76-77: “Accolsi con grande sollievo – sebbene fossi sorpresa, e mi paresse di rubare – la proposta di uno scrittore italiano, Massimo Bontempelli, che era succeduto al primo direttore nella guida del giornale, di pubblicare tutti insieme, in volume, i miei primi racconti. La cosa si realizzò immediatamente.” [...] la lettera di accompagnamento del dattiloscritto che Bontempelli spedisce a Valentino Bompiani è datata 18 novembre 1936. “Caro Valentino, ecco (a parte) il volume della Ortese: l’ho ritoccato tutto discretissimamente (come vedrai) per non togliere il fascino dello stile naturale, anche dove la sintassi è molto rischiosa. Farò dare un premio al libro in aprile (ho già fatto la domanda io, presentandolo dattiloscritto)”.

³¹ See Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 81: “ho conosciuto Paola Masino a Roma, in occasione della Fiera del Libro, nel ’37”. [...] D’acchito, ad Anna Maria la Masino non piace: “io non avevo tanta simpatia per Lei, Lei m’incuteva soggezione, mi sembrava una persona elegante e scettica, anzi per questo – si ricorda? – mi ostinai tanto ad assicurarle, in quel sabato, che ero cattiva”. Ortese soon changed her mind after visiting Bontempelli and Masino at their residence in Rome. See also Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 82: “ieri, l’ho vista ad un tratto così buona e semplice, ho sentito che Lei mi vuole bene, e Le voglio anch’io un bene grandissimo. Quando io dico così, Lei può essere sicura che è vero. Se Lei vuole, io sono ora per Lei come una più piccola sorella. Lei è contenta? Credo di sì”.

³² See Paola Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri: autobiografia di una figlia del secolo*, ed. by Maria Vittoria Vittori (Milan: Rusconi, 1995), p. 84: ‘In fondo sono perfino contenta di avere qui la Ortese perché in quei rari momenti che la vedo mi sorprende sempre con le sue stranezze. Non fa che dormire, ha una paura morbosa di ogni rumore, la notte ci obbliga a stare alzati fino alle 3 o alle 4 perché se non ci sente muovere e non vede la luce attraverso la sua porta è presa da un terrore così gagliardo che cade in una specie di catalessi: le poche ore che le rimangono libere dal sonno e dagli incubi le passa al bagno. Da otto giorni che è qui non ha ancora detto che questo: che vuol trovarsi un impiego; e non siamo riusciti che a trascinarla una volta fino in piazza S. Marco dove però si è rifiutata di guardare il palazzo ducale perché dice che non la interessa’. See also Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, p. 86: ‘Oggi ho un gran sonno perché per non fare morire di paura l’Ortese ho dovuto rimanere alzata fino alle 4 a suonarle dischi perché non poteva addormentarsi per paura dei morti: e alle 6 Massimo di ritorno da Milano mi ha svegliata’. See also Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 102: ‘E vedeste qui, quello che combina. Lava tutte le sue cose in bagno, poi si fa mandare giù i ferri e stira: stira in terra, sul vetro, nei luoghi più impensati, viene a tavola con le mollette in testa; non vuol già più fare il bagno perché dice che le fa fatica, si porta via il mangiare da tavola e lo finisce sul divano che mi riempie di briciole. Anche Massimo che è disposto a trovare ogni disordine e ogni sporcizia piena di poesia, ha ammesso oggi che questo è lo spirito napoletano e che contro lo spirito napoletano è impossibile combattere’.

³³ Masino remembered having Ortese as a guest in Rome in 1961. See Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, pp. 367-368: ‘La prima volta che la invitai a pranzo non mangiò nulla, perché trovava ogni piatto incomprensibile, estraneo. Poi si fece portare al ristorante da un amico, dicendo che noi l’avevamo affamata: prese un piatto e andò a sedersi per terra, per non stare con gli altri’.

the other hand, the opposite: a fashionable lady, yet unique in her style,³⁴ who enjoyed her social life to the full³⁵ and befriended the most famous artists and intellectuals of the time.³⁶ The degree of mutual influence in their works remains unexplored.³⁷ However, both of these women do possess a similar visionary quality and in my thesis I will explore the thematic and stylistic aspects they have in common, starting from the use they make of extraordinary children and animals to deal with their favourite themes. Their friendship came to an end in 1975 and Ortese was regretfully aware it was probably her fault.³⁸

³⁴ See Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, pp. 34-35: ‘Quando mi venne l’idea di farmi una collana d’edera dovevamo essere in bolletta nera. Certo andai a strappare qualche tralcio da qualche cancellata di giardino per abbellire un certo abito di moire verde bottiglia che mia mamma m’aveva mandato in dono (sempre modello Serafina). [...] L’edera lavata e lucidata con un panno di lana ci stava benissimo: sembrava fatta dello stesso moire. Andammo all’ambasciata. Mi guardavano tutti, un po’ sorpresi, dignitosamente sott’occhi. Ma Bottai – era la prima volta che lo vedevo – forte della sua autorità di ministro, mi disse: “Che coraggio, a portare una collana di tal fatta”. E io: “Perché? Le altre donne non portano pietre al collo? Pietre o foglie non son tutti prodotti della natura? E noti che spesso le pietre son false e son sempre più pesanti delle foglie che son sempre leggere e sempre vere”. See also Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, p. 90: ‘Oh, ieri m’è venuta una voglia e sono andata dalla modista e mi sono fatta fare un cappello a modo mio. Torno, lo dico a Massimo e gli dico: “Indovina com’è”, e lui: “Largo con le piume di struzzo!”. Proprio così! La sera me lo sono messo per andare al concerto (bellissimo, bellissimo), di Furtwängler e tutto il teatro veniva in fila sotto il palco a guardarmi. Agli uomini piaceva molto, ma le donne mi chiamavano D’Artagnan, Aramis, Athos e mi beffeggiavano perché crepavano d’invidia’.

³⁵ *Io, Massimo e gli altri* gives an outstanding portrait of Masino’s social life. In her letters to her parents here collected, she reported, in a lively, informal, gossip-like form, the plays, operas, shows she saw, the dinner parties she attended and the people she met. Here is an example, see Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, pp. 74-75: ‘Domani sera torno a sentire *Antonio e Cleopatra* di Malipiero e mercoledì *I racconti di Hoffmann* di Offenbach e l’*Aida* diretta da De Sabata. Con il quale De Sabata ho fatto conoscenza e quasi amicizia e mi pare un uomo intelligente. Finalmente uno!’.

³⁶ *Io, Massimo e gli altri* gives a very comprehensive, although not exhaustive, picture of the intellectual and artistic scene Masino surrounded herself with. Amongst the most famous people she was acquainted or friends with I could mention: Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Emil Ludwig, De Pisis, Marino Marini, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Cesare Zavattini, Corrado Alvaro, Enrico Falqui, Maria Bellonci, Giordano Bruno, Giulietta Masino and many other critics, artists and writers.

³⁷ The two read each other’s works and although each appreciated the other’s talent, they were also critical of each other. See Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 82: ‘Nonostante questi calorosi attestati di simpatia umana, Anna Maria mantiene una notevole indipendenza di giudizio: quando la Masino le fa avere *Monte Ignoso* e *Periferia*, la risposta è schietta: “certe Sue cose, in letteratura, mi allontanano da Lei: ma l’ammiro sempre. E poi Lei, come donna, mi è cara”. See also Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 463: ‘Conosco la Masino da moltissimi anni, e le devo qualche volta – poiché mi telefona e si interessa, spesso attivamente, ai miei problemi e difficoltà – delle informazioni cortesi. Ma non di più – rispetto al mio lavoro – perché di questo lavoro, in tantissimi anni, non mi ha mai detto una parola sola, che non sia, e di rado, un cauto “ottima” o “brava”; dette, anche queste tristezze – sono tristezze, per uno scrittore, – a stento’.

³⁸ See Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 93: ‘E mi dispiace di essere stata io, con il mio cattivo carattere, la causa di questa divisione; e dopo, tentai inutilmente una pacificazione. Lei non volle più, e credo di aver meritato il suo distacco’. See also Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 463: ‘La sua

As I mentioned in the previous section, Masino's and Ortese's thematic and chronological proximity to Elsa Morante meant that Morante became a valuable term of comparison in my study. Ortese and the Morante/Moravia couple knew each other but their relationship did not get off to a good start.³⁹ With time, however, each of the two women came to acknowledge the other's artistic genius.⁴⁰ Although I have not been able to find a source to confirm that Masino and Morante were acquainted, it is a fairly safe assumption that they were, since Masino knew Moravia, Morante's husband; in 1944 Masino and Bontempelli founded together with Moravia, Savinio, Maselli, Bellonci and Piovene the weekly magazine '*Città*'.

Ortese's life was almost constantly marked by financial problems, solitude and peregrinations. She voluntarily isolated herself from her society, in which she

versione la Masino l'ha raccontata a Natalia Aspesi: "non le parlo più da molti anni, perché la sola volta che le ho chiesto aiuto, in una situazione di grande dolore per me, non me l'ha dato".

³⁹ See Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 153: 'i rapporti di Anna Maria con la Morante e con Moravia non erano buoni. Di loro la Ortese non ha mai parlato volentieri. "È per via di Moravia, non di Elsa" sostiene Goffredo Fofi. "Una volta, a casa di non so chi, a Roma, Moravia non si ricordava il nome. Ma sì, quella là, quella poveretta che si lamenta sempre, quella che ha scritto...come si intitola...quel libro su Napoli... diceva riferendosi a lei, con sufficienza. Come a una morta di fame. Anna Maria se l'è legata al dito. Quando me l'ha raccontato era indignata. Si era fissata che Moravia la odiasse. Io non penso che lui l'avesse fatto apposta. Il punto è che negli anni Cinquanta Anna si sentiva esclusa dalla borghesia intellettuale romana, quella appunto di Moravia, de Martino e tanti altri che pranzavano in trattoria, dove scrittori, artisti e intellettuali si incontravano a discutere. Senza di lei".

⁴⁰ See Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 166: 'Ho incontrato Elsa una volta sola, appunto nella sua giovinezza [...] Non sapevo che dietro quella fronte ancora tanto liscia e calma abitava il genio, il genio più alto di tutti i tempi italiani della donna. I suoi libri sono i più grandi, tra i libri scritti da una donna italiana in qualsiasi tempo. [...] Belli perché sono i libri della storia del mondo – la storia senza date – sono la storia del mondo senza aste e nome'. See also Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 167: 'Siamo nel 1965: per Elsa l'*Iguana* è un capolavoro, nonostante qualche riserva sul finale'. See also Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 385: 'Sul problematico finale dell'*Iguana*, sulla necessità di rivedere la versione edita nel 1965, la Ortese tornerà diverse volte: "e poi [vorrei] rimettere finalmente a posto il racconto l'*Iguana*, e restituirgli il suo vero finale, non com'è adesso, un qualcosa di compromesso" dichiara come in altre occasioni nel 1979. E aggiunge: "la Morante è una delle poche persone che si era accorta di questo stridore". Besides the numerous thematic and stylistic points of contact which I will outline in my thesis, I think it is worth mentioning that Ortese and Morante also shared a love for Katherine Mansfield. The New Zealand writer had been one of Ortese's favourite authors from her youth; according to Cecchi and Sapegno, Ortese's leaning towards a reinterpretation of reality fantastically is based on a strong literary rigour which distinguishes her from the tradition of women writers and makes her comparable to Mansfield. Ortese mentioned Mansfield among her favourite writers more than once (see Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 64 and p. 560). Morante, also an admirer of Mansfield's writings, translated Mansfield's short stories and *Journal*, see Emilio Cecchi and Natalino Sapegno, 'Il Novecento' in *Storia della letteratura italiana*, vol. IX (Milan: Garzanti, 1969), p. 605.

seemed to feel scared and disoriented as she herself declared when she underlined her ‘evidentissima inutilità [...] di fronte alla vita pratica, alla civiltà moderna’.⁴¹ Masino, in comparison, surrounded herself with the greatest names of the intellectual élite. She met Pirandello in 1924 when, accompanied by her father, she asked him to stage her first work, the play *Le tre Marie*.⁴² This marked the beginning of a close friendship which lasted until Pirandello’s death.⁴³ The scandal arising from her relationship with a married, older, separated man, Massimo Bontempelli, forced Masino to move to Paris (1929-1930). Here she could live her love more openly and

⁴¹ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 29. Ortese wrote these words in the short story ‘Pellerossa’ when talking about her childhood fantasies and games with her brother Manuele, brought to an end by his departure (and metaphorically the end of his childhood). She refers to her: ‘evidentissima inutilità [...] di fronte alla vita pratica, alla civiltà moderna’ due to a tendency to evade reality by escaping into fantasy. This was an attitude which she would maintain in adult life, and which made her feel even more scared and lonely. In her paper “‘Nella cella del mio pensiero’ Neera: leggere, scrivere e il potere estraniante della fantasia’ presented at the conference *Borders and Boundaries: Italian Women Writers of the 19th, 20th and 21st century*, which took place on March 21st and 22nd 2011 at the University of St Andrews, Dr Olivia Santovetti looked at the isolating and evasive power and meaning of imagination for Italian woman writer Neera (1846-1918). In particular Dr Santovetti cited a section of Neera’s *Confessioni*, which I found very close to Ortese’s sentence quoted above. See: Neera, *Neera*, ed. by Benedetto Croce, (Milan: Garzanti, 1943), p. 888: ‘Il pensiero, l’immaginazione erano tali gioie per me, mi assorbivano, mi astraevano così completamente, mi rendevano così inetta alle realtà della vita, che molte volte dovetti passare per stupida – con assoluta indifferenza da parte mia’.

⁴² See Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, p. 24-25: ‘Babbo mi presentò a Pirandello dicendo: “Scusi professore, mia figlia vorrebbe parlarle”. Pirandello si volse verso di me. [...] Io, forte delle due passate esperienze, tralasciai ogni preambolo e attaccai subito: “Ho scritto un dramma: *Le tre Marie*. Sono tre donne ecc. ecc.”. [...] Quand’ebbi finito di parlare, lui disse: “Sei coraggiosa”, poi sfilò il copione da sotto il braccio, lo prese, lo tenne tra le due mani: “Se tu avessi saputo scrivere quello che mi hai raccontato saresti un genio. Ma son sicuro che non hai saputo scriverlo. È già molto che tu l’abbia pensato. E io voglio dimostrarti di essere coraggioso almeno quanto te. Lo leggo e, se non ci sono troppi errori teatrali, te lo faccio rappresentare”. [...] *Ho visto la gioia*. E mai più ho provato una sensazione fisica così trasumanata della felicità’.

⁴³ See Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, p. 59: ‘Solo molto più tardi svelammo, uno all’altra, il nostro pensiero: che in fondo eravamo responsabili della morte di Pirandello, avendolo lasciato solo, lui che ci considerava fratelli, in un momento per lui assai grave: il primo inverno in cui Marta Abba sarebbe rimasta in America a recitare *Tovarich*. “Se fossimo stati a Roma, se gli fossimo stati vicini, non l’avremmo lasciato morire” dissi qualche tempo dopo a suo figlio Stefano. [...] Che lui fosse morto stava diventando per noi una nostra colpa e non potevamo sentirne parlare; evitavamo di nominarlo o ne parlavamo al presente, come fosse ancora vivo’. On the first anniversary of Pirandello’s death, Masino dreamt of having a conversation with him in which the author invited her to follow him and recommended not tell anyone about their dialogue as they would think it was a dream. However, she did tell Massimo and Pirandello’s son about the dream; a year later Pirandello reappeared to her. See Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, p. 64: ‘Disse: “Non sei venuta, e hai raccontato quel che ti avevo detto. Non mi vedrai mai più”. Si dissolse. E, da allora, non l’ho mai più sognato.’

the two never separated until his death in 1960.⁴⁴ During her stay in Paris, Masino expanded her circle to include the greatest names in Italian and European art, two of whom were Giorgio de Chirico and Alberto Savinio, who were also her close friends and, I would add, an influence on her work.⁴⁵ Masino was clearly an unconventional woman for her day: the unmarried partner of a separated man, independent and strong-minded and of vast culture who questioned the condition of contemporary woman in *Nascita e morte della massaia*. The work was written in her Venice years, during Bontempelli's voluntary exile, when she felt oppressed by household chores and the idea of being a proper housewife. The novel was not however simply conceived from personal circumstances; it was also a reaction to the model of woman being enforced by Fascist propaganda. As regards Masino's relationship with the regime, it is worth mentioning that the years of her greatest production were those of Fascism, during which she shaped her particular style and poetics. Fascist critics disliked *Periferia* so much, that Mussolini congratulated Leandro Gellona's harsh criticism of the novel in *La provincia di Vercelli*, defining the book 'condannevole'.⁴⁶ After that, Masino would remain under the Regime's watchful eye. Fascist critics attacked, in particular, the sense of defeatism and the barrenness of her

⁴⁴ See Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, p. 31: 'Quando me ne andai di casa con le poche cose che poterono darmi (e molti erano vestiti vecchi di mia sorella e di quella nostra amica Silvia, ormai già riccamente sposata) non mi posi problemi né di caldo né di freddo, né di giorno né di sera; c'era in me una saggezza che nasceva dalla scelta più ardua che ero stata chiamata a fare in così giovane età. Abbandonare la casa paterna dove tutto era stato innocenza e reciproco affetto, per una vita irregolare, con un uomo sposato, contro la volontà e il giudizio di tutti, in una incomprensione ostile, nutrita solo da una fede cieca nel "nostro" amore. Non mi sono sbagliata. Non potevo sbagliare. Ma era ugualmente molto difficile resistere imperterrita alla massiccia opposizione degli altri'.

⁴⁵ See Francesca Bernardini Napoletano and Marinella Mascia Galateria, eds., *Paola Masino*, Scrittrici e intellettuali del Novecento (Milan: Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, 2001), p. 100: Masino met the de Chirico brothers for the first time when, in 1922, still a teenager, the de Chiricos moved into her flat in Via degli Appennini. She then met the two brothers in Paris, where they became close friends. The contact with de Chirico and Savinio was of great importance to Paola, not only in terms of friendship, but also in the artistic sense. In the years 1929 and 1930, de Chirico sketched Paola twice with Indian ink on paper.

⁴⁶ Leandro Gellona, 'Da un romanzo sballato e premiato ai vari angoli morti letterari', *Provincia di Vercelli*, 29 August 1933.

prose. In 1938 her relationship with the regime started to crack, the second publication of 'Fame' in the periodical *Le grandi firme* brought about the closure of the magazine upon Mussolini's orders. In the same year, Bontempelli was suspended from all literary activity and forced to leave Rome. Censorship for Masino was particularly strict in the publication of *Nascita e morte della massaia*, in *Tempo* in 1942: references to Italy, to the nation and the Church were prohibited. On the eve of its appearance in book form, every copy was lost in the bombing of the Milanese printer Bompiani, where the book was stored, and when it was finally published in 1945, it did not have the scandalous impact it would have had in the Fascist period. Enthusiastic about the Republic and the reconstruction years, Masino was somewhat close to the ideas of the Italian Communist Party, yet she remained at the edge of politics, believing in the importance of the intellectuals' civil commitment, but also in their independence of political parties. Given her views on industrialisation and capitalism, which I will explore in the thesis, Ortese has always been considered a writer *di sinistra*, because she initially showed a certain enthusiasm for Communist ideology. However, soon disillusioned by Communism, as we can see from the first quotation below, her being *di sinistra* became more of a personal apolitical utopian ideology than an adherence to a specific political movement or party, as seen from the second quotation:

Anzitutto, la "sinistra" *non amava l'intelligenza*.⁴⁷ Almeno tanti anni fa. Mi riferisco ovviamente alla "sinistra" di un solo paese⁴⁸...[...]
Poi, quasi improvvisamente, non fu più così. Anche quella sinistra – la sinistra stessa del mondo – si comportò, verso la natura e l'uomo

⁴⁷ I will explore Ortese's definition of *intelligenza* later in the thesis, suffice it to say for now that she sees it as a negative human prerogative which is used as a tool to victimise nature and weaker beings on the basis of the presumed superiority of mankind over other creatures.

⁴⁸ Ortese visited Russia for her journalistic work and here she refers to the advent of Communism.

fanciullo, come la colpevole destra. Disse: “Basta piangere, adesso. Costruiamo l’uomo”. E che l’uomo fosse fondato sul lavoro, invece che sulla intelligenza, per me non faceva grande differenza. Che si trattasse di dominare la natura con il lavoro o con l’intelligenza, per me non cambiava il dolore della dominazione – intendo dominazione della natura. Non volevo vedere l’uomo – lavoro o intelligenza – al centro della vita. Non volevo il suo predominio, la sua centralità nell’essere. (*Corpo celeste*, pp. 146-147)

Sono ancora e più grandemente a sinistra: ma dell’Antenato e del Bambino, intendendo per Bambini tutti i perduti alla *crescita* e all’*intelligenza*. Sono anzi all’*estrema* sinistra di tutti i *caduti* sotto i colpi dell’intelligenza. (*Corpo celeste*, p. 156)

After the war, Ortese joined the *PCI* until 1954 when the publication of her dossier on Russia brought her harsh criticism from her comrades.⁴⁹

What I wish to emphasise through this brief historical and biographical contextualisation is that, despite their two very different, almost opposing, personalities, Masino and Ortese were both at odds with their times. Masino challenged contemporary morals with her unconventional personal life, and the regime with her provocative works which, as I shall show, ridicule and mock society and institutions. Ortese, on the other hand, chose to withdraw from a world and a society she felt was alienating and fearful, voicing the suffering of the weakest in her writings. I believe it was precisely the conflict with their times, the discontent with

⁴⁹ See Antonio Motta, ‘Luca Clerici, Apparizione e visione, vita e opere di Anna Maria Ortese’, *Incroci, semestrale di letteratura e altre scritture*, <<http://www.addaeditore.it/incroci/Incroci%207/Estratti%20n.%207/Schede07.pdf>> [accessed 8/08/2011]. Here, Luca Clerici summarises Ortese’s political views in the following words: ‘In fondo, l’allontanamento dal partito altro non è che una delle tante tappe che portarono l’Ortese all’elaborazione della sua personalissima visione del mondo, apartitica ma anche apolitica, perché insieme radicalmente democratica e aristocraticamente utopica.’

the society and world in which they lived, together with their natural visionary quality, that led them to their unique experimentation and to the embracing of the exploration of the extraordinary.

1.4 Literary contextualisation

The following section is a review of key scholarly and critical works which proved most useful in the research for my thesis providing a stronger theoretical foundation on which I could base my own observations, and hence shape my argument in a clearer and more informed way. The discussion will be limited to a few key critical pieces in general areas of literary criticism, such as the literature of twentieth-century Italian women writers and the representation of animals and children in contemporary Italian literature, and also more specific critical works relating to Masino's, Ortese's and Morante's writings. As a matter of course, the range of literary criticism consulted was far greater than the summary selection of research areas and titles covered here and a complete list of the works consulted, together with references, is provided in the Bibliography.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as will be seen throughout the chapters, the extensive web of references and echoes present in Masino's and Ortese's narratives required that my readings go much further, beyond primary sources and critical, scholarly works. I was led to explore many literary works by authors of all ages, including Dante, Boccaccio, Leopardi, Pirandello, Villon, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Swift, Emerson, Hawthorne and García Márquez. The influences of and the references to the visual arts also encouraged me to take a closer look at leading artists: the Dutch painter Bosch, the Pre-Raphaelites, Fuseli and his representation of nightmare and metaphysical and surrealist artists (Giorgio

⁵⁰ See Bibliography p. 319.

de Chirico and Alberto Savinio, in particular). But it was not only the artistic and literary world which I needed to investigate: the historical contextualisation of certain themes, such as child labour or the ideal of the family during Fascism, led me to the consultation of socio-historical texts.

1.4.1 Women writers, children and animals

In the last forty or fifty years, fiction by women writers worldwide has received greater critical attention from scholars. Italy also witnessed a growing critical interest in women writers with the publication of a wide range of critical works and essays. This has often resulted in the rediscovery of many ‘forgotten’ authors, like Paola Masino herself, who, in the nineties, gained new appreciation and critical re-evaluation. This re-awakening of interest led also to the distinction between a ‘first generation’ of Italian women writers, operating in the nineteenth century, and a twentieth-century ‘second generation’ of *scrittrici*, more mature in their identity as writers and thus more open to experiment in their works. According to Maria Vittoria Vittori⁵¹ twentieth-century women writers:

hanno preso le distanze dalle loro madri dell’Ottocento (Percoto, Neera, Serao); sono in tutto e per tutto figlie del loro tempo inquieto e incerto; hanno letto e apprezzato Proust, Mansfield, Joyce, Woolf e le avanguardie; la loro sensibilità ha liquidato i residui del realismo ottocentesco.⁵²

The selection of authors Vittori presents, includes Paola Masino and Anna Maria Ortese.

⁵¹ Maria Vittoria Vittori, ‘Scrittrici del Novecento (1930-1990)’, in *Storia generale della letteratura italiana*, ed. by Nino Borsellino and Walter Pedullà (Milan: Motta, 1999), pp. 682-723.

⁵² Vittori, ‘Scrittrici del Novecento (1930-1990)’, p. 682. Not surprisingly, the full title of Masino’s autobiographical *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, edited by Vittori who put together a selection of letters and pages from Masino’s diaries, reads: *Io, Massimo e gli altri: autobiografia di una figlia del secolo*. The second part of the title seems to underline the link between Masino and her times, already explored in the previous section of this chapter.

A work on Italian women writers, which I found informative is Paola Blelloch's *Quel mondo dei guanti e delle stoffe: profili di scrittrici italiane del '900*,⁵³ which offers an overview of the leading Italian women writers of the twentieth century. Blelloch emphasises what she believes to be the main features of literature by women:

Leggendo molti romanzi scritti da donne nell'arco di un secolo ritroviamo temi ricorrenti e un rapporto diverso, più intimo e difficile, con la scrittura, elementi questi entrambi riconoscibili e perciò potremmo dire tipici della letteratura femminile. Queste caratteristiche provengono da archetipi femminili, da sentimenti cioè che sono esistiti nel subconscio della donna sempre e che risalgono a incertezze, ambiguità sommerse e mai, forse neppure ora, interamente esplorate. Fare la storia della letteratura femminile significa appunto riconoscere e definire questi temi come fili di un complesso tessuto, e mostrare che la nuova parola delle scrittrici rivela le forme primitive e i miti nati come soluzioni ad antichi conflitti. Per questa ragione queste voci di donne si ripetono come un'eco, tramandandosi un messaggio e svelando una verità che gli uomini finora hanno ignorato o interpretato imperfettamente.⁵⁴

Whether one shares Blelloch's view or not, throughout her discussion, the scholar points out what she believes to be the innovative power of female writing: they do not refrain from experimentation and introduce new themes and perspectives.⁵⁵ I

⁵³ Paola Blelloch, *Quel mondo dei guanti e delle stoffe: profili di scrittrici italiane del '900* (Verona: Essedue, 1987). Another book worth mentioning is Sharon Wood's *Italian Women's Writing, 1860-1994* (London: Athlone, 1995). It contains an entire chapter on Ortese: "Such stuff as dreams are made on": Anna Maria Ortese (born 1914) and the Art of the Real' (pp. 169-183). Here, besides outlining the different genres of Ortese's production, ranging from realistic texts to fantastic narratives, Wood repeatedly stresses the importance of the themes of childhood and metamorphoses employed by Ortese to convey her pessimistic view on modern, industrial and consumerist society.

⁵⁴ Blelloch, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁵ An example is the discussion of the theme of lesbianism: 'In conclusione le scrittrici italiane hanno anche in questo caso contribuito ad arricchire la letteratura con un tema scabroso e relativamente

believe that having touched on the importance of experimentation and new themes brought in by Italian women writers, Bletloch's overview lacks further references to Masino and Ortese who are hardly mentioned.

With regard to the relationship with the Other, with the fantastic and the supernatural, I should mention once again Farnetti's essay 'Anxiety-Free: Rereadings of the Freudian "Uncanny"'.⁵⁶ The scholar maintains that the genre which she calls 'female fantastic' is very different from the Freudian fantastic, where the encounter with the uncanny is a source of anxiety and discomfort. On the contrary, in female fantastic, the response of women to the Other, the strange, the unfamiliar is characterised by an attitude of openness, kindness, compassion, even affection and love. Female authors thus tend, claims Farnetti, to establish an empathetic rapport with strange creatures, characterised by friendship, recognition or even, in some cases, identification. Although, as mentioned above, I chose to avoid the discussion on genre, I do share Farnetti's ideas regarding a positive rapport between the female writer and Otherness, which does not cause fear or anxiety. For Ortese and Masino extraordinary children and animals are, in fact, together with the natural world and the weakest beings, the abused victims of modern society, whom Ortese loves and whose pain she wishes to voice. Furthermore, as I will explain in Chapter 3 below, Ortese believes in a reality with a magical, supernatural component which cannot be perceived immediately through the senses.

In the course of my research on the representation of the animal world in literature,⁵⁷ I came across a very interesting essay on animals in women's writings. It

nuovo; e l'hanno affrontato nei suoi aspetti più intimi, veri, spesso rivelatori dell'epoca presente'. See Bletloch, pp. 117-118.

⁵⁶ Farnetti, 'Anxiety-Free: Rereadings of the Freudian "Uncanny"', pp. 46-56.

⁵⁷ Amongst the works I consulted on the representation of the animal world in literature, it is worth mentioning: Irving Massey, *The Gaping Pig: Literature and Metamorphosis* (Berkeley; London:

is included in a volume exploring the relationship between women and animals from a sociological and feminist perspective. In this essay, entitled ‘The Power of Otherness: Animals in Women’s Fiction’,⁵⁸ Marian Scholtmeijer sees the victimisation of women as an extension of the more easily identifiable victimisation of animals. The author draws a parallel between the Otherness of women from an androcentric perspective and the more radical Otherness of animals from an anthropocentric perspective. Writing about animals allows women to reach empowerment as, by depicting the victimisation of animals, they acknowledge their own and they establish a form of solidarity with other victims of androcentric culture.⁵⁹ I share the basic idea that animal victimisation in women’s writing is often an implicit way of talking about victimisation of women, and, in Ortese’s case, also that of all the weaker members of society from children, to the elderly, the poor, the natural world in general and extraordinary beings.

In the course of my research for critical material on the representation of children in Italian literature, I came across what I believe to be a gap in scholarly work. I believe this is due to the fact that, unlike what happens in literatures of other countries,⁶⁰ in Italian literature childhood has only recently begun to be explored as a

University of California Press, 1976), in which Massey establishes a set of approaches to the study of metamorphosis (scientific, philosophical, anthropological, religious, psychological, aesthetic) and analyses the phenomenon in several key works – including Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

⁵⁸ Marian Scholtmeijer, ‘The Power of Otherness: Animals in Women’s Fiction’, in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, ed. by Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 231-262.

⁵⁹ Scholtmeijer believes that women writers denounce the treatment of animals in their fiction in three ways: by representing them as victims, by showing their empathy and identification and finally with their vision of communities of animals and humans. The first two representations are present in Masino and Ortese.

⁶⁰ Amongst publications on literature in the English language, which I found useful, it is worth mentioning: Peter Coveney, *Poor Monkey: the Child in Literature* (London: Rockliff, 1957) and Roni Natov, *The Poetics of Childhood* (New York: Routledge, 2003). These two works present overviews of the depiction of the child in literature, with particular attention to the meaning of childhood for William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lewis Carroll and Charles Dickens.

theme. The best critical analysis of children so far is, in my opinion, *Tracce d'infanzia nella letteratura italiana fra Ottocento e Novecento*,⁶¹ a collection of essays edited by Wanda De Nunzio-Schilardi, Ada Neiger and Graziella Pagliano. In the introduction, the editors themselves stress the fact that the theme has not been thoroughly dealt with and they underline the need for further research on a topic which could reveal important dimensions. In *Tracce d'infanzia*, the authors focus on the main child characters portrayed by different writers between the nineteenth and the twentieth century starting with Leopardi's childhood memories in *Zibaldone*.⁶² This comprehensive overview of characters and writers has allowed me to compare and contrast Masino's and Ortese's representation of children with that of other nineteenth and twentieth-century writers and to reflect on childhood as treated both by the two authors and in the wider literary context. For my analysis of Masino's and Ortese's children and animals, I found Neiger's 'L'immagine dell'infanzia nel Verga maggiore'⁶³ particularly interesting in terms of the way Neiger organised her material. The essay looks at children in Verga's works thematically, covering topics such as clothing, food, physical aspect, behaviour, games, illnesses, birth, death, punishments and family relations. I found this a particularly effective approach, very similar to the structure I adopted on a macro-thematic scale for my own thesis. Another interesting essay is Pagliano's 'Bimbe e bimbi della scrittura femminile',⁶⁴

A very different approach, which I explained in the previous section, is used by Kuhn in his *Corruption in Paradise: the Child in Western Literature*.

⁶¹ Wanda De Nunzio-Schilardi, Ada Neiger and Graziella Pagliano, eds., *Tracce d'infanzia nella letteratura italiana fra Ottocento e Novecento* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2000).

⁶² The great absentee in the analysis of *Tracce d'infanzia* is undoubtedly Giovanni Pascoli with his *poetica del fanciullino*, which is probably the most extensively studied aspect of childhood in Italian literature and most probably, for this reason, omitted by the editors.

⁶³ Ada Neiger, 'L'immagine dell'infanzia nel Verga maggiore' in De Nunzio-Schilardi, Neiger and Pagliano, eds., *Tracce d'infanzia nella letteratura italiana fra Ottocento e Novecento*, pp. 29-47.

⁶⁴ Graziella Pagliano, 'Bimbe e bimbi della scrittura femminile' in De Nunzio-Schilardi, Neiger and Pagliano, eds., *Tracce d'infanzia nella letteratura italiana fra Ottocento e Novecento*, pp. 85-124.

in which Pagliano considers the children depicted by the principal Italian female writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What emerges from this picture is a dominant presence of children in autobiographical and personal memories and Pagliano herself stresses that the child figures created by twentieth-century Italian women writers rotate particularly around the theme of recovery of the past and discovery of personal identity. Masino is not mentioned by Pagliano while Ortese is, but only within a biographical consideration in *Poveri e Semplici*. Pagliano herself hopes for further study of children in twentieth-century literature. This confirms the gap that my thesis aims to fill: to show how two twentieth-century *scrittrici* dealt with the theme outside an autobiographical dimension, launching it, instead, into another dimension.

1.4.2 Paola Masino: rediscovery and critical apparatus

Paola Masino is one of the female literary figures whose work was underestimated and neglected for a long time. I intend in this section not only to pinpoint the critical works I found most useful for my research, but also to briefly outline the process of rediscovery of Masino as an author. A brief attempt to rehabilitate her work and incorporate it into the literary canon was made with the second publication, in 1970, of *Nascita e morte della massaia* by Bompiani, which was reissued in 1982 by La Tartaruga. However, it is only in the mid-nineties that the rediscovery of the author and her works gained momentum. The year 1994 saw the publication of *Colloquio di notte*, a collection of short stories edited by Vittori. In 1995, Vittori also edited and published *Io, Massimo e gli altri: autobiografia di una figlia del secolo*, an autobiography including letters sent mainly to her parents and to her sister as well as extracts of her diary (or rather a sort of Zibaldone – since it does not record daily events, but ideas, images, projects, memories) selected and put together by Vittori

herself. An outstanding portrait emerges, not only of a woman writer but also of an original, unconventional, ironic and sociable member of the intellectual and literary life of the time. It could be argued that the image conveyed has been created through a careful editing of information by Vittori. Nonetheless, I believe this book has allowed me to better ‘connect’ with the author, whose works I have been studying.

In 1997, the Paola Masino Archive, carefully set up first by the writer herself, and after her death, carried on by her nephew, Alvisè Memmo, was donated to the Archivio del Novecento of La Sapienza University in Rome. Masino stored and classified the documents concerning her creative, but also her social life, including manuscripts, drafts, articles, reviews, administrative material, private correspondence and photographs.⁶⁵ My visits to the archive were extremely useful as they allowed me to penetrate the writer’s personality and private life. The rearrangement and further cataloguing of the archive led to the organisation of a conference and an exhibition of photographs and documents in May 2001 and to the publication, in the same year, of the exhibition catalogue,⁶⁶ full of bibliographical and biographical information as well as photos and documents. The year 2004 saw the publishing of another work devoted to Paola Masino’s oeuvre, *Il mito e l’allegoria nella narrativa di Paola Masino*⁶⁷ by Louise Rozier, which I shall often refer to in my thesis. Rozier explores all the central issues in each of Masino’s narrative works, however, with the exception of *Periferia*, closely following the theme of the representation of childhood and the animal world. Essays and published articles on Masino are few

⁶⁵ The cataloguing process also led to the publication in 2004 of an extremely detailed inventory of the material stored in the Archivio di Paola Masino. Francesca Bernardini Napoletano, ed., *L’Archivio di Paola Masino: inventario* (Rome: Casa Editrice Università La Sapienza, 2004).

⁶⁶ See note 45. Interesting biographical information can also be found in Beatrice Manetti’s *Una carriera à rebours: I quaderni d’appunti di Paola Masino* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2001), in which she outlines the content and meaning of the notebooks written by Paola Masino from 1929 to 1975 as a sort of Zibaldone.

⁶⁷ Louise Rozier, *Il mito e l’allegoria nella narrativa di Paola Masino* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

and far between. Three key essays I will often quote from in my study are Fulvia Airoidi Namer's 'La terra e la discesa: l'immaginario di Paola Masino',⁶⁸ Tristana Rorandelli 'Nascita e morte della massaia di Paola Masino e la questione del corpo materno nel fascismo'⁶⁹ and Flora Maria Ghezzeo's 'Fiamme e follia, ovvero la morte della madre arcaica in *Monte Ignoso* di Paola Masino'.⁷⁰ In her article, Airoidi Namer analyses the imaginary used by Masino in her three novels, thus contributing to our understanding of the deeper, symbolic stance of many images, such as those of the elements. Rorandelli, on the other hand, explores the theme of maternity in *Nascita e morte della massaia*, with reference to the socialisation and mechanisation of the female body carried out by Fascist propaganda which saw women as machines for the production of children. Finally, Ghezzeo devotes her analysis to *Monte Ignoso* and explains the main themes, including an interesting distinction between male and female folly and comments on the intricate symbolism of the novel.

1.4.3 Anna Maria Ortese: review of the critical apparatus

Literary criticism concerning Anna Maria Ortese's production is much more abundant and accessible. Here I will only mention the critical works I considered of particular interest for my research. In terms of getting to know Ortese as a person and as an author, her heritage, memories and contacts, I found Luca Clerici's volume *Apparizione e visione – Vita e opere di Anna Maria Ortese*,⁷¹ extremely informative

⁶⁸ Fulvia Airoidi Namer, 'La terra e la discesa: l'immaginario di Paola Masino', *Otto/Novecento*, 24 (2000), 161-86.

⁶⁹ Tristana Rorandelli, 'Nascita e morte della massaia di Paola Masino e la questione del corpo materno nel fascismo', *Forum Italicum*, 37 (2003), 70-102.

⁷⁰ Flora Maria Ghezzeo, 'Fiamme e follia, ovvero la morte della madre arcaica in *Monte Ignoso* di Paola Masino', *Esperienze Letterarie*, 3 (2003), 33-56.

⁷¹ See note 30. Another relevant publication for more about the woman and writer is: Francesco De Nicola and Pier Antonio Zannoni, eds., *Convegno di studi su Anna Maria Ortese: Rapallo, sabato 16 maggio 1998* (Genoa: Sagep, 1999), a collection of essays which also gives an insight into Ortese as a writer and as a person. I found of particular interest the sections on her relationship with the publishing industry (Mirella Serri's 'L'artista come ladro. La moderna inattualità di Anna Maria Ortese', pp. 31-35) and with Paola Masino (Marinella Mascia Galateria's 'Anna Maria Ortese

and exhaustive with insights into the author's complex personality and her contacts including her friendship with the Masino-Bontempelli couple. The interviews given by Ortese, collected in 'Per Anna Maria Ortese', the edition of *Il Giannone*⁷² dedicated to the author, have also given me precious information on her private life and ideas. Besides interviews, *Il Giannone* also includes scholarly essays and reviews as well as short stories by the author herself.

In terms of scholarly research on the representation of children and animals in Ortese's works, I found several articles and essays which looked at Ortese's depiction of either ordinary or metamorphic children and animals from different perspectives and angles.⁷³ However, I believe there is a substantial lack of cohesive and coherent analysis of the many roles covered by children and animals in Ortese, and it is this which my thesis aims to provide. The main role of Ortese's metamorphic creatures (universally agreed upon by scholars) is to denounce the rupture between mankind and nature and to criticise a society where animals and children are innocent victims of humanity. As Inge Lanslots in her 'Le creature zoppicanti di Anna Maria Ortese'⁷⁴ states, metamorphic creatures, who, upon appearances would seem to be monsters, are, in actual fact, victims of the 'real monster'— man, who has lost touch with nature. As for Ortese's poetics and views on society and nature, I found Sharon Wood's essay 'Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural

epistolografa', pp. 49-66). Also on Ortese, 1998 saw the publication of Monica Farnetti, *Anna Maria Ortese* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), a short thematic guide to Ortese consisting of several entries in alphabetical order which relate to different aspects of the author's works and life. Although handy for consultation, its very conciseness makes it relatively limited in its relevance to my own research.

⁷² See note 16.

⁷³ The consultation of Chapter IV 'I bambini della creazione' (pp. 137-178) in Gloria Marangon's dissertation on Ortese, Gloria Marangon, 'L'opera narrativa di Anna Maria Ortese: un percorso tra fiaba e disinganno' unpublished undergraduate dissertation, Università degli Studi di Padova, 1996-1997), is a useful initial approach, but it gives only a very general foundation. This chapter of the dissertation is, in fact, devoted to the metamorphic children and animals who underpin Ortese's trilogy of *L'Iguana*, *Il cardillo addolorato* and *Alonso e i visionari*.

⁷⁴ Inge Lanslots, 'Le creature zoppicanti di Anna Maria Ortese', *Narrativa*, 24 (2003), 105-121.

World in Anna Maria Ortese'⁷⁵ relevant as it looks at different aspects of Ortese's thought (her rejection of the Enlightenment and her ethical and philosophical position through the analysis of *L'Iguana*, *Il cardillo addolorato* and *Alonso e i visionari*). Concerning *L'Iguana*, the reading offered by Daniela La Penna in the essay 'An Inquiry into Modality and Genre: Reconsidering *L'Iguana* by Anna Maria Ortese', also gives very stimulating clues regarding various aspects of the novel and the character.⁷⁶ In particular, La Penna's metaphorical interpretation of the Iguana as a pretext for Ortese to develop colonial discourse, contributed to my reflection on Ortese's interpretation of colonialism in other works. On the innovative and scheme-subverting nature of *L'Iguana*, I should cite Adria Frizzi's article 'Performance or Getting a Piece of the Other',⁷⁷ where Frizzi looks at the constantly shifting nature of the Iguana as a way for the character to find her own voice and dominate male discourse. As regards Ortese's wish to give expression through her literature to the suffering of the weakest, it is worth mentioning three articles by Andrea Baldi: 'Infelicità senza desideri: "Il mare non bagna Napoli" di Anna Maria Ortese',⁷⁸ 'Storie di ordinaria agonia: i racconti napoletani di Anna Maria Ortese'⁷⁹ and "'Un segreto lamento di perduti": la voce degli oppressi nell'opera di Anna Maria Ortese'.⁸⁰ They all have very emblematic titles and provided a valuable and enriching contribution to my argument. Lisa Bentini's essay, "'Trovata la casa iniziato il

⁷⁵ Sharon Wood, 'Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese', Francesca Billiani and Gigliola Sulis, eds., *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic. Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions* (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), pp. 141-159.

⁷⁶ La Penna.

⁷⁷ Adria Frizzi, 'Performance, or Getting a Piece of the Other, or In the Name of the Father, or The Dark Continent of Femininity, or Just Like a Woman: Anna Maria Ortese's *L'iguana*', *Italica*, 79 (2002), 379-90.

⁷⁸ Andrea Baldi, 'Infelicità senza desideri: "Il mare non bagna Napoli" di Anna Maria Ortese', *Italica*, 77 (2000), 81-104.

⁷⁹ Andrea Baldi, 'Storie di ordinaria agonia: i racconti napoletani di Anna Maria Ortese', *Narrativa*, 24 (2003), 55-83.

⁸⁰ Andrea Baldi, "'Un segreto lamento di perduti": la voce degli oppressi nell'opera di Anna Maria Ortese', *Nuova Prosa*, 47 (2007), issue "Il testo, la voce," ed. by Giorgio Rimondi, 51-67.

gioco”. Luoghi della poetica di Anna Maria Ortese’,⁸¹ deals with Ortese’s subdued, oppressed extraordinary characters through the analysis of the spaces they live and move in: wardrobes, basements, boxes, kitchens, secluded and dark corners. These hidden environments, privileged spaces for the encounter with the Other and the extraordinary, are the symbols of their inferior condition, victimisation and marginalisation from society.

Metamorphic creatures, as with all extraordinary creatures in Ortese, not only serve to bring to light the lack of harmony between mankind and the natural world, but also represent some of the manifestations of the complexity of Ortese’s reality, which includes the extraordinary and the supernatural. This is well discussed in ‘Anna Maria Ortese: Il “Monaciello” e la nostalgia del perduto’⁸² by Giuseppe Iannaccone, an article where Ortese’s concept of a multi-layered reality including an extraordinary dimension is also well explained. Similarly, Flora Maria Ghezzi ‘Voci dall’oltrestoria: *Il cardillo addolorato* di Anna Maria Ortese e la crisi della modernità’⁸³ shows Ortese’s view of a shifting, complex reality through the analysis of the various interpretations and meaning of the character of the goldfinch. Paola Loreto, in the essay ‘*Alonso e i visionari*. La vocazione Americana di Anna Maria Ortese’,⁸⁴ makes a thorough and comprehensive comparison between Ortese’s

⁸¹ Lisa Bentini, “‘Trovata la casa iniziato il gioco’”. Luoghi della poetica di Anna Maria Ortese” in Luca Clerici, ed., ‘Per Anna Maria Ortese’, *Il Giannone: semestrale di cultura e letteratura*, 7-8 (2006), pp. 201-220.

⁸² Giuseppe Iannaccone, ‘Anna Maria Ortese: Il “Monaciello” e la nostalgia del perduto’, *Critica letteraria*, 1 (2002), 109-121.

⁸³ Flora Maria Ghezzi, ‘Voci dall’oltrestoria: *Il cardillo addolorato* di Anna Maria Ortese e la crisi della modernità’ in Luca Clerici, ed., ‘Per Anna Maria Ortese’, *Il Giannone: semestrale di cultura e letteratura*, 7-8 (2006), pp. 221-244.

⁸⁴ Paola Loreto, ‘*Alonso e i visionari*. La vocazione Americana di Anna Maria Ortese’ in Luca Clerici, ed., ‘Per Anna Maria Ortese’, *Il Giannone: semestrale di cultura e letteratura*, 7-8 (2006), pp. 245-264.

concept of reality and that of the American Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Hawthorne, whom Ortese mentions as two of her favourite authors.⁸⁵

Despite the abundance of critical material regarding the writer's work and its constructive input in the development of my argument, I believe the three most valuable works for an understanding and interpretation of Ortese's poetics, views and narratives are written by the author herself. One is *Corpo Celeste*, a small manifesto/programmatic work which contains statements on poetics made in the first person as well as argumentation in the form of interviews. The other two programmatic pieces are at the end of the collection of short stories *In sonno e in veglia*, the former entitled 'Bambini della creazione',⁸⁶ the latter, (in the form of an interview,) 'Piccolo drago (*conversazione*)'.⁸⁷ Here, Ortese discusses different aspects of her poetics and her views on the society of her times. I will quote from and refer to her very words quite often throughout the thesis.

1.4.4 Elsa Morante and the critical reception of children and animals

As previously stated, childhood in Italian literature has not yet been fully explored. On the contrary, one of the authors, who has been considered from this point of view, is Elsa Morante. The presence of critical material regarding Morante's children and animals has provided a foundation on which to develop my argument where equivalent resources were lacking for Masino and Ortese.⁸⁸ In the article, "Soltanto

⁸⁵ See note 15. In *Alonso e i visionari*, Ortese quotes Emerson three times making explicit her knowledge and familiarity with the American author. See Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 20, p. 136 and p. 182.

⁸⁶ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 153-162.

⁸⁷ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 163-181.

⁸⁸ An interesting article dealing with games is Anna Maria Cucchi's 'Il gioco e la storia', where the theme is looked at in relation to *La Storia* and *L'isola di Arturo*. Anna Maria Cucchi, 'Il Gioco e La Storia', in *Terzo Quaderno: letture di Elsa Morante*, ed. by Gruppo la Luna (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987), pp. 59-65.

l'animale è veramente innocente” Gli animali ne *La Storia*’,⁸⁹ Concetta D’Angeli looks at the different typologies of animals in *La Storia*: animals who are independent and key characters, animals who are portrayed side by side with humans, and finally animal metaphors which create a fusion between human and animal characters in a sort of metamorphosis (Useppe and the Jews).⁹⁰ I found this article interesting especially in the comparison it makes between Ortese’s and Morante’s representation of animals. Another valuable article, in this case, to compare Morante with Masino, is Mario Barengi ‘Tutti i nomi di Useppe. Saggio sui personaggi della “Storia” di Elsa Morante’.⁹¹ Here the critic states that the ideal communion between animals and children finds its roots in the opposition to adulthood, a contrast which will also be found in Masino’s *Periferia*.⁹²

Conclusion: the contribution my thesis wishes to make

The marked presence of extraordinary children and animals in Masino’s and Ortese’s narratives is no coincidence. These characters are, in fact, a tool consciously employed by the authors to address topics and perspectives in a much deeper, sharper way. The purpose of my thesis is precisely to analyse, on the one hand, the themes and views that Masino and Ortese wish to express and, on the other, the hidden truths

⁸⁹ Concetta D’Angeli, “Soltanto l’animale è veramente innocente” Gli animali ne *La Storia*’, in *Terzo Quaderno: letture di Elsa Morante*, ed. by Gruppo la Luna (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987), pp. 66-72.

⁹⁰ Both of the works by Cucchi and D’Angeli are extensively referred to in Graziella Bernabò’s *Come leggere “La Storia” di Elsa Morante*, Graziella Bernabò, *Come leggere “La Storia” di Elsa Morante* (Milan: Mursia, 1991), a critical guide to the reading of *La Storia*, in which she stresses that animals are chosen by Elsa Morante as they lack reason and, therefore, are not caught up by a morality that spoils the spontaneity of human relations. Animals are innocent and thus able to perceive the truth and the sacred in reality.

⁹¹ Mario Barengi, ‘Tutti i nomi di Useppe: saggio sui personaggi della “Storia” di Elsa Morante’, *Studi novecenteschi: rivista semestrale di storia della letteratura italiana contemporanea*, 28 (2001), 363-389.

⁹² Also fascinating is the essay: Marco Santoro, ‘Il “mondo” dei giovani morantiani’ *Esperienze letterarie*, 1 (2005), 77-98, in which the writer says that Morante makes youngsters bear her message of denunciation of the corruption and degradation of mankind and society.

they wish to unveil through the representation of such creatures. My reading will be a literary and historical one, having deliberately chosen not to follow a psychoanalytical approach, and it will not be based on the concept of genre.

I believe that my analysis can contribute to scholarly research in the field of Italian studies from different angles. Firstly, it responds to a gap in scholarly study on childhood in Italy, a theme which has not been fully explored despite its potential. As I have shown, the few scholars who have worked in this area called for more research into childhood in Italian twentieth and twenty-first century literature. Secondly, this analysis addresses the need for new areas of research into Masino's complex work. The recent efforts (perhaps not surprisingly by female scholars) to bring Paola Masino back into the foreground have certainly raised awareness of the author's valuable contribution. However, I believe there is still a lot to be discovered about this unconventional woman writer, whose complexity is yet to be fully understood. Thirdly, my thesis wishes to provide a more systematic and coherent analysis of child and animal characters in Ortese's works by looking at all their roles, many of which have not yet been fully examined by critics. Through the journey across themes and characters my thesis also intends to unveil the web of references to, echoes and reinterpretation of other literary and artistic works as well as of characters of the folkloric tradition. I believe, in fact, this intertextual, dialogical dimension has been looked at only sporadically and needs to be carried out in a more cohesive manner. Finally, I also hope my work can shed light on the similarities and differences between *due diverse figlie di un secolo*, two authors with opposite personalities, yet both experiencing an interior conflict with their reality.

Chapter 2

The victimisation *degli altri popoli*⁹³

Introduction

The first of the four thematic areas I have identified and wish to explore in my thesis is the victimisation⁹⁴ of children and animals. I have included Ortese's words *degli altri popoli* in the title as they refer to those she perceives as the weakest beings in society who are, therefore, frequent targets of physical or psychological violence and abuse: children, animals, the elderly and the sick, the foreign and the extraordinary. In this chapter, I adopt this expression to indicate only ordinary and extraordinary children and animals, key in the development of the topic of victimisation, which Masino and Ortese depict from several angles. The two authors, in fact, not only present victimisation in its concrete manifestations of physical and psychological violence, but also unmask its more abstract causes and show up its consequences. Here, I intend to study the different perspectives from which the topic is dealt with, considering character depiction, language and narrative techniques and setting Masino's and Ortese's view of the issue in the social and historical context of their times. Although my thesis deals predominantly with extraordinary children and animals, in this chapter, I shall also include ordinary children and animals in my analysis. On the one hand, this will allow a better contextualisation of the theme within a historical framework; on the other, it will enable me to better show how it is the vulnerability of children and animals and the Otherness of extraordinary beings which make the two equally easy targets of victimisation.

⁹³ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 157. Ortese italicises the expression.

⁹⁴ For an explanation of the term 'victimisation', see Chapter 1, subsection 1.1.1.

I have organised my discussion into five sections. The first two, ‘victimisation in the workplace’ and ‘domestic victimisation’, present different cases of physical or psychological violence. For the sake of clarity and flow, I have divided the examples of violence into these two categories according to where they occur. Titles, therefore, should not be taken as a record of Masino’s and Ortese’s denunciation of work exploitation or domestic violence. The third and fourth sections focus on the two main, less easily identifiable causes of victimisation: a tragic, inescapable and damning destiny, and distorted, oppressive social conventions. The last section, on the intended and unintended consequences of the victimisation of children, explores the negative primary or secondary effects on the behavioural and physical health of the victims.

In this introduction I should also underline the fact that the theme of victimisation, which recurs in a substantial part of the two authors’ narrative body, is also linked to others of their privileged topoi, which I shall explore at a later stage in my thesis. At times, then, the reader will be advised that specific subjects will be touched upon only briefly. The more general nature of this chapter means it lends itself to being the first content-based chapter of the thesis which introduces themes to be developed further on.

2.1 Victimisation in the workplace

Italian modern history since Unification is full of instances of the exploitation of the child and animal labour force suggesting it was a widespread phenomenon. Children were employed as field workers in the agricultural sector, as servants in houses, as beggars, street musicians, pedlars in itinerant jobs and, later, with the advent of industry, as factory workers. Given the country’s late industrialisation, animals were

also widely used as a workforce, especially in agriculture. Although Masino and Ortese do not openly denounce or take a stand against the exploitation of child labour, working children and animals are scattered throughout their works and their presence cannot but be a reflection of the social and historical context of their time. Furthermore, the workplace is, in several violent episodes, the environment where victimisation occurs, even when it is not work-related but has other roots. In this section I will present several cases of working children and animals, highlighting those shown as examples of victimisation in the workplace.

2.1.1 Work in the fields: *Monte Ignoso* and ‘Bambini della creazione’

An example of working youngsters, although not actually victims, is found in *Monte Ignoso*, where many of the local children can only play with Barbara on a Sunday, when they are resting from work in the fields or other jobs with the local craftsmen. Six-year old Barbara belongs to a privileged background and can thus play at all times; the children in the village, on the other hand, have to fit their playtime around their working life. Here, employment is not presented as a form of exploitation and victimisation, but rather as part of the children’s daily life.⁹⁵ It is striking, however,

⁹⁵ In the thirties, *Monte Ignoso* was published in 1931, children were considered a valuable workforce, especially in the countryside. From the early days of the Unification process, it was clear that child labour was going to be one of the main social challenges for the young Italian state. Legislation, which aimed at the protection of the young and limitations in child labour, came into force too late and proved to be weak and inefficient; furthermore, for a long time it only focused on two sectors of child exploitation, itinerant jobs and industrial employment, overlooking the critical conditions of children working in the fields. The exploitation of children in agriculture was ignored on the grounds that these children were supposedly working under caring parental supervision or alongside family members, rather than being employed by unscrupulous businessmen in the industrial sector as was actually the case. However, reality was very different. Parents and relatives often proved to be just as profit-oriented and cruel as industrialists, making their children work at the tender age of four or five. What was worse, many children did not work for their parents or relatives, but for landowners, under a system called *il garzonato*. Children had to spend a year or longer with landowners who, as well as providing them with food and shelter, also paid a small amount of money to their families. For poor, large families, selling their children’s services was a necessity. The first debate on children’s work in the fields was held in 1921 at the International Conference on Labour in Geneva. No drastic measures were taken, however, on the grounds that work in the fields, far from being dangerous, was good for the child’s development as it occurred under the watchful eye of parents. The only guideline given on the matter was that such work should not take place during school hours so as not to interfere with primary education. The intensity of the employment of children in agriculture varied: when the labour

that these children, despite their young age, should be acutely aware that they belong to a different social class and of their humble condition: some of them respond to Barbara's invitation with embarrassment,⁹⁶ while others assert their status or their need to work for a living with pride or amusement.⁹⁷

An instance of animal victimisation in the fields is presented by Ortese in 'Bambini della creazione', where the creature being exploited and abused is a draught-horse:

Ma non andava avanti che a stento; anzi, non andava mai avanti. Il suo carico, alto come una casa, era disumano. La testa del cavallo, abbassata, scarna e sensibile – come pensierosa – si volgeva continuamente a guardare verso i fianchi quelle orride piaghe. Gli occhi sembravano pieni di lacrime, ma forse era solo un colare di umore, perché si dice che i cavalli non piangono. Non avevo ancora visto l'Umanità seduta su un martirio.

[...]

Il carrettiere scese con un balzo a terra, ma non usò la frusta, che aveva sotto il braccio. Prese, sollevò, avvicinò a sé, con due mani, la grande faccia gentile del cavallo, la guardò negli occhi, e in quegli occhi, alla fine, con folle violenza, sputò. (*In sonno e in veglia*, p. 156)

force was plentiful, children were sent to work in factories or in the streets, but when labourers were scarce, due to mass emigration, women and children had to replace male workers. However, the beginning of the twentieth century saw a considerable increase in the number of children employed in agriculture: children rejected by the factories complying with the law in terms of age limits, were not put back into primary education but drawn into heavier and more dangerous jobs including agricultural ones. See Dina Bertoni Jovine, *L'alienazione dell'infanzia: il lavoro minorile nella società moderna* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1963).

⁹⁶ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, pp. 77-78: '– Bambino, vuoi giocare con noi?

Ma i bambini erano pochi. Molti erano a scuola, molti a lavorare nei campi, o a giornata dal falegname o dal sarto o dal calzolaio, molti giocavano nelle loro case. Quei pochi che passavano, correvano via senza guardare perché si vergognavano, oppure si fermavano un istante ma non rispondevano: altri rispondevano con un cenno negativo della testa e si facevano rossi fino alle orecchie'.

⁹⁷ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 78: '– Bambina?

Quella si volse fermandosi.

– Vuoi giocare con me?... con noi?

L'altra lasciò cadere i due fasci di erba, si mise le mani sui fianchi, disse con orgoglio:

– Io sono povera – e ripreso il carico lentamente se ne andava'.

The horse's tragic condition is presented by Ortese not so much to unmask animal exploitation, but to show the gratuitous, unnecessary violence that mankind inflicts on weaker beings, on those she refers to as *popoli muti*,⁹⁸ *i non aventi diritto*⁹⁹ or, as we have already seen, *altri popoli*. Similarly, in 'Piccolo drago', Ortese recalls a dream she had as a child, where the image of St Michael ordered her to kill a small, innocent, friendly dragon, making her feel, for the first time, the weight and guilt of human cruelty to which, on that occasion, she was accomplice.¹⁰⁰ In these two episodes from 'Bambini della creazione' and 'Piccolo drago', Ortese openly denounces the evil nature of man, who, on the strength of a presumed superiority, subjects weaker beings to violence, abuse and total submission. According to Ortese, only man, and not the Beast¹⁰¹ (weak, vulnerable beings, real or extraordinary), can cause needless pain, pushed by an urge to hurt, steal from or denigrate the Other.¹⁰² To assert their power, which Ortese compares to dictatorship, men choose enemies who are not their equal in strength, but defenceless and easily subjugated beings. She thus feels definitely closer to the Beast than to mankind and is ashamed of belonging

⁹⁸ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 157-158

⁹⁹ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 170. Ortese italicises the expression.

¹⁰⁰ See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 169: 'Mi trovai in piedi sul collo della Bestia, armata – io alta appena qualche centimetro – e con un ordine dell'Angelo. La Bestia non aveva capito. Mi guardò, e un attimo dopo si rovesciò sul dorso. Un fiume rosso usciva dalla sua bocca, come fosse stoffa, ma gli occhi restavano dolci e calmi. Anzi, tutto l'oro del tramonto li sommerse, e da quell'oro – e dai fiori e la stoffa rossa che uscivano dalla sua bocca – veniva una voce meravigliosa, fiavole: "Io ti volevo bene," diceva "volevo regalarti una cosa... E tu mi fai male..." e qui seguì un diminutivo del mio nome. Cercavo a terra la *cosa* che mi voleva regalare, la cercai con terrore e disperazione perché non la meritavo. Entrò la Nonna. L'Arcangelo rientrò nel muro. Steso a terra, il Drago sbiadiva come una luce. Raccolsi allora la spada, piccola e rotta. Il sogno sparì. Una emozione intensa, sconosciuta viveva adesso nel mio cuore... Il dolore dato (era stato un grande dolore, io avevo ucciso) a un amico, un piccino, una creatura così buona. Avessi potuto piangere. Ma di questo non piansi mai. Solo mutai, dentro di me, nel senso che guardai il bel San Michele con orrore, e identifichai l'Ordine Celeste (in breve: la Salvezza), con una spietatezza indicibile. [...] Avevo un peccato. Tutti gli uomini avevano un peccato e un debito immenso da pagare'.

¹⁰¹ Ortese herself uses the capital letter for Bestia. See notes 104 and 105.

¹⁰² See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 170: 'E sono convinta di una cosa: è solo l'uomo *che dà il dolore*, non la Bestia; e lo dà anche quando non necessario. Lo dà per gioia, per togliere qualcosa a *un altro*, per degradarlo; e questo lo comprendi osservando i suoi *nemici*: sono sempre i più belli, i più deboli, i più *buoni*. Se facesse questo con i suoi pari (in forza e diritto dei forti) ci sarebbe pericolo: *sceglie* perciò i popoli e le persone (anche le Bestie sono Popoli e persone) più deboli; sceglie *i non aventi diritto*'.

to a species of, in her words, assassins and thieves.¹⁰³ In the article ‘Ortese: chi sono io? Amica, ma delle vittime’,¹⁰⁴ Ortese responds to an article where Ginevra Bompiani defines her ‘amica al vivente’:¹⁰⁵

non amica al vivente, dunque, se per vivente, o viventi, devono intendersi *anche* tutti gli esseri umani nella loro stagione del trionfo, della vanità, del cinismo, e infine della crudeltà e il disprezzo per i loro “inferiori” (in potere), e comunque per i vinti. Non in questo senso. Amica agli uccelli, e a tutti i figli della Natura, sempre; *non* amica – e non sempre, o quasi mai – alla natura umana.¹⁰⁶

Baldi thoroughly explores the relationship between Ortese’s writing and the cry of the oppressed.¹⁰⁷ For Ortese, writing becomes a way to voice the torture to which the weak have been condemned, to denounce it and stop it. ‘La Ortese non si accontenta di esecrare l’abuso, ma ordisce una strategia di resistenza: il narrare si configura come risarcimento e, allo stesso tempo, rottura di una proibizione’.¹⁰⁸ Baldi rightly sees Ortese’s works as a form of compensation on the one hand, and of rupture, on the other: a way of breaking the silence to which animals, children and small creatures, elderly people and women have been relegated by history and by socio-economic structures.¹⁰⁹ Ortese does not limit herself to voicing the sufferings of the ‘altri popoli’, but she also seems to call for an intellectual unity of the intelligentsia against the violent dictatorship of mankind. In the framework to ‘Bambini della

¹⁰³ See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 171: ‘Ed è riflettendo continuamente su questo *bisogno*, senza capirlo (ci rifletto da una vita) che io sono più che mai dalla parte delle Bestie, mi sento loro parente, o comunque un amico, un *devoto*: e grande è la malinconia che provo nel sapersi appartenente alla specie umana. Non che questa non abbia una superba bellezza e spesso bontà: ma perché *tutto* ciò che possiede mi sembra frutto di un FURTO. Come creatura *umana* – ecco la disperazione – mi sento da sempre: Assassino e Ladro’.

¹⁰⁴ Anna Maria Ortese, ‘Ortese: chi sono io? Amica, ma delle vittime’, *La Stampa*, 19 June 1990, p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ginevra Bompiani, ‘Amica al vivente: Anna Maria Ortese’, *Leggere*, 21 May 1990, pp. 8-13.

¹⁰⁶ Ortese, ‘Ortese: chi sono io? Amica, ma delle vittime’, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ Baldi, “‘Un segreto lamento di perduti’”, pp. 51-67.

¹⁰⁸ Baldi, “‘Un segreto lamento di perduti’”, p. 53.

¹⁰⁹ Baldi, “‘Un segreto lamento di perduti’”, pp. 51-67.

creazione', in fact, Ortese has just sent an unnamed young French intellectual a book by an unnamed Italian writer describing an episode of violence similar to the episode with the horse. She explains she has done so in the hope that young intellectuals have at last understood the nature and enormity of the abuse and are envisaging the beginnings of a revolution for the freedom *degli altri popoli*.¹¹⁰

Going back to the quotation of the draught-horse, Ortese's proximity to the Other, whether animal, child, real or imaginative being, and her deliberate distancing herself from a superior and dominating mankind emerges also from her language. When referring to animals she makes use of a vocabulary normally employed for human beings. The quotation above offers some good examples: the weight the horse has to pull is described as 'disumano', his head is defined as 'pensierosa', as if an animal could indulge in a pensive moment just like humans, and its 'muso' is referred to as 'faccia'. Ironically enough, the cruel carter is called 'l'Umanità' with a capital U.

2.1.2 Begging and conning: *Monte Ignoso* and 'Oro a Forcella'

In Masino and Ortese the presence of youngsters begging and conning passers-by arousing their sympathy is also a reflection of the situation of their times when the employment of children as beggars, street musicians and pedlars in itinerant jobs was still common.¹¹¹ Other writers had previously denounced this social evil; in fact, the

¹¹⁰ See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 157-158: 'Capire, capire alla fine se, dopo mezzo secolo di orrori, e un secolo o due di abbagli culturali, capire se gli uomini più giovani e preparati – come si può presumere debba esserlo un intellettuale della sinistra (o anche la destra) francese –, abbiano inteso finalmente qual è il cuore del problema, il cuore del tempo, il cuore della verità (di questo inferno che attanaglia la storia dal privato al pubblico, dalle coste dove sorge il sole a quelle dove tramonta). E *quale rivoluzione* ci aspettiamo. Dico *noi*, mi metto in prima fila, desidero essere vista e firmare, e dare tutto ciò che ho, anche d'invisibile (soprattutto dispongo di cose invisibili), a favore di questa causa, o rivoluzione. Essa riguarda la liberazione *degli altri popoli* – i popoli muti di questa terra, i popoli detti Senza Anima – dal Dittatore fornito di anima – e per di più immortale! – che è il loro carnefice da sempre'.

¹¹¹ Immediately after unification, legislators were particularly concerned with the issue of child trafficking, which inevitably led to itinerant jobs: children of large, poor families were sold to

denunciation of child exploitation and child poverty was common in nineteenth-century Italian literature, Serao's 'Una fioraia',¹¹² for instance, the story of a young beggar who ends up being run over by a coach. However, Masino's and Ortese's depiction of child beggars is far from the pathetic tones of Serao, where children were presented merely as innocent victims. In their works, instead, aware of the powers they possess to arouse generosity, they use them wilfully for profit. In *Monte Ignoso*, at Barbara's party, the village children play games where real life is represented at its worst and one of them even pretends to be a beggar.¹¹³ In Ortese's

middlemen who started them off as beggars, jugglers, organ or accordion musicians. However, it was not the scale of child trafficking nor the effects on children that worried the Italian government, but rather the negative image of Italy that these beggars could reflect abroad: legislators were worried that the Italian State might be seen as a nation of vagabonds, of beggars and thus acquire a bad international reputation. In 1873 itinerant musicians were banned from the streets of Paris and thus flooded into those of London and the US, where children became shoe polishers, organ players and sellers of ice-creams, chestnuts and newspapers. In the same year the law ('legge Guerzoni') against organised begging and itinerant jobs came into force. With industrialisation, the focus shifted from child trafficking and working in the streets to work in factories. In Italy, child labour laws were passed very late and had very little impact on real life. At the end of the nineteenth century, as the interests at stake were obviously very high, several public inquiries were carried out but to no effect: industrialists profited greatly from child labour as children were paid less than half what an adult was paid. Families were also forced to send their children into work as the low cost of child labour inevitably pushed male adults out of jobs and often to migrate. The first child protection law came into force in 1886 and only placed a limit on the working age of children, rather than enforcing the 'half-time system', which was in place in other European countries. The law passed in 1902 raised the age limit from nine to 12 for underground work (to 14 three years after the law came into force), to 15 years for unhealthy and dangerous jobs. Night work was not allowed before the age of 16 and daily working hours were reduced to eight for children under 12 who had been already employed, 11 hours for children aged between 12 and 15 and a limit was set at 12 hours for all other child workers. This law stated that the children employed had to certify they had completed primary education and that they were in a good state of health. However, extensions, exceptions (especially regarding finishing primary school), evasions abounded and subsequent legislation tended to soften, rather than strengthen, the law. As the First World War loomed, child labour was vital and child protection laws were set aside as every hand was precious. The fascist regime joined the International Labour Organisation adopting, in theory, all the recommendations in terms of child protection and education. School was made compulsory to the age of 14, but actually outside the cities there was no provision made for schooling after the 4th or 5th and final year of primary school. Moreover, inspections were rare and children could be exempted from education with the simple production of 'certificates of unsuitability' issued by a head teacher. See Bruna Bianchi and Adriana Lotto, eds., *Lavoro ed emigrazione minorile dall'Unità alla Grande guerra* (Venice: Ateneo Veneto, 2000) and Bertoni Jovine, *L'alienazione dell'infanzia*.

¹¹² Matilde Serao, *Piccole Anime* (Milan: Baldini Castoldi, 1914).

¹¹³ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 81: 'Uno strano personaggio, con la testa tanto grossa che doveva sorreggerla con le mani, e vestito in modo che non si riusciva a capire se fosse maschio o femmina, s'era seduto in un canto e rapidamente trasformato in mendicante, chiedendo con voce piagnucolosa la carità per questo giovane infelice'.

short story ‘Oro a Forcella’,¹¹⁴ two, three or four-year-old children are used by their own mother to gain public sympathy and jump the queue at a pawnbroker's.¹¹⁵ Clearly understanding their mother's plan, they smile with cynicism.

2.1.3 Domestic service: *L'Iguana*

Working children in Masino's and Ortese's times were also frequently employed in domestic service, as servants in private houses, especially in the case of girls who were considered less productive in physically demanding labour.¹¹⁶ This is reflected particularly well in Ortese's works where one can find extraordinary youngsters working as domestic staff: Estrellita in *L'Iguana*, the *monaciello* Nicola in *Il monaciello di Napoli*, il Portapacchi in *Il cardillo addolorato*. The most outstanding example is Estrellita in *L'Iguana*, a story, this, which also provides a good illustration of victimisation in the workplace. Child-animal Estrellita works as a servant for Ilario and his two brothers, who mistreat her, submitting her not only to heavy household chores, but also to violence, injustice and abuse. The Iguana is also subject to a form of physical and psychological victimisation having its roots in her relationship with Ilario and his family, which I will outline in the next section. Here, I wish to analyse the Iguana's victimisation as a servant. Right from his first encounter with Estrellita when he mistakes her for an old lady, Daddo realises that

¹¹⁴ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 63-71.

¹¹⁵ See Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 69: ‘Queste due creature, che potevano avere sì e no tre o quattro anni, sottili e bianche come vermi, avevano sul viso di cera certi sorrisetti così vecchi e cinici, ch'era una meraviglia, e ogni tanto guardavano di sotto in su, con un'aria maliziosa e interrogativa, quella loro frenetica madre’.

¹¹⁶ Legislators almost exclusively focused on the protection of children exploited in industry, ignoring those employed in the agricultural sector as well as those working in commercial or domestic services. For many young people, particularly girls, working as maids in wealthy city households was the only opportunity to escape the hard work in the fields. In their eyes, it was a great improvement in their condition as they avoided physical exhaustion and could put some money aside for their dowry. However, work conditions were still harsh and living alone in the city extremely risky. See Bianchi and Lotto, eds., *Lavoro ed emigrazione minorile dall'Unità alla Grande guerra* and Bertoni Jovine, *L'alienazione dell'infanzia*.

she is forced to do housework that is too demanding for her body. Urged by the charitable and gallant spirit of a gentleman of his rank, Daddo tries to help her several times during his stay in Ocaña:

In quel momento, però, sembrava proprio non farcela. Una delle sue verdi zampette era fasciata, e con l'altra, sospirando intensamente, essa si sforzava invano di tirare su dal pozzo un grosso secchio.

Immediatamente il Daddo, con quello spirito di cavalleria che lo rendeva così amabile, senza perdere tempo a chiedersi, come avrebbe voluto la religione che egli professava, se quella creatura era cristiana o pagana (come più sembrava), si precipitò accanto alla bestia, che gli levò in volto due occhietti supplichevoli e fantasticanti, mormorando – mentre il conte prendeva lui il secchio. (*L'Iguana*, p. 30)

Togliendole dalle braccine quel peso, e raccattando il libro ch'era caduto, trovò modo di farle una fuggevole carezza sulla testina paurosa; al che la bestia non rispose nulla, ma ancora levò sul lombardo i suoi occhietti dolci e appassionati, che raccontavano una infinita tristezza, e pareva dirgli: "Aiutami!". Indi, silenziosa, uscì.

(*L'Iguana*, p. 42)

As a servant, she is shown no respect, and not only in terms of workload. She is forced to sleep in a dark, grim, unfurnished basement, similar to an animal den, her bed being a pile of sacks and rags and her meals the masters' leftovers thrown to her on the floor. Her compensation consists of small stones, which she hides away with the utmost care believing them to be valuable coins and not realising that she has been openly conned by her employers.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ See Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 56: 'La Iguana, fornita come usano i bambini sulle spiagge, di una paletta e un minuscolo secchiello, si diresse, senza nemmeno togliersi il fazzoletto dal capo, verso il punto dov'erano i pacchetti, e li ne aperse uno, come per controllare, e il conte vide che conteneva pietre piatte e tondeggianti, tutte della medesima grandezza. [...] Il conte aveva visto fare troppe volte

2.1.4 Linguistic strategies to emphasise victimisation in *L'Iguana*

In tackling the theme of the exploitation of this defenceless child-animal, Ortese employs two devices in the portrayal of Estrellita as a victim: the use of description in the place of dialogue and the repeated presence of diminutives. Unlike Masino, for victimised characters, Ortese prefers third-person description to dialogue, where dialogue allows for characters to play a more active role. This choice can be seen as yet another way of presenting the passive role of such creatures as Estrellita and other extraordinary children thereby underlining their defencelessness and how much of a victim each is. The Iguana's description is entrusted completely to a third-person narrator; her brief direct speech interventions are limited to thanking Daddo, to short utterances in Portuguese such as '*Não para mim... Não para mim...*',¹¹⁸ and to cries of pain and fear. In the first quotation above, for example, Estrellita does not utter a word. While struggling with the bucket, she only sighs. When Daddo does help her with the bucket, she looks at him murmuring and imploring, and when Daddo gives her a hand with a heavy volume, she is mute, communicating by an imploring look in her eye. This is also true for other victimised creatures such as Hieronymus in *Il cardillo addolorato* as Baldi rightly explains:

Nell'*Iguana* e nel *Cardillo addolorato* (1993) le tribolazioni dei reietti ripropongono quindi la dialettica di silenzio e voce su un piano speculativo, così da mettere sotto accusa una mancanza e un abuso del vivere vecchi di secoli; la "servetta" Iguana frequenta con impaccio il dominio della parola (e al termine del romanzo farà scarsi progressi nell'apprendere a leggere e a scrivere), mentre il "servitorello" Käppchen ne è addirittura esiliato (fatta salva una finale

questa operazione a Milano, per non rendersi conto che quei rotolini erano, per la disgraziata servetta, denaro, o come tali le erano stati dati ed essa li considerava'.

¹¹⁸ Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 145. Ortese italicises this expression.

lamentazione). L'allusione a sfumature regionali e la mimesi del registro dialettale introdotte in precedenza nei racconti lasciano qui luogo, nelle vittime, a una lingua esitante, sincopata ed ellittica, contaminata da forestierismi (il portoghese nell'*Iguana*, il francese e il tedesco nel *Cardillo*).¹¹⁹

It is not surprising, then, that the presence of almost-dumb characters, generally a child or child-animal, is a recurrent feature in Ortese's works. Besides Estrellita and Hieronymus, other mute characters are Sasà in *Il cardillo addolorato* and Mohammed in *Alonso e i visionari*. Silence, with the inability to voice suffering, Baldi points out, denounces the subjugation and violence to which weaker beings are gratuitously subjected by mankind. I would also add that the lack of recourse to speech for these Ortesian characters, on a more general level, is perfectly in line with the choice of distinguishing a domineering mankind, empowered by speech, from the innocent *popoli muti*, to whom speech is denied. In this regard, George Steiner,¹²⁰ looking back at classical mythology, describes speech as the human prerogative which functions as a parting line between mankind and other living beings and determines the superiority of man.¹²¹ However, resorting to ancient Greek heritage, Steiner adds that speech is for humans at the same time a privilege and a damnation as it gives them a dangerous weapon to compete with the Gods.¹²² Going back to the use of the rhetoric of silence as a way for the author to denounce abuse, Sarah

¹¹⁹ Baldi, "Un segreto lamento di perduti", p. 61.

¹²⁰ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

¹²¹ Steiner, *Language and Silence*.

¹²² See Steiner, pp. 55-56: 'That articulate speech should be the line dividing man from the myriad forms of animate being, that speech should define man's singular eminence above the silence of the plant and the grunt of the beast – stronger, more cunning, longer of life than he – is classic doctrine well before Aristotle. [...] Possessed of speech, possessed by it, the word having chosen the grossness and infirmity of man's condition for its own compelling life, the human person has broken free from the great silence of matter. Or to use Ibsen's image, struck with the hammer, the insensate ore has begun to sing. But this breaking free, the human voice harvesting echo where there was silence before, is both miracle and outrage, sacrament and blasphemy. It is a sharp severance from the world of the animal. [...] More than fire, whose power to illumine or to consume, to spread and to draw inward, it so strangely resembles, speech is the core of man's mutinous relations to the gods'.

Dauncey¹²³ provides an interesting perspective on the use of silence in literature.

According to Dauncey:

Silence may be widely deployed within discourses signalling the existence of racially and culturally subjugated and muted groups but each instantiation of the motif is discrete. It does, however, work to link discourses that share in the ambition of revealing oppressive hegemonic practices.¹²⁴

This is the use Ortese makes of the rhetoric of silence: a warning and denunciation of the subjugation and abuse to which weaker beings are victims. Ortese's preoccupation, however, goes beyond the categories of race and culturally discriminated groups and concerns all the *popoli muti, altri popoli*. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that silence is not used by Ortese to subvert communication as a form of destructive protest, but rather as an alarm bell for the reader. On this point, I believe it is important to bear in mind Steiner's view of silence as another, yet no less important, form of communication similar to speech or the musical note.¹²⁵ Not only does Steiner see silence as a form of communication, but he also considers it as a viable alternative for poets and writers working under a totalitarian regime:

If totalitarian rule is so effective as to break all chances of denunciation, of satire, then let the poet cease (and let the scholar cease from editing the classics a few miles down the road from the death camp). Precisely because it is the signature of his humanity, because it is that which makes of man a being of striving unrest, the

¹²³ Sarah Dauncey, 'The Uses of Silence: a Twentieth-Century Preoccupation in the Light of Fictional Examples, 1900-1950' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2003).

¹²⁴ Dauncey, p. 5.

¹²⁵ See Steiner, p. 30: 'We live inside the act of discourse. But we should not assume that a verbal matrix is the only one in which the articulations and conduct of the mind are conceivable. There are modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded not on language, but on other communicative energies such as the icon or the musical note. And there are actions of the spirit rooted in silence. It is difficult to *speak* of these, for how should speech justly convey the shape and vitality of silence?'

word should have no natural life, no neutral sanctuary, in the places
and season of bestiality. Silence *is* an alternative.¹²⁶

Chilean, magic realist writer Isabel Allende is another woman writer who, in order to cast light upon the condition of the weakest components of society, resorts to silence as a form of communication. In the *House of the Spirits*¹²⁷ one of the main characters, clairvoyant Clara, takes refuge in mutism as a protest against her domineering, violent husband. Silence draws its strength precisely in its apparent hindrance to communication.¹²⁸

The longest dialogue between the Iguana and Count Daddo starts off in the form of a script, with stage names and cues ('IG' stands for Iguana and 'CONTE' for Daddo) and carries on with the pace and flavour of a dialogue acted out on stage. It is interesting to observe that for the dialogue in which the Iguana is engaged, the author has chosen to let her speak through stage cues rather than spontaneously. Once again, Ortese has chosen to avoid Estrellita's natural interaction with Daddo to further emphasise the subjugated condition of a creature who, having been forbidden self-expression, is unable to speak her mind and to discuss her feelings freely. La Penna also points out: 'Significantly, in two dialogues in which Estrellita is involved, Ortese decides to use the typographical layout of a play script, in order to emphasize the authorial (and the patriarchal and imperialist?) control over the character's limited self-expression'.¹²⁹ The effect on the readers is to distance them from Daddo's perspectives and points of view; the author seems to remind her audience

¹²⁶ Steiner, pp. 73-74.

¹²⁷ Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés Editores, 2001).

¹²⁸ The first period of Clara's taking refuge in silence occurs after the death of her sister Rosa, when having been traumatised, she decides to stop speaking and this continues for years. The second long period of silence occurs during her second pregnancy and again during her third when her husband punches her breaking some of her teeth. After this episode, she will never speak to her husband Esteban again. It is interesting to note that Clara's silence is also paralleled by another form of communication which is not accessible to Ortese's dumb characters: writing. She, in fact, keeps a diary where she takes notes about her life, from major events down to the most trivial facts.

¹²⁹ La Penna, p. 174.

that the reality presented in the novel is not singular or absolute but rather a series of perspectives put together by an omniscient narrator.

The other linguistic device employed by Ortese to portray the figure of the exploited servant is the widespread use of diminutives, which aims to simply emphasise the smallness of the creatures and to make them appear defenceless and vulnerable. As I will show further on in this chapter, Ortese also makes use of this device for other extraordinary, victimised children. From the passages above taken from *L'Iguana*, we can see that Estrellita's physical exertion is made even more painful by the recurrent use of diminutives: 'una delle sue verdi zampette era fasciata',¹³⁰ 'due occhietti supplichevoli',¹³¹ 'Togliendole dalle braccine quel peso',¹³² 'sulla testina paurosa',¹³³ 'i suoi occhietti dolci e appassionati'.¹³⁴

2.2 Domestic victimisation

In this section, I would like to explore other examples of psychological and physical victimisation against weaker beings, this time at home or within family boundaries. The cases I will present are forms of verbal, physical, psychological violence, which include abortion, infanticide as well as indifference.

2.2.1 *Io ho chiuso gli occhi per non vedere*:¹³⁵ violence in *Periferia*

In Masino's works, rather than involving extraordinary children, domestic victimisation concerns ordinary children. Consider, for instance, the children of *Periferia*, who are either subject to, or witnesses of, physical and verbal abuse and indifference on the part of their parents, with serious effects on their behaviour and

¹³⁰ Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 30.

¹³¹ Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 30.

¹³² Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 42.

¹³³ Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 42.

¹³⁴ Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 42.

¹³⁵ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 91.

psychological well-being. Examples of this are: Fulvia and Anna, who regularly overhear their parents' arguments at night,¹³⁶ a situation which leads Anna to the development of masochistic tendencies and turns Fulvia into a violent bully; twins Maria and Giovanni with a mean, violent father, who often beats up his wife and son, and with his penny-pinching ways leaves the family almost starving.¹³⁷ This domestic environment has very different effects on the twins: the boy rebels and manages to run away with his mother, while the girl, almost brainwashed, becomes as stingy as her father and shows signs of suffering from an eating disorder.¹³⁸ A further example is Luca, whose parents, on the other hand, are careless and indifferent to their son's need for affection. As a result, Luca is constantly trying to seek attention in the wrong way, behaving violently and aggressively even to the point of being prepared to commit murder.¹³⁹ With characters like that of Luca, Masino also seems to wish to unmask the romantic view of childhood as a pure, innocent phase of life. These children's behaviour undoubtedly reflects bad parental examples, but it also shows that children are not entirely good-natured, being often ambiguous creatures, with sinister and cruel traits.¹⁴⁰ The children of *Periferia*

¹³⁶ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 34: '– Questo non è buio. Buio è la notte quando io sto in camicia nel corridoio e aspetto che babbo e mamma si ammazzino. Loro urlano urlano chiusi in camera. C'è uno spiraglio di luce sotto la porta. Lo sai che quando si ammazza uno il sangue esce piano piano da sotto la porta? Io guardo sempre là. Poi non urlano più e fanno dei colpi, come se picchiassero coi pugni sulle coperte. Suona tutta la casa. Gli altri non dormono, lo so, neanche Fulvia, ma hanno paura di venire nel corridoio perchè al buio, se pensi al sangue, subito ti pare di avere i piedi bagnati. Quando mamma piange me ne torno a letto, ma quando piange babbo mi metto a piangere anch'io sottovoce. Il mio babbo quando piange è come uno che russa, oppure che sospira perchè gli pare che nel mondo ci sono troppi morti...'

In Masino's *Racconto grosso* and *Periferia*, words such as *perché*, *benché*, *più*, *così* are often written *perchè*, *benché*, *piú*, *cosí*.

¹³⁷ See Chapter 5.

¹³⁸ See Chapter 5.

¹³⁹ See Chapter 5.

¹⁴⁰ See Chapter 5.

already prove they possess those features that will characterise them as adults: arrogance, frustration, submission, avarice, envy.¹⁴¹

In *Periferia*, Masino gives a very graphic account of these children's experiences in strong tones without euphemism when describing violence and abuse.

Here is an example:

Lui va e torna e babbo conta i soldi e mancavano due lire e Giovanni ha detto che le aveva perdute per la strada. Babbo l'ha mandato a ricercarle ma lui non le ha trovate e babbo non ha detto nulla, ha fatto così con i denti – Maria si morse il labbro inferiore. – E mamma si è messa a tremare. Mamma trema sempre. [...] Quando Giovanni dormiva (io sto nel letto vicino a lui) babbo è venuto con una candela nel candeliere di bronzo che io non posso neppure alzare, perchè ad accendere la luce aveva paura che Giovanni si svegliasse. E ha messo una mano sul cuore di Giovanni e gli ha domandato: – Dove sono le due lire? – [...] – L'ho messe dentro alle scarpe –. A babbo gli si sono scoperti tutti i denti e ha domandato ancora: – Per farne che cosa? – E Giovanni: – Per darli a Carlo. [...] – Per sapere il suo segreto. – Canaglia! – E gli ha sbattuto quel candeliere sulla fronte tanto forte che ha fatto un rumore basso e subito ha cominciato a uscirgli tanto sangue. Io ho chiuso gli occhi per non vedere ma ho sentito che entrava mamma. (*Periferia*, pp. 90-91)

The father's rage, which is near to exploding-point, is described through vivid images such as 'ha fatto così con i denti', 'gli si sono scoperti tutti i denti', which shows an almost bestial ferocity, 'mamma si è messa a tremare'. The act of violence is not just hinted at, but depicted in its entirety 'gli ha sbattuto quel candeliere', 'ha fatto un rumore basso', reproducing the sound of metal on the child's head. What makes this passage even more terrifying is that it comes directly from the mouth of

¹⁴¹ See Chapter 5.

one of the witnesses, Maria, who, accustomed to scenes of this sort, says: ‘mamma trema sempre’, ‘io ho chiuso gli occhi per non vedere’ (cited in the heading of this subsection). The fact that it is a child who reports the violence is an almost constant pattern of the novel, where victimisation is not shown and analysed by a third-person narrator, but emerges through the dialogues and the games of the children themselves. *Periferia*’s children speak and act with a scepticism and a detachment which does not belong to their age. They are tormented, torn and deeply sad youngsters who, in the words of a critic of Masino’s time, Luigi Chiarini, look at the bad and the evil in their lives as do people who are used to pain and suffering.¹⁴² For this reason, other critics contemporary to Masino, such as Adriano Grande¹⁴³ or Francesco Bernardelli,¹⁴⁴ complained that the protagonists of the novel far from being observed in a realistic way, were seen through the deforming eye of the author, as she herself wants them to be. I should argue that their innocence lies precisely in the fact that the children never see themselves as victims and in some cases even believe themselves to be so manipulative as to be in control of the situation. This is the case of Luca who plays truant and tries to behave as badly as he can in order to

¹⁴² Luigi Chiarini, ‘Periferia’, *Quadriovio*, 17 September 1933.

¹⁴³ See Adriano Grande, ‘Paola Masino e i bambini’, *L’Italia Letteraria*, 30 July 1933: ‘Non sono più i bambini, che vengon narrati: è l’autrice che cerca di rifarsi bambina e “inventa”, con la sua mentalità di grande, pensieri e fantasticherie che, attribuite a bimbi, non convincono: e non già perchè i bimbi non le possano pensare, ma perchè l’autrice scopre troppo sè stessa, o non le accorda a sufficienza col resto’.

¹⁴⁴ Francesco Bernardelli, ‘Paola Masino: Periferia, Fabietti: Festa in Famiglia’, *La Stampa*, 25 July 1933: ‘Così la scrittrice e poetessa si è sostituita sovente ai suoi minuscoli personaggi; non sempre, ma troppo spesso; non grossolanamente, ma, anzi, con un’abilità e raffinatezza che tanto più sconcertano, che tanto più ci lasciano perplessi, quanto più si avvicinano al mondo infantile. Anche quando l’espressione è vaga, approssimativa o liricamente stonata, si sente che la sostanza dell’osservazione è esatta. Ci si accorge allora, con un po’ d’irritazione, che l’artificio sottile e consapevole, e una certa esaltazione sentimentale, hanno reso questi bimbi troppo filosofici, troppo poetici o, forse, troppo consci della loro originalità – provocata, pretesa, voluta – di bimbi’.

draw attention to himself, but his efforts are useless as his parents are indifferent to him.¹⁴⁵

2.2.2 *Allora babbo, se puoi, sfacci pure*:¹⁴⁶ Masino's view of infanticide

In the context of domestic victimisation, it is important to note that infanticide, which one would instinctively perceive as the most extreme form of domestic violence, can, on the contrary, be presented as a positive act of altruism and selflessness on the part of the parent. In Masino's short story 'Fame',¹⁴⁷ father of two, Bernardo, strangles both of his children to relieve them from hunger on a cold winter day. Father and children see death as the only escape from starvation and the only way to end a life of misery which, as they state in the beginning, was given by a God who is too selfish to destroy it. Infanticide is thus an act of generosity on the part of the father who is implored by the children themselves: 'allora babbo, se puoi, sfacci pure. Ho tanta fame'.¹⁴⁸ This appeal, which I also used as the heading to this subsection, echoes Dante's encounter with count Ugolino, whose children also had begged their father, who had given them birth, to put an end to their lives.¹⁴⁹ Masino's children Chiara and Mario use, in fact, the verb 'sfacci', which involves creating and destroying the outcome of creation. Whether the echo of Dante is intentional or it is

¹⁴⁵ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 85: '– È la mia mamma. Va a prendermi a scuola; non mi troverà e speriamo che si pigli un bello spavento –. Si mise a ridere.

– E dopo non ti picchia? – domandò Armando.

– Picchiare! – fece un atto di disprezzo – Se glielo avessi detto che non vado a scuola lei avrebbe risposto "benissimo". Non gliene importa nulla di quello che faccio. Neanche a babbo. Io posso fare quello che voglio e faccio sempre quello che è male e lo faccio come se loro mi sgridassero, per provarci un po' di gusto. Mi piacerebbe tanto avere un babbo e una mamma che si accorgono che io faccio male. Fare il male da solo fa fatica. Certo c'è più bravura.

– Si soffre molto a fare il male? – domandò Anna.

– Si gode sempre, ma passa subito e viene sempre più voglia'.

¹⁴⁶ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 43.

¹⁴⁷ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, pp. 41-46.

¹⁴⁸ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 43.

¹⁴⁹ See Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia, Inferno*, ed. by Bianca Garavelli, 5th edn (Milan: Bompiani, 1997), canto XXXIII, ll. 61-63, p. 480:

'e disser: "Padre, assai ci fia men doglia
se tu mangi di noi: tu ne vestisti
queste misere carni, e tu le spoglia"'

just a coincidence, is hard to establish, but I do not believe it would be too daring an assumption to say that Masino had Count Ugolino in mind. A similar vision of infanticide is presented in *Periferia*, when Maria's and Giovanni's mother reacts to her husband's violence by exclaiming that she would prefer to kill her boy and her unborn child rather than see them suffer.¹⁵⁰

2.2.3 Ortese's domestic violence: parental indifference and rejection

Whereas Masino's interpretation of domestic victimisation concerns ordinary children, Ortese deals with the same theme focusing mainly, even though not always, on extraordinary ones. Furthermore, while in *Periferia* Masino represents different forms of victimisation (physical and psychological), all the examples of domestic victimisation in Ortese concern a particular type of psychological victimisation, which consists in a form of rejection or lack of love from a parental figure. Many are the child characters who suffer because of the distancing, the indifference or complete rejection on the part of a parental figure. This is the theme, as the title suggests, of the short story 'Indifferenza della madre',¹⁵¹ where ordinary child Mario suffers deeply from the progressive weakening of his tie to his mother as he grows older, interpreting it as a sort of betrayal. Desperately trying to attract her attention and love, he pretends to be dead. It is particularly interesting to see how Ortese describes the loosening of the mother-child bond:

Ma a poco a poco, e cioè quando il bambino, trascorsi i primissimi
anni, comincia a perdere certa aureola di animalità che lo circondava
dai capelli leggeri come piuma ai piedi morbidi come fiori; e i suoi

¹⁵⁰ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 92: 'Mamma urlava sempre, diceva: "Io le ammazzo queste creature piuttosto che vederle soffrire così". Io ho provato a dire che non soffrivo per non farla piangere ma il sangue mi veniva in bocca e lei continuava a gridare: "Sì, le ammazzo, questa e quella che porto. Abbiamo fame! Ho fame! Ho fame! Assassino!" E si è messa a battere con la pancia contro lo spigolo del letto'.

¹⁵¹ Ortese, *L'infanta sepolta*, pp. 13-19.

sguardi, fino allora ridenti e incerti, acquistano una interiorità, manifestano un pensiero e annunciano quasi la capacità di un distacco da coloro che lo hanno generato; e, in altre parole, uno sconosciuto “io” compare in quella carne con l’intento preciso di mutarla, e correggerne via via il disegno, e finalmente (cosa che avverrà nel tempo) distruggerla: allora quella prima trionfante e come inesauribile tenerezza dei genitori si arresta, disorientata, e, senza che essi neppure se ne avvedano, comincia a perdere rapidamente tutta la sua forza.

(L’Infanta sepolta, pp. 13-14)

Three relevant aspects should be pinpointed in this quotation. Firstly, the association between children and animals which, as I will explain in more detail below, is almost constant in Ortese’s production. At times the association between children and animals is explicit, as in the case of metamorphic children and animals. At others, it is more implicitly suggested by similes or words, which, despite being normally used for animals, are used to describe children or vice versa. In the passage quoted above, the association between Mario as a baby and an animal is created by the expressions ‘certa aureola di animalità’ and by similes such as, ‘capelli leggeri come piuma’. Secondly, it is important to note that the parents’ detachment from the child occurs precisely when the child, after losing his animal, pure, innocent nature, slowly becomes a man with the emergence of an ego of his own, ‘uno sconosciuto “io”’. It is this transition from simple animality (for Ortese the purest, noblest of conditions) to becoming a member of mankind (for Ortese a species of assassins, thieves and violent dictators) that causes the distancing of the parents. They still look after the child, but with the care and attention they give to the many other administrative problems of their daily lives. This way Ortese apparently criticises human relations which, instead of being ruled by true feelings, seem to be controlled by business and

economics to the detriment of younger, more sensitive creatures like Mario. Thirdly, it is important to mention that Mario is called by his name only once and he is usually referred to as *bambino* or *figlio*, which goes to represent the universality of his experience.

‘Che?...Che cosa?’¹⁵² is another short story where Ortese depicts indifferent parents. These are Tommaso and Elisabetta Gomez, two immature, childish parents, wrapped up in their own, separate and distant world. The Gomez children do not suffer for their parents’ lack of attention, but rather feel:

Non severità, ma un’indulgenza pensosa, un’umanità quasi conscia delle supreme bizzarrie e debolezze della vita e dei suoi personaggi, era il sentimento più schietto che essi provavano per quelle due innocenti creature, che Dio aveva loro destinato come maestri e guide.

(*L’infanta sepolta*, p. 103)

In this case, as I will show for other characters, children are older than their years while the parents are affected by a sort of Peter Pan syndrome which does not enable them to fulfill their parental role and assume their responsibilities. Children’s ‘indulgenza’ towards their parents is the reversal of what normally happens in life, where parents show this feeling towards their children. They also possess ‘un’umanità quasi conscia delle supreme bizzarrie e debolezze della vita’ just like experienced grown-ups.

The short story ‘Folletto a Genova’¹⁵³ also presents a case of rejection from a parental figure and this time the victim is an extraordinary child, Stellino or Folletto, a goblin. Folletto, a creature of a hundred and twelve, ‘di razza bambina’,¹⁵⁴ lives with Ruperta and her mentally impaired brother Lalio. After a failed marriage,

¹⁵² Ortese, *L’infanta sepolta*, pp. 98-106.

¹⁵³ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 57-72.

¹⁵⁴ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 67.

Ruperta has turned into a cold-hearted, bad-tempered woman, who has completely closed her heart to her once beloved Folletto. Instead, despite the abuse and humiliations he is subjected to, he still adores her as a mother. Ruperta has, in fact, lost the ‘*puerilità della bambina (che dentro di sé era sempre stata)*’¹⁵⁵ and this makes it impossible for her to accept and cherish the otherness of the Folletto. Stellino, who is critically ill, implores her love, like Mario, but nothing brings Ruperta back to him and eventually he dies.

A similar sense of rejection is that experienced by other Ortesian extraordinary children and animals: Estrellita in *L’Iguana* and the puma Alonso in *Alonso e i visionari*.¹⁵⁶ Up to two years before Daddo’s arrival at Ocaña, the Iguana used to be happy, loved, cherished and spoiled by Ilario, her ‘*babbo dei babbi*’,¹⁵⁷ who had raised her from her animal condition almost to that of a girl. However, one day, her relationship with her father changed when the marquis suddenly rejected her animal nature, seeing it as vile and identifying it with the emblem of Evil. The Iguana, like Mario and the Folletto, tries unsuccessfully to regain the father’s love to the point of faking or exaggerating injuries and illnesses.

Finally, another victim of rejection on the part of his master, is the puma Alonso. Just like Mario, the Folletto and Estrellita, Alonso is at first loved by his second master Julio, an arrogant, violent, selfish, and strong-minded boy, the emblem of the modern *superuomo*. Afterwards, however, Julio starts behaving

¹⁵⁵ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 65.

¹⁵⁶ In *Il cardillo addolorato* different cases of domestic victimisation see two extraordinary children as victims. The former, Sasà, experiences her mother’s lack of care and affection, which does not originate, however, from a sudden rejection. Elmina, in fact, is more of a mother to the extraordinary metamorphic child Hieronymus than to her own daughter. In a way, Elmina seems to devote her love to the weaker of the two, to the one rejected from society, and it is not clear whether Sasà really suffers from it, since her image constantly shifts from that of an innocent girl to that of a violent, scheming social climber. The second case regards Hieronymus bullied both by Geronte and Sasà, who makes him her favourite target. Hieronymus is targeted by another child, Gerontino Watteau a spoiled, insensitive, upper-class boy who abuses metamorphical Hieronymus verbally.

¹⁵⁷ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 125.

ambiguously, alternating gestures of affection with evil tricks up to the ultimate unjustified rejection. The animal who acts as a father figure to Julio, is rejected on the basis of his animal Otherness:

“Chi sei? Cosa vuoi? Vattene!” egli grida guardando me, ma il piede ancora levato contro l’esile corpicino di Alonso che, a quanto capisco, si era alzato, per così dire, per andargli incontro, ripetendo subito dopo: “Vattene! Tu puzzi!”.

Il misero piccino (ciò che posso vedere e capire, in un sentimento atterrito e finalmente sincero) è rotolato a terra nello stesso attimo, davanti a noi. Respira sì orribilmente, ma è silenzioso ora, e un minuto dopo distende la testina sul pavimento, guardando non più Julio, certo, ma il suo vecchio cielo, e muore. (*Alonso e i visionari*, p. 135)

The scene above is particularly harsh as the animal’s loyalty to his master is returned by Julio with a kick and with disgust for his animal nature ‘Tu puzzi!’. The rejection of Alonso coincides with his death and it is quite symbolic that the animal should eventually give up his unrequited love for Julio and look at the sky as if hoping to find peace and rest in death.

The reason why all of these characters undergo a sudden rejection rests in the author’s views on the relationship mankind has with the natural world and the extraordinary. As I mentioned above, Ortese has a negative conception of man as a violent, aggressive, and dominant being convinced he is entitled to rule all creatures despotically by right of superiority. According to Ortese, this presumed superiority is grounded, on the one hand, in intelligence and, on the other hand, from a religious perspective, in the belief of having a soul. It is important to understand what Ortese means by ‘intelligence’ and how she differentiates it from ‘reason’. The two concepts are different and opposed, the latter being the knowledge and observance of the

‘leggi – non visibili ma riconoscibili – che rendono possibile la vita’,¹⁵⁸ which is common to all living beings. Intelligence, instead, is a human prerogative the aim of which is to assault and break the laws of life followed by nature in order to conquer and dominate everything.¹⁵⁹ Men have been shown to be driven by intelligence and not by reason from the time that Adam and Eve chose to disobey God in the Garden of Eden, to deprive the tree of its fruit and to reject obedience to the natural laws of life in favour of evil.¹⁶⁰ The triumph of intelligence is identified by Ortese with the French Revolution and the Enlightenment,¹⁶¹ when intelligence, wrongly named reason, began its fatal dictatorship. Since the Enlightenment, in the name of rationality, society has followed the rules of intelligence to pursue objectives at odds with the laws of life, abusing the natural world and closing the doors to the existence of a reality beyond the one perceived with the senses. The second motif for the presumed superiority of mankind finds its roots in religious faiths that consecrate man as the only being endowed with an immortal soul in contrast to the natural world. The ‘popoli detti Senza Anima’¹⁶² are regarded, in fact, as symbols of Evil ‘E di che simbolo, se non del Male, detestato, sembra, da quel buon cristiano, o pagano, o di altre fedi, che è – non si può tacerlo – l’Erede della Creazione, il Primogenito, il figlio di Adamo?’.¹⁶³ Estrellita, for example, from the perspective of the Church, is seen as the Devil; a bishop is called to exorcise the house where she lives to allow

¹⁵⁸ Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, p. 138.

¹⁵⁹ See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, pp. 138-139: ‘Scopo della intelligenza, oggi, è l’assalto – non più solo discussione, non più critica e dialettica –, ma vero e proprio assalto alla Legge. Nella mira sono proprio l’accerchiamento e il rovesciamento della Legge. È l’assedio di una capitale, che determinerà, con la caduta di un regime odiato, la destituzione del Principe. L’intelligenza si pone ormai chiaramente, in questo tempo di abbaglianti trionfi, non più come *rivale* della ragione, ma come suo successore e erede. È l’erede’.

¹⁶⁰ See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, p. 139: ‘L’albero del bene e del male, e l’albero della vita sono stati le prime mire della intelligenza. Al diavolo l’Eden, sembra aver detto la celebre Coppia: sapere e dominare è tutto’.

¹⁶¹ See Chapter 4.

¹⁶² Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 158.

¹⁶³ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 160.

the Hopins to move in. Rejection by a parental figure thus becomes a metaphor of mankind's rejection of nature and, more widely, of the Other, once loved and cherished and then abused in the name of a rational, anthropocentric culture based on the principle of the superiority of man. As I have already pointed out when talking about the horse, and as other scholars have also highlighted,¹⁶⁴ Ortese's writings are literature of denunciation and a call for change in the hope of winning support from other intellectuals. Ortese advocates a denial of the hubris of rationality¹⁶⁵ to restore a peaceful order in which men, nature, women and the extraordinary Other coexist.

2.3 Victims of distorted and oppressive social conventions

As shown in the previous section, the agents perpetrating victimisation in the workplace and at home, are easily identifiable with parental figures and/or masters. In Masino's production, on the other hand, there are two other less easily recognisable causes of victimisation: distorted and oppressive social conventions and a tragic and unavoidable destiny, which I will explore in this section and also in the one following. Whereas Ortese's narratives aim to expose the problematic relationship of mankind with nature and the Other, many of Masino's works focus on unmasking opportunism, hypocrisy and the contradictions of the society of her time. The author portrays the victims of a hypocritical society founded on meaningless social rules, which they find it hard to comply with. Two key examples are found in *Nascita e morte della massaia* and in 'I Pellirosse',¹⁶⁶ where the protagonists are respectively the Massaia, and Nanni. As far as the former is concerned, to avoid deviating from the main topic area, I shall here only consider her childhood years.

¹⁶⁴ See Iannaccone; Baldi, "Un segreto lamento di perduti"; Wood, 'Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese'.

¹⁶⁵ Iannaccone, p. 112.

¹⁶⁶ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, pp. 117-123.

2.3.1 *Respira come uno che attende la condanna:*¹⁶⁷ **the Massaia and Nanni**

The young Massaia lives, of her own free will, completely detached from the real world in a trunk full of rubbish, insects and leftovers, all covered in dirt, dust, insects and crumbs. However, despite the grotesque, primitive way in which she lives, the girl deliberately chooses her lifestyle ‘dopo una infanzia da Peter Pan al femminile, ribelle alla propria crescita, alla quale resiste chiudendosi’.¹⁶⁸ She spends her time thinking, which reminds us of Morante’s Usepe in *La Storia*, who shares with the Massaia a contemplative nature and the habit of thinking as a favourite pastime. For Usepe, thinking seems to be a fantastic, joyful, innocent game which Morante links to the animal world through the figure of the *panda minore*;¹⁶⁹ for the young Massaia it is much more profound as ‘la bambina andava quotidianamente catalogando pensieri di morte’.¹⁷⁰ The Massaia’s family, representing social conventions and lack of values, does not understand the girl’s lifestyle and treats her as an inanimate object. The lexis used by Masino for the description belongs to the semantic area of household chores, which reflects the family’s perception of the girl:

la famiglia non badava piú a lei che come a un mobile. Ogni mattina le cameriere le spolveravano il capo, le spazzavano i piedi, le sbattevano e ripiegavano addosso gli abiti. A Pasqua la spingevano sul bancone tra le seggiole e le credenze di cucina, la lavavano con la

¹⁶⁷ Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 51

¹⁶⁸ Airoidi Namer, p. 167.

¹⁶⁹ See Morante, *Opere*, p. 587: ‘Fu allora che Usepe imparò a passare il tempo *pensando*. Si metteva i due pugni sulla fronte, e cominciava a *pensare*. A che cosa pensasse, non è dato saperlo; e si trattava, probabilmente, di futilità imponderabili. Ma è un fatto che, mentre lui stava così a pensare, il tempo comune degli altri per lui si riduceva quasi a zero. Esiste nell’Asia un piccolo essere detto *panda minore*, di un aspetto fra lo scoiattolo e l’orsacchiotto, il quale vive sugli alberi in boschi di montagna irraggiungibili; e ogni tanto scende in terra in cerca di germogli da mangiare. Di uno di questi panda minori si diceva che trascorresse dei millenni a pensare sul proprio albero: dal quale scendeva in terra ogni 300 anni. Ma in realtà, il calcolo di tali durate era relativo: difatti, nel mentre che in terra erano passati 300 anni, sull’albero di quel panda minore erano passati appena dieci minuti’.

¹⁷⁰ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, pp. 13-14: ‘la bambina andava quotidianamente catalogando pensieri di morte. Pensava e si mangiava le unghie; finite le unghie e i pensieri, masticava tozzi di pane e sfogliava libri in cerca di altro nutrimento’.

soda, le davano cera sui capelli, petrolio alle giunture, guardavano che la pelle del volto e delle mani non fosse tarlata, le accomodavano una ghirlanda di violacciocche sul capo e intorno al collo e ai polsi gale di carta velina azzurra o rosa, poi la spingevano nella stanza da pranzo tra le torte pasquali e i vassoi di uova sode, a che il prete la benedicesse, povera creatura. (*Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 16)

The quotation above, for example, contains a skilful selection of words typical of cleaning and household duties: ‘spolveravano’, ‘spazzavano’ ‘sbattevano e ripiegavano’, ‘la lavavano con la soda’, ‘davano cera’, ‘tarlata’. Finally, the young lady agrees to leave the trunk and become part of the society she initially rebelled against, aware of the fact that she is entering a fake world based on appearances where everyone is acting out set parts. In order to be presentable for a ball in her honour, which she sees as the utmost sacrifice, she subjects herself to a series of painfully hot baths. The baths and the water as symbols of purification recall the lustral water present in Ancient Greek iconography; in Euripides water is used as a purifying element before sacrificial death on the altar.¹⁷¹ Several elements describing her entrance to the ball, such as the white gown and pale nakedness, call up the image of a virgin on the point of being sacrificed.¹⁷² This is not only hinted at through the employment of iconographic images, but also clearly perceived and explicitly stated both by the girl and the guests, as the two extracts below show:

Rinuncio per pietà filiale e dunque merito ogni castigo. Cominciamo.

Cominciate a castigarmi; sono davanti a voi per questo. Regina

¹⁷¹ See Chapter 4.

¹⁷² See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 42: ‘Là in quell’angolo, in piedi, appoggiata tra le due pareti, stava la figlia nel violentato abito, nella sua monda nudità. Tutt’intorno a lei era una gran zona di vuoto e silenzio, indi cerchi si erano formati in cui le ragazze guardando alla donna troppo bianca nella sua carne e nei suoi abiti, parlavano in fretta, imbarazzate, con gli orecchi e la fronte rossi, e i giovani stavano in un rattratto silenzio, abbassati gli sguardi a terra’.

sbagliata che si conduce da sola al patibolo. (*Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 42)

“Strano sonno ha questa ragazza” pensavano ora gli invitati guardandola. “Respira come uno che attende la condanna, come un assassino sotto il capestro si contorce, e appare estenuata. Dorme come se accettasse una fatalità. (*Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 51)

Her first public appearance is marked by words of sacrifice, punishment and violence: ‘castigo’, ‘al patibolo’, ‘come uno che attende la condanna’, ‘come un assassino sotto il capestro’, ‘come se accettasse una fatalità’. In her adulthood, the Massaia’s life will be a constant struggle between the exasperated will to comply with the rules and be the perfect housewife and the longing for the happy childhood years in the trunk.

A second victim of oppressive social conventions is Nanni in ‘I Pellirosse’, who belongs to one of the most grotesque as well as best-portrayed groups of characters in Paola Masino’s depiction of childhood, a category which I have named ‘childish adults’. Childish adults are adults who either behave like children, or are convinced they have not grown up, due to madness or a sort of Peter Pan syndrome.¹⁷³ As a child, Nanni is a reserved boy who enjoys ‘giocare ai pellirosse’;¹⁷⁴ pretending to be an American Indian leader, he keeps a camp under the table and a doll as his Indian wife. However, for him this is not just a game, it is a reality he cannot let go of completely even in adulthood (he will always live it as an inner fantasy) and which, on several occasions, will make him an object of ridicule. Paola Masino shows Nanni as a melancholy figure: both in his boyhood and as an adult he is laughed at and bullied, he has to sacrifice and hide the world which to him

¹⁷³ See Chapter 5 for details about childish adults and the world of games.

¹⁷⁴ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 119.

is real and happy so as to be what society expects from him. In this short story, adulthood and childhood are two separate worlds that cannot communicate. The border line between the two stages in life lies precisely in imagination, an ability adults do not possess, but which Nanni still has. Outside, he complies as much as possible with what society demands, but inside he lets reason abandon him and goes back to living his fantasy:

Davanti al futuro suocero fu preso da uno strano pallore e si fece forza per non gridare: – Aquila Muta, tu mi darai tua figlia o sarò io questa volta a mangiarti la carne come spaghetti. – Ma seppe dominarsi e fu marito. (*Colloquio di notte*, pp. 119-120)

Despite the fact Nanni is a sad character, the depiction Masino makes of him and his world is not devoid of humour. In the extract above, the humour arises not only from the situation but also from the domestication of a foreign world like that of American Indians. Nanni's words to his future grandfather 'mangiarti la carne come spaghetti' sound funny rather than threatening. On his deathbed, Sequoia, his Indian wife-doll, appears to take him away with her and 'Finalmente egli entrava nella propria verità'.¹⁷⁵ Sequoia leads him to the world he belonged to, which he had been obliged to keep secret throughout his whole existence. His life 'sempre più squallida e sommersa dalle preoccupazioni'¹⁷⁶ is not worth living, but in death he finds the solace and happiness he had not been able to enjoy while he was victimised by society. Thus, there seem to be two truths, that of the child and that of the adult; they never meet, but coexist in Nanni. At last in death he can go back to living his fantasies as he used to do in his childhood when imagination was more powerful than reason.

¹⁷⁵ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 122.

¹⁷⁶ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 120.

2.3.2 Ortese's imperfect Heroes¹⁷⁷ in 'Pellerossa'

Nanni's American Indians are not unique in Masino's and Ortese's works. In the short story 'Pellerossa',¹⁷⁸ chronologically antecedent to Masino's 'I Pellirose', Ortese builds up a parallel between her personal experience of alienation from modern society and the oppression of entire populations carried out by colonisers. Young Ortese and her brother Manuele decide to decorate an empty room in their house. Sensitive to the American Indian cause,¹⁷⁹ the girl decides to devote her first painting to a large-sized Sioux Hero. The joy and satisfaction she initially feels in front of her work is soon replaced by fear and shock.¹⁸⁰ To reduce the emotional impact that the lonely Hero has on her, Ortese paints a group of Mexican rebels fighting against 'la civiltà invadente e brutta',¹⁸¹ singing songs of freedom and inviting her to join in. Then she adds a mob of Hispanic 'uomini barbari con donne e fanciulli che pareva turbati chiedessero conto della forzata prigionia'.¹⁸² These characters are for Ortese symbols of integrity, purity and uncontaminated

¹⁷⁷ The capital has been used as in the original text by Ortese (Eroe).

¹⁷⁸ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, pp. 21-30.

¹⁷⁹ See Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 23: 'ché da alcuni mesi, per certa lettura di opuscoli missionari in cui si deplorava il decadimento della bella razza americana tanto diletta a noi, io ero rimasta impressionatissima, mangiavo di malavoglia e unico mio conforto era una impetuosa discussione che aprivo giornalmente in famiglia sulla "viltà dei bianchi" e altre esagerazioni'.

¹⁸⁰ The passage about the pellerossa's creation bears similarities to Dr. Frankenstein's creation of the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831). Both Shelley's protagonist and Anna Maria Ortese's girl narrator create a being; at first they both feel shocked and wish to destroy the result of their work as they are scared and find the presence of the creature unbearable. Both of them realise that their creation is in the wrong place and feel responsibility for their action. Young Ortese says: 'si abbuiò in me non so che sgomento e poi m'accorsi che ciò veniva dall'intuizione mia d'un certo esagerato radiante da quella colorazione tutta primitiva; come un gelo iniziale che mi avesse presa innanzi alla proiezione oggettiva e sconcertante della mia passione. Appena capita la cosa, pallidissima, avrei voluto distruggere subito il lavoro parendome la presenza insostenibile'. See Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, pp. 24-25. Similarly, the creator of Frankenstein: 'I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. [...] I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created'. See Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. by M. K. Joseph (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 57-58. In both authors the creatures are primitive and therefore fundamentally good-natured beings. In Shelley it is lack of love and the cruelty of society that turn the creature into a revengeful being; similarly, in Ortese it is the conventional bourgeois context of employees and students that cause the Hero to look like a ridiculous outsider.

¹⁸¹ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 26.

¹⁸² Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 27.

primitiveness, victims of the oppression and subjection of a civilisation which makes them feel alienated:

io venivo sempre scoprendo in essi i difetti di costruzione che già mi avevano afflitta in Cavallo Bianco. E allora non potevo ancora intenderne la poesia, anzi la logica; ch , se gli Eroi erano sbagliati e inverosimili, questo appunto costituiva il loro pregio massimo, non formando la perfezione tecnica che la decadenza dell'eroicit : la quale   sbazzata appena, gigante, chiassosa, sbagliata a fondo e, soprattutto, vergine di meditati estetismi.

[...]

Cavallo Bianco era per  sempre nella pi  tenera profondit  dei miei sentimenti, forse per la stessa malinconia che di lui mi faceva pietosa, forse, e pi  inclino a crederlo, per la primitivit  potentissima che si sprigionava dalla sua persona [...] quella s  era una creatura umana, un uomo vero: colossale, sbagliato, ingenuo, feroce e pensieroso poi come tutti i selvaggi nei quali le passioni, non sfociando nell'abile dialettica, rimasero ferme negli occhi come quelli degli animali dolorosi e profondi. (*Angelici dolori*, pp. 26-27)

The adjectives that Ortese uses in the descriptions of the heroes, reveal her conception of what is heroic and noble. 'Sbagliato' and 'inverosimile' highlight the outcast, alienated condition of the characters, 'ingenuo', 'primitivo', 'vergine' stress their purity and primitiveness. Only as an adult does Ortese understand that heroes are such precisely because of their being different from the norm, they are heroes because they are the Other. Their isolation from and oppression by civilisation reflect Ortese's own sense of estrangement as a writer and status of outsider which has characterised her writing as well as her life. She herself admits 'Ormai della vita

civile io non comprendevo più niente',¹⁸³ and becomes aware of the 'ormai evidentissima inutilità [...] di fronte alla vita pratica, alla civiltà moderna'.¹⁸⁴ Besides, alienation does not just arise from the nature-civilisation dichotomy, but also from the childhood-adulthood opposition. When Manuele, at first a playmate and an accomplice, grows up, he stops sharing her dreams and games; likewise, her older brothers become authoritative and decide to pull down the paintings seeing them as mere pieces of paper. Childhood is identified with imagination, the ability to create and believe in a different reality, while adulthood, the age of reason, does not allow any room for imagination.¹⁸⁵ It is also important to notice how most of the Heroes created by young Ortese are Hispanic and express themselves in their native language. The cry for freedom 'Libertad, haz que dulce resuene'¹⁸⁶ is a line from the Venezuelan humanist Bello's (1781-1865) *Himno de Colombia*,¹⁸⁷ which Ortese refers to as *Himno de la Libertad*. Bello dedicated the text to Simón Bolívar, the political and military leader and liberator who first guided the Latin American struggle for independence from the Spanish Empire and was later to become president of the Republic of Gran Colombia, which included contemporary

¹⁸³ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 28.

¹⁸⁴ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 29. See note 41.

¹⁸⁵ Adult Ortese, in her isolation and alienation from modernity, has not totally lost the ability to imagine. She often still dreams of a Maria Rosaria to take her away; see Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 30: 'Strano a dirsi, io non posso fare a meno di attenderla. [...] E io pregando le reali cose e il lavoro che aspettino un poco, mi trovo a bordo della nave la quale è vuota e le sue sartie cantano di felici speranze invocando la terra d'Eroi'. Reason, however, has inevitably somehow reduced the imaginative power of adult Ortese. See Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 30: 'S'intende, sogni. Ma pur buono è questo tornare anche di alcuni momenti, con libero piacere e a volte lagrime, a quelli che uno amò Eroi mesti, e Cavallo Bianco e il fratello Manuele e tanti altri.' The memory of an irretrievable past seems to evoke Leopardi's pleasure of remembering: 'Per la copia e la vivezza ec. delle rimembranze sono piacevolissime e poeticissime tutte le immagini che tengono del fanciullesco, e tutto ciò che ce le desta (parole, frasi, poesie, pitture, imitazioni o realtà ec.). [...] Siccome le impressioni, così le ricordanze della fanciullezza in qualunque età sono più vive che quelle di qualunque altra età. E son piacevoli per la loro vivezza anche le ricordanze d'immagini e di cose che nella fanciullezza ci erano dolorose, o spaventose ec.' Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone di pensieri*, ed. by Anna Maria Moroni, 2nd edn (Milan: Mondadori, 1993), p. 705.

¹⁸⁶ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 22.

¹⁸⁷ Andrés Bello, 'Himno de Colombia', in *Cervantes Virtual*, <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/poesias--35/html/>> [accessed 21/08/2011].

Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama. In ‘Pellerossa’, Ortese quotes this text more than once, changing the words slightly to give it a more universal meaning. Bello’s ‘Colombianos, volad a las armas, repeled, |repeled la opresión’,¹⁸⁸ in Ortese’s version becomes ‘Ciudadanos, volad a las armas, |repeled, repeled la opresión’,¹⁸⁹ the replacement of ‘Colombianos’ with ‘Ciudadanos’ seems to respond to Ortese’s wish to remove the verse from its historical context and extend the appeal to all mankind. Likewise, Bello’s ‘Ciudadano, morir es mejor’¹⁹⁰ is turned by Ortese into ‘Ciudadanos, morir es mejor’,¹⁹¹ in this case the plural form ‘Ciudadanos’ is used because the Heroes are addressing the rest of the group. The influence of the Hispanic world on Ortese’s writing has been analysed by Mazzocchi in the article ‘Anna Maria Ortese e l’ispanità’.¹⁹² According to Mazzocchi, the roots of Ortese’s ‘ispanità’ are various and linked to her autobiographical experiences: the Catalan origins of her family, the Hispanic cultural heritage of Naples, where she lived and set many of her works, her readings and closeness to Hispanic literature.¹⁹³ On the function of the Hispanic elements in her writing Mazzocchi explains:

la funzionalità che l'elemento ispanico acquista nell'opera della scrittrice va individuata in primo luogo nelle potenzialità affettive e fantastiche che le sfumature ispaniche della lingua da un lato, e i riferimenti culturali iberici dall'altro, possono dare alla pagina, nella direzione di quell'onirico-allegorico-simbolico (i termini sono stati variamente impiegati dalla critica) in cui la scrittrice traspone la

¹⁸⁸ Bello, ‘Himno de Colombia’, lines 3-4.

¹⁸⁹ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 29.

¹⁹⁰ Bello, ‘Himno de Colombia’, line 16.

¹⁹¹ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 29.

¹⁹² See Giuseppe Mazzocchi, ‘Anna Maria Ortese e l’ispanità’, *MLN*, 112 (1997), 90-104.

¹⁹³ See Mazzocchi, p. 90.

propria realtà autobiografica, affermando i diritti dell'anima
individuale, e quindi della vita, sulle cose, sul mondo.¹⁹⁴

I agree with Mazzocchi when he says that the dream-like, remote, fairy-tale connotations that the Hispanic elements give to the text, help the author express her private pain, which becomes, thanks to these distant allegorical and symbolical elements, collective pain.¹⁹⁵ I would also add, however, that, in this text, as well as in *L'Iguana*, Hispanic cultural and linguistic elements are chosen to convey the brutality of colonisation, which victimised innocent, noble people, bringing about suffering and destruction. Ortese's proximity to the American Indian cause also has a biographical dimension. In 1996 she tried to save an American Indian, Scotty Lee Moore, from capital punishment and fought against the death sentence for half-American Indian, Joseph O'Dell. Ortese does not dispute their guilt but lays the blame on the marginalisation and degradation the two had experienced.¹⁹⁶

2.4 Victims of a tragic, unavoidable destiny

Besides society and its conventions, another cause of victimisation is the presence of a tragic, unavoidable destiny, which, in Masino plays a more important role than in Ortese. The two main Masinian characters, who are bound to be victims of such a destiny are Barbara in *Monte Ignoso* and Lino, the protagonist of the homonymous short story in *Colloquio di notte*. Both children, in fact, cannot escape the fate of a premature and absurd death. The only Ortesian victim of fate is Hieronymus in *Il cardillo addolorato*, who is also destined to die, unless adopted before his 300th birthday. The idea of weaker beings victimised by a force which is beyond their

¹⁹⁴ Mazzocchi, p. 91.

¹⁹⁵ See Mazzocchi, p. 99.

¹⁹⁶ See Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 625.

control, is at the heart of Morante's *La Storia*, where war and socio-economic conditions oppress children, animals, women and those at the margins of society.

2.4.1 *Monte Ignoso: vampe incendiarie presaghe di distruzione e di morte*¹⁹⁷

Destiny is the main victimiser in *Monte Ignoso*, where the victims are a child, Barbara, and her mother, Emma. Long before her daughter, Emma has started to be haunted by the protagonists of the biblical paintings in her house and, in particular, by the portrait of an ancestor-priest, Federico Vaira.¹⁹⁸ One day, the image of the priest starts haunting Barbara too. He first appears to the six-year-old child one afternoon while she is eating in the garden. Emma immediately understands the identity of the priest, 'uno vestito buffo', to whom Barbara is talking. She never questions the girl's sincerity and throws herself into a desperate and ferocious defence of her daughter, first arguing and smashing the portrait of Vaira, then sending her to a boarding school so as to protect her from her fate. She believes, wrongly, that she can prevent Barbara's death by an act of will, and states 'ma tu non devi morire, perché io non voglio'.¹⁹⁹ But the priest will appear to Barbara again on a school trip, ultimately causing her death. Although Barbara knows neither her

¹⁹⁷ Ghezzi, 'Fiamme e follia', p. 37.

¹⁹⁸ The biblical painting and the portrait of Monsignor Federico Vaira on the walls of Emma's house at Monte Ignoso, come to life at night when they carry out their century-long acts of violence, abuse and indecency. Murder, rape, treason and cheating occur amongst the protagonists of the paintings until daylight. As her mother before her, Emma is attracted by the paintings at night, becoming an accomplice of their misdoings. However, she is conscious of the negative influence they are exerting, forcing her to follow their examples and be a 'donna', Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 21. See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, pp. 21-22: 'Credevo di essere malata e non sapevo guarirmi e non soffrivo. Ora schianto di rabbia perché lo so che è lui, che sono loro, che mi torturano così. Hanno cominciato prima ancora che io nascessi. La mia mamma, la tua nonna, Barbara, li guardava quand'era incinta e la incantavano. Lei, ogni sera il marito (ma erano loro invece, ora lo so) la obbligava a essere una di queste donne, Esther o un'altra. Non posso dirti quello che facevano. Si mettevano in terra, qui davanti. Io sono nata così. Da allora, sempre, tutta questa gente mi è stata addosso. Io entro nei quadri, loro ne escono. Di notte. Tuo padre mai. Ma l'altro sì. Che cosa ti sto raccontando Barbara? L'altro non c'entra. È questo prete maledetto che mi spinge a farti male. Apposta, perché mi vuole'. Emma lays on herself the blame for Barbara's hallucinations and seeing the priest, she feels guilty as if she had contaminated her daughter by passing over her 'sangue malato', Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 64. In her struggle to save Barbara, Emma even invokes God and states: 'Io non sono più una donna. Sono una forza di amore materno: una tua forza. Sono un tuo miracolo e anche una dimostrazione. Se mi distruggi, distruggi la volontà materna, la concezione', Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 103.

¹⁹⁹ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 89.

mother's secrets, nor about the pictures, she seems to accept the idea that she is part of a wider plan. She precociously seems to understand that her life is linked to the red house of Monte Ignoso and asks: 'Sei proprio sicura, che vivrò ancora, oppure ho già vissuto tutto, qui?'.²⁰⁰ Once at boarding school, she seeks comfort in the memories of her garden, her *hortus conclusus*, but soon the contact with reality, with a world she neither knows nor loves, ends up by becoming a prison for her. Emma finally accepts her defeat in the struggle against the supernatural and Barbara, on her deathbed, once again proves to be, even though not completely, aware of the fact that it is her fate to die:

– Mammina, bisogna dirgli di farmi morire subito. Non posso più soffrire.

– A chi, Barbara? A chi, bisogna dirlo?

– A lui, mamma. Io non so come si chiama. Mamma cara, uccidimi te.

Emma gettò un altro urlo, lacerante. Non se ne accorse neppure. Le era nato su dal ventre, come nasce dagli occhi lo sguardo. (*Monte Ignoso*, p. 136)

In the passage quoted above, Masino once again presents infanticide in a positive way: it is Barbara herself who asks her mother to put an end to her life. Unlike Bernardo in 'Fame', however, Emma does not find the strength to kill her daughter. She is under the illusion that she can fight against and defeat their destiny, the presence of which is not only perceivable in connection with the events in the lives of the protagonists, but also throughout the novel; Masino, in fact, skilfully depicts Monte Ignoso as a sinister place cursed by an omen of impending death. The dominant colours are the red of fire and blood and the darkness of shadows. The reference to fire hinted at in the name, 'Ignoso', and its nature (it is a volcano)

²⁰⁰ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 89.

metaphorically refers to the ‘vampe incendiarie presaghe di distruzione e di morte’,²⁰¹ a sentence which I have used as a heading for this subsection. According to Ghezzo, Monte Ignoso, characterised by a devastating fury and a feral carnality where the distinctions between life and death, folly and reason, love and incest are blurred, mirrors the iconic violence of a biblical microcosm.²⁰²

2.4.2 *Si era dovuto contentare di stracciare un solo minuscolo bambino:*²⁰³

‘Lino’

Angelic and picaresque at once, extraordinary child Lino²⁰⁴ redeems and comforts the protagonist and her children at various difficult stages of their lives, rescuing them from execution, hunger and despair. He dies in a rather absurd and avoidable manner, which seems even more unbelievable considering the intelligence, the sharpness and shrewdly resourceful approach to life he displays during the hardships of war. Lino, the child who was able to take care of others, inexplicably dies a death which could only have occurred to the most innocent, unaware, naïve child:

Il Capufficio in persona aveva dato fuoco alla mina che aveva fatto saltare l’edificio. Era un serio impiegato, faceva bene fino in fondo tutto il dover suo: certo però si doveva esser molto doluto di far crollare l’edificio vuoto, quando tutta la folla gli era scivolata via dai corridoi incontro alla libera morte degli uomini vivi. Il Capufficio si era dovuto contentare di stracciare a pezzi, insieme con le colonne gli schedari e i cornicioni, un solo minuscolo bambino che era venuto per caso a giocare sulla soglia del ministero: un bambino che non aveva neppure iniziali nell’alfabeto, un bambino di cui non fu ritrovato

²⁰¹ Ghezzo, ‘Fiamme e follia’, p. 37.

²⁰² Ghezzo, ‘Fiamme e follia’, p. 40.

²⁰³ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 84.

²⁰⁴ In Chapter 3 I shall analyse Lino as a divine child.

intatto che il volto, con gli occhi azzurri socchiusi e un fondo sorriso
sulle labbra. (*Colloquio di notte*, p. 84)

On a closer reading, however, it is clear that, despite its absurdity, the Capoufficio has to be contented with blowing up an empty building and the death of just one, insignificant, tiny child. Lino's death is not an accident, but a predestined event, which is why I chose the sentence 'si era dovuto contentare di stracciare [...] un solo minuscolo bambino' as the heading of this subsection. Lino's destiny has a Christological connotation, it is the death of a saviour who lives to rescue others to eventually redeem them through his sacrifice. The interpretation of Lino as a saviour is also supported by the angelic iconographic nature of this ageless child: the small size, the pale white complexion, the blue eyes and the serene smile. Lino seems to anticipate Morante's Usepe in *La Storia*, another child saviour who dies prematurely, leaving behind the horrors of war. Usepe's Christological traits are, however, more explicit than Lino's angelic nature. While pregnant, Ida has a dream where she is rejected by the hospital because of her Jewish origins, just like Mary and Joseph who had difficulty finding shelter. The worsening of his health with more frequent epileptic attacks is his Passion. Finally, Ida finds Usepe lying on the floor with his arms wide open like Jesus on the cross and holds him in her arms in a posture which is reminiscent of the *Pietà* in figurative arts. The similarities between Lino and Usepe, are not to be found only in the sacrificial nature of their fate, but also in their physical description. They are both very small in size and with expressive eyes. Lino's 'occhi sbarrati',²⁰⁵ when saving the protagonist from

²⁰⁵ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 74.

execution, cannot but be compared to Ueseppe's 'occhi spalancati'²⁰⁶ at the sight of the Jews being deported to the concentration camps.

2.4.3 *La sua fine è così certa, che quei due non conettono più:*²⁰⁷ Hieronymus

The only Ortesian character to be victimised by fate, besides being subjected to domestic abuse, is Hieronymus Käppchen in *Il cardillo addolorato*. The name, age and nature of the child shifts continuously. Only after several searches can Neville reconstruct, at least partially, the puzzle and the mystery surrounding this metamorphic child. According to the Duca Benjamin von Ruskaja, Hieronymus Käppchen was adopted from Cologne in 1779 by Don Mariano, who was unaware of his extraordinary and metamorphic nature:

Di costui, demone o folletto che sia, altro non posso dire, in sostanza, che è uno sventurato, fuori – per nascita – della Nostra Madre Chiesa... dannato, dunque, al nulla, e con una scadenza, che farebbe tremare chiunque, sulle spalle...”.

“E... non si può sapere” con orrore e tristezza, ma anche, forse, un filo di pietà il principe “cosa, alla fine, potrebbe salvarlo... [...]?”.

“Nulla più che un vero atto di adozione...registrato dal Tribunale di Napoli. Purtroppo, questo documento non fu mai completato, per l’opposizione del marito della Helm, allora in vita – uno scrupolo cristiano. Don Mariano neppure, essendo vedovo (era indispensabile per l’adozione la controfirma di una moglie), poté farlo. [...] Quando Elmina fu grandina, e cominciò a comprendere, promise a suo padre che si sarebbe sposata solo per questo... per realizzare l’adozione. Sposò, per questa ragione e solo con questo intento (non amava gli uomini né era portata alla maternità), il povero Albert. Ma il sacrificio, o l’inganno – chiamalo come vuoi –, fu vano. Albert,

²⁰⁶ Morante, *Opere*, p. 544.

²⁰⁷ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 299.

educato alla francese, prese la cosa a ridere. E il motivo per cui, ora, ella sembrava accettare Alphonse come marito, non era altro: la sognata adozione del giovanotto! Ormai egli ha ventisei anni, per la gente – per chi conosce i fatti, assai di più. E la sua fine è così certa, che quei due non conettono più”. (*Il cardillo addolorato*, pp. 298-299)

The Duca identifies his fate with the deadline by which the child has to be officially adopted, else he will die. In this extract from the novel, Ortese merges Hieronymus’ unchangeable fate with other privileged themes, which contribute to the suggestion of the inevitability of the child’s destiny. First of all, the idea that the extraordinary Hieronymus is born ‘fuori – per nascita – della Nostra Madre Chiesa’ and therefore is ‘sventurato’ and ‘dannato’. Discussing the frequent rejection by a parental figure affecting many Ortesian characters above, I explained that the author imputes to religious belief one of the causes of men’s arrogance and presumed superiority, which leads mankind to victimise the Other. This is the case of Hieronymus who, born ‘demone o folletto’, and therefore a pagan creature, is rejected and condemned by the Church and consequently by mankind conditioned by religion. For example, Brigitta Helm’s husband refused to adopt him precisely on the grounds of his faith, a ‘scrupolo cristiano’, thus undermining one of the child’s chances of reintegration into society. Another theme which emerges from this quotation and determines Hieronymus’ fate is Albert’s education, in fact he was ‘educato alla francese’. As I have already stated, Ortese ascribes to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution the rupture between mankind and the Other (nature and the extraordinary). Albert’s eighteenth-century education did not allow him to understand and believe in Hieronymus’ nature and condition, and this was a further hindrance to his adoption.

Finally, another theme dear to Ortese, which I will analyse further on in this thesis, but which I wish to anticipate here,²⁰⁸ is that of appearances and reality; for Ortese, what appears and is perceived by the senses is often deceptive. This is the case with Hieronymus' age. The child-animal is twenty-six years old, but the Duca specifies 'ventisei anni, per la gente – per chi conosce i fatti, assai di più'. Hieronymus' age shifts throughout the novel; in his search for the truth about the child, Neville encounters confusing, often contrasting versions. His friend Nodier tells him Hieronymus is twenty-seven years old and that he will become or go back to being a normal child at the age of thirty. Ferrantina, however, says Hieronymus is at least thirty, if not three hundred years old. The uncertainty about Hieronymus' age also hinders a clear perception of the proximity of the deadline; Nodier, for example, is not prepared to wait three years to marry Elmina as only after Hieronymus becomes a boy, will she be able to be happy and free. As Emma does for Barbara, Elmina too embarks on a desperate and unsuccessful fight to change Hieronymus' destiny. His fate cannot be changed: even the few people who could have helped him (Notaio and Luigi Re) do not act promptly enough to save him and in the end Nodier and Teresa will kill him.

2.5 The consequences of victimisation on children

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Masino and Ortese do not only limit themselves to the portrayal of victimisation in its several forms and agents, but also depict the tragic effects it has on the victims. In particular, they show the consequences of victimisation on children whether ordinary or extraordinary. The two authors seem to identify the repercussions of victimisation, on the one hand, with

²⁰⁸ See Chapter 3.

the fact that the children become adults too quickly and, on the other, with widespread physical or mental handicap. Considering extraordinary as well as ordinary children in the works by Masino and Ortese, one immediately perceives that many of them are wiser than their years. They are children who have had to grow up very quickly in response to harsh circumstances and the negative models around them. They have had to become cunning and resourceful enough to get by. However, one also notices that many of these children and animals, particularly those who are less independent and sharp, are affected by disease or physical and mental deficiency, which seem to be the consequences of lack of attention, of love and care compounded by the general decay in the environment. I shall first look at the extraordinary and ordinary children who behave in a manner far beyond their years. I shall then move on to consider the theme of disability and illness among children and animals.

2.5.1 Children older than their years

The example of a child who is too wise and mature for her age is Barbara in *Monte Ignoso*. Her intelligence emerges from her games, the way she accepts her mother's decisions and, most of all, her behaviour towards her mad father. As for the games, Barbara 'amava le cose grandi e misteriose, Dio, la Morte, l'Amore'²⁰⁹ and in her play she discusses themes of universal prominence more suitable for an adult

²⁰⁹ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, pp. 18-19: 'Molte volte giocavano loro tre insieme, ed erano felici. Si rincorrevano, leggevano favole, passeggiavano abbracciati ragionando seriamente di cose universali. Barbara amava le cose grandi e misteriose, Dio, la Morte, l'Amore. Ne parlava come di persone reali e cercava di rappresentarle. "Dio è più grande dei monti. La Morte è più grande di Dio. Non è cattiva, ma è tanto più in su di noi che le nostre preghiere non le arrivano. Allora se mamma dice: - Morte cara, Morte bella, non prendermi Barbara - la Morte non sente e prende Barbara. Allora mamma piange e tutti intorno dicono: - Morte sei cattiva, esci subito da questa casa. - Invece la Morte mi ha preso perché mi vuole bene, come mamma mi ha scelto tra tutti i bambini di Dio perché le piacevo più degli altri. Così ognuno prende quello che gli piace, anche se non si deve. L'Amore splende come il sole e traversa il cielo cantando". Emma e Giovanni provavano tanta meraviglia e pena quando la sentivano dire queste cose. Cercavano distrarla e la portavano in qualche casa amica dove potesse trovare ragazzi della sua età per giocare'.

intellectual mind than for a child. When her mother decides to send her to boarding school, she agrees without hesitation, she controls her tears and, to avoid too much pain, asks only to be given a day's notice of the departure date. Barbara's maturity is, however, mostly evident in her relationship with her father Giovanni. Father and daughter play a game where roles are reversed, Barbara is the mother and Giovanni is the child. Because of his mental instability, the man confuses the game with real life, regresses to childhood and believes she is the gentle, kind, loving mother he never had. Barbara, unlike Giovanni, knows when the game should end; while they play, she is happy to act the mother, but, outside playtime, she goes back to her role as a daughter. About to leave for boarding school, Barbara begs her father not to call her 'mother' and not to play anymore: 'Non giocare più ora, babbo. Io devo partire davvero'.²¹⁰ As this quote shows, the girl distinguishes fiction from reality, while Giovanni confuses the two. An exploration of the dynamics of this mother-son game will be made below where I shall also consider Giovanni's madness as well as Barbara's reaction.

In *Monte Ignoso* Barbara is not the only child who is older than her years. The village children invited to Barbara's party also appear more mature, but their adult-like behaviour does not have a positive connotation as it does in Barbara's case. These are probably among the best examples of children whose childhood has been stolen by harsh circumstances, poverty or negative adult models:

Distribuirono la merenda ai bambini. Un pane, due manciate di noci, quanta frutta volevano. Entrarono in casa più volte a riempire le ceste. I fanciulli non sapevano dove mettere tanta roba: se ne empivano le tasche il berretto le sottanine le camicie. In breve si stabilirono, qua e là, piccoli mercati, dove i più furbi ingannavano sfacciatamente gli

²¹⁰ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 99.

sciocchi barattando noci marce con nespole buone, temperini, palline di vetro. Sorsero risse e guerre furibonde. Partiti che difesero l'imbroglione, pochi timidi che parteggiavano per l'imbrogliato. Ora che si erano accorti di essere i padroni, diventavano sicuri e prepotenti. (*Monte Ignoso*, p. 82)

The passage above shows how, in their games, children tend to reproduce the work pattern they see in the adult world around them: stronger children bully weaker ones, violence is repeatedly used, children are greedy and take advantage of Emma's generosity, and on the market stalls they set up for fun, the only laws they seem to know are those of deceit and prevarication. The reflection of adults' violence, competitiveness and abuse of power in children's playtime can also be found in *Periferia*, which I shall look into further on.

As previously explained, the character of Lino combines an angelic nature with a picaresque appearance. Leaving aside his angelic and extraordinary features, Lino's picaresque traits are the evidence of a childhood being stolen by hardship and war. He is an orphan who lives by his wits, getting by in the streets and receiving occasional help from generous families. His circumstances have thus made him pragmatic and sharp, such qualities that the protagonist and her children do not possess. Lino does not hesitate, for example, to resort to thieving regularly so as to provide them with food, thus teaching a skill necessary to be able to fend for oneself. He also seems extremely resourceful and experienced, leading others to shelter, warning them against perils and constantly checking on their safety:

Presi di nuovo Lino sulle braccia e uscii con lui e i miei figlioli nella notte. Lino tremava di freddo ma non avevo modo di coprirlo. Fece qualche movimento per cui intesi che voleva camminare. Lo posai a terra e lui in fretta si avviò lungo i muri. Ogni tanto si voltava per

vedere se lo seguivamo, o per avvertirci con un gesto minimo di nasconderci ch  stava per passare la pattuglia di sorveglianza al coprifuoco. Camminammo fino all'alba da una all'altra rientranza dei muri, da un tronco a un pilastro, strisciando con le mani e le ginocchia su per una scala, andando carponi nei fossi. Qualche volta spararono intorno a noi e Lino tornava indietro a toccarci, se eravamo tutti sani.

(*Colloquio di notte*, p. 79)

As one can see in the text above, Masino skilfully stresses the contrast between Lino's personality as a mature, sharp, cunning figure who takes care of an entire family and his physical appearance as a small, trembling, mute creature. On the one hand, Lino 'tremava di freddo', he is held in the protagonist's arms like a baby until he wants to walk, 'voleva camminare' and his gesture is 'minimo'; on the other hand, he is a leader who can be fearless, 'in fretta si avvi  lungo i muri', cunning, 'per avvertirci [...] di nasconderci ch  stava per passare la pattuglia di sorveglianza al coprifuoco', and caring, 'tornava indietro a toccarci, se eravamo tutti sani'.

Similarly to the children of Monte Igneso, youths in Ortese's *Il mare non bagna Napoli* reflect in their behaviour and games the squalor of the reality they belong to. Later on in the thesis, I shall analyse the games these characters play, but here I would like to mention an emblematic example from the short story 'La citt  involontaria'.²¹¹ It is the case of Luigino, a child whose attitude is that of a cynical and experienced adult:

Gli era apparso su tutta la faccia un sorriso ambiguo, sprezzante, che contrastava bizzarramente con l'espressione assente e morta degli occhi. Sentendomi imbarazzata, come se il suo sorriso, misteriosamente maturo, non gi  pi  di bambino, ma di uomo, e di uomo avvezzo a trattare solo con prostitute, contenesse un giudizio,

²¹¹ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 73-97.

una valutazione atroce della mia stessa persona, mi allontanai di qualche passo. (*Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 79)

In the quotation above, Luigino's smile, which the narrator recognises immediately as 'di uomo' and even worse 'di uomo avvezzo a trattare solo con prostitute', makes the narrator feel uncomfortable, as if he were being judged. Further on in the short story, Ortese dwells critically upon the stolen childhood of these children,²¹² small men and women, who are experienced in the ways of life, corruption, vices and sex and denounces their condition with the following words: 'questa infanzia, non aveva d'infantile che gli anni'.²¹³

In *Il cardillo addolorato*, extraordinary Sasà too is, at times, older than her years. Her precocity does not involve a deeper understanding of life in all its aspects, but is only limited to the financial side of it. In fact, four-year-old Sasà proves to be a scheming social climber prepared to con her own mother in order to get a good dowry. She hates Hieronymus and is ashamed of him, identifying in the feather on his head 'una vera e propria sfida al suo spirito borghesuccio, alla sua smania di successo'.²¹⁴

Per questo Sasà – domani una squisita damina francese, spero – lo aborre. Egli rappresenta per lei, che già sogna, nel suo piccolo cuore di passerotto, di sposare il vero Geronte, il Durante-Watteau, egli rappresenta il nulla e la morte. Lo calunnia anche, credimi, e nel suo terrore di lui c'è non poca intenzione di mettergli contro Elmina. In

²¹² See Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 93: 'Io guardavo soprattutto i ragazzi, e capivo che essi potessero morire d'improvviso, correndo, come *Scarpetella*. Questa infanzia, non aveva d'infantile che gli anni. Pel resto, erano piccoli uomini e donne, già a conoscenza di tutto, il principio come la fine delle cose, già consunti dai vizi, dall'ozio, dalla miseria più insostenibile, malati nel corpo e stravolti nell'animo, con sorrisi corrotti o ebeti, furbi e desolati nello stesso tempo. Il novanta per cento, mi disse la Lo Savio, sono già tubercolotici o disposti alla tubercolosi, rachitici o infetti da sifilide, come i padri e le madri. Assistono normalmente all'accoppiamento dei genitori, e lo ripetono per giuoco. Qui non esiste altro giuoco, poi, se si escludono le sassate'.

²¹³ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 93.

²¹⁴ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 306.

realtà, è Gerontuccio che ha paura di lei... Ed è questo il preciso motivo per cui Elmina lo soccorre sempre. (*Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 307)

As for all the other children in this section, Alessandrina's evil and scheming nature is not her fault, but the result of the negative influence of those who surround her. In particular there is Ferrantina-Madame Civile who, to take revenge on her ex-husband, plays the family members off against one another, including Sasà and Hieronymus. She teaches Sasà to be mean 'la nostra ingenua Alessandrina ha appreso le vostre arti'.²¹⁵ In the portrayal of bourgeois Alessandrina Durprè, Ortese uses a subtle irony: in the quotations above, Sasà's precocious social climbing aspirations are ironically presented as 'spirito borghesuccio', 'una squisita damina francese'. Irony is clearly conveyed through the use of diminutive suffixes, which, combined with words like 'borghese' and 'squisita dama', convey a sarcastic, negative tone. On the subject of diminutives, Anna Laura and Giulio Lepschy rightly explain that, although suffixes are generally divided into four categories (diminutivi, accrescitivi, vezzeggiativi, and peggiorativi or spregiativi), it is difficult to attribute one or more of these values to the suffixes themselves, as the effect is determined by the word that is modified or by the context.²¹⁶ Ortese's choices are skilful, precisely in this respect: she uses suffixes with carefully selected words with the aim of creating certain effects such as irony. In this case, the use of the diminutive and generally endearing suffix -uccio with the adjective 'borghese' in its negative connotation, creates an ironic effect. Likewise, the use of the diminutive, endearing suffix -ino/a to describe a four-year-old social climber, gives the context a humorous touch.

²¹⁵ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 381.

²¹⁶ Anna Laura Lepschy and Giulio Lepschy, *The Italian Language Today*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 177.

2.5.2 Children affected by disability and illness

When I started looking at Masino's and Ortese's children and animals, it was immediately clear that many of them – mainly children and metamorphic children rather than ordinary animals – are affected by different forms of disability and illness. Lanslots describes the metamorphic creatures of the trilogy as 'creature zoppicanti'.²¹⁷ I believe this term can be more appropriately used to define the characters affected by a physical disability, whom I intend to describe here. Their condition is neither treated nor sympathised with by adults but rather ignored, misinterpreted and in some cases directly brought on by the adults themselves. I firmly believe that widespread suffering and disability affecting Masinian and Ortesian characters is no coincidence: the two authors use this recurrent theme to strengthen their picture of victimisation, laying bare its inevitably disastrous consequences on the youngest, weakest and most defenceless beings. Illness and handicap in ordinary and extraordinary children thus become symbolically synonymous of violence and abuse or simply illustrative examples of a society that does not care. In Masino's works, handicap, excluding madness, which I will discuss further on and which affects male adults, is not as widely present as in Ortese's production, where it is a recurrent theme. However, in *Periferia* Armando is a disabled ordinary child character.

2.5.3 Armando and Eugenia: the theme of sight

Periferia's Armando is extremely short-sighted and, as the boy explains to his friends, his impaired sight is due to his parents' heavy beatings to his head. He has learned to live with his problem and to take full advantage of it when playing with the other children. 'L'idea di nascondere dietro di sè uno che ci vedesse era dello

²¹⁷ Lanslots, pp. 105-121.

stesso Armando che aveva rapidamente imparato a sfruttare la propria cecità'.²¹⁸

Thus Armando, like the other children who have to grow up too quickly, has learnt to bear his misfortunes and to get along by making the most of them whenever possible.

Through Armando's story Masino develops the theme of vision, a topic also present in Ortese's work. When Armando wears his glasses for the first time, his reaction is that of disillusionment and frustration:

– Sapete che cosa vi dico? Che il mondo senza occhiali è molto più bello. Ora che lo so com'è, non capisco che gusto c'è a veder bene. Con gli occhiali tutto è piccolo con una striscia nera intorno, invece, senza, tutto è morbido come fatto di nebbia, non si vede mai la fine, ci si immagina quello che si vuole. (*Periferia*, p. 77)

From Armando's words above, we understand that Masino seems to share Leopardi's poetics of the indefinite/infinite. In *L'Infinito*,²¹⁹ Leopardi's image of the hedge restricting the view allows imagination to sweep over the infinite of space and time; likewise Armando's eye problem makes him see the things around him with indistinct borders, as if everything was 'morbido'.²²⁰ Armando's short-sightedness and his reaction to clear vision with the glasses cannot but be compared to Eugenia's experience in Anna Maria Ortese's 'Un paio di occhiali'.²²¹

²¹⁸ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 38.

²¹⁹ Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti –con introduzione e commento di Mario Fubini* (Turin: Loescher Editore, 1964), pp. 114-117.

²²⁰ Besides the image of the hedge in *L'Infinito*, the concepts of imperfect sight and the infinite are also present in other *Canti*. These poems are mainly set in a moonlit landscape, where objects possess indistinct contour lines. Another example is the canzone *Ad Angelo Mai quand'ebbe trovato i libri di Cicerone della Repubblica*, see Leopardi, *Canti*, pp. 50-60, where the awareness of borders is seen as an obstacle to the power of imagination and thus to the perception of the infinite. In this poem, Leopardi refers in particular to the discovery of America, which has led to the end of the imagination of the infinite blurred borders of the known world. He believes that unclear sight, produced by factors such as a partial or broken light, shadows of darkness, reflexes, a cloudy sky, is a source of *piacere* as it allows imagination to run wild. This idea is also present in *Zibaldone*: 'A questo piacere contribuisce la varietà, l'incertezza, il non veder tutto, e il potersi perciò spaziare coll'immaginazione, riguardo a ciò che non si vede.' Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, p. 633.

²²¹ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 15-34.

Eugenia, a young Neapolitan girl suffering from a strong myopia is about to put on spectacles for the first time. As soon as she tries them on, in a wealthy Neapolitan area, Eugenia is amazed by what she sees from the window. However, her reaction when she first wears glasses in her poor, squalid surroundings is very different. She is horrified at what she sees and feels sick:

Eugenia, sempre tenendosi gli occhiali con le mani, andò fino al portone, per guardare fuori, nel vicolo della Cupa. Le gambe le tremavano, le girava la testa, e non provava più nessuna gioia. [...] Improvvisamente i balconi cominciarono a diventare tanti, duemila, centomila; i carretti con la verdura le precipitavano addosso; le voci che riempivano l'aria, i richiami, le frustate, le colpivano la testa come se fosse malata; si volse barcollando verso il cortile, e quella terribile impressione aumentò. Come un imbuto viscido il cortile, con la punta verso il cielo e i muri lebbrosi fitti di miserabili balconi; gli archi dei terranei, neri, coi lumi brillanti a cerchio intorno all'Addolorata; il selciato bianco di acqua saponata, le foglie di cavolo, i pezzi di carta, i rifiuti, e, in mezzo al cortile, quel gruppo di cristiani cenciosi e deformi, coi visi butterati dalla miseria e dalla rassegnazione, che la guardavano amorosamente. Cominciarono a torcersi, a confondersi, a ingigantire. Le venivano tutti addosso, gridando, nei due cerchietti stregati degli occhiali. Fu Mariuccia per prima ad accorgersi che la bambina stava male, e a strapparle in fretta gli occhiali, perché Eugenia si era piegata in due e, lamentandosi, vomitava. [...] Eugenia,

pallida come una morta, si sforzava inutilmente di rovesciare, perché non aveva più niente. I suoi occhi sporgenti erano quasi torti dalla sofferenza, e il suo viso di vecchia inondato di lacrime, come istupidito. Si appoggiava a sua madre e tremava.

“Mammà, dove stiamo?”. (*Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 33-34)

The description of Eugenia's reaction has far more tragic connotations than Armando's. While clear sight is for Armando a barrier to the imagination and the perception of the infinite, for Eugenia, it is the moment when she becomes aware of the misery and sadness of the world around her, which, at first, she does not even recognise. As Baldi clearly explains in an article appropriately called 'Infelicità senza desideri',²²² 'In questa tragedia dell'infanzia gli occhiali cerchiati di metallo divengono triste metafora di un'iniziazione all'ingiustizia sociale, di un'acquisita consapevolezza che dissipa ogni fraintendimento e speranza'.²²³ In the same article, Baldi underlines that the revelation of social injustice occurs through the presence of the marvellous. In fact, to unveil the truth of Eugenia's world, Ortese resorts to the breaking up of the dream, the fantasy represented by the beautiful reality Eugenia had seen from the shop window.²²⁴ The entire story, in Sharon Wood's words, is built precisely on the clash between utopian and dystopian vision.²²⁵ The symbolic nature of this experience of initiation is also highlighted, as Cosetta Seno Reed points out, by the climate of choral expectation around the girl when she puts on the spectacles for the first time.²²⁶ Armando, who had already experienced the wrongs of the world (his mother's beatings), does not like what he sees through the glasses as it restricts the world of imagination in which he had taken refuge to escape from reality. Eugenia, on the other hand, does not like wearing glasses because they afford

²²² Baldi, 'Infelicità senza desideri', pp. 81-104.

²²³ Baldi, 'Infelicità senza desideri', p. 89.

²²⁴ Baldi, 'Infelicità senza desideri', p. 89.

²²⁵ See Wood, "'Such stuff as dreams are made on'", *Italian Women's Writing, 1860-1994* (London: Athlone, 1995), p. 170. In this article, Wood compares Ortese's 'Un paio di occhiali' to Poe's *The Spectacles* (1844), where glasses are also the means for the protagonist to gain awareness of reality. Poe's story is, however, much more light-hearted and humorous. It is very likely that Ortese, an admirer of Poe's writing, was familiar with the short story. The homonymy of the two protagonists Eugenia and Eugénie could support the idea that Ortese had Poe's short story in mind when writing 'Un paio di occhiali'.

²²⁶ Cosetta Seno Reed, 'Anna Maria Ortese: *Un paio di occhiali e Interno familiare*. Due diversi tipi di estraniamento', *Rassegna Europea di Letteratura Italiana*, 20 (2002), 131-142, p. 135.

her an awareness of the negative aspects of the world she did not have before: ‘Mammà, dove stiamo?’ she wonders. Another reason why Eugenia’s reaction is much more tragic is the fact that Ortese skilfully builds up the intensity of the moment. First, she emphasises the high expectations of the child who looks forward to her glasses hoping to be able to enjoy a view like the one she had seen the first time. Then she stresses the girl’s disappointment when faced by the degraded environment where she finds herself to be living. Sight, understood as the acquisition of awareness of the wrongs of the world, in ‘Un paio di occhiali’, is not only represented by Eugenia’s final reaction to the spectacles, but is given voice by other characters like her aunt, Nunzia, who says: ‘figlia mia, il mondo è meglio non vederlo che vederlo’²²⁷ and the *marchesa* who, to mock Eugenia, says: ‘A te, che ti serve veder bene? Per quello che tieni intorno!’²²⁸

Like other child characters I have already considered, Armando and Eugenia are also shown as older than their years. Armando, sounds like an adult when, approaching the subject, he says: ‘Sapete che cosa vi dico?’,²²⁹ and Eugenia, who finally gains knowledge of the world, with ‘il suo viso di vecchia’,²³⁰ is described as an old woman.

2.5.4 *Tubercolotici, rachitici o infetti da sifilide*:²³¹ illness and disease

Disabled characters are present in Ortese’s production right from her first collection of short stories *Angelici dolori*, where we find a deformed child. In the short story ‘Una macchia’,²³² the narrator enters a country inn where he is served by someone

²²⁷ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 18.

²²⁸ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 29.

²²⁹ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 77.

²³⁰ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 34.

²³¹ Adapted from Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 93.

²³² Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, pp. 354-357.

who first appears to be an animal but then turns out to be a little girl.²³³ In many ways the child anticipates other Ortesian characters with whom she shares some traits: like Estrellita, she is a servant perceived as an animal with the gaze of an old woman; like Hieronymus she limps and walks similarly to an animal learning its first steps. Her deformed, repugnant body is completely in contrast with the vital, spring-time nature about to burst outside the inn. When the narrator sees her caressing a blooming tree, which, with all its beauty, almost seems to be mocking the poor girl,²³⁴ he cries and is totally disillusioned with divine justice. What is also different in this short story is that it is one of the rare cases where nature has a negative connotation and plays the role of the victimiser rather than the victim.

Luciana Ombra is a disabled character in the short story 'Gli Ombra';²³⁵ she is an eight-year-old girl who finally dies after a long heart disease. Luciana, whose body is swollen and almost black, is bedridden and looked after by her family who has never mentioned her existence to anyone on the grounds of 'umano pudore di

²³³ See Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 355: 'Non avevo mai visto quella creatura informe, vestita di nero (era il mattino di Pasqua) come se per essa non esistessero la natura e la gioia, e la vita fosse una penombra, un lutto continuo. Si sarebbe detta un animale, cane o capra, che da poco avesse imparato a camminare sulle zampe posteriori. Procedeva infatti in modo curioso, una specie di saltellio, e così arrivò dietro il banco. Allora mi guardò con due occhi piccoli e tranquilli, occhi, pensai, non avvezzi alla luce, di dietro una massa di capelli grigi di polvere, squallidi come la vecchiaia. Anche il giubbettino che indossava era lacero, sporco, e al posto dei bottoni c'era dello spago. Dava l'impressione di essersi trascinata sottoterra, per arrivare fin lì. Mi guardava con un sorriso tenue, gelido. Era una bambina'.

²³⁴ See Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 356: 'Con una manina adunca, una specie di zampa che usciva dalla manica della veste, sporgeva in fuori, fino a toccare l'albero. I suoi occhi erano così impassibili, il suo viso così demente, che stentai a intendere che cosa facesse lì, con la sua mano vicino allo splendore di quell'albero. Poi capii improvvisamente; lo accarezzava.

Il suo gesto era così timido, così segreto, da far sì che il significato ne sfuggisse a prima vista, sotto l'impressione di un atto meccanico e privo di senso. [...] ma ecco che la sua mano, quello che in lei era vivo, benché assolutamente privo di espressione e di forza, strisciava, per così dire, verso quella perfezione, quella gioia, la cercava senza saperlo né vederla, con uno spasimo e un'umiltà che rimanevano senza risposta, perché la forma non può rispondere all'informe, né il puro all'impuro, né la gioia infinita a una tristezza ugualmente infinita. Infatti il pescio, sotto la carezza di quella orribile creatura, rimaneva indifferente, e tutte le sue bocche continuavano a ridere e a offrirsi all'azzurro, al calore del sole che lo avviluppavano'.

²³⁵ Ortese, *L'infanta sepolta*, pp. 139-144.

una sventura'.²³⁶ The author gives particular emphasis to Luciana's cry, which she compares to the sound of two natural elements seeking freedom: a stream of water trying to reach the sea and a fish trying to escape from a net.²³⁷ The images of the stream and of the trapped fish metaphorically stand for the girl's life of imprisonment, which will only find rest in death. Another interesting aspect is, once again, Ortese's polemical attitude towards the Church. Luciana's relatives all demand to know what appears in front of her on her deathbed and themselves suggest what the vision could be. Her mother wants to learn what she sees, her aunt insists on her seeing a palace, a lady in pink, angels and a beautiful garden; her father, on the other hand, expects her to see God. The girl, instead, responds: "Niente vedo, papà" disse a un tratto con una voce tranquilla e come spezzata. "Voi mi dite bugie",²³⁸ in a phrase, dismantling the family's Catholic beliefs. Her voice is 'tranquilla' as though to signify that death does bring peace, albeit not the religious one. As I will explain in Chapter 3, the girl cannot see anything because, having no faith, she does not believe.

In the short story 'La città involontaria' most child figures are ill or disabled.²³⁹ Suffering, handicap, illness and lack of care represent the moral degradation of the

²³⁶ Ortese, *L'infanta sepolta*, p. 143.

²³⁷ See Ortese, *L'infanta sepolta*, p. 142: 'Improvvisamente mi colpì un gemito. La sua singolarità era in questo: che rassomigliava al rumore di un filo d'acqua che scorre tra alti monti neri, fra enormi cose impassibili, cercando la liberazione, il mare. Era qualche cosa di più triste di un semplice respiro umano'. See also Ortese, *L'infanta sepolta*, p. 144: 'Vidi che questa sussultava come un pesce nella rete, e tutti si buttavano contro il letto per vedere: era il momento'.

²³⁸ Ortese, *L'infanta sepolta*, p. 144.

²³⁹ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 73-97. Ugliness and mental health problems also affect the ordinary children in *I ragazzi di Arese* in *Silenzio a Milano*, a collection of journalistic pieces. Here the young offenders of an institution in Arese, near Milan, do not seem to have been imprisoned for breaking the law but just because they were a burden to their families. They are depicted as ugly, living dead. See Anna Maria Ortese, *Silenzio a Milano* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1986), pp. 46-47: 'La pelle era come cenere, gli occhi arrossati non dicevano intelligenza, né i volti la minima bellezza. Erano anzi notevolmente brutti, con un che di anormale, in ogni caso, come se la natura avesse posto mano alla loro formazione con del materiale di scarto'. Ortese's encounter with two boys at the institution is similar to Daddo's first meeting the Iguana, when he thought she was an old lady. In Ortese, *Silenzio a Milano*, p. 46: 'Improvvisamente, scorgemmo due persone. Erano due vecchietti,

place and the miserable living conditions. Luigino, whom I mentioned earlier in this chapter is blind:

“Nu pucurillo ce veco; mo’ veco ‘n’ ombra che acala ‘a capa. Ve ne jate, signò?”.

[...]

“V’accompagnasse, ma aspetto ‘n amico” proseguì con una nuova intonazione, dove la spavalderia della menzogna, necessaria a salvarlo, moriva in una specie di stupefatta pietà, d’intenerito calore.

(Il mare non bagna Napoli, p. 79)

Unlike Eugenia and Armando, who acknowledge their condition of impaired vision and live with it without complaining, Luigino tries to minimise it: ‘*nu pucurillo ce veco*’, ‘*V’accompagnasse, ma aspetto ‘n amico*’. When Ortese states: ‘la spavalderia della menzogna, necessaria a salvarlo’, she is explaining that this lie is clearly necessary for him to survive in an environment where only the strongest win and where disability could provide a target for victimisers.

Another child the narrator meets in the Granili,²⁴⁰ is Scarpetella who has died suddenly, without clinical reason, while playing with his peers. The dead body looks serene and happy; death, Ortese implies, is a better option for these children. In ‘La città involontaria’, we also encounter Nunzia, another suffering creature, waiting for

che si dirigevano verso noi con una strana andatura, automatica e rapida, goffa e piena di una bizzarra esaltazione. Avvicinandosi, vedemmo ch’erano due esseri giovani, di età imprecisabile, forse otto, forse sedici anni’.

²⁴⁰ The Granili is the setting of ‘La città involontaria’, a building similar to a beehive, where people live in harsh conditions. See Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 73: ‘È un edificio della lunghezza di circa trecento metri, largo da quindici a venti, alto molto di più. L’aspetto, per chi lo scorga improvvisamente, scendendo da uno dei piccoli tram adibiti soprattutto alle corse operaie, è quello di una collina o una calva montagna, invasa dalle termiti, che la percorrono senza alcun rumore né segno che denunci uno scopo particolare. Anticamente, le mura erano di un rosso cupo, che ancora emerge, qua e là, tra vaste macchie di giallo e ditate di un equivoco verde. Ho potuto contare centosettantaquattro aperture sulla sola facciata, di ampiezza e altezza inaudite per un gusto moderno, e la più parte sbarrate, alcuni terrazzini, e, sul dietro dell’edificio, otto tubi di fognatura, che, sistemati al terzo piano, lasciano scorrere le loro lente acque lungo la silenziosa muraglia’.

death. She is a child of two, but she seems to be a baby because of her retarded growth probably caused by malnutrition or a genetic disease:

In quel lettino, privo di biancheria, su un cuscino molto piccolo, sotto una giacca da uomo, incrostata e dura, riposava una neonata dal viso bizzarramente gentile e come adulto: un viso delicato, bianchissimo, illuminato da due occhi dove brillava l'azzurro della sera, intelligenti e dolci, che si muovevano in qua e in là, tutto osservando, con un'attenzione superiore a quella che può concepire un bambino di pochi mesi. Vedendoci, si posarono su noi, su me, salirono alla fronte, si girarono, cercarono la madre, come interrogando. La madre alzò con una mano la giacca, e vedemmo un corpicino della lunghezza di qualche palmo, perfettamente scheletrito: le ossa erano sottili come matite, i piedi tutti grinze, minuscoli come le zampine di un uccello.

(Il mare non bagna Napoli, p. 94)

Here the child's tragic condition is underlined both by the contrasting description of the poverty of the place where we can see a 'lettino, privo di biancheria', 'una giacca da uomo incrostata e dura' and by the delicate and angelic traits of the child herself with her white face and intelligent, loving blue eyes. The portrayal of Nunzia is particularly touching and contains many typical features of Ortese's children. Like many of such characters she looks older 'come adulto', 'con un'attenzione superiore', 'si posarono su noi, su me, [...] come interrogando'. An animal simile is used for the girl, 'i piedi tutti grinze, minuscoli come le zampine di un uccello', which likens Nunzia to a bird, and thus a metamorphic child. The use of similes is one of the linguistic devices employed by Ortese to create an indirect but constant association between children and animals.²⁴¹ Another typical feature of Ortese's depiction of children and particularly of extraordinary children is the use of series of

²⁴¹ See Chapter 4.

adjectives for character description.²⁴² This allows the reader to visualise the extraordinary creatures and bring them to life more easily. Nunzia too is depicted in this manner because, being compared to a bird, she is more similar to a metamorphic child with ‘un viso delicato, bianchissimo, illuminato da due occhi dove brillava l’azzurro della sera, intelligenti e dolci’.

Ortese’s representation of suffering childhood is not limited to the depiction of ordinary, real children, but also includes extraordinary characters. Sasà in *Il cardillo addolorato* is initially presented as a dumb, unintelligent creature devoid of any physical strength. Hieronymus il Portapacchi is also dumb with a lame right leg, which makes him walk like a chick, one of the animals he will turn into in his metamorphoses. Through Teresa’s remarks in reply to Nodier, Ortese voices her view of handicap and illness in youths as the result of the abominable living conditions, the degradation and the victimisation which worldly and unworldly children are subject to:

“Ma... non si potrebbe curare?” fece eco Nodier, [...]

“No, signor mio” spiegò Teresa, abbassando appena gli occhi; “del resto,” aggiunse “vi sono molti fanciulli, in Napoli, in questa condizione, lo avrete notato anche voi”. (Nodier non lo aveva notato).

“O muti, o ciechi, o zoppi. Spesso, anche cattivi. Frutto delle brutte condizioni del popolo, in questa città che ne vide tante...”. (*Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 228)

Mohammed in *Alonso e i visionari* has little shaking legs and does not speak.

2.5.5 Linguistic devices to emphasise frailty and disability

Weakness, fragility and handicap are not only explicitly referred to by the two authors, but also constantly and subtly emphasised through a skilful use of narrative

²⁴² See Chapter 4.

techniques and linguistic devices. This is particularly important in Ortese's works. As we have mentioned for *Estrellita*, Ortese prefers description to dialogue especially for her extraordinary children. In fact, characters such as Sasà and Hieronymus, are practically dumb, they only utter animal cries or moans of pain and suffering, presentation being left entirely to the narrator. Likewise, Mohammed, who does not say a single word, is portrayed through the descriptions of the narrator-character, Stella Winter. Ortese's extraordinary characters do not intervene much in the plot in terms of action and dialogue, but their presence is vital for the development of events. Therefore, the choice of description for extraordinary children can be seen as a further attempt to stress the passive role of these creatures with the aim of enhancing their defenceless condition as victims. Dumbness, silence or the use of foreign words, as mentioned for *L'Iguana*, are strategies employed by Ortese to symbolise a century-long subjugation.

In the presentation of the scheming nature of young Sasà, I referred to a particular use Ortese makes of diminutives to convey irony. On a wider scale, however, Ortese resorts to diminutives to further emphasise the smallness, defencelessness and vulnerability of her unworldly children. In *Il cardillo addolorato* Sasà 'Sembrava anche debole: quasi priva di peso e di ogni capacità e forza, perfino quella di chiudere gli occhietti'²⁴³ and she feared 'un nano con una penna di gallina, che Sasà odiava con tutto il suo cuore piccino';²⁴⁴ Hieronymus' small size and poor health are also stressed with diminutives and he is presented as 'Gerontino, fanciullo forse sui sette anni, e anche più piccino, e particolarmente malandato';²⁴⁵ 'Nodier, che aveva notato come il fanciullo, oltre che mutolo, fosse zoppo leggermente dalla

²⁴³ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 184.

²⁴⁴ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 193.

²⁴⁵ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 226.

gambina destra’,²⁴⁶ being bullied, Hieronymus turned into an even smaller, defenceless creature and when Teresella tried to hold him, ‘sfuggì alle sue manine buone, come un povero gatto tormentato dai monelli...o un caprettino’.²⁴⁷ In *Alonso e i visionari*, ten-year-old Mohammed, a tiny fragile child, is described in these terms: ‘poi abbassò il capino dorato’,²⁴⁸ ‘una gambina del piccolo, e anche un orlo del grembialetto, era macchiata’,²⁴⁹ ‘Ma ricordo, [...] le visite, sulle gambine traballanti’.²⁵⁰ Extraordinary children’s smallness is also stressed by the use of such adjectives as ‘piccolo’, ‘minuscolo’. In *Il cardillo addolorato* Sasà is referred to as ‘la piccola Alessandrina Dupré’,²⁵¹ Hieronymus is at times called ‘Geronte, con l’aggiunta di Piccolo’;²⁵² Estrellita in *L’Iguana* has ‘occhi, tornati piccini e seri’²⁵³ and looks like ‘una minuscola damina’;²⁵⁴ Decio in *Alonso e i visionari* is ‘il piccolo Decio’,²⁵⁵ Mohammed is defined as ‘il bimbo quasi invisibile, tanto piccolo’,²⁵⁶ ‘cosa talmente dignitosa e minuscola da stupire’,²⁵⁷ to quote just a few from a whole range of examples.

When comparing Ortese’s representation of extraordinary children with that of ordinary children, it is interesting to notice that the use of diminutives is considerably reduced, particularly for those of *Il mare non bagna Napoli*. Here the characters, whose childhood years have been stolen, behave, think, and act as if they were adults. The few diminutives we find clearly have ironic connotations, for instance:

²⁴⁶ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 228.

²⁴⁷ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 311.

²⁴⁸ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 221.

²⁴⁹ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 221.

²⁵⁰ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 235.

²⁵¹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 175.

²⁵² Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 256.

²⁵³ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 78.

²⁵⁴ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 124.

²⁵⁵ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 18.

²⁵⁶ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 219.

²⁵⁷ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, pp. 220-221.

‘avevano sul viso di cera certi sorrisetti così vecchi e cinici, ch’era una meraviglia’.²⁵⁸ Only a few of them, referring to Nunzia, are used to convey fragility and vulnerability: ‘vedemmo un corpicino della lunghezza di qualche palmo’,²⁵⁹ ‘come le zampine di un uccello’.²⁶⁰ As for ordinary children in the trilogy (generally upper class children, who do not live in the same harsh conditions as their Neapolitan counterparts), the number of diminutives increases, and they are mostly used to express endearment. In *Il cardillo addolorato* Florì is described as ‘una bellissima creatura, più giovane di una rosa e più poetica di un uccello, una bimba di forse sei sette anni, con grandi occhi e lisci capelli dorati, intenta a leggere in un suo libriccino dorato aperto sulle ginocchia’.²⁶¹

Elsa Morante also uses diminutives with the aim of emphasising her privileged characters’ smallness and vulnerability. Many of her critics, as Mangano reports, have harshly criticised her ‘abuse’ of diminutives and terms of endearment in *La Storia* ‘dichiarando perfino in chiave scherzosa che il romanzo opponeva “anarchicini” e “nazistini”’.²⁶² However, I agree with those critics like Mangano who believe that diminutives in *La Storia* are particularly abundant compared to other works by Morante because, despite the presence of an omniscient narrator, Useppe’s perception seems to obscure the narrator’s point of view, and Useppe is just a small child. Mangano explains:

il sistema percettivo di Useppe, che finora era stato una specie di “voce dietro la scena”, sembra occultare quello della narratrice onnisciente e la maggior parte delle sensazioni vengono filtrate dal

²⁵⁸ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 69.

²⁵⁹ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 94.

²⁶⁰ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 94.

²⁶¹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 61.

²⁶² Daniel Mangano, ‘La Storia ovvero il mondo salvato da un ragazzino’, *Narrativa*, 17 (2000), 101-116, p. 103.

suo sguardo che, siccome si tratta di un bambino, fa da lente di ingrandimento. Questa tecnica ha sul lettore un effetto particolare: deforma gli oggetti al tal punto che il lettore non sa più se la visione che gli si prospetta davanti sia dovuta ad un'esagerazione del bambino o se si tratti invece di una sua impossibilità a percepire un'altra realtà. Tutto questo contribuisce a fare entrare il lettore in una dimensione nuova, quella dell'innocenza storica e dell'unica realtà, quella della verità poetica.²⁶³

I would also argue that the frequent use of diminutives in *La Storia* has a deeper conceptual meaning. What Morante wishes to do in the novel is show the contrast between the history of official events, of power and politics and the humble, simple, 'small' history of the real people, made of the ordinary things of every day life. By starting each chapter with a historical overview and devoting narration to the history of the people, that is, *la Storia* with a capital 'S', Morante's intent is to give voice to those who have never been heard. Thus, the diminutives used in her narration are the crucial component of a style which comes across as much more personal and affectionate than the official, cold, journalistic jargon of historical reports. We could say that the presence of diminutives in *La Storia*, as well as in other works, is one of the choices made by the author to give unheard children, animals and women a chance to be listened to:

Al mondo "adulto e storico, formalizzabile nel linguaggio del gergo giornalistico e burocratico [si contrappone] quello visionario e alogico dei bambini e degli animali, ma anche dei deliranti e dei sognanti". Si apre così lo spazio ad un altro tipo di parola (che potremmo chiamare "profetica", come fa Donatella Ravanello riprendendo il termine da Blanchot), che veicola un diverso modo di conoscenza.

²⁶³ Mangano, p. 109.

Donne, animali e fanciulli sperimentano un modello di conoscenza 'altro', un "conoscere con il corpo" attraverso il quale nel 1968 la Morante spera che i Felici Pochi salveranno il mondo scandalizzandolo.²⁶⁴

Differently from Ortese and more similarly to Masino, who finds in destiny and distorted social conventions the causes of victimisation, Morante's characters in *La Storia* are victims of powers totally beyond their control. It matters not a whit whether they are good or bad, morally sound or questionable, they are all equally victims of war, politics or economics. In *La Storia*, Morante, like Masino with the children of *Periferia*, presents characters who, despite being victims who arouse the reader's sympathy, are not necessarily morally good. An example is German soldier Gunther, who, although a rapist, is nonetheless presented as a lonely, innocent boy, distanced from the world he knew by the brutality of war. Another example is Cat Rossella, a murderer, a bad mother, a cold-hearted opportunistic creature. Ortese, unlike Masino and Morante, associates the victimised status with goodness, with the creatures she believes to be targeted by human cruelty. Similarly to Ortese, Morante adopts descriptions rather than dialogues for characterisation. As a result, psychological insight into the characters emerges not so much from dialogue, but through the narrator's description. As Barengi also stresses, *Menzogna e sortilegio* has very little dialogue, *L'isola di Arturo* does contain limited, short interactions, while *La Storia* does have dialogues, although they appear hardly effective.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Elena Fumi, 'Rileggendo Elsa Morante: costanti e varianti', *Critica letteraria* 3 (2005), 565-580, p. 577.

²⁶⁵ Barengi, pp. 364-365.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered how Masino and Ortese present the theme of the victimisation of children and animals from different perspectives depicting the forms, the agents and the consequences of violence and abuse. As I have shown, the two authors concentrate on different types of victimisation (Ortese tends to portray cases of domestic victimisation, in particular parental rejection) and different agents (Masino's works contain mainly victims of fate and society rather than of family members). They both, however, explore the consequences of victimisation, which are a lost childhood, handicap and disease.

Through the examples analysed, I have demonstrated how both extraordinary as well as ordinary children and animals contribute towards making victimisation a topos in the works of these two authors. While ordinary characters are mainly victimised on the basis of their weakness, frailty and harsh conditions, extraordinary characters are also victimised on the grounds of their Otherness, that is, their being different. Ordinary and extraordinary children thus become the emblem of 'i non aventi diritto', the disadvantaged categories oppressed by a vast array of perpetrators of violence. Even though both writers deal with this theme, it is only Ortese who seems to possess a cohesive and explicit poetics governing it. This can be perceived throughout her works but also in more theoretical pieces such as 'Bambini della creazione', 'Piccolo drago' and *Corpo Celeste*. As I have explained, this theory sees mankind with its hubris and presumed superiority based on intelligence as the product of the rupture of the relationship with nature, once loved and now mistreated, usurped and forgotten. For Masino the representation of victimisation is not based on a body of theory, but is rather a topos which supports and triggers the development of other, wider themes. The victimisation of children in *Periferia*, for example,

allows the degradation of the family and the society of the time to be revealed. The victimisation of Lino and Barbara introduces the theme of fate, the inexorable destiny the characters are bound up by for different reasons (Lino for his Christological traits, Barbara for the curse on Monte Ignoso). The victimisation of the young Massaia and Nanni are key to the unmasking of the superficiality, the lack of values and the emptiness of social conventions.

From this chapter it is evident that the subject of victimisation is present in a large part of the two authors' works. Clearly, then, there are topics, arguments and perspectives linked to victimisation and victimised characters which I have not yet explored or have only briefly introduced. I have, however, pinpointed where further analysis will be carried out and I shall start in the next chapter with the exploration of the extraordinary elements in relation to children and animals.

Chapter 3

Beyond the visible

Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyse the numerous extraordinary children and animals present in Masino's and Ortese's works and the broad range of opportunities that their non-ordinary nature offers the writers as channels for specific themes and programmatic choices. Consequently, the magic, the supernatural and the fantastic elements are given here more prominence and the concept of reality is, as the chapter heading above suggests, extended beyond what is tangible and immediately visible. Ordinary characters, therefore, take to the sidelines as the focus is on their extraordinary counterparts. The metamorphic nature of some extraordinary children and animals will be investigated more fully in the next chapter of my thesis.²⁶⁶

The first section of the chapter will analyse Ortese's poetics of reality. I will draw a parallel with the American Transcendentalists with regard to the relationship between reality and imagination, and that between sight and belief. I will also explore the Ortesian concept of sight in comparison to the Leopardian *doppia vista*. In the second section, I shall look at Ortese's extraordinary children and animals who permit explicit intertextual links, conscious or unconscious literary echoes, and novel re-interpretations of themes and elements from literary tradition. I shall also consider aspects that these texts share with those by writers who, I believe, have a very similar approach or sensibility. The third section explores Masino's idea of reality, laying the foundations for the fourth section on the intertextual dimension of Masino's short story 'Famiglia', and for the fifth section on the function and significance of three

²⁶⁶ See Chapter 4.

types of extraordinary creatures in her works, which I have called the ‘divine child’, the ‘visionary child’ and the ‘unborn child.’

3.1 Ortese’s multi-layered reality

The use of extraordinary children and animals with the aim of developing a programmatic discourse on reality is more evident and substantial in Ortese than in Masino. Masino does not resort to these characters as a means to voice her views on reality and fiction, but rather, supernatural and fantastic elements coexist in her narratives with ordinary ones in a sort of pastiche unsupported by a theoretical concept of reality. By contrast, for Ortese, the theme of reality and fiction is a particularly pressing one and, together with her love of nature and her rejection of the Enlightenment and modernisation, forms one of the mainstays of her thought and literary production.

3.1.1 Reality/imagination, sight/belief, the Leopardian *doppia vista*

Ortese believes reality to be much more complex and articulated than can be perceived through the senses, with multiple layers wherein is embedded what is visible and perceivable as well as the magical, invisible dimension of extraordinary creatures. In ‘Piccolo drago’,²⁶⁷ Ortese specifies that what is commonly considered as real and concrete is only perceived as such because it is more tangible, closer in time and in space. Only by distancing oneself from this presumed reality, can one appreciate that it is, in fact, immaterial, unreal, pure imagination. Hence, for Ortese, reality coincides with imagination, and imagination is not created by living beings who, on the contrary, spring from it:

²⁶⁷ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 163-181.

Questo reale – o realtà –, non è che un gran sogno, e la sua *realtà* (se si escludono i materiali di cui si serve per manifestarsi, del resto completamente vuoti, quindi *immateriali*), è pura Immaginazione. E questa *Immaginazione non è nostra* – di ogni essere vivente –, ma piuttosto ogni essere vivente *viene da questa Immaginazione*, e come creatura di questa Immaginazione. (*In sonno e in veglia*, p. 175)

Ortese's views appear to be similar to those of New England Transcendentalist authors, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson, with whom she shares the idea that reality only exists in the spirit and that the physical world is only one manifestation of it. In her article 'Alonso e i visionari. La vocazione americana di Anna Maria Ortese',²⁶⁸ Paola Loreto underlines these common features:

L'impianto della sua concezione del mondo è, come quello di Emerson, di impronta idealistica. [...] La vera realtà, [...] è quella invisibile, della quale la realtà che cade sotto i nostri sensi è l'immagine.²⁶⁹

In *Corpo Celeste*, Ortese programmatically explains, recites, almost, in the form of a creed similar to the Christian Creed, her concept of reality which, as Farnetti points out, emerges from all her works, from *Angelici dolori* to *Alonso e i visionari*, titles that well represent her 'poetics of the invisible'.²⁷⁰

Credo in tutto ciò che non vedo, e credo poco in quello che vedo. Per fare un esempio: credo che la terra sia abitata, anche adesso, in modo *invisibile*. Credo negli spiriti dei boschi, delle montagne, dei deserti, forse in piccoli demoni gentili (tutta la Natura è molto gentile). Credo

²⁶⁸ Loreto.

²⁶⁹ Loreto, p. 253.

²⁷⁰ See Farnetti, *Anna Maria Ortese*, p. 66: 'Il "credo" dell'autrice, modulato sulla falsariga del *Credo* cristiano, vale a eccellente autocommento di tutte le sue opere, da *Angelici dolori* ad *Alonso e i visionari*, i cui stessi titoli (e valgano questi due a campione) sono spesso, quanto all'invisibile, evidenti e programmatiche indicazioni di poetica'.

anche nei morti che non sono più morti (la morte è del giorno solare).²⁷¹ Credo nelle apparizioni. Credo nelle piante che sognano e si raccomandano di conservare loro la pioggia. Nelle farfalle che ci osservano, improvvisando, quando occorra, magnifici occhi sulle ali. Credo nel saluto degli uccelli, che sono anime felici, e si sentono all'alba sopra le case... In tutto credo, come i bambini. (*Corpo celeste*, pp. 155-156)

The first line of the quotation, 'credo in tutto ciò che non vedo, e credo poco in quello che vedo', is significant as it defines the author's lack of belief in sensorial perception and particularly in sight. In this respect, Ortese echoes Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*,²⁷² where he also expresses the unreliability of the sense of sight. The different characters who see the letter on the adulteress's breast attach different meanings to it depending on their spiritual, as well as mental, state. Furthermore, in the final episode of the novel, when reverend Dimmesdale reveals the letter on his breast, wanting to confess his sin, the witnesses react in different ways giving various personal interpretations,²⁷³ including that of refusing to see what is under their eyes,²⁷⁴ in a form of 'stubborn fidelity'.²⁷⁵ Loreto concludes:

²⁷¹ It is worth discussing the sentence 'Credo anche nei morti che non son più morti'. Here, I would like to draw a parallel with Leopardi's *Il dialogo di Federico Ruysch con le mummie*. See Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, ed. by Cesare Galimberti (Naples: Guida, 1986), pp. 233-246. It is midnight and all the dead raise their song in chorus at the end of the 'anno grande e matematico' Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, p. 239, when they are allowed to speak, if questioned, only to the living and for not more than fifteen minutes. Ruysch asks the mummies what they felt when they died and they reply that they did not realise the moment was approaching: 'Sappi che il morire, come l'addormentarsi, non si fa in un solo istante, [...] mi ricordo però che il senso che provai, non fu molto dissimile dal diletto che è cagionato agli uomini dal languore del sonno, nel tempo che si vengono addormentando' Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, pp. 244-245. They then fall into a deep silence similar to a peaceful quiet sleep, which is clearly not death.

²⁷² Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Dent, 1967), p. 47.

²⁷³ See Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, pp. 311-312: 'Most of the spectators testified to having seen, on the breast of the unhappy minister, a SCARLET LETTER – the very semblance of that worn by Hester Prynne – imprinted in the flesh. As regarded its origin there were various explanations, all of which must necessarily have been conjectural. Some affirmed that the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, on the very day when Hester Prynne first wore her ignominious badge, had begun a course of penance – which he afterwards, in so many futile methods, followed out – by inflicting a hideous torture on himself. Others contended that the stigma had not been produced until a long time subsequent, when old Roger Chillingworth, being a potent necromancer, had caused it to appear, through the agency of

la capacità di fede, davvero *cieca*, dei fedeli di Dimmesdale [...] la loro volontà profonda ha scelto di credere a quello che i loro occhi *non vedono*, piuttosto che a quello che vedono.²⁷⁶

This is the idea expressed in the quotation from *Corpo Celeste* ‘credo in tutto ciò che non vedo’.

The sight/belief relationship in Ortese is also discussed by other critics, such as Farnetti and Seno Reed, who point out Ortese’s views on the unreliability of the senses, particularly, sight.²⁷⁷ Concerning this point Farnetti says:

la Ortese appare debitrice [a Leopardi] della [idea della] “**doppia vista**”, o facoltà di vedere un “secondo genere di obbietti” oltre a quelli “di cui gli occhi ricevono la sensazione”, di cui si discetta in *Zibaldone*, 4418. Un’idea, quest’ultima, che l’autrice sviluppa nel suo concetto di **invisibile** e che si costituisce per lei a modalità primaria, nonché forse unica, di conoscenza e di “espressività”.²⁷⁸

Ortese was certainly acquainted with the concept of *doppia vista*, which, she does apply in some circumstances. However, in my opinion, it is not true for the whole canon of her poetics. According to Leopardi, the empirical world does exist; what he, instead, calls *il caro immaginare*, the faculty of imagination, the ability to go beyond the real and the rational, is only a prerogative of the ‘uomo sensibile e

magic and poisonous drugs. Others, again – and those best able to appreciate the minister’s peculiar sensibility, and the wonderful operation of his spirit upon the body – whispered their belief, that the awful symbol was the effect of the ever-active tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly, and at last manifesting Heaven’s dreadful judgment by the visible presence of the letter. The reader may choose among these theories’.

²⁷⁴ See Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 312: ‘certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant’ s’ .

²⁷⁵ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 313.

²⁷⁶ Loreto, p. 261.

²⁷⁷ See Seno Reed, p. 133: ‘Attraverso le protagoniste, di *Un paio di occhiali e Interno familiare*, Ortese riesce a dimostrare come la “conoscenza” e la felicità non siano raggiungibili attraverso i sensi, e di come sia indispensabile l’acquisizione di una “seconda vista” di leopardiana memoria’.

²⁷⁸ Farnetti, *Anna Maria Ortese*, pp. 68-69.

immaginoso'²⁷⁹ like the poet himself, 'degli antichi',²⁸⁰ and of children or adolescents.²⁸¹ I think Ortese's position is slightly different: she states that the empirical world of the senses 'non è che un gran sogno',²⁸² an illusion, a manifestation of imagination.

As already stated, Ortese's manifestations of her views on reality can be found scattered throughout her fiction. In the framework to 'Il Monaciello di Napoli',²⁸³ through the voice of a male writer (with evident autobiographical references) wishing to enter a literary competition, Ortese discloses her belief in the existence of figures normally thought of as unreal and also her rejection of modernity. Scared of the 'Commissione armata di criteri artistici la cui modernità m'incute un vago spavento',²⁸⁴ the writer/narrator questions, for a moment, how true his grandmother's encounters with the *monaciello* Nicola are. However, he hastily overcomes his doubt and challenges the reader to deny he has perceived this reality beyond the real:

Del resto, o Lettore intelligente, credi proprio che la vita sia così semplice come appare? Non hai mai, in nessun momento della tua vita, per esempio un giorno di maggio, avvertito nell'aria, coll'odor dei fiori e la danza delle farfalle, l'esistenza di un mondo più brillante, più gioioso e soave? E d'inverno, quando il vento urlava terribilmente

²⁷⁹ See Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, p. 1162: 'All'uomo sensibile e immaginoso, che viva, come io sono vissuto gran tempo, sentendo di continuo ed immaginando, il mondo e gli oggetti sono in certo modo doppi. Egli vedrà cogli occhi una torre, una campagna; udrà cogli orecchi un suono d'una campana; e nel tempo stesso coll'immaginazione vedrà un'altra torre, un'altra campagna, udrà un altro suono. In questo secondo genere di obbietti sta tutto il bello e il piacevole delle cose. Trista quella vita (ed è pur tale la vita comunemente) che non vede, non ode, non sente se non che oggetti semplici, quelli soli di cui gli occhi, gli orecchi e gli altri sentimenti ricevono la sensazione'.

²⁸⁰ See Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, p. 368: 'La forza creatrice dell'animo appartenente alla immaginazione, è esclusivamente propria degli antichi. Dopo che l'uomo è divenuto stabilmente infelice, e, che peggio è, l'ha conosciuto, e così ha realizzata e confermata la sua infelicità; [...] l'immaginazione veramente forte, verde, feconda, creatrice, fruttuosa, non è più propria se non de' fanciulli, o al più de' poco esperti e poco istruiti, che son fuori del nostro caso. [...] Che smania è questa dunque di voler fare quello stesso che facevano i nostri avoli, quando noi siamo così mutati?'

²⁸¹ See quote above.

²⁸² Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 175.

²⁸³ Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, pp. 11-61.

²⁸⁴ Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, p. 13.

intorno alla tua casa, con alti gridi un po' meccanici un po' umani, e tu sedevi ben caldo nella tua poltrona, non ti è mai accaduto di avvertire, in quella voce un po' disuguale e dolorosa, il lamento e la ribellione di povere creature inimmaginabili? Certo che sì, Lettore. Esse sono nascoste dovunque, e ci guardano con occhi sì puri, sì dolci, sì pieni di lagrime e raggianti d'amore. Fate dalle sottili trecce bionde, gnomi, coboldi, maghi, spiritelli, fino al caratteristico Monaciello napoletano, di cui parlava mia Nonna, questi esseri vivono, vivono! (*Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, p. 14)

As Iannaccone points out, the way in which Ortese addresses the reader as 'Lettore intelligente' is particularly provocative as she refers to a form of intelligence only capable of believing in what is visible and empirically deduced.²⁸⁵ In this respect, Ortese fits into the European literary tradition, where we can find authors such as Maupassant,²⁸⁶ who in *Le Horla*,²⁸⁷ the most famous of his fantastic stories, states that our sensory perceptions are too limited and imperfect to sound the mystery of the invisible, and our minds are too weak to understand reality objectively. Likewise, to the empirical reality of the 'Lettore intelligente' and of the 'Commissione', the

²⁸⁵ Iannaccone, p. 118: 'Perciò, non è senza polemica che la Ortese si rivolge al Lettore del *Monaciello* definendolo "intelligente" (p. 14), allorché l'intelligenza si riduce a semplice computo di ciò che appare, adoperandosi solo per l'"infinito sviluppo" e l'"incontenibile proliferare di scienza e tecnica", estraniandosi progressivamente "alle ragioni della vita, della Terra e dell'uomo". È con l'intelligenza, infatti, che si giustifica la trasformazione del mondo in oggetto depurato dagli attributi di un codice tradizionale e la cancellazione del simbolo e della credenza sostituiti dai costumi materialistici di una vita profana svuotata di ogni implicazione trascendente o semplicemente immaginativa'.

²⁸⁶ See Guy de Maupassant, *Le Horla et autres contes fantastiques*, ed. by Marie-Louise Astre (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), pp. 69-110.

²⁸⁷ See Maupassant, p. 71: '*12 mai* [...] Tout ce qui nous entoure, tout ce que nous voyons sans le regarder, tout ce que nous frôlons sans le connaître, tout ce que nous touchons sans le palper, tout ce que nous rencontrons sans le distinguer, a sur nous, sur nos organes et, par eux, sur nos idées, sur notre coeur lui-même, des effets rapides, surprenants et inexplicables? Comme il est profond, ce mystère de l'Invisible! Nous ne le pouvons sonder avec nos sens misérables, avec nos yeux qui ne savent apercevoir ni le trop petit, ni le trop grand, ni le trop près, ni le trop loin, ni les habitants d'une étoile, ni les habitants d'une goutte d'eau...avec nos oreilles qui nous trompent, car elles nous transmettent les vibrations de l'air en notes sonores. Elles sont des fées qui font ce miracle de changer en bruit ce mouvement et par cette métamorphose donnent naissance à la musique, qui rend chantante l'agitation muette de la nature...avec notre odorat, plus faible que celui d'un chien...avec notre goût, qui peut à peine discerner l'âge d'un vin! Ah! Si nous avions d'autres organes qui accompliraient en notre faveur d'autres miracles, que de choses nous pourrions découvrir encore autour de nous!'

writer/narrator opposes the no less real world of fairies, gnomes, elves. From the quotation above it is interesting to note that the second reality is depicted as joyful and idyllic, ‘un mondo più brillante, più gioioso e soave’; yet at the same time, it is a world of sadness and suffering, one where ‘il lamento’ and ‘quella voce un po’ disuguale e dolorosa’ are heard and eyes ‘pieni di lagrime’ are seen. Once again, Ortese wishes to highlight the victimisation of creatures which, because of their Otherness, are condemned by scientific thought to mistreatment, abuse and, in this case, to oblivion.²⁸⁸

3.2 The extraordinary characters populating Ortese’s world

In this section I shall analyse Ortese’s extraordinary children and animals focusing on how their presence allows the author to create a wide net of intertextual references, conscious or unconscious echoes and re-interpretations of elements of tradition. For clarity of discourse, I have divided the characters/themes in the seven subsections below.

3.2.1 The multiple facets of reality: shifts in character perception

Whereas in the framework of ‘Il Monaciello di Napoli’ Ortese explicitly expresses her views on the multiple facets of reality, in the trilogy of *L’Iguana*, *Il cardillo addolorato* and *Alonso e i visionari*, they are embedded in the plots. Particularly emblematic is the intertwining and shifting of the different layers of reality in *L’Iguana*, where everything is subject to a constant change in perception, most evidently the nature of the characters and their names. Ilario appears to Daddo as a noble man, a wretched young intellectual, an *hidalgo* or a tyrant; by the same token, Estrellita resembles an iguana, an old lady, a child, a young girl once loved and now

²⁸⁸ See Chapter 2 for the theme of ‘victimisation’.

an outcast, a victim, the embodiment of evil, a daughter, a bride, a beast and, finally, a human servant. La Penna rightly perceives the numerous names by which the character is referred to as a way for the narrator to increase ‘the uncertainty regarding Estrellita’s iconography by forcing the reader to question the other characters’ perceptions of the servant’.²⁸⁹ Estrellita is called, to mention but a few: ‘vecchia’,²⁹⁰ ‘nonnina’,²⁹¹ ‘Iguana’,²⁹² ‘iguanuccia’,²⁹³ ‘creatura’,²⁹⁴ ‘bestia’,²⁹⁵ ‘bestiuccia’,²⁹⁶ ‘animaluccio’,²⁹⁷ ‘sventurata servetta’,²⁹⁸ ‘fanciuletta-bestia’,²⁹⁹ ‘menina’,³⁰⁰ ‘bestiolina’,³⁰¹ ‘donnaccia’,³⁰² ‘figlia del male’.³⁰³ Likewise, Ilario is called ‘don Ilario’,³⁰⁴ ‘il marchese’,³⁰⁵ ‘il Segovia’,³⁰⁶ ‘il giovane’,³⁰⁷ ‘Mendes’.³⁰⁸ Like the characters of *L’Iguana*, in *Il cardillo addolorato*, Hieronymus’ appearance is also subject to continuous shifts as he turns into a disabled child, a lamb, a chick, a cat, a dwarf and Sasà’s image acquires the traits of a victim, a bully, a social climber, a flying *palummella*. Similarly, in *Alonso e i visionari*, little Mohammed can be identified with Alonso the puma, a puppy and a Spanish waiter. It is also interesting to note that both Hieronymus’ and Sasà’s ages are indefinite and not immediately obvious, in the maid Ferrantina’s words to naïve Prince Neville, ‘Continue a

²⁸⁹ La Penna, p. 168.

²⁹⁰ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 29. Page numbers offer only one example from the many present in the text.

²⁹¹ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 30.

²⁹² Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 31.

²⁹³ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 32.

²⁹⁴ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 32.

²⁹⁵ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 104.

²⁹⁶ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 106.

²⁹⁷ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 55.

²⁹⁸ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 119.

²⁹⁹ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 103.

³⁰⁰ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 94.

³⁰¹ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 78.

³⁰² Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 126.

³⁰³ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 123.

³⁰⁴ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 31.

³⁰⁵ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 33.

³⁰⁶ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 114.

³⁰⁷ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 151.

³⁰⁸ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 153.

credere all'età della gente! In genere, è una convenzione'.³⁰⁹ Hieronymus may be twenty-six, twenty-seven or even three hundred years old.³¹⁰ Sasà, despite being a four-year-old, behaves like a scheming adult and social climber.

It is important to note that in *L'Iguana*, programmatic views are, however, not just embedded in the plot, but also explicitly voiced, as, for example, when Daddo and Ilario discuss Neorealism. Here, Ortese avails herself of the opportunity not only to express her poetics, but also to take a position in the debate on Neorealism in Italian literature³¹¹ which Daddo defines as an art that should enlighten the real, but

³⁰⁹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 365.

³¹⁰ See Chapter 2.

³¹¹ Neorealism in Italian literature started between the 1930's and the 1940's as a reaction against the cultural isolation of the exponents of *Ermetismo* and the moral mediocrity of the society of the time subjugated by the Fascist dictatorship. During the *Resistenza* and after the *Liberazione*, where peasants, workers and intellectuals fought together for a better society, and under the influence of Gramsci's ideas, the objective of culture became that of creating a new literature *nazionale-popolare*. Therefore, Neorealism developed with 'una motivazione decisamente sociale e politica, intesa da un lato a proporre come proprio destinatario il popolo o il proletariato, dall'altro a contribuire alla sua presa di coscienza ideologica. [...] Guerra e Resistenza, lotte contadine e operaie furono i temi prescelti, trattati con indubbia vena pedagogica ed etico-politica.' See Mario Pazzaglia, *Letteratura italiana 4, testi e critica con lineamenti di storia letteraria*, 3rd edn. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1992), p. 922. The movement was characterised by the denunciation of a social reality full of injustices and unsolved problems; the proposal of new social contents; a more straightforward language open to the communication with a wide public. However, the writers, generally left-winged and *impegnati*, seemed to make different choices after the year 1960, which saw the electoral defeat of the *forze di sinistra* and the triumph of the *Democrazia Cristiana*. It was then that the literary experience, never systematically explained, gave rise to a dispute within the cultural circles of the *Sinistra*. Even before this date, however, the definition of Neorealism had proved to be a controversial subject as reported by Carlo Bo. See Carlo Bo, *Inchiesta sul Neorealismo*, Quaderni della radio, XIII (Turin: Edizioni Radio Italiana, 1951). According to Bo, even authors such as Elio Vittorini, Vitaliano Brancati, Italo Calvino, Vasco Pratolini, whose writings did feature realistic elements, did not belong to an organised school, based on a doctrine like French Naturalism. See Bo, p. 8. Giulio Ferroni also agrees that for most of these novelists, including Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio, Neorealism is just a common ground of themes, contents, discussions and concerns which interested only part of their activity and believes that applying the Neorealist label could be too restrictive. See Giulio Ferroni, *Profilo Storico della letteratura italiana*, vol. II (Milan: Einaudi scuola, 2000), p. 1044. The debate on Neorealism and its definition, according to Salvatore Guglielmino, continued up to the end of the 1960's even if the awareness of a crisis within the movement and the controversy against it had already started in the 1950's with the publication of Vasco Pratolini's *Metello* (1955). Italo Calvino acknowledged that, even though Neorealism was not a school, it achieved a lot in terms of style and contents: the introduction of the spoken language and of dialect, and 'il nuovo protagonismo popolare, che condusse a una, per lo meno possibile integrazione fra scrittori e pubblico, quale assai raramente si era verificato nella storia della letteratura e della cultura italiana'. See Pazzaglia, p. 952. Calvino, however, interpreted the social problems of his years in an original, inventive manner and the solution he proposed was that of moving 'Dalla letteratura dell'oggettività alla letteratura della coscienza'. See Italo Calvino, 'Il mare dell'oggettività', in *Saggi 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barenghi, vol. I (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), p. 59. In his opinion, the end of Neorealism did not mean that literature became detached from the world. 'Oggi cominciamo a richiedere dalla letteratura qualcosa di più d'una

which unfortunately does not take into account the idea that reality has multiple layers and that the last layer is pure and deep imagination:

“Sentii parlare di realismo. Che cos’è questo?”. “Dovrebbe essere”
rispose il conte un po’ impacciato “un’arte di illuminare il reale.
Purtroppo, non si tiene conto che il reale è a più strati, e l’intero
Creato, quando si è giunti ad analizzare fin l’ultimo strato, non risulta
affatto reale, ma pura e profonda immaginazione”. “Questo io l’avevo
sospettato, nella mia solitudine!” esclamò il giovanetto, con una
espressione di gioia che fece uno strano effetto al conte, quasi, benché
egli potesse capire, di compassione. “E il risultato di ciò – non è vero,

mimesi degli aspetti esterni degli oggetti o di quelli interni dell’animo. Vogliamo dalla letteratura un’immagine cosmica [...], cioè al livello dei piani di conoscenza che lo sviluppo storico ha messo in gioco’. See Calvino, ‘La sfida al labirinto’, in *Saggi 1945-1985*, vol. I, p. 123. He never abandoned reason and human history, he only presented it through the mediatory filter of irony, science and the fantastic. Hence, his often unconventional narratives where he never loses the concrete sense of reality. Carlo Cassola’s political and social commitment in literature also declined in 1960. This year, in fact, saw enormous changes in society due to the shift of population from country to town, the migration from the South to the North, the growth of the industrial cities, the emerging consumer culture and the spread of mass media with the consequent influence on traditional literary forms. For Cassola, the end of Neorealism did not involve distance from social problems. New themes started to be dealt with: the condition of the individual in the industrial world with the resulting sense of alienation, estrangement and neurosis. The new social life suggested topics such as loneliness, difficulty in establishing human relationships, the crisis of values and of the family unit, the issues of the generation gap and of women’s role in society. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Neorealism is disputable. In *Ragazzi di vita* (1955) and *Una vita violenta* (1959), where the author’s language alternates with the jargon of the *borgate romane*, Pasolini expresses his ‘idea del popolo [...] come depositario d’una vitalità incorrotta, nonostante l’avvilimento etico, economico, spirituale’. See Pazzaglia, p. 912. However, he cannot be considered a true Neorealist, Guglielmino states. In his writing, in fact, ‘l’atteggiamento per il popolo ora diventa disposizione populistica [...], viscerale adesione ad un nuovo mito del buon selvaggio, ora invece torbida (e in ultima analisi, decadente) attrazione per un vitalismo picaresco e sbracato’. See Guglielmino, p. 372/1. Pasolini, who nostalgically declared the death of the ‘Realismo/– sigillato con sangue partigiano’ – see Pier Paolo Pasolini, ‘In Morte del Realismo (1960)’, in *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Walter Siti, vol. I (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), pp. 1029-1036 –, subsequently went through considerable changes according to Guglielmino. In fact, as the urban subproletariat was becoming increasingly affected by and involved in the process of the consumer culture, the pillars of Pasolini’s poetics, however contradictory it might have been, collapsed. See Guglielmino p. 372/1. Carlo Emilio Gadda who, similarly to Masino, portrayed reality in a distorted, deformed way, expressed a negative opinion of Neorealism. He criticised its followers with disparaging words: ‘il modo con cui i neorealisti trattano i loro termini è, di preferenza, quello di un umore tetro e talora dispettoso come di chi rivendichi qualcosa da qualcheduno e attenda giustizia, di chi si senta offeso, irritato. [...] Allora la polemica aperta, la diatriba, il grido, l’ingiuria sono preferibili ai termini pseudo-narrativi di una supposta obbiettività. [...] Un lettore di Kant non può credere in una realtà obbiettiva, isolata, sospesa nel vuoto; [...] Il fatto in sé, l’oggetto in sé, non è che il morto corpo della realtà, il residuo fecale della storia. See Carlo Emilio Gadda, ‘Un’opinione sul Neorealismo’, in *Saggi Giornali Favole e altri scritti, I*, ed. by Liliana Orlando, Clelia Martignoni, Dante Isella, (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), p. 630.

Daddo? – può essere un superamento delle antiche concezioni di natura e spirito, immaginario e reale, non è vero?”. “Senza dubbio”.³¹²

While Masino does not take part in the debate, Elsa Morante does, and in a much more active and programmatic way than Ortese. In ‘Nove domande sul romanzo’,³¹³ she criticises the *astrattisti* and their opposite the *naturalisti* and the *documentaristi* in art.³¹⁴ When asked to express her views on the topic of Realism, she states that the artist is to possess both imagination and ‘un dono superiore di ragione’,³¹⁵ necessary requirements to discover the truth in things. She also adds:

al romanziere (come a ogni altro artista) non basta l’esperienza contingente della propria avventura. [...] La sua esplorazione deve tramutarsi in un valore per il mondo: la realtà corruttibile dev’essere tramutata, da lui, in una verità poetica incorruttibile. Questa è l’unica ragione dell’arte: e questo è il suo necessario *realismo*.³¹⁶

Like Morante’s, even Masino’s and Ortese’s more realistic fiction (*Periferia* and *Il mare non bagna Napoli*) do not totally adhere to the schemes of Realism or Neorealism, but always imply a distorted and deformed view of the reality perceived by the senses.

3.2.2 Angels and spirits: Signor Lin and the heart

In the short story ‘Il Signor Lin’,³¹⁷ like in ‘Il Monaciello di Napoli’, it is a grandmother who introduces her grandchild to a supernatural being, this time, an angel. The girl, affected by a feverish delirium, is terrified of the spiders around her bed. Her grandmother, who looks after her, requests the intervention of Signor Lin, an angel without wings who lives in her bedroom:

³¹² Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 60

³¹³ Elsa Morante, ‘Nove domande sul Romanzo’, *Opere*, vol. 2, pp. 1495-1520.

³¹⁴ Morante, ‘Nove domande sul romanzo’, p. 1513.

³¹⁵ Morante, ‘Nove domande sul Romanzo’, p. 1500.

³¹⁶ Morante, ‘Nove domande sul Romanzo’, p. 1520.

³¹⁷ Ortese, *L’infanta sepolta*, pp. 56-61.

Il signor Lin era un Angelo che viveva nella sua stanza, e del quale essa mi aveva sempre parlato come di una persona buonissima e straordinariamente bella, che trascorreva il giorno in letture o curando gli uccelli malati che mia nonna trovava per via. Si occupava anche di giardinaggio. Parlavano spesso di Dio e del mondo, e la nonna mi riferiva che allora il signor Lin si faceva pensieroso. (*L'infanta sepolta*, p. 57)

From the description above, it is interesting to note that this Ortesian angel, far from the conventional angelic figure, embodies key aspects of her poetics: his love for the animal world ‘curando gli uccelli malati’ and for the natural world ‘si occupava anche di giardinaggio’, the skeptical view of traditional religions and his pessimistic outlook on the world ‘parlavano spesso di Dio e del mondo, [...] allora il signor Lin si faceva pensieroso’. Initially, the girl does not believe in his existence ‘io non avevo mai potuto vederlo, perché non ci credevo. Ma quella sera ero così angosciata, che tutto mi pareva possibile’.³¹⁸ The fact that the girl is initially not able to see Lin confirms the reversal of the *intellego ut credam* Enlightenment position and the restatement of the Augustinian *credo ut intellegam* belief (as already seen above in Hawthorne’s ‘stubborn fidelity’).³¹⁹ Furthermore, Ortese links the ability to perceive the Other with a series of particular conditions. Firstly, the protagonist’s young age, Leopardi’s *caro immaginare*, typical of childhood and adolescence. Secondly, the child’s mood, ‘quella sera ero così angosciata’, which helps to eradicate the certainties of reason and to give her a newer and wider perception of the fantastic, supernatural world. Thirdly, her illness, which has the power to take her out of the constraints of reason to lead her, through her febrile and delirious state, to the world of the Other. I also feel it worth pointing out that the supernatural creature, often

³¹⁸ Ortese, *L'infanta sepolta*, p. 57.

³¹⁹ See note 275.

ignored or neglected, finally obtains wings and, therefore, freedom once it has eventually been recognised by all the human beings it lives with. No wonder Lin goes away once the girl has recovered; the angel now has acquired a dignity of its own by virtue simply of having been seen. As far as ‘illness’ is concerned, the idea that the presence of a pathology, whether physical or psychological which makes possible the experience of Otherness, is a topic interestingly dealt with by authors of all ages. In his letters from Sant’Anna Hospital, Tasso, seriously ill, often refers to *il folletto* and other visions.³²⁰ On December 30th 1585 he wrote to his friend Maurizio Cattaneo:³²¹

Sappia dunque, c’oltre que’ miracoli del folletto, i quali si potrebbono numerare per trattenimenti in altra occasione, vi sono molti spaventii notturni: perché, essendo io desto, mi è paruto di vedere alcune fiammette ne l’aria; [...]. Ho veduto ancora [...] ombre de’ topi, che per ragione naturale non potevano farsi in quel luogo: [...] E fra tanti terrori e tanti dolori, m’apparve in aria l’immagine de la gloriosa Vergine, co’l Figlio in braccio, in un mezzo cerchio di colori e di vapori.³²²

Guy de Maupassant also considers the relationship between the state of illness and the perception of the Other, particularly during the last phase of his writing, when he was experiencing mental problems. In *Le Horla* the protagonist’s terrible fever causes anguish and torment and leads him to the perception of an invisible being

³²⁰ See Torquato Tasso, *Lettere da Sant’Anna*, ed. by Franco Costabile (Rocca San Casciano: Cappelli, 1960). It must be pointed out, however, that the belief in magic, well rooted in the Renaissance culture and shared by intellectuals such as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and later Francesco de’ Medici, was still strong in Tasso’s time. This accounts for the co-existence in the letter of a lucid mind and what we would now call hallucination.

³²¹ Tasso, p. 175.

³²² Tasso, p. 179.

whose presence will progressively dominate his thoughts.³²³ In the end, Lin, with his soothing presence and calm, yet strict, approach manages to cure the girl. After her recovery, she is informed by her grandmother of Lin's departure when he has finally acquired the wings he longed for.³²⁴ Like the adult frame narrator of 'Il Monaciello di Napoli', the girl, now a grown-up, still wants to believe her grandmother's words are true; Lin has actually existed and may come back into her life:

“Tornerà, me lo ha assicurato...” diceva Nonna trattenendo a stento le lagrime “fra molti anni, se sarai buona...lo vedrai ricomparire, così gaio e tranquillo, come quella sera...”. [...] A volte mi sembra di sentire dei passi, la sera, se sto sola in casa, e immagino di sentire la sua voce affettuosa che dice: “Certo ch'è possibile. M'infilo la giacca”, e – benché ormai sia diventata una persona grande e ragionevole – il mio cuore si mette a battere nel silenzio, oscuramente, pieno di una speranza così fine, così dolorosa, ch'io potrei morire se si avverasse. (*L'infanta sepolta*, pp. 60-61)

Here, Ortese is in line with the thought developed by Leopardi in 1828. The sentence 'benché ormai sia diventata una persona grande e ragionevole' is a typically Leopardian statement, assertive of the fact that deep creative imagination in an adult cannot exist without previous strong, intense experience in youth.³²⁵

³²³ See Maupassant, p. 70: 'J'ai un peu de fièvre depuis quelques jours; je me sens souffrant, ou plutôt je me sens triste. D'où viennent ces influences mystérieuses qui changent en découragement notre bonheur et notre confiance en détresse. On dirait que l'air, l'air invisible est plein d'inconnaissables Puissances, dont nous subissons les voisinages mystérieux'.

See Maupassant, pp. 73-74: '2 juin Mon état s'est encore aggravé. Qu'ai-je donc? [...] Tout à coup, il me sembla que j'étais suivi, qu'on marchait sur mes talons, tout près, à me toucher'.

See Maupassant, p. 80: '5 juillet [...] Ah! qui comprendra mon angoisse abominable?'

See Maupassant, p. 96: '13 août Je n'ai plus aucune force, aucun courage, aucune domination sur moi, aucun pouvoir même de mettre en mouvement ma volonté. Je ne peux plus vouloir; mais quelqu'un veut pour moi; et j'obéis'. Note the protagonist's condition, his *fièvre* and his *angoisse*.

³²⁴ See Ortese, *L'infanta sepolta*, p. 60: “Stanotte” disse quando poté parlare, con voce tremante “gli sono spuntate improvvisamente le ali. Aveva già qualche piuma da ieri sera... non te lo dissi per non spaventarti. Sai,” continuava con una specie d'incoscienza “dovunque nascono fiori e piume in questa stagione, ed era tanto che lui le aspettava...”.

³²⁵ The idea of the limitations of reason, which the girl becomes aware of in accepting the angel, is a truth that we also find in Shakespeare:

Among Ortese's extraordinary beings, we must mention a creature who possesses childish features and an irrational temper. The *spiritello* (also called *fanciullo*) is presented as the personification of her heart, often tormented by contradictory feelings. This occurs, in particular, in two short stories of the collection *Angelici dolori*, the homonymous 'Angelici dolori'³²⁶ and 'Viaggio a Roma',³²⁷ where her emotions are filtered through the behaviour of 'il mio fanciullo',³²⁸ 'lo Spiritello mio.'³²⁹ She talks to her heart and often tries to calm it/him down, holding a conversation similar to the dialogue between two opposites, self-control/rationality (Ortese) and emotion/irrationality (the heart). In 'Angelici dolori' the *fanciullo* represents amorous feelings:

In verità, noi non sapevamo nulla, e spesso un mio tentativo di ragionamento veniva annullato da un grido del fanciullo, su quanto egli era piacevole, come guardava. Mentre io dicevo "e certo tu provasti altre volte di tali tumulti, e non sta bene così facilmente cedervi", colui m'interrompeva con puerilità sconcertanti, o impazienti gridi. (*Angelici dolori*, p. 71)

'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.

See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I. v. 167-168, ed. by John Dover Wilson, 2nd edn (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971). Hamlet's words were often quoted by Freud. See Paul Roazen, *Encountering Freud, The Politics and Histories of Psychoanalysis* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990). Pascal also stated that reason, far from being almighty, shows us its very limits; he spoke about the reasons of the heart which reason does not know; they do exist like the others and have a reality of their own. See Blaise Pascal, *Pensieri*, ed. by Adriano Bausola, trans. by Adriano Bausola and Remo Tapella, parallel text French/Italian (Milan: Bompiani, 2000), p. 264: 'Nous connaissons la vérité, non seulement par la raison, mais encore par le coeur; c'est de cette dernière sorte que nous connaissons les premiers principes, et c'est en vain que le raisonnement, qui n'y a point de part, essaye de les combattre. [...] Et il est aussi inutile et aussi ridicule que la raison demande au coeur des preuves de ses premiers principes, pour vouloir y consentir, qu'il serait ridicule que le coeur demandât à la raison un sentiment de toutes les propositions qu'elle démontre, pour vouloir les recevoir'.

³²⁶ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, pp. 66-76.

³²⁷ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, pp. 279-295.

³²⁸ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 71. Page numbers offer only one example from the many present in the text.

³²⁹ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 282.

As emerges from the quotation above, the *spiritello* is completely irrational, immature and selfish. In ‘Viaggio a Roma’ the *spiritello* cannot contain the excitement and the joy of his first visit to the capital:

Andata a letto, e mentre io veramente cadevo dal sonno, il cuore o spirito ch’egli fosse, seduto a me accanto, non ristava dal carezzarmi i capelli con una (per così dire) sua manina bruciante di febbre.

“Dormi” gli dicevo.

“E non posso, cara”.

“Perché non puoi? Odi canti?”.

“Sì... non so... la mia Patria. Pensa che la vedrò! E andremo in treno, anche”. (*Angelici dolori*, p. 281)

The personification of the heart, as this quotation shows, is not only verbal, as seen from the ongoing dialogue between the two, but also physical, as he is represented ‘seduto a me accanto’.

3.2.3 *Monacielli*, elves and fairies: Ortese’s interpretations of Neapolitan and Celtic folklore

I shall first consider Ortese’s re-interpretation of the Neapolitan folklore figure of the *monaciello*, and examine how Ortese re-elaborates this figure across a range of her works. It is evident, as Iannacone also suggests, that the figure of the *monaciello* is not used by Ortese as a colourful, folkloristic image borrowed from tradition, but as the emblem of her poetics of reality: believing in the *monaciello* means believing in the existence of a reality once shared by all and now rejected as irrational.³³⁰

³³⁰ See Iannacone, p. 119: ‘Credere, allora, nell’esistenza del “monaciello” – questa creatura che non è fantasma né parvenza aleatoria, ma essere vivente e operante, nella sua ambivalenza caratteriale, nella commistione di santità e diabolicità, di bontà e malvagità, dell’essere ora “amico sentimentale, stravagante, capace spesso di delicatezze femminee” (p. 21), ora “terribile nelle ire, pericoloso e triste nelle improvvise follie” (p. 22) – significa assumere il punto di vista minoritario e deriso di un’accettazione simbolica, un tempo accreditata e condivisa, oggi illuministicamente rifiutata come credenza irrazionale, come fattore di sovvertimento del retaggio materialistico consegnato da quello che la Ortese definisce “pensiero francese” (il riferimento al deprecato secolo dei Lumi è evidente)’.

The best and most accomplished example of her revisiting of this traditional character is Nicola, in the short story ‘Il Monaciello di Napoli’.³³¹ The first innovation that Ortese brings to the legendary character is to make him not the only *monaciello*: according to Ortese there are many, a ‘masnada’,³³² of them living in Naples. Nicola, as his fellow *monacielli*, is an ageless *scugnizzo*, who does not grow old, dwells in the family home for generation on generation, akin to ancient Rome’s tutelary deity. Physically, Ortese’s *monacielli* of the short story look like thirteen-year-old boys: short, faces covered in dirt, they wear black cloaks and pointed hats after the fashion of bandits. They live in the bedroom of an old, deaf aunt who cannot hear them, making themselves at home in an old, broken wardrobe, without a lock, amongst filthy rags and parrot feathers, where they put a broken chair, a small table with cards and empty glasses. Their lifestyle is rather bohemian: they misbehave and spend the day drinking, playing cards and playing nasty tricks on people.³³³ Furthermore, they seem to be rather contradictory in their manners, being at times amiable and affectionate, at others, rebellious and hostile.³³⁴ Nicola is like the other *monacielli*: he spends his time playing the flute, singing bawdy songs, shirking his

³³¹ Ortese’s ‘Il monaciello di Napoli’ also contains several aspects of the fairy-tale genre, as Iannacone underlines. Iannacone looks closely and in detail at the style of this short story where the slow, serene and airy rhythm of narration is accompanied by a contradictory atmosphere of suspense, expectancy and even melancholy. See Iannacone, pp. 111-113. He points out that the vague, uncertain atmosphere is marked by the frequent use of full stops, adjectives such as ‘strano’ and several explanations which attempt to give shape to something which is too airy to express. The large number of diminutives and terms of endearment is another typical feature of the style of the fairy tales. See Iannacone, p. 113.

³³² Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, p. 20.

³³³ See Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, pp. 22-23: ‘Passavano tutto il giorno là, soli soli, il cappellaccio sulla nuca, giocando a carte con gli amici, bestemmiando, raccontandosi storielle poco edificanti e, soprattutto, bevendo del buon vino sottratto alla dispensa dei signori. Quando erano ubbriachi (perché, mi duole dirlo, questo spiacevole fatto avveniva con facilità), cadevano riversi sul piano dell’armadio, i capelli biondi all’aria, la faccia vermiglia, beata, un sigaro spento tra le labbra, e i piedi nudi’.

³³⁴ See Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, pp. 21-22: ‘Un insieme di cuore e di furbizia, d’ignoranza e sagacia, di passione e spensieratezza; uno spirito affettuoso, aperto, ma insofferente di legami fino alla ribellione; un amico sentimentale, stravagante, capace spesso di delicatezze femminee, ma terribile nelle ire, pericoloso e triste nelle improvvise follie’.

household duties, breaking things and disturbing the tranquillity of the house until the young protagonist decides to take him under her wing and makes him feel loved, cared for and respected. In her depiction of Nicola, Ortese modifies and adds novelty to the representation that Neapolitan legend gives of *'o munaciello*. Like the folklore character, Nicola is short and ageless; however, he is not deformed nor does he have the gaunt appearance which the legendary *monaciello* used to hide under a monk's gown. His personality, in line with tradition, is split: at times good, generous and helpful (according to legend he may leave money to the people he scares) and at times evil, mean and vindictive (in popular tradition he may scare people, play tricks on them, harass women and even secretly make them pregnant).³³⁵ As in legendary tales, Nicola wears a hat. However, unlike in folklore, the hat does not change colour according to his mood (red when good, black when bad). Furthermore, traditionally he does not live in houses, but simply turns up unexpectedly in different places. This figure is often present in popular literature and a few authors also explain his origin. In the seventeenth century, Giambattista Basile mentioned *qualche monachetto* in 'La Mortella',³³⁶ one of the stories collected in *Il Pentamerone*. One night, in his dark bedroom a prince heard strange noises and 'pensò subito che fosse o qualche mozzo di camera, che voleva alleggerirgli la borsa, o qualche monachetto, che gli voleva togliere di dosso le coperte'.³³⁷ To explain the meaning of the word *monachetto*, Benedetto Croce, who translated Basile's book from ancient Neapolitan dialect into Italian, adds an explanatory footnote, also making reference to various sources across

³³⁵ Tasso's *folletto*, with his annoying tricks, comes to my mind again, Tasso, p. 176: 'Del folletto voglio scrivere alcuna cosa ancora. Il ladroncello m'ha robati molti scudi di moneta; [...] mi mette tutti i libri sottosopra: apre le casse; ruba le chiavi, ch'io non me ne posso guardare' he writes in his letter to Maurizio Cattaneo on December 25th. On December 30th 1585, in reply to two of Cattaneo's recent letters, Tasso wrote, Tasso p. 177: 'l'una è sparita da poi ch'io l'ho letta, e credo che se l'abbia portata il folletto, perché è quella ne la quale si parlava di lui'.

³³⁶ Giambattista Basile, *Il Pentamerone, ossia la fiaba delle fiabe*, trans. by Benedetto Croce, 21st edn, vol. I, II (Bari: Gius. Laterza e Figli, 1925), pp. 30-42.

³³⁷ Basile, p. 32.

European culture.³³⁸ Another *monachetto* appears in ‘Vardiello’³³⁹ belonging to the same collection; we find him in a house where nobody wanted to live just because ‘frequentata dal monachetto’.³⁴⁰ In her transcription of Neapolitan legends, Matilde Serao,³⁴¹ sees the figure as the deformed son of Caterina Frezza, daughter of a rich merchant, and Stefano Mariconda. Their young love was opposed by the girl’s family, who killed Stefano to bring an end to their relationship. Their child was raised in a convent by Caterina and, after her death, he disappeared in mysterious circumstances or was killed. Another legend has ‘o *munaciello* a worker at the old waterworks; able to enter and exit houses as he chooses through underground passages. The legend, however, mixes with reality: il *pozzaro*, a typical Neapolitan figure, really existed and had specific tasks³⁴² in the maintenance of the town water pipes. Guglielmo Melisurgo³⁴³ hints at the job done by *fontanieri e pozzari*:

ai quali era affidata la sorveglianza pel regolare funzionamento dei
due acquedotti e la manutenzione ed esercizio di una Città sotterranea
composta di angusti cunicoli sboccanti e comunicanti tra loro e di

³³⁸ Basile, p. 32: “‘Monaciello’: il “moine bourru” dei francesi e il “frayle” degli spagnoli (il Liebrecht richiama anche lo “snebergius nigro cucullo vestitus” delle *Disquisitiones magicae* del Delrio): folletto o spirito familiare, che s’immagina in Napoli vestito da chierichetto e con un zucchetto rosso sul capo. Di lui corrono, nel Napoletano, le stesse storie che si narrano dappertutto: cfr. PITRÉ in *Bibl. d. tradiz. popol.*, XVII, 68-72, e, meglio ancora, il libro HEINE sulla *Germania*, I’.

³³⁹ Basile, *Il Pentamerone, ossia la fiaba delle fiabe*, pp. 55-62.

³⁴⁰ Basile, p. 59.

³⁴¹ Matilde Serao, *Leggende napoletane* (Rome: Newton and Compton, 1995).

³⁴² See ‘La leggenda del Monaciello’, *Napoli Sotterranea*, <<http://www.lanapolisotterranea.it>> [accessed 10/10/2011]: ‘Ogni abitazione, nella città di Napoli, poteva attingere acqua dalla cisterna sottostante tramite un pozzo al quale aveva accesso il “pozzaro”, una classe di liberi professionisti che si muovevano con destrezza in questi antri camminando lungo stretti cunicoli e arrampicandosi su per i pozzi grazie a dei fori praticati a distanza più o meno regolare. Questi personaggi, veri signori del mondo sotterraneo avevano libero accesso a tutte le case mediante i pozzi e hanno dato origine ad aneddoti e leggende ancora vive nell’immaginario napoletano come quella dei “monacielli”, spiriti benevoli o maligni che si occupavano più della padrona di casa che della rete idrica, ed usavano le vie sotterranee che conoscevano bene, per sparire o apparire, sotto il mantello da lavoro che, nella penombra, somigliava appunto al saio di un monaco’. See also Bentini, p. 213: ‘Quasi ogni abitazione a Napoli era dotata di un pozzo, dove si prelevava l’acqua: il compito di penetrare nelle profondità spettava al pozzaro, un omino di bassa statura – in modo da facilitare il movimento nei cunicoli – vestito con un impermeabile e un cappellino nero. Con il tempo a Napoli la figura del pozzaro si sovrappone a quella antica del monaciello: il bambino col cappello nero accede così ai sottosuoli delle città’.

³⁴³ Guglielmo Melisurgo, *Napoli sotterranea* (Naples: Colonnese, 1979).

migliaia e migliaia di vasche di conserva d'acqua potabile alle quali si accedeva dai cunicoli.³⁴⁴

In the short story 'La casa del bosco',³⁴⁵ Ortese seems to hint at the legend of the *monaciello* living in waterworks and at the figure of the *pozzaro*; the narrator is attracted by the bright light generated by a stream of diamonds coming from the sewer pipes. Through an opening in the pipes she can see the figure of Myškin or M'Yškin, *Fochista del sogno*, a fantastic Persian character with several features of the legendary *monaciello*:

Myškin, o M'Yškin [...] era poi vestito piuttosto curiosamente, di una tuta di maglia nera, fissata alle caviglie in calzari a righe – mentre un copricapo, diciamo berrettino nero con visiera, ornato in cima di un lume rotondo, formava l'altra parte stranissima del suo abbigliamento. Ed era quel berrettino, molto calcato sugli occhi, che impediva di discernere il suo volto, di cui scorgevi solo il mento e la bocca, atteggiata a un sorriso malinconico, e dietro quella bocca era spesso, senza ragione, un'ombra improvvisa. Due lunghi orecchini, a forma di mezzaluna, pendevano poi dal suo orecchio sinistro e dal destro, incastonando ciascuno tre pietre turchine; mentre all'orecchio destro era fissato da un tralcio verde, ma come naturalmente, cioè nato *dall'orecchio stesso*, un mazzettino rosa, di due o tre gerani. Sul braccio, poi (né voglio dimenticare una sottile corda dorata che gli stringeva più volte la vita) portava un mantello, o scialle, di cui non posso dire nulla, tranne che era una cascata di luna in una notte verde di maggio. (*In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 39-40)

He dwells in the underground pipes, similarly to the *monaciello* of the legend who lives in the waterworks. Like the *monaciello*, he wears a hat 'un copricapo, diciamo berrettino nero con visiera', which hides his face, allowing only a melancholy smile

³⁴⁴ Melisurgo, p. 14.

³⁴⁵ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 11-55.

to show. The sentence ‘e dietro quella bocca era spesso, senza ragione, un’ombra improvvisa’ seems to hint at the frequent mood swings, another characteristic of the *monaciello*. Like his legendary counterpart, Myškin or M’Yškin has a cloak, although a much more sophisticated one ‘portava un mantello, o scialle, di cui non posso dire nulla, tranne che era una cascata di luna in una notte verde di maggio’, while his long earrings, in the shape of a half moon, testify to his Oriental heritage. I wish to pause briefly on his right ear which ‘era fissato da un tralcio verde, ma come naturalmente cioè nato *dall’orecchio stesso*, un mazzettino rosa, di due o tre gerani’. The sprig with the flowers grows spontaneously from his ear and is thus part of his body. Ortese creates a similar image in the depiction of Hieronymus in *Il cardillo addolorato*, who has a feather growing naturally from his head, as a last symbol and reminder of his bond with nature. This natural sign establishes a parallelism between the victimised categories of extraordinary characters and those of nature, both marginalised and condemned by scientific thought, mankind and modernisation.

In the story ‘Saluto di notte’,³⁴⁶ the author, oppressed by daily problems, dreams of being in London. Walking through a square at night, she encounters a young man who gives her peace and serenity:

e, a distanza di qualche passo, vestito di scuro, mantello e cappello nero, un fanciullo, o ragazzino. Vidi poi che non era un ragazzino, ma un giovane, di faccia molto scura, esotica, serena, però come di persona che vi è familiare (mentre *non era* familiare). Portava mantello e cappello con mite autorità, e, al piede, piccoli stivali. (*In sonno e in veglia*, p. 134)

Once again, like the *monaciello*, the mysterious, yet familiar, figure, is wearing a cloak and a hat. At the end of the short story, Ortese, having identified the young

³⁴⁶ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 129-135.

man with someone who really existed, says that after twenty years his face had not changed at all:³⁴⁷ like the *monaciello*, this character does not grow old.

The character of Stellino, the *folletto*, in the short story ‘Folletto a Genova’,³⁴⁸ also possesses some of the *monaciello*’s traits and seems to anticipate in many ways the Hieronymus of *Il cardillo addolorato*:

Quel corpicino macilento, abbandonato sotto una mantellina ritagliata in vecchi giornali (dove scorgevi ancora i titoli di una precedente guerra mondiale), la pezzuola sul capo, da cui intuivi la dolce affettività umana, e da cui spuntavano due attente orecchie nere, tutto, in lui, era fatto per ridere... non era serio... meno la striminzita manina che posava sul cuore, simile più a un ramo di rosmarino che a una vera zampina umana (così farneticavo), con le unghiette tutte in fuori, ormai dimenticate, distorte. Sì, potevo capire che egli avesse ormai i suoi bravi CENTODODICI ANNI! (*In sonno e in veglia*, p. 67)

First of all, the age, he is a small child of 112; like the *monaciello*, he will never grow old and like Nicola, he is physically similar to a child rather than an old man. Like Nicola, Stellino has lived his whole life in the same room of the house. He wears a cloak, this time made out of old newspapers, and a ‘pezzuola sul capo’ rather than a proper hat.

In *Il cardillo addolorato*, Hieronymus has all the *monaciello*’s traits I have described above. He is very small in size and never grows old; he wears a hat, which accounts for the name *Käppchen*³⁴⁹ or *Berrettino*,³⁵⁰ little hat. He is also called

³⁴⁷ See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 135: ‘Seppi, tempo dopo, che esisteva realmente, era persona grandemente colta e *mite*. In questi giorni, poi, è morto. Era certo più vecchio di vent’anni, ma il suo caro viso era immutato’.

³⁴⁸ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 57-72.

³⁴⁹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 263. Page numbers offer only one example from the many present in the text.

³⁵⁰ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 293.

‘Mantelletto’,³⁵¹ which recalls the cloak worn by the other Ortesian *monacielli*. Like Nicola, he lives in the house, where he does minor household chores, such as sweeping the floor or carrying parcels. Like the *monaciello*, he is a pagan creature, born without the blessing of the Church and thus doomed to be damned.

In her depiction of Stellino and Hieronymus, Ortese seems to merge features of the Neapolitan figure with those of the spirits or elves of the Germanic tradition. In many ways, Stellino, also called *folletto*, and Hieronymus seem to recall the hobgoblin of Celtic folklore, a friendly spirit of the Brownie type. Brownies are a type of fairy, small in size and dressed in rags, who come out at night to finish the work not completed by the servants. They are personally attached to a member of a family and take charge of household or farmyard duties. It is easy to upset a Brownie and make him turn into an evil spirit named Boggart. If treated with respect, however, Brownies are faithful to their masters.³⁵² According to Briggs’ Dictionary of Fairies,³⁵³ Hobgoblins are generally good-humoured and helpful but also fond of jokes and can become nasty when provoked. A famous Hobgoblin that Ortese was certainly familiar with, is Puck in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In the play a fairy says to Puck:

those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,
You do their work, and they shall have good luck:
Are you not he?³⁵⁴

Stellino and Hieronymus, also possess the typical hobgoblin features of the Celtic tradition: their body was hairy, having ‘Dovunque una gran peluria dorata-grigia, che

³⁵¹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 293.

³⁵² See Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies and other supernatural creatures* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), pp. 45-47.

³⁵³ See Briggs.

³⁵⁴ See Briggs, p. 223.

intorno al mento era bianca'.³⁵⁵ In the case of Hieronymus there are other details which seem to hint at Celtic folklore: the German name and his birth in Cologne. Typical of this tradition is also his dual nature. In fact, during the novel he can appear as an innocent victim, but Ortese completes his figure with a sinister touch which characterises so many fantastic creatures in Northern mythology. Hieronymus behaves violently and cruelly towards Sasà. Furthermore, he turns out to be a negative, baleful presence in the family; selfishly tied to Elmina's apron strings, he scares off her suitors, thus preventing her from having and enjoying a life of her own. Finally, we know that his damnation is inevitable. Giordano Dall'Armellina, an expert in European ballads, when referring to folklore and popular culture, also discusses the nature of elves and fairies pointing out their ambivalent traits.³⁵⁶ He says that they can be both masculine and feminine, good or evil. Elves, such as the elfin-knights, who live in the greenwood, are definitely supernatural masculine beings, who can be associated with death, seduction and fertility. In the Middle Ages people commonly believed in the existence of such supernatural creatures and the Church, intending to destroy the old faith, claimed that they were devilish beings. Eventually priests were forced to recognise them but 'made every effort to turn a world of beautiful fantasy into a menacing world of misery and sadness'.³⁵⁷ Dall'Armellina adds that fairies were also thought to be fallen angels who remained between Heaven and Hell when God hurled Lucifer down to Hell and closed the doors of Heaven. Dall' Armellina goes on to explain that 'as Lucifer had also closed the doors of Hell, the fallen angels found shelter in holes in the earth (wells, hilltops, standing stones and old trees with an opening at the base were generally believed to

³⁵⁵ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 62.

³⁵⁶ Giordano Dall'Armellina, *Medieval British Ballads in a European Context* (Turin: Loescher, 2000), p. 36.

³⁵⁷ Dall'Armellina, p. 36.

be entrances to the “Other World” or “Fairyland”).³⁵⁸ Therefore, it is possible to conclude that many features of the *monacielli*, their contradictory character, the secluded places they live in, the fact that they can get women pregnant and, sometimes, their sinister aspect of destruction and death can be traced back to popular Northern European culture.

Why did Ortese choose to re-invent the character of ‘*o munaciello* and make it a frequent presence in her works? Was this choice dictated only by her personal attachment to the Neapolitan world and the pagan tradition? When talking about the programmatic framework to ‘*Il Monaciello di Napoli*’, I explained that Ortese selected this legendary folklore figure as the emblem of a more truthful perception of reality which got lost in the empirical and scientific thought of the Enlightenment. Not surprisingly, both ‘*Il Monaciello di Napoli*’ and *Il cardillo addolorato* are set in the eighteenth century, the golden age of rational thinking. In ‘*Il Monaciello di Napoli*’, Ortese openly denounces the victimisation of the pagan *monacielli* caused by ‘L’ingresso, nella nostra cultura, del pensiero francese; i progressi della scienza’,³⁵⁹ which seemed aimed to destroy the belief in the fantastic, magical dimension of reality.³⁶⁰ Therefore, Ortese’s use and frequent reinterpretation of this legendary figure is meant to recover the extraordinary dimension of reality present in the legends and superstitions which people used to believe in and value before the advent of empirical thought. Her revisitations of the figure of the *monaciello* add two

³⁵⁸ Dall’ Armellina, p. 36.

³⁵⁹ Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, p. 20.

³⁶⁰ See Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, pp. 19-20: ‘fra quella gente gaia, socievole, affettuosa, crescevano e si nascondevano come funghi certe creaturine [...] Non so se quelle creaturine esistano ancora, ma temo di no, già in quel tempo essendo la loro istituzione in visibile decadenza. Che vuoi! L’ingresso, nella nostra cultura, del pensiero francese; i progressi della scienza che mirava con un impetuoso colpevole entusiasmo a demolire la credenza nell’irreale ch’era tanta parte della nostra vita; e infine i provvedimenti di Santa Chiesa, che mettevano in guardia i fedeli contro questi “spiritelli diabolici, che s’insediano nelle famiglie, e con la loro condotta irreligiosa corrompono la gioventù”, tutto questo complesso di motivi, [...] infliggevano un grosso colpo a quella innocente masnada’.

main features to the Neapolitan tradition. On the one hand, the strong bond with nature, not present in the original Neapolitan *monaciello*, which can be seen in the flowers growing from Myškin's or M'Yškin's ear, in Hieronymus' feather as well as in Stellino's and Hieronymus' metamorphic nature.³⁶¹ On the other hand, the features of Celtic and Northern European folklore which lead me to believe that the author intended to establish the links with other folkloric traditions in order to emphasise the universality of her message.

3.2.4 Hieronymus/Geronte/Gerontino and Alonso: the complex choice of names

A closer look can now be turned to Ortese's choice of the name Hieronymus for the character also known as Hieronymus Käppchen, Geronte o Gerontino il Piccolo, Berrettino, il Portapacchi, Hieronymus Käppchen, Lillot (as in *L'Iguana*, here too the idea of a shifting reality is suggested by the use of multiple names for the same character). The name brings to mind figures of the figurative as well as the literary arts. First, we should consider the etymology of Hieronymus or Geronte, as he is also called, from the Ancient Greek *gheron*, old. The reference to old age is highly appropriate for a boy of 300. The German-sounding name is justified in the plot by the fact that the metamorphic boy was born in Cologne. Outside the plot, it seems to hint, as said above, at the rich world of fairy tales and legends of Germanic tradition; however, I firmly believe that the choice of the name Hieronymus is much more sophisticated and complex than might appear at first glance. More specifically, calling this metamorphic, deformed, dwarf-child-animal character by such a name, Ortese clearly wishes to refer, and likely pay tribute, to the Dutch painter

³⁶¹ See Chapter 4.

Hieronymus van Aeken Bosch.³⁶² Although I have not found any clear proof of Ortese's familiarity with Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, it is more than likely that she had some knowledge of his works as Bosch's fantastic, surrealist, satirical style particularly appealed to the new artistic tastes of twentieth-century Europe. Bosch is considered by some critics a forerunner of the surrealists and parallels have often been drawn with Salvador Dalí. Despite being loyal to the values and the beliefs of his time, Bosch enriched his paintings, even those dealing with more austere themes, with a sarcastic, fantastic, wild imagination which led many to think of him as a heretic or lunatic. I shall give just two key examples of Bosch's works, as a thorough analysis of his paintings is not the purpose of this section. The famous triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1500-1505),³⁶³ for example, portrays fantastic, grotesque figures as well as many metamorphic creatures such as humans flying with wings, half fish-half human creatures, metamorphic birds with legs, a fully-dressed rabbit with legs, a human with the face of a cat wearing a woman's hat, a pig dressed as a nun. Likewise, in *The Hay Wagon* (1515 c.a.),³⁶⁴ we can see insect wings and reptile tails, the snake of the Garden of Eden with a human bust and face, human-animal metamorphic creatures pulling the cart, a man with frog legs, men with reptile tails, a deer with human legs, a figure that looks like the mixture of a man, a butterfly and a rat. Bosch's metamorphic, deformed creatures bring to mind Ortese's multi-

³⁶² Hieronymus (in Middle Dutch Jeroen) van Aken (c.1450/1460-1516) was a Dutch painter born in Hertogenbosch, the flourishing capital of the fifteenth-century Duchy of Brabant, also known as Den Bosch, near which he lived all his life. The name 'Bosch' with which he signs his works, derives from his birthplace. The largest collection of his paintings, including *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, *Table of the Mortal Sins* and *The Hay Wagon*, can be seen at the El Prado Museum in Madrid. See: Larsen, Erik, *Hieronymus Bosch: catalogo completo*, trans. by Tania Gargiulo (Florence: Octavo, 1998).

³⁶³ Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1500-1505, oil on wooden panel, Madrid: Museo del Prado. See: Larsen, p. 103, p. 131.

³⁶⁴ Bosch, *The Hay Wagon*, c. 1515, oil on wooden panel, Madrid: Museo del Prado. See: Larsen, p. 74 and p. 122.

metamorphic dwarf so, supposing that Ortese was familiar with Bosch's paintings, why would she pay tribute or refer to the Dutch painter? I believe that, if my interpretation of the name Hieronymus as an intentional reference to Hieronymus Bosch is correct, Ortese may have wished to establish a dialogue or a connection with somebody who, like her, has been able to represent and give space to metamorphic, fantastic, imaginary beings. I do not think it would be at all surprising that Ortese should have chosen the painter's name for her character.

To return to the name Hieronymus/Geronte/Gerontino, Ortese's use of homonymy is also interesting. A similar study has been carried out for Elsa Morante's *La Storia* in the article 'Tutti i nomi di Usepe: saggio sui personaggi della "Storia" di Elsa Morante'³⁶⁵ by Barengi. In his article, Barengi observes that in Morante's *La Storia*, the various forms of the name Giuseppe (the Christian name of the little protagonist, whom everyone calls Usepe) are recurrent and given to many creatures, including both male and female adults, children and animals. In Pietralata, for example, there are six characters named Giuseppe, and three in Nino's partisan camp. Barengi highlights a similar and, I believe, much more extreme use of homonymy in García Márquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967),³⁶⁶ where the device is used by the author to create an atmosphere of fatalism and predestination. Here the passing down of names within the Buendía dynasty (José Arcadio, Aureliano, Amaranta, Úrsula) creates a sense of a cyclical return to the past.³⁶⁷ In

³⁶⁵ Barengi, pp. 363-389.

³⁶⁶ Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*, 18th edn (Madrid: Espasa, 2000).

³⁶⁷ Together with García Márquez, cited by Barengi in his analysis, I would cite the use of homonymy made by another leading exponent of Latin American magic realism, Isabel Allende. In *The House of the Spirits* (1982), names are particularly important. See: Allende. The female lineage here is not highlighted by homonymy, but by names sharing the common association with light and purity: Nívea, Clara, Blanca and Alba. On the other hand, the male names of the family of peasants, the Garcías, is a good example of homonymy: Pedro García is the father of Pedro Segundo García, who is the father of Pedro Tercero García. They are only individualised by a number with the aim of reinforcing the idea of peasants' unchangeable destiny based on the same life of monotony and

Ortese's trilogy, there are two important instances of homonymy: one, in *Il cardillo addolorato*, concerns Hieronymus/Geronte/Gerontino and the other is found in *Alonso e i visionari*. Hieronymus, at times also called by the Italian equivalent of his name Geronte or Gerontino, is initially confused with the aristocratic child Gerontino Watteau/Durante. In *Alonso e i visionari*, Alonso is the name of the puma and of a Spanish waiter, but it soon acquires a universal meaning extended to the humble, the weak and the mistreated of the world, whom Stella Winter invokes: "Alonso... piccolo Alonso... dove sei tu?" pregai. "Mi vedi?". E, più sottovoce, aggiunsi l'invocazione blasfema: "Aiutami tu, bambino".³⁶⁸ As we can see from these two examples, Ortese's use of homonymy has a different purpose in Morante and García Márquez; Ortese does not use it to create a sense of fatalism and predestination, but to generate ambiguity through a set of mixed identities, which further emphasises her idea of a reality made of various, often imperceptible facets. The ambiguity in the identity of characters such as that of Alonso confuses the reader and leaves open the possibility that the waiter and the puma are one metamorphic entity.

3.2.5 Selvaggio, Alonso and the *cardillo*: a web of references

In 'La casa del gatto',³⁶⁹ the cat is seen as a human rather than an animal 'quello non era no un gatto, una bestia ordinaria',³⁷⁰ it could smile, cry and speak. It is referred to not only as 'una bestia assai bella',³⁷¹ 'bestiola',³⁷² but also as 'intelligentissimo Selvaggio',³⁷³ 'nobile amico',³⁷⁴ il Poeta',³⁷⁵ 'spiritello mesto'.³⁷⁶ The extraordinary

repetitive work as that of their ancestors. This lack of opportunity for social mobility and revolt will be terminated by Pedro Tercero, who will put an end to the cycle.

³⁶⁸ See Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 176: "Aiutami tu, bambino". Sì, mi ero rivolta a un'altra razza, o un popolo, oltre l'umano, avevo sentito la divinità della nostra Terra, e madre, tanto tenuta a distanza, e dei suoi incomprensibili figli, spesso terribili figli, ma anche creature di pace, di bene'.

³⁶⁹ Ortese, 'La Casa del gatto'.

³⁷⁰ Ortese, 'La Casa del gatto', p. 1.

³⁷¹ Ortese, 'La Casa del gatto', p. 1.

³⁷² Ortese, 'La Casa del gatto', p. 2.

³⁷³ Ortese, 'La Casa del gatto', p. 2.

element is, in fact, explicitly inferred from the plot where a cat, once brutally killed by a man, now appears to the narrator as a living creature. Ortese shows, once again, man as a cruel, violent, perverse being in opposition to the natural goodness of the animal who, possessing such qualities as a noble nature, creativity, and supernatural powers, proves to be far superior. The story recalls Poe's *The Black Cat*³⁷⁷ in the reference it makes to mankind in total disintegration and degradation: the protagonist is destroying himself through alcohol and gives vent to his most uncontrollably brutish instincts. Similarly to the cat in 'La casa del gatto', Poe's Pluto is described as 'a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree'.³⁷⁸ The cat's intelligence, affectionate disposition and supernatural traits are present in both authors' stories, even though in Poe there are different psychological implications.

As said above, the nature of the extraordinary puma Alonso, 'un cucciolo speciale [...] di razza angelica, soprannaturale',³⁷⁹ remains a mystery. Yet, its vivid description brings back the picture of a famous real dog. When, in his final days, he is seriously ill and in dire straits, Alonso recalls Argos in the *Odyssey*, where the dog, lying on a pile of manure, wags his tail when recognising his master only to die happily immediately afterwards:

there the dog Argos lay in the dung, all covered with dog ticks.

Now, as he perceived that Odysseus had come close to him,

he wagged his tail, and laid both his ears back; only

he now no longer had the strength to move any closer

³⁷⁴ Ortese, 'La Casa del gatto', p. 2.

³⁷⁵ Ortese, 'La Casa del gatto', p. 2.

³⁷⁶ Ortese, 'La Casa del gatto', p. 3.

³⁷⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (London: Dent, 1984), pp. 518-527.

³⁷⁸ Poe, p. 519.

³⁷⁹ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 243.

to his master.³⁸⁰

Ormai non alza nemmeno più il capo dalla sua cuccia, e fa orrore vedergli gli occhi tanto tristi ma aprirsi se non al nome del suo vecchio amichetto-fratellino. Talora Julio, con la innocente crudeltà dei giovani, passa davanti alla sua stanzetta di invalido cantando *Decio! Decio!* – e vedessi allora come la vecchia carogna (ché tanto simile mi pare davvero all’antica anima umana, all’azzurra bontà di Dio), vedessi come si trascina faticosamente sulla soglia. (*Alonso e i visionari*, p. 132)

Furthermore, his exotic origin, size, theoretically wild nature, as well as his close friendship with a child recalls, for me, another exotic pet in the literature of magic realism: *Barrabás*³⁸¹ in Isabel Allende’s *La casas de los espíritus*.³⁸² The publication of the novel by the Chilean writer, translated into Italian in 1983, precedes that of *Alonso e i visionari* (1996) and, given the success of the book, it is not unlikely, that Ortese would have read it or heard about it. The animal arrives in a truck with other items collected by Marcos, uncle to the clairvoyant child Clara Del Valle, during his exotic travels. Clara, like Decio with the puma, immediately falls in love with the animal. *Barrabás* is of an unknown species and probably not a dog at all, but, like Alonso, a wild, exotic animal.³⁸³ The similarities between Alonso and *Barrabás* lie

³⁸⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. by Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007), p. 261.

³⁸¹ Allende uses italics for the the name of *Barrabás*.

³⁸² See Allende.

³⁸³ See Allende, p. 30: ‘Era de raza desconocida. No tenía nada en común con los perros que vagabundeaban por la calle y mucho menos con las criaturas de pura raza que criaban algunas familias aristocráticas. El veterinario no supo decir cuál era su origen y Clara supuso que provenía de la China, porque gran parte del contenido del equipaje de su tío eran recuerdos de ese lejano país. Tenía una ilimitada capacidad de crecimiento. A los seis meses era del tamaño de una oveja y al año de las proporciones de un potrillo. La familia, desesperada, se preguntaba hasta dónde crecería y comenzaron a dudar de que fuera realmente un perro, especularon que podía tratarse de un animal exótico cazado por el tío explorador en alguna región remota del mundo y que tal vez en su estado primitivo era feroz. Nívea observaba sus pezuñas de cocodrilo y sus dientes afilados y su corazón de

not only in their exotic origin, but also in their wild yet domestic nature³⁸⁴ and their privileged relationship with a child. In fact, Clara looks after *Barrabás* like a mother, while in the relationship between Decio and the puma, the puma acts as a father figure to the child. Another similarity is the destiny of the two animals after their death, or apparent death. Decimo seems to send his friend, Miss Rose, the skin of Alonso, while Esteban Trueba, back from his honeymoon, gives his wife Clara the skin of her *Barrabás* complete with head to use as a rug – the girl faints and the rug has to be removed. Although not exotic creatures, but simple dogs, Blitz and Bella in Elsa Morante's *La Storia* also seem to be echoed in Ortese's puma. In particular, Bella, a second mother to Usepe, recalls the puma's fatherly attitude towards Decio.

The goldfinch of *Il cardillo addolorato* is probably the extraordinary animal that is immersed in the thickest web of references. The bird's song, heard throughout the story, is an airy, invisible presence. It is not only associated with grief and sorrow, but also with joy and freedom accompanied, however, by the awareness that reaching these is impossible. Within the plot the *cardillo* assumes many different identities: it could be a longed-for creature whose arrival is eagerly awaited by many; Flori's favourite pet, accidentally killed by her sister; a Borbonic spy, or just a voice as Madame Pecquod says:

Questa voce, che nasce da un desiderio e un sogno generale di bene,
non è di un uccello, e questo uccello, perciò, non lo troverete mai.
Questa voce è connaturata alla primavera... alle stelle... alle buone
notti d'estate... Fa piangere e diventare buoni. Vi accorgete da ciò, da
questa memoria e questo desiderio pungente e disperato di bene, che è
passato il Cardillo... È che la vostra vita vi appare non buona, vi pare

madre se estremecía pensando que la bestia podía arrancarle la cabeza a un adulto de un tarazón y con mayor razón a cualquiera de sus niños'.

³⁸⁴ See Allende, p. 30: 'Pero *Barrabás* no daba muestras de ninguna ferocidad, por el contrario. Tenía los retozos de un gatito'.

che ve ne sia un'altra, più buona... più mite, e con quella vorreste
cambiare la vostra povera vita... (*Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 368)

In its embodiment of a series of contradictions, the *cardillo* is referred to as 'tenero e maledetto',³⁸⁵ it sings a 'vertiginosa e lieta canzone, davanti alla quale vorremmo tapparci le orecchie',³⁸⁶ it is defined as '*il Padre degli orfani e delle stesse animucce infernali, [...] che vagano smarrite sulla terra*',³⁸⁷ as well as a creature 'che di tutti aveva pena e disprezzo'.³⁸⁸ Among the numerous interpretations of the goldfinch given by Ortese's critics, the following observations by Ghezzi are worth mentioning. In the *cardillo*'s song, Ghezzi hears the suffering scream and cry for help of the victims of history conceived as a disastrous sequence of catastrophic events.³⁸⁹ Furthermore, even though its nature is volatile and flimsy, Ghezzi states that it is possible to set it into 'un preciso orizzonte storico e geografico',³⁹⁰ and, with a concrete metaphor, she identifies it with 'l'anima di Napoli lacera e derelitta'.³⁹¹ Finally, Ghezzi also puts forward the idea that 'il Cardillo ortesiano non esiste',³⁹²

³⁸⁵ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 376.

³⁸⁶ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 376.

³⁸⁷ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 404. Ortese italicises this sentence.

³⁸⁸ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 376.

³⁸⁹ See Ghezzi, 'Voci dall'oltrestoria', pp. 239-241: 'il Cardillo, con il suo canto straziante e portentoso, diventa figura emblematica di quella che per la Ortese è la profonda alterità della storia. [...] è l'angelo dell'oltrestoria, figura della storia come catastrofe [...] che giace *al di là* della temporalità terrena, degli eventi e azioni generati dagli esseri umani [...] L'oltrestoria ortesiana è anche la dimensione del dolore creaturale, di ciò che la catastrofe della storia ha reso maceria e rovina. Regno dell'ineffabile, essa tuttavia risuona di voci, di canti, di lamenti. I lamenti delle creature della natura, delle creature mute e zoppicanti, dolorose e menomate (come folletti reietti, monacielli angariati, iguanucce malmenate, e quant'altri mai oppressi) si mescolano ai pianti dolorosi di chi ha subito la violenza della storia e delle sue rivoluzioni, di chi è stato "soggetto a ogni angheria, o rappresaglia, o violenza e crudeltà illimitata di cui abbonda l'immenso Universo"'.
³⁹⁰ See Ghezzi, 'Voci dall'oltrestoria', p. 242.

³⁹¹ See Ghezzi, 'Voci dall'oltrestoria', p. 242: 'l'uccello magico è infatti anche l'anima di Napoli lacera e derelitta, di una Napoli *storicamente* sofferente, dove "la scura e fredda vita geme" (p. 19); esso diventa emblema di una antica cultura partenopea, pre-moderna e pre-illuministica e perciò pulsionale e pre-razionale, che lascia spazio al mistero e alle superstizioni, al sacro e al pagano, alle creature del sottosuolo (monacielli e gnomi), al gesto della follia e del sogno, al corporeo e al materno, al non-finito e alla porosità, alle infinite volute del barocco. Il canto del cardillo è, allora, quello di Napoli stessa, ovvero, quello, rinato, della sirena Partenope, da cui la città prende nome, morta in una grotta del golfo. E come quello delle sirene (che sono uccelli, prima di essere donne-pesce), il suo canto esprime l'assoluto e l'inattingibile e, come tale, rimane incomprensibile ai più'.

³⁹² See Ghezzi, 'Voci dall'oltrestoria', p. 243.

adding that it is nothing but ‘l’impulso divino che è in noi, [...] memoria sepolta e repressa di un’antica innocenza e purezza che la Storia e la civiltà hanno cancellato.’³⁹³ In the *cardillo*, I also find an echo of Leopardi’s *uccelli*³⁹⁴ and the *gallo silvestre*,³⁹⁵ in his *Operette Morali*.³⁹⁶ The former, are described as happy creatures who, unlike the other animals and man himself, are capable of enjoying their life and express their delight through their songs.³⁹⁷ The latter, on the contrary, reawakens the sleepy mankind, bringing back the sad awareness of the miserable human condition.³⁹⁸ Like Leopardi’s *uccelli*, Ortese’s goldfinch seems to represent the bliss which is denied to man; like *il gallo silvestre*, it reminds man of his sorrowful state. Besides combining aspects of both, I believe that in Ortese the bird has a more complex and also ambiguous dimension. Although its mystery is impenetrable, for each one of the protagonists the *cardillo* really exists and has a different meaning. A source of consolation for Florida, ‘Il Cardillo, sul cuscino, presso il volto della padroncina, le baciava i capelli, come ella fosse solo un altro uccelletto, [...] con molta tenerezza e scherzoso spirito’;³⁹⁹ the nostalgic memories of the past for Brigitta Helm, who says: ‘è la nostra memoria, [...] il desiderio dei giorni

³⁹³ In this regard, Ghezzi, mentions an ancient Persian myth contained in the poem *Mantiq-al-tayr* (Language of the birds), which ‘racconta che, un giorno, gli uccelli del regno decisero di andare a cercare il loro Re Uccello. Dopo innumerevoli difficoltà e defezioni, dopo infinite valli e monti superati, gli ultimi trenta uccelli “purificati dalle loro fatiche, toccano la montagna del *simurg*. Lo contemplanò, finalmente: s’accorgono che essi stessi sono il *simurg*, e che il *simurg* è ciascuno di loro e tutti loro”’. See Ghezzi, ‘Voci dall’oltrestoria’, p. 243.

³⁹⁴ Leopardi, ‘Elogio agli uccelli’ in *Operette Morali*, pp. 299-318.

³⁹⁵ Leopardi, ‘Cantico del gallo silvestre’, in *Operette Morali*, pp. 319-332.

³⁹⁶ Leopardi, *Operette Morali*.

³⁹⁷ See Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, p. 301: ‘Sono gli uccelli naturalmente le più liete creature del mondo [...] sempre ti rallegrano [...] sentono giocondità e letizia più che alcuno altro animale’ (p.301). See also Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, p. 302: ‘Gli uccelli per lo più si dimostrano nei moti e nell’aspetto lietissimi [...] Per ogni diletto e ogni contentezza che hanno, cantano; e quanto è maggiore il diletto o la contentezza, tanto più lena e più studio pongono nel cantare. E cantando buona parte del tempo, s’inferisce che ordinariamente stanno di buona voglia e godono’.

³⁹⁸ See Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, p. 320: ‘un certo gallo salvatico [...] sta in sulla terra coi piedi, e tocca colla cresta e col becco il cielo’. See also Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, p. 323: ‘Su, mortali, destatevi. Il dì rinasce: torna la verità in sulla terra [...] Sorgete; ripigliatevi la soma della vita; riducetevi dal mondo falso nel vero [...] (il dì) richiama alla memoria i disegni, gli studi e i negozi’. See also Leopardi, *Operette Morali*, p. 326: ‘Mortali, destatevi. Non siete ancora liberi dalla vita’.

³⁹⁹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 83.

belli...i giorni impossibili, che tutti abbiamo incontrato’;⁴⁰⁰ a goal to pursue, a change to look forward to and the very meaning of life for the prince who says:

lì dorme il segreto, e riposa la verità finale, in quanto solo nelle
conclusioni è custodito il vero di una vita e, qualunque sia stato il
suo inizio, si svela il Destino. (*Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 97)

In fact, in the end Neville ‘Benedisse il Cardillo che arrivava, e finalmente gli avrebbe spiegato tutto. [...] La follia e la separazione, il dolore e questa gioia che giungeva adesso con lui: tutta calma, fredda, infinita.’⁴⁰¹

Birds, such as pigeons, goldfinches, sparrows with their light fragile nature are constantly present in Ortese’s narrative because, being creatures of the air, they are spirits, therefore, expressions of the invisible. In her thesis, Gloria Marangon⁴⁰² explores this recurring theme in Ortese’s poetry and prose. Moving from sky to earth, birds appear to be emissaries of the afterlife capable of bringing eternity in contact with the transience of human condition. In the poem *Viene un Colombo a sera sulla finestra e muto*,⁴⁰³ despite being silent, the pigeon communicates with the author and brings back the souls of her dead parents:

Vola, papà, non piangere, vola con mamma via,
ringrazia del giardino il Signore gentile.
Qui, nel giorno, la vita dai dolori è confusa,
rintronata siccome una spiaggia dal mare.
Affettuoso colombo, piuma del cuore mio,
ala della mia infanzia, anch’io colombo sono,
le sere di domenica sulla città lontana:
col mio papà m’innalzo, con la sua sposa bianca,
sul carcere del mondo, busso ai vetri di Dio. (*Il mio paese è la notte*,

⁴⁰⁰ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 382.

⁴⁰¹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 415.

⁴⁰² Marangon.

⁴⁰³ Ortese, *Il mio paese è la notte* (Rome: Empiria, 1996), pp. 110-111.

pp. 110-111)

Here the bird symbolises poetry which makes possible the acquisition of a visionary power and, through that, the contact with the invisible. The view of the bird as the essence of poetry recalls John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*.⁴⁰⁴ In this poem the songbird is also a voice: it brings joy as it allows one to forget the pain and sorrow of the world, but it is, at the same time, reminiscent of death. Meditating on the fact that the bird does not know what illness and suffering are, Keats cannot help turning his thoughts to his family members, all of whom died young:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.⁴⁰⁵

Human destiny is different from that of the nightingale who, belonging to the world of eternity, can go on singing for ever. Therefore, at the end of the ode the poet gives up imagination, accepts the loss of the temporary pleasure given by the bird's song, and by doing so accepts life and death.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fabled to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! Adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:

⁴⁰⁴ John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale' in *The Complete Poems*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 346-348.

⁴⁰⁵ Keats, p. 346.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music – Do I wake or sleep?⁴⁰⁶

3.2.6 Estrellita, traditional and modern women-amphibious

With the woman-amphibious nature of the character of Estrellita, Ortese follows the traditional thread of half woman-half animal creatures: from the Sirens of Greek mythology, half woman-half bird, to the Sirens in the *Odyssey*, the women-snakes/dragons of Medieval ballads, to the mermaids of North European folklore and Andersen's fairy tales. However, Ortese's recovery of tradition is never so simple and straightforward and Estrellita's half woman-half animal is not presented as fact but as the product of Daddo's and Ilario's perception. Once again, Ortese's prerogative is to display the multiple facets of reality through the shifts in perception and the non-existence of one definite truth. La Penna, acknowledging Estrellita's link with her literary predecessors, also underlines the fact that Estrellita's amphibian nature is a mental construction of Daddo's and Ilario's:

Many critics have emphasized Estrellita's literary genealogy, which includes Ondina, Morgana, the little mermaid, Lorelei, and Melusina, all of whom represent "the idea of a metamorphic and ambiguous creature, suspended between the human and the animal, and between the realms of water and earth." Yet Estrellita shares the amphibian nature of those fairy creatures only insofar as the implied reader is willing to accept Daddo's and Ilario's warped linguistic misrepresentation of the servant.⁴⁰⁷

Like many other late-nineteenth and twentieth-century authors, Ortese was certainly familiar with, or at least aware of, the tradition of the medieval bestiary, which started to develop in the twelfth century. The didactic texts were illustrated with real

⁴⁰⁶ Keats, p. 348.

⁴⁰⁷ See La Penna, p. 175: 'As mentioned above, Estrellita's human nature is revealed at the end of the novel. The denouement strips away the thick *immaginazione* with which both Daddo and Ilario have covered up Estrellita's reality, revealing it at its best as the result of literary sublimation (Daddo/Ilario), and at its worst as an act of horrendously brutal racial harassment (Mendes)'.

as well as fantastic mythological animals and, to physical and physiological descriptions, they added a complex net of symbolic and religious connotations. Zoomorphic, monstrous, metamorphic creatures were very much part of the Medieval imaginary and literary heritage, and several modern authors have borrowed images and motifs from the zoological medieval tradition, revisiting and reinterpreting them with a new, more complex and sophisticated sensibility. As regards twentieth-century world literature, I should mention Jorge Luis Borges' *Manual de zoología fantástica* (1957)⁴⁰⁸ and Julio Cortázar's short story of metamorphosis 'Axolotl' (1968).⁴⁰⁹ As for Italian literature, an example of an author explicitly referring to the tradition of medieval bestiaries is Dino Buzzati with his *Il colombre* (1966)⁴¹⁰. There are also authors who, despite the fact they do not directly echo the bestiary tradition in their descriptions, do make a wide use of animal figures. Two such are Federigo Tozzi in his *Bestie* (1917)⁴¹¹ and Tommaso Landolfi in works such as 'Mani' (1937),⁴¹² 'Il mar delle blatte' (1939)⁴¹³ and 'Il babbo di Kafka' (1942).⁴¹⁴ As far as these types of figures are concerned, another possible influence on Ortese could be Alberto Savinio, whose paintings and narratives present a sort of bestiary of fantastic zoology. Savinio is capable of playing with reality, subjecting the human figure to a variety of metamorphoses. In 'Mia Madre non mi capisce',⁴¹⁵ just to give an example, the protagonist's mother is seen as a little hen

⁴⁰⁸ Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero, *Manual de zoología fantástica* (Mexico: Fondo de cultura economica, 1998).

⁴⁰⁹ Julio Cortázar, *Final del juego*, 2nd edn (Madrid: Suma de Letras, 2004).

⁴¹⁰ Dino Buzzati, *Il colombre e altri cinquanta racconti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010).

⁴¹¹ Federigo Tozzi, *Bestie*, ed. by Vincenzo Cerami (Rome: Theoria, 1989).

⁴¹² Tommaso Landolfi, *Dialogo dei massimi sistemi*, ed. Idolina Landolfi (Milan: Adelphi, 1996).

⁴¹³ Tommaso Landolfi, *Il mar delle blatte e altre storie* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1975).

⁴¹⁴ Tommaso Landolfi, *La spada* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1976).

⁴¹⁵ Alberto Savinio, *Mia madre non mi capisce*, in *Casa "la Vita"* (Milan: Adelphi, 1988).

who, at the end of the story finds its little chick. Silvana Cirillo⁴¹⁶ quotes Savinio who says:

dipingo uomini e donne con teste di animali [...] perché in queste forme apparentemente ibride e fondamentalmente armoniose e complete, è l'espressione del carattere umano più profondo e più sacro. [...] Quelle mie pitture sono "studi di carattere", meglio ancora ritratti. Perché il ritratto, il vero ritratto, è la rivelazione dell'uomo nascosto. Il quale ora è un gatto, ora un cervo, ora un maiale. Più di rado un leone.⁴¹⁷

The concept of a reality beyond the visible 'il vero ritratto è la rivelazione dell'uomo nascosto' and the unity of being 'il quale ora è un gatto, ora un cervo, ora un maiale' are two of Ortese's fundamental beliefs.

An emblematic image of woman-amphibious in Italian literature which seems to be close to Ortese's Iguana in its fusion of human, natural and supernatural elements, is Lighea in the homonymous short story⁴¹⁸ by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. In the intense heat of the Sicilian summer, a charming mermaid with her ambiguous, divine and physical nature, initiates the young man, Rosario La Ciura, to the pleasures of a divine primordial love:⁴¹⁹

il volto liscio di una sedicenne emergeva dal mare, due piccole mani stringevano il fasciame. Quell'adolescente sorrideva, una leggera piega scostava le labbra pallide e lasciava intravedere dentini aguzzi e bianchi, come quelli dei cani. Non era però uno di quei sorrisi come se ne vedono fra voi altri, sempre imbastarditi da un'espressione

⁴¹⁶ Silvana Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio: le molte facce di un artista di genio* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997).

⁴¹⁷ Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio*, p. 188.

⁴¹⁸ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Racconti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961).

⁴¹⁹ See Tomasi di Lampedusa, pp. 88-89: 'era una bestia ma nel medesimo istante era anche una Immortale ed è peccato che parlando non si possa continuamente esprimere questa sintesi come, con assoluta semplicità, essa la esprimeva nel proprio corpo. Non soltanto nell'atto carnale essa manifestava una giocondità e una delicatezza opposte alla tetra foia animale ma il suo parlare era di una immediatezza potente che ho ritrovato soltanto in pochi grandi poeti'.

accessoria, di benevolenza o d'ironia, di pietà, crudeltà o quel che sia; esso esprimeva soltanto sé stesso, cioè una quasi bestiale gioia di esistere, una quasi divina letizia. Questo sorriso fu il primo dei sortilegi che agisse su di me rivelandomi paradisi di dimenticate serenità. Dai disordinati capelli color di sole l'acqua del mare colava sugli occhi verdi apertissimi, sui lineamenti d'infantile purezza.⁴²⁰

The similarities to Ortesian Estrellita are numerous. She is a youngster, described as a smiling 'adolescente', a 'sedicenne' with 'occhi verdi' and 'lineamenti d'infantile purezza', yet, like an animal, she has 'dentini aguzzi...come quelli dei cani'. Being a mermaid, she combines the animal and human elements with those of the divine world 'divina letizia'. Like Estrellita, who has mischievous traits, Lighea also possesses ambiguous characteristics, those of an enchantress 'il primo dei sortilegi'.

Finally, looking in particular at the representation of iguanas in twentieth-century literature, we can see that these animals, indigenous to Latin America, are present or at least mentioned by Latin American magic realists. In Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, for example, when blood-related José Arcadio Buendía and Úrsula get married, their families are against the wedding for fear they might give birth to iguanas.⁴²¹

3.2.7 Estrellita and Caliban: a colonial discourse

As mentioned in the previous section, Ortese resorts to the image of the woman-amphibian like many other twentieth-century authors. However, I believe that by choosing the iguana species in particular, Ortese goes beyond tradition, enriching the image with symbolism and meaning. The iguana, living in Central America and in the Caribbean, belongs to regions that experienced a long devastating history of

⁴²⁰ Tomasi di Lampedusa, pp. 83-84.

⁴²¹ Once wedded, Úrsula, influenced by her mother's superstition, wears iron chastity trousers to avoid her husband getting her pregnant, until the day José Arcadio obliges her to give up, See García Márquez, p. 78: '-Si has de parir iguanas, criaremos iguanas -dijo-'.

colonisation and therefore lends itself as the symbol of a colonised, exploited and mistreated nature. Thanks to this figure, Ortese can enrich the theme of defence of the natural, wild world against modernity and industrialisation, with the addition of a colonial discourse. The exploitation of Estrellita finds a further explanation in the fact that, through this character, Ortese does not wish merely to depict the condition of a rejected and mistreated child and animal as my literary reading in Chapter 2 suggests. This character has a deeper, metaphorical meaning: she stands for colonisation and its brutality. It is, therefore, important to turn briefly to the metaphorical reading suggested by La Penna, who comments:

In Ortese's *L'Iguana*, the progression of the narrative will inexorably transform what had until then been perceived as the latent human nature of the reptilian servant into a full-blown human identity. The progressive anthropomorphism of the Iguana is coupled with a parallel accentuation of the glaringly evident political overtones of the reptilian metaphor: the iguana stands for the oppressed "popolo" (people), the "anima stessa di quest'isola" (the very soul of this island), the exploited indigenous populations of the New World.⁴²²

The Iguana, in fact, can also be interpreted as the symbol of the indigenous populations of the New World conquered, usurped and looked down on as inferior by European colonisers initially attracted by their exoticism and wilderness (Ilario). As La Penna underlines,⁴²³ Estrellita is the only Portuguese-speaking character in the novel, while the rest of the exchanges between characters occurs in Italian so as to underline the Iguana's 'estrangement from a narratized discourse'.⁴²⁴ Furthermore, Estrellita's interventions in Portuguese, the language of the colonial élite, denote a

⁴²² La Penna, p. 169.

⁴²³ La Penna, pp. 160-187.

⁴²⁴ La Penna, p. 174.

basic, halting proficiency in the language, which once again stresses the position of inferiority of the animal-child-servant.

Another author who uses an iguana for the same purpose is Karen Blixen in a passage from *Out of Africa* (1937),⁴²⁵ where the murder of the iguana becomes the symbol of the colonisers' pointless greed. The narrator herself says that she had been fascinated by the colours of the iguanas lying in the sun and confesses to murdering more than one for their shiny, jewel-like skin. However, after killing the iguana, she realised that it was life that gave those bright hues to the animal for death dulled them to plainness.⁴²⁶

Colonial discourse in *L'Iguana* is carried out not only by means of selection of an exotic animal like the iguana as a protagonist, but also via another important intertextual reference this time to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which is also the title of the second part of Ortese's novel. Many scholars, La Penna and Wood⁴²⁷ among them, have associated Estrellita with Caliban. The relationship between Estrellita and Ilario presents the same dynamics as the relationship between Caliban and Prospero: Ilario and Prospero, who first loved and cherished Estrellita and Caliban respectively, ended up enslaving the creatures, pouring scorn and hatred on them.⁴²⁸ As La Penna

⁴²⁵ Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa* (London: Cape, 1964).

⁴²⁶ Blixen, p. 247: 'I stood in Meru and looked at my pale hand and at the dead bracelet, it was as if an injustice had been done to a noble thing, as if truth had been suppressed. So sad did it seem that I remembered the saying of the hero in a book that I had read as a child: I have conquered them all, but I am standing amongst "graves". In a foreign country and with foreign species of life one should take measures to find out whether things will be keeping their value when dead. To the settlers of East Africa I give the advice: 'For the sake of your own eyes and heart, shoot not the Iguana'.

⁴²⁷ See La Penna, pp. 170-171 and Wood, 'Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese', p. 144.

⁴²⁸ See William Shakespeare, 'The Tempest', I. ii. 331-337; 345-348; 351-358 in *Complete Works*, ed. by W. J. Craig, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

'*Cal.* This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou camest
first,
Thou strok'dst me, and mad'st much of me;
wouldst give me
Water with berries in 't; and teach me how

reduced to a slave, but it cannot be denied that in this case the blame is to be ascribed to society, which can sometimes produce more harm than savagery itself. Likewise, Estrellita can be spiteful and hostile as a consequence of the way she is treated by Ilario and his brothers.

3.3 Masino's distorted, surreal, nightmarish and dreamlike reality

Masino uses extraordinary characters in her works to present her views on reality and reality/fiction in a very different way to Ortese. Masino, in fact, does not employ or create such figures deliberately to present her poetics on reality and on reality and fiction. On close consideration of Masino's extraordinary children and animals in terms of purpose, we could say that their function is solely that of dealing in a more powerful and striking way with the specific themes dear to the author. Thus, I should say that, while Ortese presents extraordinary children in order to show the different sides, layers and parts of reality, Masino uses them mainly to unveil the violence, hypocrisy and injustice of society, at times to mock it and make her message universal. Contemporary critics⁴³¹ have emphasised and appreciated the use that Masino makes of fantastic, surrealist and magical elements (not only characters, the main object of my analysis, but also events, atmosphere and landscape), pointing to her sharp, graphic criticism and ability to mock and subvert through the grotesque and the surreal. Airoidi Namer, for example, praises Masino's style as unique on the Italian literary scene of the time, describing it as 'postfuturista, magica e irrealista, surreale e espressionista, dal linguaggio creativo e ridondante di immagini'.⁴³² In the

⁴³¹ Among the main scholars responsible for Masino's rediscovery (see Chapter 1) are: Francesca Bernardini Napoletano, Maria Vittoria Vittori, Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, Beatrice Manetti, Giamila Yehya, Flora Maria Ghezzeo, Fulvia Airoidi Namer and Louise Rozier.

⁴³² Airoidi Namer, p. 162.

same article, however, Airoidi Namer refers to Carlo Emilio Gadda's very different views on Masino's writings:

Gadda accusava [la scrittura della Masino] di "argillosità allegorico-novecentistica" stigmatizzando la sua maniera "ai limiti d'un futurismo deteriore, tutto notazione dell'immediato percepire e niente espressione del profondo apprendere". Sono frasi della recensione spietata che Gadda scrisse nel 1931, dopo aver letto *Monte Ignoso*, condannando anche "un andare per onde dal simbolistico-fantastico al reale e viceversa". Eppure, in queste parole di "lombarda" condanna vi è l'implicito riconoscimento di quanto oggi possiamo apprezzare nella prosa audace e immaginifica della Masino: il suo gusto del fantastico e dell'astrazione simbolica, la vitalizzazione dell'inanimato, la deformazione delle immagini, la furia metaforica.⁴³³

This was not the only occasion when Gadda manifested his disapproval of Masino's style. Gadda also expressed himself negatively with regard to *Decadenza della Morte* 'desidero serbare un cavalleresco silenzio. Postilla al silenzio: Paola Masino è giovanissima'.⁴³⁴

⁴³³ Airoidi Namer, p. 185.

⁴³⁴ Carlo Emilio Gadda, 'Scritti dispersi', in *Saggi Giornali Favole I*, p. 712.

3.4 The intertextual dimension of Masino's 'Famiglia'⁴³⁵

Ortese establishes a dialogue with other literary works or folklore with a view, mainly programmatic, to proclaiming the existence of a reality opposed to the values of the Enlightenment. By so doing, she portrays an abused natural world and introduces colonial discourse. Masino's dialogue with other texts aims, instead, to emphasise the universality of the message she wishes to convey, has the decorative function of showing erudition and culture as well as her predilection for pastiche and contamination. Explicit intertextual references are particularly prominent in 'Famiglia', a highly complex story with a surrealist flavour, which is one of the best examples of Masino's ability to intertwine the literary discourse of past and present. Given the importance of the intertextual dimension of this text, a study of both children as well as adult characters will be needed here. All the members of the Pada family are figures belonging to different literary traditions, with different origins, languages and historical periods. They all speak different languages and in the text there are short passages in archaic Italian, English, Spanish, German and French.

The character of Lisabetta, is an intertextual reference to Lisabetta da Messina, the protagonist of the fifth story of the fourth day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 147-188. The story is told by a child who lives with his mother, father and 30-year-old sister Eva in a council housing complex. While all the wings of the building are crowded with people living in the flats as well as in communal areas, H wing houses only two families: the boy's family and, upstairs, the Padas. The first contact with the family occurs when the boy's sister sends him to the Padas to borrow some basil. The journey upstairs has a supernatural aura, time seems to stop and the air is freezing cold despite it being a hot July day. On his arrival, the boy finds that each member of the family speaks a different language and that, to his surprise, he understands everything. The description of the characters is surreal and seems to be the result of a hallucination. The environment grows even more surreal until, as he is about to leave, the family members start throwing things at each other and behaving deliriously. He runs downstairs, where his sister Eva praises him for being so quick: time has stopped at the Padas'. The next day, Eva brings back some basil to Lisabetta as a way of befriending her. When Eva and the boy enter the flat, Mrs Pada asks whether the boy is alive and Eva insults them and tries to get away. The boy seems attracted by that world. From the surreal conversation, they appear to be dead, each one doomed to a different form of punishment. Once more the family stages another hallucinatory scene. Eva comes to her senses and her 'human' cry brings everything back to normal: she finds the strength to escape with her brother, who is still attracted to the Padas. Eva goes into the communal garden, where she calls out to all the residents of the building that they must stand together against the abnormal Padas. The Padas are finally evicted.

Masino was probably familiar, not only with the original novella by Boccaccio, but also with two other versions of the story, the poem *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil* by John Keats (1818),⁴³⁷ the painting by John Everett Millais entitled *Lorenzo and Isabella* (1849)⁴³⁸ and the painting by his fellow Pre-Raphaelite William Hunt, entitled *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1868),⁴³⁹ both inspired by Keats' poem. In fact, Masino's description of Lisabetta 'stava diafana, con il lunghissimo collo azzurrino reclinato sulla spalla, simile a un cigno stanco'⁴⁴⁰ seems to embody the Pre-Raphaelite canon of beauty, and she could well have used Millais' portrait of the girl as a source of inspiration. Although the character finds its origin in Boccaccio, Masino adds another dimension to her Lisabetta: Masino's Lisabetta and her plant are, in fact, one entity. The young lady's physical description constantly makes use of plant images, the colour green is often part of her and she smells of basil, as is shown in the quotation below, where her hands are 'vegetali quasi' and her fingers look like 'rametti':

Mi guardava di sotto le palpebre abbassate con verdi pupille; le mani,
vegetali quasi, con dita fragili come rametti, le vibravano intrecciate

⁴³⁶ See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, vol. I, II (Milan: Rizzoli, 1999), vol. I, pp. 303-307. Lisabetta, the sister of three rich merchants falls in love with a young man, Lorenzo, who used to work for her brothers. Having discovered their affair, the brothers decide to kill Lorenzo outside the city. They tell Lisabetta that they have sent him away on business. Lorenzo, however, will appear to Lisabetta in a dream and tell her where he is buried. The girl finds the body and cuts off his head, which she places in a basil plant. She then waters the plant with her tears. Her obsession with the pot of basil is soon discovered and the brothers take it away from her. Lisabetta, deprived of her plant, falls ill. Her brothers find Lorenzo's head, and, fearing the news may become public, they move to Naples. Lisabetta dies, still enquiring about her pot of basil. Boccaccio's story is based on an ancient popular Sicilian song which he refers to and partly quotes in the end 'Qual esso fu lo malo cristiano/che mi furò la grasta, etc.' See Boccaccio, *Decameron*, vol. I, p. 307. The song can still be read in Carducci's collection of *cantilene e ballate*. See Giosuè Carducci, *Cantilene e ballate, stambotti e madrigali nei secoli XIII e XIV*, ed. by Giosuè Carducci, (Sesto S. Giovanni: Madella, 1912). It is a young woman's lament: she is desperate because someone has stolen her *grasta* called *testo* in Boccaccio's novella (*testo* meaning *vaso di terracotta utilizzato per tenervi piante*).

⁴³⁷ Keats, pp. 239-255.

⁴³⁸ John Everett Millais, *Lorenzo and Isabella*, 1849, oil on canvas, Liverpool: Walker Art Gallery.

⁴³⁹ William Hunt, *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*, 1868, oil on canvas, Newcastle upon Tyne: Laing Art Gallery.

⁴⁴⁰ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 157-158.

insieme sul cuore. E tutta odorava di basilico tanto che subito ne ebbi
il gusto in bocca e pensai: “Forse basta che tocchi i cibi per dargli
sapore”. (*Racconto grosso*, p. 158)

In depicting her Lisabetta as a talking and bleeding plant, Masino also seems to echo, consciously or not, the thirteenth canto of the *Inferno*,⁴⁴¹ when Dante meets suicide Pier della Vigna in the form of a tree, and also Virgil’s encounter between Aeneas and Polydorus, the youngest of Priam’s sons, killed by Polymestor and transformed into a tree.⁴⁴²

The second intertextual reference Masino makes through a member of the Pada family is to the grandfather, referred to as Macduff’s son, a minor character in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.⁴⁴³ The reference clearly goes beyond the name. Firstly, Masino employs Shakespearean cues, ‘as birds do’,⁴⁴⁴ for instance:

L. Macd Sirrah, your father’s dead:
And what will you do now? How will you live?

Son As birds do, mother.⁴⁴⁵

“E come fai a vivere?”

Allora la sua fronte s’illuminò di lontanissima gioia, le gote gli si
fecero chiare di contenuta innocenza; con voce acerba pigolò:

“As birds do”. (*Racconto grosso*, pp. 166-167)

⁴⁴¹ Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto XXXIII, ll. 31-45, pp. 185-187.

⁴⁴² Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. by David West, book 3 (London: Penguin Classics, 1991).

⁴⁴³ See William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV. ii., ed. by Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1970). Macduff joined Prince Malcolm in England. Lady Macduff is angry as she is convinced that her husband has deserted her family. She talks to her son. A messenger arrives to warn them of impending danger, but before they can react, the murderers appear, kill the son and chase after the mother.

⁴⁴⁴ Other Shakespearean cues used by Masino are ‘poor monkey’ and ‘run away, I pray you’:

“Poor monkey, run away, I pray you”.

Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 169 and p. 176.

See Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV. ii. 58:

‘*L. Macd*. Now God help thee, poor monkey!’.

See Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV. ii. 83-84:

‘*Son* He has kill’d me, mother:

Run away, I pray you!’.

⁴⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV. ii. 30-32.

Secondly, both characters, Shakespeare's and Masino's, are compared to a bird, although in different ways. In *Macbeth*, the bird image is a simile that conveys the fragility and defencelessness of Lady Macduff and her young son deprived of Macduff to protect them.⁴⁴⁶ Masino, on the other hand, does not limit herself to the use of a simile, but creates a fully metamorphic character: the grandfather, in fact, acquires coloured feathers all over his body and his postures and gestures are those of a bird spreading and fluttering its wings.⁴⁴⁷ In Masino there is a lot of ambiguity surrounding the age of Macduff's son: he is an old man, but, probably, to enhance the analogy with his Shakespearean counterpart, he is often depicted as a child and, at times, referred to as a baby. 'Vedi baby Macduff che con lui si finge un vecchione?' says Alonso.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁶ *L. Macd.* Wisdom! to leave his wife, to leave his babes,
His mansion, and his titles, in a place
From whence himself does fly? He loves us not:
He wants the natural touch; for the poor wren,
The most diminutive of birds, will fight,
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.
All is the fear, and nothing is the love;
As little is the wisdom, where the flight
So runs against all reason.
[...]

L. Macd. Sirrah, your father's dead:
And what will you do now? How will you live?
Son. As birds do, mother.
L. Macd. What, with worms and flies?
Son. With what I get, I mean; and so do they.
L. Macd. Poor bird! thou'dst never fear the net, nor lime,
The pit-fall, nor the gin.
Son. Why should I, mother?
Poor birds they are not set for.
My father is not dead, for all your saying'.

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, IV. ii. 6-30.

⁴⁴⁷ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 158-159: 'E piú forte di questi, all'improvviso, un odore polveroso di uccello e di gabbia impregnò l'aria che fu traversata da mulinelli di piccole piume variopinte. Mi volsi di scatto e vidi il vecchissimo nonno che, aperto uno degli usci interni dell'anticamera, soffiava verso me quelle piumette e altre di cui aveva piene le mani. Era tanto alto che stava piegato in due, il suo torso così curvo si spingeva dentro la stanza e la invadeva, il suo volto era pieno d'uno scintillio malizioso; una peluria lanuginosa, entro cui si erano impigliate piccole piume azzurre e rosa, gli si arruffava in ricciolini per le guance. Sbattendo le braccia come ali, festosamente, mi disse con la stridula voce che avevo udito poco prima da dietro la porta: "Come in"'.
"Come in"'.
⁴⁴⁸ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 180.

Italian and English literature thus represented, Masino has Alonso, Mr and Mrs Pada's three-year-old son, as the voice of Spanish literature and his ten-year-old sister Carlotta, that of German literature. Alonso, who uses the dog as his horse, is the emblem of a knight, ready to fight for a just cause in the name of chivalry and to protect the defenceless: 'Carlotta no llorar, jo te defendo',⁴⁴⁹ 'Usted ofende. Usted no sabe las reglas de la caballeria'.⁴⁵⁰ Through knight Alonso, Masino calls up the master of Spanish literature, Miguel de Cervantes and his *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*;⁴⁵¹ the real name of Don Quixote was, in fact, Alonso Quijano.⁴⁵² Furthermore, Masino depicts her Alonso with an ironic, almost humorous touch echoing the tone of the imaginary adventures of Don Quijote. In the following quotation, the expression 'con i piccoli pugni' gives the passage an ironic flavour, made even stronger if we remember that the mighty knight is here a child galloping on a dog:

Al rumore corse dall'anticamera il figlio Alonso e si gettò contro sua madre con i piccoli pugni alzati gridando:

"Atrás, atrás es una mujer!". (*Racconto grosso*, pp. 165-166)

Alonso Pada's sister, Carlotta, is the character chosen to represent German literature and the reference to Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*⁴⁵³ is explicitly revealed by Masino. Carlotta, in fact, mentions the suicide of young

⁴⁴⁹ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 159-160.

⁴⁵⁰ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 179.

⁴⁵¹ Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Obras completas*, ed. by Angel Valbuena Prat, II, 18th edn (Madrid: Aguilar, 1975).

⁴⁵² See Cervantes II, LXXIV, p. 860: '– Dadme albricias, buenos señores, de que ya yo no soy don Quijote de la Mancha, sino Alonso Quijano, a quien mis costumbres me dieron renombre de *Bueno*'.

⁴⁵³ See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Penguin, 1989). See also the character in: Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

Werther (who killed himself when rejected by Carlotta) and also the fact that she had to look after her young brothers and sisters after the death of her mother.⁴⁵⁴

As a representative of French literature, Masino chooses François Pada, the father. Unlike the other family members, François Pada is not a character in a novel, but the voice of fifteenth-century French author François Villon, poet, vagabond and thief who lived a large part of his life as a bandit, arrested several times, and finally sentenced to death. As in the example quoted below, François Pada's interventions are more limited and many of his utterances are direct quotations of Villon's words:⁴⁵⁵

“Cy gist et dort en ce sollier qu’amour occist de son raillon vostre très vaillant et pendu mari François”. (*Racconto grosso*, p. 163)

CY GIST ET DORT EN CE SOLLIER,
QU’AMOURS OCCIST DE SON RAILLON,
UNG POVRE PETIT ESCOLLIER,

⁴⁵⁴ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 179-180: “Allora” singhiozzò di rabbia Carlotta “per la bella invenzione di tuo marito dovrò sempre avere sulla coscienza la triste fine di quel giovane Werther che se non avesse potuto uccidersi non sarebbe neppure mai nato? E aspettando le rinascite di quel mentecatto dovrò in eterno affettare pane nero per la merenda dei miei fratelli? E se tento di passare la mia sorte su un altro dando a lui questa pagnotta dannata?”.

⁴⁵⁵ For other direct quotations from Villon's works compare Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 164: “Par m’âme, ou la teste as plus dure qu’un jalet ou mieulx te plaist qu’honneur caste malchance!” with François Villon, *Complete Poems*, trans. by Barbara N. Sargent-Baur, parallel text French/English (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 270:

Ou la teste as plus dure qu’un jalet,
‘Ou mieulx te plaist qu’honneur ceste meschance’.

See also Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 177:

“Vivre aux humains est incertain et après mort n’y a relais; même qui est mort n’a ses lois de tout dire”.

and Villon, p. 22:

‘Et puy que departir me fault
Et du retour ne suys certain
(Je ne suys homme sans default
Ne qu’aultre d’assier ne d’estain;
Vivre aux humains est incertain
Et après mort n’y a relaiz) –

Je m’en vois en pays lointain –
Si establi ce present laiz’.

See also Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 178:

“Mon col saura...”.

and Villon, p. 272:

‘Je suis François, dont il me poise,
Né de Paris emprés Pontoise,
Et de la corde d’une toise
Savra mon col que mon cul poise’.

QUI FUT NOMMÉ FRANÇOYS VILLON.
ONCQUES DE TERRE N'EUST SILLON.
IL DONNA TOUT, CHASCUN LE SCET:
TABLE, TRESTEAUX, PAIN, CORBILLON.
POUR DIEU, DICTES EN CE VERSET:⁴⁵⁶

The final words of François Pada/François Villon close the short story. They are from the beginning of Villon's most famous work, the *Ballade des pendus*, which he is said to have written in prison, while awaiting execution.⁴⁵⁷

The boy-narrator's sister is called Eva, just like the Biblical character from Genesis. It is very likely that Masino chose this name to emphasise the sister's human traits, in contrast to the Padas' extraordinary nature. The Biblical Eve is attracted by the apple and, likewise, Masino's Eva is attracted by something that will cause havoc, the basil. Eva displays her human nature when, to conform to social courtesy and to the polite conventions between neighbouring families, she says the following words: 'E se a volte hai bisogno di qualche cosa non far complimenti. Tra vicini ci si aiuta volentieri'.⁴⁵⁸ Another example is given by her adherence to social laws and her total inability to accept or understand the Padas' reality. This leads her to gather together and stir up all the occupants of the building against the family.

The boy is the only unnamed character in the story and has no intertextual dimension. He is the only living human being capable of accepting and respecting the Other, in this case represented by the Padas. During his first visit to the family, the boy is neither surprised at his ability to understand speech in different languages

⁴⁵⁶ Villon, p. 182.

⁴⁵⁷ Compare Villon, p. 264:

“‘Freres humains qui après nous vivez,
N'ayez les cueurs contre nous endurciz,
Car se pitié de nous povres avez,
Dieu en avra plus tost de vous mercis”’.

with Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 188:

‘Freres humains qui après nous vivez,
n' ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis,
Car, se pitié de nous povres avez,
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis’.

⁴⁵⁸ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 171.

nor shocked by the characters' behaviour. Instead of questioning their nature, he seems to be preoccupied with minor details, such as the absence of a calendar on the walls, the fact that the children do not interrupt their games to say hello, the presence of large spaces in comparison to his own cramped house or the fact that none of the noise made by the Padas could be heard from his flat. One could say that the boy's acceptance of a different reality is due to his boyish innocence, which does afford him a full understanding of what is going on around him. He himself is aware that he has only a partial knowledge of some aspects of life.⁴⁵⁹ However, Masino makes the boy a much more complex character, capable of thoughts and feelings that go far beyond the innocence of his years. Rather than suggesting lack of awareness of the Padas' nature, the boy's young age and behaviour would seem to highlight open-minded acceptance and almost empathy with the family. For example, in one of the hallucinatory scenes the boy witnesses while in the Padas' household, he cries for the help of Macduff's son rather than for his mother or sister:

Allora mi accorsi che, oltre il nonno e Carlotta, ognuno in suo idioma e tutti allo stesso modo ripetevano frasi e atteggiamenti e aspetti, trascorrendo rapidissimi dall'uno all'altro. E a un tratto il signor Francesco Pada cominciò a dare calci all'aria e a mostrare la lingua, la signora Pada a ripararsi dal soffitto come se macigni le crollassero sopra dall'alto, e il fanciullo farsi magrissimo e tutto bianco e armato e più piccolo del suo volpino che ora con zoccoli, criniera e froge di cavallo se lo portava in groppa nitrendo intorno alla stanza e Lisabetta

⁴⁵⁹ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 156: 'Vidi che in mezzo alla stanza sul volpino stava il figlio minore, presso lui in terra la bambina che con in mano due mezzi gusci di noce di cocco imitava quel fracasso di cavalcata. Più tardi ho saputo che questo è un sistema usatissimo nei teatri ma allora rimasi a bocca aperta a guardare e intanto pensavo: "Come può essere che quando fanno questi giochi, di sotto non si senta niente?". See also Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 162: 'In terra presso il focolare stava accosciata una donna grandissima, di pelle scura, mal pettinata e discinta; ma non dava l'impressione né dello sporco né dello scomposto sebbene ora, che so più cose intorno ai fatti della vita, mi renda conto che la donna stava in atteggiamento sconcio'.

con le mani goccianti sangue scivolare a terra e cominciare a morire.
Non potevo muovermi né parlare ma dentro me chiamavo forte in aiuto il nonno. Forse mi sentí, perché tremando per lo sforzo, senza neppure vedermi, mormorò: “Poor monkey, run away, I pray you”.
(*Racconto grosso*, pp. 168-169)

In *Famiglia* the intricate intertextual dimension is not a mere erudite exercise pandering to Masino’s flair for pastiche. Masino creates a complex architecture of literary allusion to convey a message of fraternity with and sympathy for the Other, and to point the finger accusingly at society for forgetting, in the name of conformism and adherence to conventions, the existence of this Other. The choice of different literary voices, belonging to different historical periods and linguistic and cultural backgrounds, responds precisely to Masino’s wish to make the message universal. The Padas are dead people, who had once been human or dead fictional characters. In their household, the linguistic Babel of the human world seems to have found a peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding. In fact, the name Pada also bears a symbolic meaning. The *Enciclopedia delle Religioni*⁴⁶⁰ reads as follows:

sulla sommità del Picco di Adamo o Śrī Pada (“piede propizio”), nello Sri Lanka, vi è una grande incisione sulla roccia: secondo i buddhisti essa è l’impronta del piede del Buddha stesso [...]. Per gli induisti essa è l’orma di Śiva, per i musulmani è quella di Adamo; per i cristiani è quella dell’apostolo Tommaso.⁴⁶¹

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Śrī Pada, which has been a place of pilgrimage for all religions,⁴⁶² confirms Masino’s intention to convey the idea of human fraternity. The idea of the ‘human family’ appears in the dialogue between Eva and Lisabetta when

⁴⁶⁰ *Enciclopedia delle Religioni*, ed. by Mircea Eliade, 14 vols. (Milan: Jaca Book, 1993-2010).

⁴⁶¹ *Enciclopedia delle Religioni*, p. 453.

⁴⁶² *Enciclopedia delle Religioni*, p. 453.

the boy hears two versions of Lisabetta's words, the conventional, predictable answer to Eva's questions as well as Lisabetta's real thoughts:

“Sì, signorina. E anch'io mi chiamo Pada, Lisabetta Pada, perché Francesco è mio cognato e cugino”.

E per me:

“Ma non siamo congiunti tutti della medesima unità? Che domande stupide si ostinano a porsi gli uomini”.

[...]

“E quei due bambini così piccoli son suoi figli?”

“Sì”.

“E io e tu. E tu di me. E io di te. E ognuno di ogni altro”.

[...] “Perché i vostri bambini non vengono mai in cortile a giocare con gli altri?”

“Sono scontrosi, e si spaventano del chiasso, degli urli”.

“Ma perché ve li atterrirebbero. I vostri figli hanno confini”.

(Racconto grosso, pp. 173-174)

The same message of fraternity is conveyed by François' final words, an exhortation to men to stick together in love and sympathy. When the Padas are finally expelled from the building, evicted by a congregation of angry neighbours gathered by Eva, Mrs Pada expresses the injustice they have been subjected to, but also their immunity to cruelty, which belongs only to humans:

Portava sul petto la targhetta con il suo nome e sul seno sinistro appuntato il campanello di porcellana bianca. La seguiva il signor Francesco, di verde vestito, poi Lisabetta tra Carlotta e Alonso. Ultimo il nonno con il volpino.

[...]

“ma basta. Ora ce ne andiamo. Non sappiamo dove andare. I nostri bimbi che, comunque sono bimbi, vagheranno senza tetto, fuori da

ogni consorzio. Ma questo né a te né ai signori inquilini interessa. Perciò voi siete uomini e noi lo fummo o lo fingemmo. La crudeltà non è piú nostro attributo, e la remissione dei peccati altrui ancora non ci appartiene. Dunque, addio...”. (*Racconto grosso*, pp. 185-186)

Finally, the distinctive image of ‘la targhetta con il suo nome’ cannot but remind the reader of the Star of David which Jews were forced to sew on their clothes.

3.5 The divine, the visionary and the unborn child

In Masino’s works there are also single children whose extraordinary nature becomes an even more powerful instrument for the exploration of universal themes such as the brutality and absurdity of war, the ineluctability of destiny, madness, the unchangeable law of procreation, the reconciliation of essence and form. These are children with supernatural powers, children with visions and, in one case, the fetus of an unborn child. In this section, I intend to focus on the characteristics and functions of three ‘types’ of extraordinary children depicted by Masino: the ‘divine child’, ‘the visionary child’ and the ‘unborn child’. In identifying and ‘labelling’ these categories, I have followed Kuhn’s approach in *Corruption in Paradise: the Child in Western Literature*. For the definition of the divine child, I have followed the theories of Jung and Kerényi.⁴⁶³

3.5.1 The divine child: Lino

The first divine child is Lino from the homonymous short story ‘Lino’.⁴⁶⁴ This character’s ‘divine’ nature stems from the fact that we are never told whether he really exists or is only present in the protagonist’s mind. He first appears to the protagonist-narrator during her father’s burial to comfort her with his smile. From

⁴⁶³ Carl Gustav Jung and Károly Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology, The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series XXII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

⁴⁶⁴ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, pp. 71-84.

that day on, Lino magically appears at difficult moments in the protagonist's life during the war: to help her escape the execution decided by the Capoufficio, to comfort and miraculously cure her in hospital, to prevent her children from being run over by a cyclist, to provide her and her family with food and to protect them from death. Lino is described as:

un bimbo di pochi anni, con un volto minimo, bianco bianco, quasi trasparente, e cosparso di lentiggini, un corpo esiguo [...] più che un fanciullo un proposito di fanciullo, una speranza di figlio: provavo a dargli nome, famiglia, abitazione. (*Colloquio di notte*, p. 71)

Lino's frail, barely substantial appearance and fair complexion emphasise his angelic traits; the description of the boy as 'un proposito di fanciullo, una speranza di figlio', hints at his supernatural, unreal element. Even though his supernatural nature is never explicitly referred to, the protagonist is aware of the effect the child has on her: 'Pensavo a Lino con un'intensità così fonda che m'ero dimenticata d'essere una mamma',⁴⁶⁵ 'Come può un bambino così piccolo esercitare tanto fascino su una persona così matura'.⁴⁶⁶ For Kuhn, Lino would be a cross between the enigmatic and the redemptive child. As an enigmatic child, he does not communicate through words.⁴⁶⁷ However, he always manages to get his message across either through gesture,⁴⁶⁸ or directly through action as when he does not hesitate to save the protagonist's children from being run over by a cyclist. As a redemptive child, Lino does redeem the protagonist and, unlike other similar children in literary tradition, he

⁴⁶⁵ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 78.

⁴⁶⁶ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 76.

⁴⁶⁷ See Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 74: 'Gli feci cenno di aprire i vetri per parlarmi, ma non capì; smise anzi di sorridere e prese a guardarmi con gli occhi sbarrati'.

⁴⁶⁸ See Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 74: 'vidi là in faccia il braccino gracile del bimbo accennare lontano in fondo alla strada e suggerire così a me con una mimica evidente e annunciare all'usciera: – È scappata, è scesa dalla gronda'. See also Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 76: 'Questa volta, prima che la sorpresa avesse dentro me agitato il più leggero sussulto, il chierichetto mi strizzò l'occhio per invitarmi a non riconoscerlo'.

offers not only comfort and spiritual redemption, but also safety from a war presented here as absurd and cruel. The originality of Masino's Lino lies in the combination of angelic features and elements of the picaresque rogue. We must not forget that Lino's ways of providing succour are not always based on ethical grounds: he is ready to steal food and agrees to kill a lamb to provide a meal. Rozier believes, in fact, that Lino echoes Lazarillo de Tormes and Victor Hugo's Gavroche.⁴⁶⁹ Just like Useppe in *La Storia*, Lino can be seen as a 'divine child' in Kerényi's definition. Similarly to many divine children or mythological heroes, Lino is an orphan:

Abandonment, exposure, danger, etc. are all elaborations of the "child's" insignificant beginnings and of its mysterious and miraculous birth.⁴⁷⁰

His parents are never mentioned; besides, the protagonist learns from a priest that Lino was first brought up in an orphanage and after the building was destroyed, he lived thanks to the help of generous families. Just like other divine child figures, such as Zeus or Dionysus, he is in constant danger and often in risky situations, but he always succeeds in overcoming peril. Divine children, in fact, manage to overcome risks thanks to their supernatural powers. Lino, however, also seems to rely more on his own wits along with more than a shade of luck, like the protagonist of the picaresque novel. His death as well appears to be in contradiction with his divine nature, but the inconsistency is due to the fact that he stands for the innocent, pure and divine sacrificial victim who dies to ransom humanity.⁴⁷¹ He is, according to Jung's concept, the child as beginning and end:

⁴⁶⁹ Rozier, p. 153.

⁴⁷⁰ Jung and Kerényi, p. 86.

⁴⁷¹ See Chapter 2.

The “child” is therefore *renatus in novam infantiam*. It is thus both beginning and end, an initial and a terminal creature. The initial creature existed before man was, and the terminal creature will be when man is not. Psychologically speaking, this means that the “child” symbolizes the pre-conscious and the post-conscious essence of man. His pre-conscious essence is the unconscious state of earliest childhood; his post-conscious essence is an anticipation by analogy of life after death.⁴⁷²

Daniel Mangano has made a similar observation for Ueseppe, whom he also sees as the Jungian divine child.⁴⁷³

3.5.2 Visionary children

A second group of children which stands out in Masino’s fiction is that of visionary children, such as a young Paola Masino in ‘Paura’⁴⁷⁴ and Barbara in *Monte Ignoso*. Their visions are extremely vivid and real and the narrator never questions their veracity. Unlike divine children, visionary children are very much part of this world even though their intelligence would belie their young age.

In ‘Paura’ a girl, whom the narrator reveals later in the story to be young Paola Masino (talking about herself in the third person), awakes from a deep sleep on a hot August afternoon and finds herself at home alone. As she wanders through the house calling for her mother, she has a series of different nightmarish visions which make

⁴⁷² Jung and Kerényi, p. 97.

⁴⁷³ See Mangano: ‘La Storia ovvero il mondo salvato da un ragazzino’, *Narrativa*, 17 (2000), 101-116, p. 111: ‘potrebbe essere il “fanciullo divino” di stampo junghiano che porta dentro di sé il destino collettivo del mondo. Come si sa, il fanciullo divino è sempre frutto di una nascita straordinaria e quando appare, possiede già la totalità delle caratteristiche che formano la sua personalità. Come in tutti i miti di questo genere (basti pensare a Zeus assente mentre Dionisio viene catturato e sbranato dai Titani), il padre è sempre assente nei momenti importanti (era già il caso ne *L’Isola di Arturo* e sarà vero anche in *Aracoeli*, romanzo nel quale il padre è spesso in viaggio e non può abitare subito con i suoi). La morte di Ueseppe non è una vera morte, non è un annientamento; richiama piuttosto il motto, ripetuto a caratteri uguali senza virgole né punti, stampato lungo il cerchio di una ruota ne *La serata a Colono*: E MORTE E NASCITA E MORTE E NASCITA E MORTE E NASCITA’.

⁴⁷⁴ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, pp. 105-109.

her feel scared and increasingly desperate. The light coming through the blinds seems to her to be a blade:

Le parve che quella lama oscillando a un tratto si allungasse e aprisse verso di lei due enormi mascelle di lupo a ghermirla. Allora scoppiò in un urlo deforme mentre un sudore bavoso le scendeva dalle ascelle sul piccolo grembo. (*Colloquio di notte*, p. 105).

That her vision appears very real is emphasised by the use of a tragic tone with an almost Gothic flavour: ‘un urlo deforme’, ‘un sudore bavoso’. The suffused light in the corridor resembles the light inside a grave and she feels as if she had been buried alive.⁴⁷⁵ Later, wrapped up in a curtain, she sees her own image detached from herself. The fourth and last vision is the most relevant one:

il sole filtrando nel tessuto le mostrò che proprio contro il suo petto stava accovacciato un frate cappuccino, il terreo volto pieno di fosse scure, le labbra appena mosse in una preghiera. [...] Ma ora ella è sicura di essere già sotto terra e quel frate, fatto d’ossa e cappuccio, le annuncia: Paola, tu sei... (*Colloquio di notte*, pp. 106-107).

The visions affect Paola deeply and only her mother’s arrival will calm her. However, the vividness of the picture will stay with her long enough to come back in her adult life at the sight of a Capuchin friar. The short story is, in fact, divided into two parts, the first concerns young Paola’s visions and her resulting fears, the second recounts the episode when Paola was stopped by a German patrol and risked execution. On that occasion, the sight of a Capuchin friar brought back her childhood fears: once again the ‘sudore bavoso mi scendeva dalle ascelle sul grembo’.⁴⁷⁶ The

⁴⁷⁵ See Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 106: ‘Ella ebbe davvero la certezza di essere sepolta viva; sepolta, ma viva ancora perché qualche cosa le picchiava pugni forti nella nuca e alle tempie. Tac tac tac’.

⁴⁷⁶ See Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 108: ‘mi misi col pensiero a correre [...] fino a che mi ritrovai avvolta in quella tenda, stretta tra il monaco e il mio terrore. E mentre così furiosamente precipitavo in

comparison between the fear caused by childish visions and the terror brought about by war has a double effect: on the one hand, it emphasises the absurdity of war since the adult/protagonist is as scared as she used to be when she was a child, on the other hand, young Paola's visions are not dismissed as the sheer product of childish fantasies, but they are shown to be the consequence of the shocking impact of war.

The second visionary child is Barbara, in *Monte Ignoso*. Barbara's mother, is haunted by the characters depicted in paintings of biblical scenes hung in her house and by a portrait of an ancestor-priest, Federico Vaira, all of whom lead her to a loss of dignity (she commits adultery) and to self-torture.⁴⁷⁷ The priest first appears to Barbara one afternoon while she is eating in the garden:

A un tratto Barbara si volse appunto a quella porta al suo fianco e sorrideva e faceva gesti e un poco arrossiva, come quando deve entrare in salotto a salutare le visite. (Barbara ha sei anni). Non aveva parlato, pure Emma le domandò:

– Con chi parlavi, Barbara?

– Con un prete. Va a trovare babbo.

– Monsignore?

– No. Uno vestito buffo.

– Come vestito buffo?

– Con tanti capelli bianchi, tutt'intorno, come farina. E calze lunghe lunghe fino qui, e due fibbie sulle scarpe. Guarda: grosse così. Molto belle. Troppo. Bellissime. Avrei voluto giocarci un bel po'. Se me le mettevo in testa sarei sembrata una fata. (*Monte Ignoso*, pp. 14-15)

me stessa, una paura sempre più vile mi prendeva le viscere, un sudore bavoso mi scendeva dalle ascelle sul grembo'.

⁴⁷⁷ Barbara's mother, Emma, offers Masino two opportunities to establish links with nineteenth-century European literature. The protagonist's name clearly evokes that of the famous adulteress Emma Bovary in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), while the context of the affair recalls that of David Herbert Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928).

The second and longest of Barbara's visions occurs during an afternoon out with the nuns and her school-friends. Among a group of children, she notices an old beggar, who reminds her of the priest she had seen and to whom she wants to give a letter for her mother:

I ragazzi lo seguivano cercando di trattenerlo per i lembi volanti del mantello. Allora Barbara si alzò, e anche lei lo seguiva chiamando: – Monsignore! Monsignore! [...] Il vecchio le sembrava grande come un monte, il mantello una regione amica: Monte Ignoso con il suo giardino. (*Monte Ignoso*, p. 118)

Despite the other children's laughter and mockery of the old man, Barbara is convinced she knows who he really is and keeps following him until he enters a house. A woman comes out and beats her cruelly for teasing the old man. Barbara faints and when she recovers consciousness, she feels so weak that she needs more rest and this is when she has her third vision. Here reality and unreality merge in a series of dreams within the dream. Barbara dreams of falling asleep and of telling her mother her adventure: she mistook an old beggar for the priest and only wanted to give him a letter for her. However, when Barbara actually reawakens, she finds, to her confusion, that she is surrounded by people asking her questions while she is convinced she has already told her story. When Emma arrives at her daughter's bedside at the hospital, she proves to be the only one who can understand what happened to Barbara: it is not a rational, earthly experience, but an extraordinary force, a destiny haunting both mother and daughter, in different ways, a fate which no one can alter. Considering the relationship between Emma and Barbara we could find a parallel to the myth of Persephone and Demetra as presented by Kerényi. According to Kerényi, Persephone is the *Kore* by definition; she differs from the

other two main *Kore* of Greek mythology, Athene and Artemis⁴⁷⁸ as she embodies the balance between two forms of existence: life when at her mother's side and death when at her man's side. Similarly, Barbara is alive when close to her mother Emma at Monte Ignoso, but steps towards death once she is away from her mother's side. In the words of Kerényi: 'Mother and daughter form a living unity in a border-line situation—a natural unit which, equally naturally, carries within it the seeds of its own destruction'.⁴⁷⁹ Another analogy between the myth and the plot of Monte Ignoso is that Barbara's actual death occurs without Emma being present when Giovanni locks himself in his daughter's hospital room and forbids his wife to see her dying. This form of kidnapping, although on behalf of a father and not of a male partner, seems to recall Persephone's abduction to Hades. Emma, just like Demetra, does not exist without Barbara, Persephone, the *Kore*, who is sacrificed to her fate. This myth also seems to be transferred somehow to the infernal scenarios and gloomy atmospheres of parts of *Monte Ignoso*:

The Earth Mother is always chthonic and is occasionally related to the moon, either through the blood-sacrifice already mentioned, or through a child-sacrifice, or else because she is adorned with a sickle moon.⁴⁸⁰

We know nothing about young Paola or Barbara's appearances. The only descriptive reference related to Barbara is that she is six years old and that, like her mother, she has red hair. In fact, what Paola Masino insists on is their powers rather than their appearance.

⁴⁷⁸ Athene is *Kore* as a complete negation of references to her maidenhood: she is detached from references to her mother on the one hand or a man on the other. She sprang from her father and there is no reference to a potential man at her side, she is pure spiritual force. Artemis is also a *Kore*, but in a very different way from Athene. She embodies untouched virginity and her femininity implies the possibility of falling into a male trap as well as the relationship with her mother, although a less strong one than that between Demeter and Persephone. See Jung and Kerényi, pp. 106-107.

⁴⁷⁹ Jung and Kerényi, p. 107.

⁴⁸⁰ Jung and Kerényi, p. 159.

Visionary children are also present in Ortese's works. Particularly relevant is the example in the short story 'Il continente sommerso'.⁴⁸¹ Through a recurrent dream, young Ortese encounters three sisters, her teenage friends, with their parents. In the dream, the three girls question Ortese about their existence, whether they are simply the result of her imagination. They seem to be trying to convince her that what she sees in her dreams is true, to encourage her to believe in her visions instead of dismissing them as pure imagination:

“Non ci sognasti?”.

“Verità? Bontà?”.

“Non tradirci mai, prego!” con tristezza si raccomandavano. (*In sonno e in veglia*, p. 124).

Once again, the image of the three girls is used by Ortese for her programmatic discussion on reality and fiction, this time with the focus on dreams, which she does not see as mere illusions, but as a bridge with the past. She distinguishes two types of dreams: those that re-elaborate facts and events of the day and those that come 'dall'esterno, il perduto all'uomo, cioè il suo passato, il tempo che non è più'.⁴⁸² As far as the latter are concerned, Ortese argues that, far from being illusions, they may exist in a reality or a place unknown to us:

Ma io, quando vedo in sogno le tre fanciulle, subito sento che non è un sogno, cioè illusorio, che realmente qualcosa di me intravede un tempo lontano, ma privato di materia, e tale tempo è lo spirare puro del cuore verso le sue origini. Ah, quanto sconosciute, dilette. E talvolta, sento che per *esse* la cosa è uguale: provengono da abissi (la scia della nave) e m'interrogano. (*In sonno e in veglia*, p. 125)

⁴⁸¹ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 111-128.

⁴⁸² Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 121.

The portrait Ortese draws of this gentle aristocratic family, noble at heart as well as in manners, clearly contains a biographical reference. It is meant to be a tribute to the Croce family who had been particularly kind to the author. The prince and the princess of the story are Benedetto Croce and his wife, and the three girls, their youngest daughters Lidia, Alda and Silvia. In the years 1941-1942, as explained by Lidia Croce,⁴⁸³ Ortese worked at their house for about six months, together with other young Neapolitan artists of limited means. She was particularly fragile and upset over the recent loss of her brother in Albania and it was Mrs Croce who gave her comfort and support.⁴⁸⁴ The memory of the generous hospitality was to stay with Ortese for a long time and many years later she dedicated this short story to the family.⁴⁸⁵

3.5.3 The unborn child: *rosso*

An extraordinary 'child' I find it hard to fit into a category is the son in the short story 'Figlio'.⁴⁸⁶ I will call him 'child' in inverted commas as this is not a real child, but an aborted fetus: he represents the son as an ontological category rather than as an individual. That is why he does not even have a name, but is simply referred to as *figlio* or as *rosso*. The appellative *rosso* derives primarily from the fact that the unborn child is covered in red hair and is not a completely formed human being but 'un grumo di materia trabalzante',⁴⁸⁷ almost like the interior of a body. However, it is possible that by using the term *rosso*, Masino wishes to reinforce the reference to blood, to the idea that blood ties are indissoluble. This extraordinary character serves to make the short story into a philosophical-religious allegory where Masino presents

⁴⁸³ Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 118.

⁴⁸⁴ Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 119.

⁴⁸⁵ Clerici, *Apparizione e visione*, p. 119.

⁴⁸⁶ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 107-145.

⁴⁸⁷ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 120.

issues linked, among others, to the concepts of existence and the double. Existence is one of the main themes that Masino explores, and the pre-existence of essence, first of all. In fact, it is the son who seems to decide his materialisation when he finds another woman to give birth to him.⁴⁸⁸ A second theme presented is the unchangeable law of creation, which man cannot undermine without sparking off tragic effects. For Masino, abortion and its consequences make it possible to contrast the process of life-giving, but only at the cost of disruptive consequences on the balance of creation: it is an act of human hubris involving violence against nature, which will only be compensated for by another violent act (Secondo's death). The exclusive, totalising love between the two parents brings death and not life for they are guilty of avoiding their commitment to life. The mother herself, understanding that *il rosso* is her son, admits that:

Chi non crea dunque si sottrae alla legge prima. E chi uccide uno che non ha creato, che non ne ha ancora avuto il modo o il tempo, lo sottrae al suo dovere e al suo diritto, è come uccidesse una donna che porta in sé un bambino. (*Racconto grosso*, p. 132)

Giving birth is, thus, not only an act of love but also an inescapable event: her abortion means the mother is breaking an eternal law. Her gesture makes her a 'madre paurosa di se stessa nel figlio, falsaria, subdola, e dunque inutile'.⁴⁸⁹ Another main theme is *being/not being*. After he has decided to come to life, the son is forced into the limbo of *non-being* and tries by every means possible to go back to the status he deserves. He achieves this with a second birth, the indefinite transformed into matter, Plato's disaggregated matter, he is like an amoeba lacking in form and

⁴⁸⁸ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 109: 'Poiché ebbe trovato la donna in cui mettere radici, l'uomo da cui scaturire, il figlio si staccò con un supremo atto dall'indeterminato e scese nel ventre umano a far parte delle cose create'.

⁴⁸⁹ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 137.

knowledge. Parts of his body are described as: ‘grumo di materia trabalzante’,⁴⁹⁰ ‘due pezzi di sapone sfatto’,⁴⁹¹ ‘la materia viscida’,⁴⁹² ‘con occhi che pareva gli straripassero in gelatina per la faccia’.⁴⁹³ The only thing this deformed creature knows is that somewhere everything he is lacking does exist: Secondo, his born half brother, is, in fact, the form that the first son does not have. Secondo is also an incomplete figure; although he is ‘sano e normale fino all’insulto’,⁴⁹⁴ he has no self-consciousness, starting from the fact that he bears a name unaware of the truth that preceded him. Right from the very first meeting, the son and Secondo become two parts tragically trying to reunite and to complete each other: ‘Appena fuori si mise a cercarlo. Ora non si capiva piú chi dei due seguisse l’altro’.⁴⁹⁵ The two components, matter and form, attract each other as they are complementary, but one part ends up overwhelming the other as what is missing is the original act of love in their procreation.

An extremely interesting aspect also touched on by this complex text is the process of knowledge acquired through sight. The son gains sight from Secondo’s visual abilities, which is what allows him to gain knowledge and to progressively repossess both his own life and the world around him:

Allora si mise a usare gli occhi crudelmente, rifiutando il beneficio delle palpebre, a sostenere le tenebre e il sole, a sorvegliare nord e sud a un tempo, a disimparare il sonno; li adoperava senza compromessi e precauzioni, li allenava: era occupato nel proprio sguardo come in una commemorazione. Finché giunse a pensare che, oltre allo sguardo,

⁴⁹⁰ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 120.

⁴⁹¹ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 120.

⁴⁹² Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 120.

⁴⁹³ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 121.

⁴⁹⁴ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 119.

⁴⁹⁵ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 128.

Secondo doveva cedergli a poco a poco tutte quelle necessità vitali che portava in sé e che certo non gli spettavano, speculazioni fortunate di un capitale altrui. (*Racconto grosso*, p. 126)

Gaining sight is for *rosso* the acquisition of a long-yearned self-awareness ‘era occupato nel proprio sguardo come in una commemorazione’ and an open door for the reappropriation of ‘tutte quelle necessità vitali che portava in sé e che certo non gli spettavano’. This process (of acquisition of self-awareness) is skilfully painted through images of light and darkness, where light stands for knowledge, order and harmony, and darkness is a source of pain and destruction. When, in the light of dawn, Secondo finally looks at the shadow haunting him, he opts for knowledge, gains self-awareness and dies.

The figure of *il rosso* and, as a result, the whole short story, also bears many religious connotations such as the timelessness of being, the decision for birth regardless of the couple’s will, a young mother confused by the event, and the parents who wish to destroy the son, representing mankind’s killing of Christ on the cross. Finally, when *rosso* kills his brother, sucking life away from him, Secondo attempts to utter ‘una continua parola che forse era e-go o o-me-ga, forse al-fa o J-h-va’⁴⁹⁶ therefore the self, the Alfa representing the beginning, the Omega standing for the end and Jhva meaning God. The fact that the word is a ‘continua parola’ seems reminiscent of the *om* of Hinduism: ‘La sillaba *om* è tutto l’universo. [...] Il passato, il presente, il futuro: tutto ciò è (compreso nella) sillaba *om*. E anche ciò che è al di là del tempo, che è triplice, è (compreso nella) sillaba *om*’,⁴⁹⁷ ‘simbolo dello sforzo del devoto di unirsi all’Assoluto’.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁶ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 139.

⁴⁹⁷ Giangiorgio Pasqualotto, *Figure di pensiero, opere e simboli nelle culture d’Oriente* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2007), p. 36.

⁴⁹⁸ *Enciclopedia delle religioni*, p. 269.

Conclusion

In Chapter 2 my concern was to show how extraordinary children and animals, through their Otherness, are employed to represent the theme of victimisation of the weakest creatures in society. The analysis here shows clearly that there are many other reasons for Masino and Ortese to favour the creation of extraordinary children and animals. Their presence allows Ortese to express her programmatic views on reality and its multiple dimensions. Through extraordinary characters, both writers create a dialogue with other texts whether through intertextual references, voluntary or involuntary echoes, or through the re-interpretation of elements of literary or popular tradition. These links to authors, texts and works have different aims: from that of supporting their poetics (Ortese's re-elaboration of the *monaciello*), to the acknowledgement of a similar sensitivity, and, again, to expressing the universality of the message conveyed (fraternity in the short story 'Famiglia'). Finally, the depiction of children and animals who are not ordinary becomes an opportunity to deal with such themes as war, fate, and creation in a more sharply focused and detailed way.

Looking back at the portrayal of all the extraordinary characters analysed here, it is clear that these are all positive figures who inevitably appeal to the readers and win their compassion. Empathy and sympathy with the Other is, as previously discussed, the main characteristic of the female fantastic.

Chapter 4

Children of Nature

Ortese's cry of nature and Masino's natural destructive force

Introduction

In the analysis I undertook in Chapters 2 and 3, the importance of the theme of nature in Masino's and Ortese's works came up again and again demonstrating, in particular, the different forms and perspectives employed by the authors to represent their natural world. It appears in the form of animal or metamorphic characters: among others, we have already encountered Estrellita the Iguana and Alonso the puma; as a landscape, for example, the doomed, gloomy land of Monte Ignoso; and, finally, in Ortese's poetics, as already mentioned, nature appears also as an abstract concept, the author sees the natural world as an innocent victim of the abuse showered upon it by a supposedly superior mankind by modernity and industrialisation.

In this fourth chapter, I intend to explore more closely the treatment of the theme of nature, providing a more cohesive and thorough study of its role and portrayal. The title *Children of Nature* is an attempt to encapsulate in a few words two very different views of the natural world. I believe this title well captures Ortese's love for all the 'Bambini della Creazione'⁴⁹⁹ in all their forms, as well as Masino's pride in being the child of a natural calamity, an earthquake, which would shape her views of the natural world. The analysis falls into four sections. The first considers the depiction of metamorphic children and animals, whose function I have already explored in previous chapters without, however, going into great detail

⁴⁹⁹ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 162.

regarding their nature. The second and third sections will focus on each author's view of nature: from Ortese's friendly, defenceless, entity mistreated by humans, to Masino's idea of an ancestral disruptive force linked to fate and death. I shall also highlight similarities and common ground between the two representations. The fourth and final section will look at nature as landscape in the works of both authors. I believe it is important to give an overview of the environment in which extraordinary characters live as this shapes what children and animals become: defenceless victims or cynical creatures. From even a purely superficial reading of the two authors' narratives, it is clear that for Ortese, issues related to nature are much more pressing than for Masino. That is why, in this chapter, Ortesian thought and characters will be given a slightly greater prominence.

4.1 Ortese's metamorphic characters

The focus in this section will be on the description of the nature of metamorphic children and animals, a particular group of extraordinary characters who are present, almost exclusively, in Ortese's narratives. These figures share the common characteristic of being able to turn into one another. The function of metamorphic children is the same as those of the other extraordinary children and animals. However, given their presence, it is hard not to wonder why Ortese has depicted so many metamorphic children and animals among her extraordinary ones. The explanation lies in the fact that metamorphosis allows Ortese to condense into one character the main features of all the victims of mankind. These characters bring together at one and the same time the weakness and defencelessness of children, the presumed inferiority of animals from an anthropocentric perspective, the good nature of animals as well as of the whole natural world and the presumed inferiority and

marginalisation of the different, the Other. Given the negative opinion she holds of man, it is hardly surprising to find that in Ortese's writings the great majority of human characters who undergo an animal metamorphosis are children rather than adults.⁵⁰⁰

Interestingly enough, two of the very few metamorphic adult characters represented by Ortese, are: a teacher-bear in 'L'ultima lezione del signor Sulitjema',⁵⁰¹ who instils in children a deep love for nature, and Alessandro in 'Uomo nell'isola',⁵⁰² an unbaptised, elderly man. By specifying that he is unbaptised, Ortese highlights how extraneous to him is the religious principle according to which only man and no other living being has an immortal soul, which is the principle that determines mankind's presumed superiority on religious grounds.

'L'ultima lezione del signor Sulitjema' tells the story of the last day at school of an old, feeble teacher in a tiny, remote, timeless village of Norway. Orso (the name is no coincidence) Sulitjema, despite being strict with his pupils, had a 'vera e

⁵⁰⁰ In this respect, a parallel could be drawn with Savino's Surrealist art which, like Ortese's poetics, was based on the belief of the importance of childhood, the rejection of conventions, logical comprehension and on the predilection for the fantastic world of imagination. See Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio*. Silvana Cirillo clearly explains the characteristics of his art and often quotes him. Besides adopting the child's attitude, the artist says, we must 'ascoltare questa voce, [...] quella infantile, quella del folle, quella dell' "altro"' (see Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio* p. 166) and praises 'la passionalità, la spontaneità tipiche dell'infanzia' (see Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio* p. 154). See also Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio* p. 156: 'Fin qui credo balzi chiara all'attenzione la fundamentalità dell'infanzia come struttura mentale e letteraria, come rottura con il mondo vecchio dei padri, come interruzione di un rapporto dipendente dalla cultura genitrice, autoritaria, per riattingere, invece, alla cultura originaria, più antica, più libera e coniugarla con il linguaggio di oggi'. In support of Surrealist painting and in rebellion against rules, Savinio adds that the new cultural movement 'ha aperto alla pittura la regione delle verità nascoste così malviste e temute dall'autorità e dal buon senso' (see Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio* p. 153). Referring to Metaphysical and Surrealist art, Cirillo points out (see Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio* p. 18): 'non sono poetiche del trascendente, dell'astratto, ma al contrario intendono far scendere il divino e l'astratto in terra, scoprire la divinità che è in noi stessi, nelle cose, nel mondo, nell'oggetto [...] Cogliere la materia nel suo mistero, raggiungere fino agli strati ulteriori, inconsci dell'uomo e a quelli misteriosi, magici, sconosciuti della materia e poi uscirne'. Finally, considering the ideas above, on the subject of metamorphosis, he states that 'la deformazione è fondamentale' (see Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio* p. 153) and finds in Surrealism 'un'altra buona ragione per dipingere e rappresentare uomo e animale fusi insieme' (see Cirillo, *Alberto Savinio* p. 18). These common beliefs lead Savinio and Ortese to similar choices in the expression of their art.

⁵⁰¹ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 147-152.

⁵⁰² Ortese, *L'Infanta sepolta*, pp. 91-97.

illuminata religione dell'infanzia'⁵⁰³ and in children he saw the future and hope of mankind. As he takes his leave from his pupils, for the last time he shares his wisdom about life and nature:

“Primo: non badate molto alle apparenze, cioè non giudicate gli uomini dal loro pelo o, al contrario, dai loro sontuosi vestiti. Secondo: non giudicate la Natura tanto silenziosa e fredda, e soprattutto obbligata a sfamarvi, come finora hanno fatto i vostri coraggiosi padri. No, figli miei: la Natura ha occhi e orecchie più di quanto voi intendiate. E...forse non ci crederete, essa vi ama. Onoratela e vogliatele sempre il più gran bene possibile: non vi mancherà mai nulla su questa terra, e quando, dopo una lunga vita felice chiuderete gli occhi, sarà solo per riaprirli su una terra e un mare più belli: e uccelli e orsi, non maestri e capi di Stato, uccelli e orsi e altri animali che avrete amato, essi soli vi accoglieranno e, se del caso, giudicheranno”. (*In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 151-152)

His words are the clear enunciation of Ortese's poetics: the old teacher's first recommendation refers to Ortese's concept of reality as a multi-layered entity. The second expresses Ortese's view of nature as a good, loving entity that should be cherished and respected. It also reveals her hope for a life (in this case after death) where the judges are not the representatives of arrogant, hierarchical, despotic mankind (Heads of States and teachers) but of the purer, fairer animals. When suddenly, during the lesson, the foresters arrive, Sulitjema runs away through a window to vanish for ever and not be found again. The police investigations assume him to be a real bear who loved teaching human children. However, his pupils, who ignored the police theories, always remember him as their dear teacher. An eccentric elderly man, he, nonetheless, possessed wisdom and knowledge of forests and

⁵⁰³ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 151.

solitude. As to the reason of his disappearance, the narrator tells us that his students accepted that the question be left unanswered as they do not have, and never will have, the typically human presumption of expecting to understand everything, even the most bizarre facts of life.

The other case of metamorphosis of an adult is Alessandro in 'Uomo nell'isola', together with his servant Anna. The young narrator and her family pay a visit to their uncle Alessandro, an old experienced sea captain who, after exploring the world and living in exotic places, has settled in La Valletta, in Malta. The family is welcomed by their uncle's servant, Anna, whose animal likeness is evident from the very moment she opens the door 'Con le manine giunte sul petto, così simili a due zampine per il gran pelo rosso che le ricopriva'.⁵⁰⁴ Likewise, a connection between Alessandro and the sea is immediately established: 'mio Zio Alessandro ci apparve come un veliero o una nuvola'.⁵⁰⁵ His resemblance to the sea becomes progressively more striking: the way he moves his legs makes the narrator think of waves, his teeth look like stones on the river bank, his tongue is likened to a wave, from his pipe and mouth to the children comes the sound of water⁵⁰⁶ and, while they are asleep, the metamorphosis reaches its completion, Alessandro becomes the sea:

⁵⁰⁴ Ortese, *L'Infanta sepolta*, p. 93.

⁵⁰⁵ Ortese, *L'Infanta sepolta*, p. 93.

⁵⁰⁶ See Ortese, *L'Infanta sepolta*, pp. 94-96: 'Ci stupiva il movimento ritmico delle sue lunghe gambe, impercettibile e regolare sotto la grande coperta di seta celeste che gli copriva le ginocchia, e così bizzarramente somigliante al movimento crescente del mare, quando si anima davanti a un orizzonte deserto. Forse sbagliavamo o sognavamo, ma ci pareva anche di scorgere dei gabbiani, sulle sue ginocchia, e percepire, dietro le vocine graziose dei genitori, rauchi, melodiosi, solitari gridi. [...] In quel punto, le orecchie che ornavano la pipa di mio Zio Alessandro, da rosse si fecero di fuoco, e poi crebbero, e palpitavano come fiamme, e, come fossero bocche, se ne sprigionava un canto selvaggio e infinitamente tranquillo, accorato e calmo come il rumore delle acque sotto gli scogli nelle grandi notti di luna. Anche dalle labbra di Zio usciva ora una musica, la sua bocca era aperta e i suoi denti scintillavano, ma così dolcemente, che io non vidi mai un cristiano ridere con denti così candidi e acuti un riso così mite. Sembravano ciottoli su una riva, e la sua lingua era l'onda che li abbagliava. [...] Zio Alessandro si alzava finalmente in piedi, come una nave, cantando e fumando, e così usciva, con rumore grande e vento, dalla stanza, dove ormai, quieti e incantati, noi fratelli dormivamo'.

Non lo vedemmo più, mai più, ma tutta notte lo sognammo. Correva per tutte le stanze, gettando urli bellissimi, pieni di vanto, e le sue membra infinite erano di tutte le varietà dell'azzurro, e bianchi e lunghi i suoi capelli come la spuma, e allegra la sua anima non battezzata. [...]

Perché mio Zio Alessandro era uomo soltanto di giorno; di notte, ritornava il Mare. (*L'Infanta sepolta*, pp. 96-97)

In the above quotation I find the reference to 'la sua anima non battezzata' of particular importance. The narrator often insists on the fact that her uncle has not been baptised and that, unlike them, he is not a Christian. Ortese objects to a Christianity that discriminates against those who are not part of its institutionalised practice, does not accept Otherness and reiterates the superiority of man as the only living being with an immortal soul. In the case of Alessandro, the author seems to suggest, it is precisely this status of being unbaptised that gives him freedom and allows him to be in touch with, as well as part of, the sea, something that the children who have been christened can only dream about and admire. Going back to Anna's animal resemblance, the children soon realise she also has a red tail and an extraordinarily non-human strength. They conclude Anna is in fact a big monkey, bought to Mindanao by Alessandro who keeps her as a servant devotedly waiting upon him as they grow old together. Unlike the other Ortesian animal-servant, Estrellita, Anna seems to be kind and affectionate and to fit into her role with pleasure. I assume this is because, unlike the Iguana, she is respected as an Other by a master who is also charged with Otherness – he is not baptised and has a metamorphic nature.

Masino does not employ metamorphic characters to the same extent that Ortese does; in her representation of nature, in fact, she does not draw on the association between children and animals, but represents both separately.⁵⁰⁷

4.1.1 *Pianto di cuccioli e bambini*:⁵⁰⁸ Ortese's metamorphic children and animals

Metamorphic characters are to be found throughout Ortese's fiction from her very early writings. In some cases, as for Hieronymus, the metamorphic process is fully described and the reader is a witness of it. However, in the majority of cases, the metamorphic change occurs as another character's shift in perception. This is the case of 'Una macchia', where the narrator initially mistakes a young, deformed girl for an animal, or in *L'Iguana* where it is Daddo's eyes that determine Estrellita's amphibian, child-like, old-lady nature. As explained above, in the previous chapter, Ortese uses the strategy of shifts in perception to show the multi-layered nature of reality that goes beyond what is immediately perceived by the senses and includes an invisible, extraordinary dimension. Another interesting example of metamorphosis that is not fully described, and which could be simply a character's misperception, is to be found in the short story 'Sulla terrazza sterminata'⁵⁰⁹ in *In sonno e in veglia*. Here, the narrator, feeling the strain of solitude and despair, remembers that, when she was young, she was told of the presence on Earth of some angelic creatures 'i

⁵⁰⁷ The main ones, presented in Chapter 3, are two adult characters from the short story 'Famiglia', Lisabetta Pada who has a human/plant nature and Macduff's son who is often perceived and portrayed as a baby and a bird rather than a grandparent.

⁵⁰⁸ Salvatore Quasimodo, 'Vicolo' in *Poesie e discorsi sulla poesia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1971), p. 29. The heading in Italian for this subsection is a line from the poem *Vicolo* by Salvatore Quasimodo, whom Ortese knew very well. I chose this particular line as it seems to reflect the cry of sorrow of Ortese's children and animals, whose association is so deeply rooted in the writer, that she sees them as one metamorphic whole.

⁵⁰⁹ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 137-145.

custodi buoni dell'uomo'.⁵¹⁰ Wondering whether her angel has grown old with her or if, on the contrary, it has become 'molto piccino',⁵¹¹ she invokes the creature:

lo chiamai istintivamente, con sciocchezza improvvisa: "Se ci sei, rispondi, e fa' presto, per favore" dissi. "Se ci sei, *bestia*, o *angelo* mio caro, rispondi" così dissi.

Come detto – be', diciamo un istante dopo – una cosina di luce, piccolissima, si mise a girare davanti a me.

"Be', sei una lucciola!" ridendo dissi.

[...]

"Oh Lucciola, Lucciola, prega per me".

Girò un poco, come facendo: "...Sì...sì...be'... vedremo... Ma tu, intanto, di me ti eri dimenticata, eh?" ed eccola – ogni tanto girandosi – era andata via. (*In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 143-144)

The day after, the narrator miraculously receives great news about a new home in her mail. In her attempt to discover who delivered the letter, she makes enquires of a lady who reports noticing a six-year-old girl in a dark cloak. While walking out of the narrator's house with a lantern in her hand, she 'Saltava, come le scolarine, con gambe assai snelle, e quasi *volava*, dice, all'altezza dei cespugli'.⁵¹² It is evident that the glow-worm and the little girl with the lantern are the angelic figure the narrator evoked. Two details point at the metamorphosis: the lantern the girl is holding, reminiscent of the light of a glow-worm and the verb '*volava*', highlighted by Ortese who writes the verb in italics. It is also very interesting to note that in the first quotation, Ortese's 'custode buono dell'uomo' is addressed as '*bestia*, o *angelo*' (in italics) as if the writer intended to stress her conceptual synonymy of the two terms.

⁵¹⁰ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 143.

⁵¹¹ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 143.

⁵¹² Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 145.

A final element worthy of note is the reworking made once again by Ortese of the *monaciello*. The narrator of ‘Sulla terrazza sterminata’ lives in a house where strange events occur constantly: cigarettes disappear, random figures are seen on the television screen, objects move. Not surprisingly, like the *monaciello*, the girl/glow-worm wears a dark cloak, has not grown any taller and may have played tricks on the narrator for having been neglected.

A different example of metamorphosis is that presented in ‘Vita di Dea’⁵¹³ in *L’Infanta sepolta*. In this short story metamorphic transformation acquires a more spiritual dimension and it is used to introduce the possibility of reincarnation after death. Without describing the physical transformation, the narrator hints at the reincarnation of her perfectly beautiful friend Dea in the form of a frog. In life, Dea gives the narrator her interpretation of this principle as a form of cyclical justice which allows those who had nothing in this life to obtain everything in the next, in a different guise. She also warns her friend not to feel disgust should she one day see a frog struggling to cross the road to go and die somewhere, for she will be looking at her through the eyes of the frog. Years later, after Dea’s death, the narrator and her boyfriend will see a frog dying as it stares at them exactly as Dea said she would.⁵¹⁴ This episode is a chance for Ortese, through the voice of the narrator, to think on life after death and to wonder whether the dead look at us every day through animals and flowers. Reincarnation as a form of metamorphosis after death is also present in

⁵¹³ Ortese, *L’Infanta sepolta*, pp. 82-90.

⁵¹⁴ See Ortese, *L’Infanta sepolta*, p. 89: ‘Una povera rana, il corpo a metà schiacciato dalla ruota di qualche carro ch’era passato da poco, cercava di portarsi verso il margine della strada, fino all’ombra di un ciuffo d’erba, dove morire in pace. Lo raggiunse (oh, con quanta lentezza!) e vi si accasciò. Ci eravamo inginocchiati come fanciulli davanti al suo dolore, ed essa, tutta un palpito orribile nel gonfio corpicciuolo, volgeva a non so che cielo due pupille torbide e disperate. Non ci vedeva, non vedeva più questo mondo spaventoso. Rimanemmo qualche attimo muti. “Ci guarda!” disse ad un tratto Dad. Non ci guardava. Mi guardava. Io mi copersi il viso con le mani. *Quello* sguardo, e l’angoscia *così particolare* e solenne di quegli occhi torti, fissi in non so che gioia perduta, in che alta luce precipitata, io l’avevo visto un’altra volta, non mi era nuovo’.

‘Folletto a Genova’, where the mistreated dead Stellino, flies out of a cardboard box in the form of a skylark.⁵¹⁵

Ortese’s most widely-known metamorphic children and animals are, however, the main characters of the trilogy. I have considered their function in previous chapters without, however, looking closely at their metamorphic nature. In a chronological order of publication, the first of these characters is Estrellita, the Iguana. As I have already pointed out, Estrellita’s nature is constantly shifting according to Daddo’s perception, a technique which Ortese uses to emphasise the idea of a misleading truth. Whether the animal actually goes through a series of metamorphoses, or is just seen by Daddo as a series of different creatures, is not clear to the reader at any point in the novel. When Estrellita first appears, she is seen as an old lady. However, Daddo soon realises he has before him an animal in an old woman’s clothes, rather than an elderly woman. Daddo’s dual perception of the Iguana starts to change again when he presents her with a scarf; for the first time he sees the Iguana as an animal-child rather than as an animal-old lady.⁵¹⁶ From that moment, the Iguana’s behaviour and attitude will be compared, either directly or indirectly, to that of a little girl who ‘posava con una indifferenza e quasi malgarbo, che più volte il conte aveva notato nei fanciulli infelici, le pietanze sul tavolo’⁵¹⁷ or was ‘fornita come usano i bambini sulle spiagge’.⁵¹⁸ The moment of total identification between the Iguana and a child occurs during the night when Daddo

⁵¹⁵ See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 71: ‘E che ne uscì, patria mia, se non – lucida e lieve come tre note di gioia – una uccella... una felice allodola? Essa sparì tremando nel cielo, che era tornato azzurro, puro maggio, entro una collana di mandorli, e dileguò nella perfetta purezza del Creato’.

⁵¹⁶ See Ortese, *L’Iguana*, pp. 31-32: ‘il giovane si rese conto, stordito, che la creatura che egli aveva chiamato “nonnina” era, in realtà, ancor meno di una ragazza, essendo una iguanuccia di non più di sette otto anni, che solo il grinzoso aspetto della sua specie, e un deperimento che si poteva attribuire a cause varie, come il portare pesi, il servire assiduo e non so che selvaggio abbandono, troppo grave anche all’infanzia di una bestia, avevano come accartocciata e incupita’.

⁵¹⁷ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 36.

⁵¹⁸ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 56.

sees her at the hen house where Estrellita is playing an outdoor game, just as any other child would do.⁵¹⁹ The ambiguity between the Iguana and a child is maintained to the end of the novel when, at the bottom of the well, Daddo finally sees Estrellita as what she really is, not an iguana, but a humble young servant.⁵²⁰

A minor metamorphic character in *L'Iguana* is Perdita, a monkey brought up by Ilario's mother as if she were her own daughter. Daddo sees her in a portrait and dwells on the nature of the creature wondering whether she is a bird or a monkey, only to finally receive confirmation from Ilario that she is a monkey. From a love letter written by the *marchese*, Daddo also understands that Ilario was in love with Perdita. It is her loss, due to perhaps death or being sold, Daddo presumes, that gave Ilario a sense of disgust for inferior creatures, which had dramatic consequences for the Iguana, a victim of this change in feelings. Whether Perdita and Estrellita may be seen as one creature or not is not clear, and there are different interpretations. For Wood, Perdita is Estrellita once loved by her master and then rejected.⁵²¹ According to La Penna's more literal reading, Estrellita became for Ilario a replacement for Perdita, who could not fulfil her role and was then rejected.⁵²² I believe that it is

⁵¹⁹ See Ortese, *L'Iguana*, pp. 76-77: 'La giovane Estrellita (ché ormai sulla sua giovinezza, anzi la cruda infanzia, non rimaneva dubbio), aveva tracciato sul terreno, con una pietra appuntita, quel recinto rettangolare che tante volte il Lettore avrà visto fare dai fanciulli, e col quale egli pure, da bimbo, avrà passato delle ore...[...] l'intero gioco, che consiste nel saltare su un piede solo da un quadrato all'altro, senza toccare la linea di divisione, e facendosi precedere da un sassolino, è chiamato "La settimana"'.
⁵²⁰ See Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 172: 'Non era una Iguana, e nemmeno una regina. Era una servetta come ce ne sono tante nelle isole, con due occhi fissi e grandi, in un volto non più grande di un chicco di riso. Ed aveva i capelli neri aggiustati come una torricella intorno al volto severo e timido. La sua bocca non sorrideva. Non era vestita di merletto bianco, ma di semplici cenci grigi. E su quei cenci, tutti sparsi intorno a lei come petali di fango, sembrava dormire, sognare. Gli occhi erano aperti e fissi'.

⁵²¹ See Wood, 'Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese', p. 143: 'Estrellita, whom we see only enslaved and humiliated, formerly enjoyed her master's protection and benevolence as Perdita, whose very name clearly signifies loss'.

⁵²² See La Penna, p. 168: 'The Italian Count also senses that Ilario has been romantically involved with Estrellita but, as Ilario himself explains later, the infatuation had been brief and doomed: Estrellita could not be a substitute for his lost lover, a *menina* called Perdita to whom he had dedicated a poem celebrating her beauty'.

difficult to determine a concrete physical identification between the two characters as this cannot be entirely proven even though, at the end of the novel, Daddo, seeing Estrellita in the well, calls her Perdita. In my opinion, it is more important to underline that the identification between the two figures is to be had from the fact that they both represent the idea of the lost and/or rejected love of a subdued creature. As La Penna suggests, the minor character of Perdita creates, at the same time, both an intratextual and an intertextual reference.⁵²³ In terms of intratextuality, Daddo's love for the Iguana refers back to Ilario's love for Perdita the monkey, be it an animal or servant. In terms of intertextuality, the name Perdita clearly establishes a link with Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.⁵²⁴ Perdita is the daughter of the King of Sicily and is rejected and lost for many years by her father. Once again, an extraordinary character is employed to establish an intertextual discourse with other texts.

The second example of the metamorphic child of the trilogy is Geronte/Gerontino il Piccolo/il Portapacchi/Hieronymus Käppchen/Lillot in *Il cardillo addolorato*. The main characteristic of this metamorphic child-animal character is that he can turn into different animals and he can also undergo a multiple metamorphosis, displaying elements of different animals at once. The different names do not correspond to the different ways in which the character presents himself, and this lack of correspondence makes the character even more ambiguous. He makes his first physical appearance while carrying parcels with Elmina in the

⁵²³ See La Penna, p. 172: 'Estrellita's last transformation occurs when Daddo is approaching his end: he meets the servant once again and calls her "Perdita". In this name, the semantic halo of the Iguana is at once annulled as an unredeemable "loss" of meaning and strengthened, since both the intratextual relationship to other incarnations of submission (the *menina*) and the intertextual allusions to the Shakespearean macro-text are evoked and further reinforced'.

⁵²⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson, 9th edn (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

human form of a feeble child of around seven years of age, a feather on his head as the symbol of his link to the natural world.⁵²⁵ Contrary to Estrellita, Hieronymus' metamorphoses are not mere changes in another character's perception; they do occur, some of them before the reader's very eyes. Before we witness one of his metamorphoses together with prince Neville, we hear about them from other characters. According to merchant Nodier, Hieronymus is able to turn into various animals: a bird, a wild cat, a kid, a chick, mainly when he is unhappy, scared or feels that he has to defend himself.⁵²⁶ The first metamorphosis seen by the reader takes place when Gerontino Watteau teases him with a bawdy song.⁵²⁷ But the most significant one occurs after Sasà has taken off his feather, which turns out to be naturally attached to the boy's forehead:

cercavano di quietare il pianto, o per dir meglio pigolio, sconsolato dell'orfano. Tutt'e due le manine di questi erano diventate *zampetti* – e dunque una di quelle metamorfosi, in felino, capretto o pulcino, di tutte le volte che il Portapacchi aveva paura, si stava adesso verificando, ed era brutta da vedere. Con gli *zampetti*, egli non poteva rimettersi la penna adorata sul capo, ma lo tentò; alla fine, disperato, la prese in bocca. [...] Già, inoltre, gli spuntavano baffi bianchi sulle

⁵²⁵ See Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, pp. 225-226: 'un tale Geronte o Gerontino, carico di voluminosi pacchi: non il nipote di donna Violante [...] Gerontino, fanciullo forse sui sette anni, e anche più piccino, e particolarmente malandato; vestito male, poi, di soli abiti smessi e più grandi di lui, [...] Inoltre il piccino, che pareva sciocco e timidissimo, e aveva la fronte fasciata da un fazzoletto grigio a righe, portava sul capo, tra i riccioli sbiaditi e mai lavati, una vecchia penna di volatile, forse di gallina'.

See Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 332: 'Quella penna, tanto deteriorata, è l'ultimo segno di un suo antico legame... con la natura, diciamo così, naturale, o boschiva, di pulcino, o gallinaceo... o figlio di una creatura naturale'.

⁵²⁶ See Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 326: 'costui si trasforma in un volatile, e anche in altri figlioli della Natura; mette su artigli, e corna, e pelo, e piume... e così conta di difendersi.' See also Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 366: 'quando è infelice, o ha paura, appare sotto forma di felino – sordido, strano –, esce di notte. Oppure, andate a capire perché, è un capretto di pochi mesi, o un pulcino che corre dietro alla madre. [...] Poi, di colpo, è colui che avete veduto... con la penna sotto il berrettino'.

⁵²⁷ See Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 311: 'Subito Teresella, che lo aveva scorto, lo soccorse, ma egli sfuggì alle sue manine buone, come un povero gatto tormentato dai monelli... o un caprettino... Diventò la metà più piccolo, e tutto bianco, e si precipitò fuori dalla stanza'.

povere gote, segno che la metamorfosi era di tipo misto, e i trecento anni, nel suo portamento muto, ora li dimostrava tutti. (*Il cardillo addolorato*, pp. 380-381)

In this multiple metamorphosis Hieronymus seems to become the emblem of all of Ortese's weakest beings: he is an orphan, a tiny defenceless animal ('pulcino', 'capretto') and an elderly being at the same time. It is interesting to note that the animal metamorphosis includes transformation into a wild cat, normally perceived as a dangerous, aggressive animal rather than as a docile, easily victimised one like a chick or a kid. This apparent contradiction is just an intentionally included reminder by Ortese of her belief that all animals, however wild and fierce they may seem, are in fact good, loving, mistreated beings.

Mohammed in *Alonso e i visionari* is also a metamorphic child, although his metamorphosis is only suggested towards the end of the novel. His metamorphic traits are the spots on a leg and his clothes, which bring to mind a puma.⁵²⁸ His link to the puma is also confirmed in the end by the child's interest in the maps of Arizona, the puma's native country. At the same time, his love for drawing the dog Salvo and his bowl⁵²⁹ suggests a close similarity to a dog. This is not surprising as, throughout the novel, the puma, despite being a wild cat, is in fact described as a tame, affectionate, household pet and is often referred to as *cucciolo*. On one occasion, Julio also mistakes the dead puma for an old dog. Metamorphosis in

⁵²⁸ See Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, pp. 220-221: 'il bimbo, cosa talmente dignitosa e minuscola da stupire. Ci guardò un momento, come da immensa distanza, anzi, come guardando da muraglie e nubi e strade – assai pietosamente –, poi abbassò il capino dorato, una guancia sulla spalla del soldato; e parve mandare, ma io fantastico, un leggero sospiro. [...] Una gambina del piccolo, e anche un orlo del grembialetto, era macchiata di rosa o di azzurro, non so bene... era questo... erano quelle misere macchie già notate, e poi non più ritrovate, sul cane, a causarmi tanto improvviso silenzio e malinconia'.

⁵²⁹ See Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 235: 'Ma ricordo, [...] le visite, sulle gambine traballanti, nella nostra casa, e come preferisse su tutto lo "studio" di Jimmy, e una volta lo trovassi addormentato col capino su una vecchia e festosa carta dell'Arizona. Ciò mi commosse. Egli, Decio, sapeva scrivere benissimo, benché così piccino (almeno di statura), ma preferiva disegnare, e disegnava sempre, non so perché, il piccolo Salvo, che lo adorava, e la sua ciotola color arancio'.

Alonso e i visionari is also suggested by the homonymy where Alonso is the name of the puma but also that of a Spanish waiter, Alonso Torres Aranda.

4.1.2 *Su quelle striminizite gambe di belva malata*:⁵³⁰ language devices

As mentioned in Chapter 2, to make the link between children and animals even stronger, Ortese avails herself of a linguistic strategy which enables her to reinforce the association between the two. When describing children, she employs lexis borrowed from the animal world, and when talking about animals she uses vocabulary belonging to the world of children. This cross-reference system unconsciously creates in the mind of the reader, an implicit tie between children and animals. Ortese employs this technique widely for her metamorphic creatures to consolidate in the reader the idea of their shifting nature. In *Il cardillo addolorato* children are associated with animals from the very beginning: Sasà's fear of the *cardillo* is referred to as 'il cruccio [...] che stringeva nelle sue zampine il cuore della disgraziata piccina',⁵³¹ when Hieronymus still has a child's look, he has 'un musetto apatico, *boschivo*'⁵³² and he cleans Elmina's bag 'con una manina pallida, e vagamente sparsa di peluzzi bianchi';⁵³³ when Sasà plucks his feather, the boy's cry sounds like a 'pigolio'.⁵³⁴ Ferrantina admits that Sasà and Hieronymus 'si sbranavano...si avversavano molto'⁵³⁵ and il Notaro refers to the children's jealousy and fear saying 'c'è qualcosa di tremendo – intendo una forza – in quei corpicini di passerotti, sotto le loro poche piume';⁵³⁶ likewise the Duca, talking about Sasà's

⁵³⁰ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 132.

⁵³¹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 193.

⁵³² Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 349.

⁵³³ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 353.

⁵³⁴ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 381.

⁵³⁵ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 253.

⁵³⁶ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 257.

crush on Geronte, says: ‘nel suo piccolo cuore di passerotto’.⁵³⁷ In *L’Iguana Estrellita*, when perceived by Daddo as an animal, is described in human terms. The parts of her body are referred to as if they belonged to human beings. She held ‘una immensa scopa grigia tra le manine’;⁵³⁸ Daddo ‘ogni tanto vedeva una verde manina allungata fuori del tavolo’.⁵³⁹ Likewise, in *Alonso e i visionari*, the puma is described with ‘striminizite gambe di belva malata’,⁵⁴⁰ and is referred to as a human being when it is said that ‘Alonso era già umano, in quei giorni – era molto piccino, ma tutta la sua faccia splendeva di bontà umana, come ce la descrisse Milton nel viso di Adamo, nei teneri giorni della sua fortuna davanti agli Angeli’.⁵⁴¹ Human characters are also presented in terms drawn from the world of animals, used by other characters with a derogatory meaning to highlight a particular feature. For example, *monaciello* Nicola, to insult the girl’s sisters, says: ‘Quelle brutte scimmie delle tue sorelle’⁵⁴² and he calls the girl herself ‘un moscerino’⁵⁴³ when he resents her patronising tone. Likewise, Teresella tells Sasà off calling her ‘scimmietta’.⁵⁴⁴ Neville calls Elmina ‘Capra’⁵⁴⁵ to hint at her stubborn personality and Sasà’s is often called ‘Palummella’,⁵⁴⁶ a nickname which hints at her ability to fly. Nadina Civile, a minor character in *Il cardillo addolorato*, is also known as ‘*Sorcinella*’ probably because of her lack of good looks.⁵⁴⁷

Another technique Ortese uses to create an indirect association between children and animals is the simile and metaphor. When first received by Don

⁵³⁷ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 307.

⁵³⁸ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 144.

⁵³⁹ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 36.

⁵⁴⁰ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 132.

⁵⁴¹ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 205.

⁵⁴² Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, p. 43.

⁵⁴³ Ortese, *Il Monaciello di Napoli – Il Fantasma*, p. 51.

⁵⁴⁴ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 222.

⁵⁴⁵ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 69.

⁵⁴⁶ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 372.

⁵⁴⁷ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 117.

Mariano, Hieronymus was welcomed as an unfortunate child, but the animal link was already evident when he was said to be ‘alto quanto una bestiola!’;⁵⁴⁸ furthermore, before the metamorphosis, he is already compared to different animals as he ‘sfuggì alle [...] manine buone, come un povero gatto tormentato dai monelli... o un caprettino...’.⁵⁴⁹ In *L’Iguana*, when perceived as an animal, Estrellita is often compared to a young girl who ‘si aggiustò la sciarpa sul capo, [...] proprio come una donnina davanti allo specchio’;⁵⁵⁰ as seen earlier in this section, her behaviour is often depicted as similar to that of a child on the beach (‘come usano i bambini sulle spiagge’);⁵⁵¹ she is shown ‘con quell’aria tra disattenta e triste degli orfani’;⁵⁵² and behaves ‘al modo di tutti i fanciulli del mondo’;⁵⁵³ on the other hand, when Daddo notices Estrellita’s human characteristics and nature, her masters perceive her as an animal and she was grasped ‘di sorpresa, come un gatto, per la collottola’;⁵⁵⁴ and ‘fuggì, [...] come il topolino atterrito’.⁵⁵⁵ When Ilario used to treat her as his own daughter, despite being aware of her animal nature, she was compared to a child. It is said that ‘Il marchese passeggia con lei sulla spiaggia, dandole il braccio, proprio come a una minuscola damina’;⁵⁵⁶ ‘una gentile e affascinante figliolina dell’uomo’.⁵⁵⁷ In *Alonso e i visionari* a simile runs all the way through the novel to stress the paternal role of the puma who ‘Guardava il bimbo [...] come fosse un padre, un padre di umanità’.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁴⁸ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 296.

⁵⁴⁹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 311.

⁵⁵⁰ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 32.

⁵⁵¹ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 56.

⁵⁵² Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 93.

⁵⁵³ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 77.

⁵⁵⁴ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 100.

⁵⁵⁵ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 103.

⁵⁵⁶ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 124.

⁵⁵⁷ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 124.

⁵⁵⁸ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 47.

These two techniques aimed at binding together children and animals are also used with ordinary children and animals, as shown in Chapter 2 for the draught horse and baby Nunzia.⁵⁵⁹

Another device employed by Ortese in the representation of extraordinary children is the use of a sequence of adjectives referring to the same noun.⁵⁶⁰ Elvio Guagnini points out that ‘l’aggettivazione, talvolta multipla’⁵⁶¹ is a feature that enhances the dream-like atmosphere of her descriptions. I only partly agree with this statement as I believe that the main purpose of multiple adjectives is to make descriptions more vivid and tangible. Ortese’s extraordinary and metamorphic children and animals are, in fact, extremely easy to visualise: they fit into the context of the story and are accepted by the reader as integral parts of that reality without arousing shock or surprise. In my opinion, this is made possible precisely by the use of series of adjectives which bring extraordinary and metamorphic children and animals to life for the reader rendering their presence tangible and concrete. To give a few examples, Hieronymus’ look when he steps into the novel reads as follows: ‘anche più piccino, e particolarmente malandato; vestito male, [...] pareva sciocco e timidissimo’,⁵⁶² his feather ‘è l’ultimo segno di un suo antico legame...con la natura, diciamo così, naturale, o boschiva, di pulcino, o gallinaceo’,⁵⁶³ he is said to be ‘disgraziato, sciocco e soprattutto ornato di una sudicia penna di gallina’.⁵⁶⁴ In the representation of ordinary children, series of adjectives are not as relevant as in the

⁵⁵⁹ For other examples see Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 85: ‘una decina d’occhi attentissimi, quali rossi e mezzo chiusi, quali pieni di un’avidità animale, giravano in certe orbite incassate’. See also Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 60: ‘Julio mi getta uno sguardo che non gli ho mai visto, da fiera’.

⁵⁶⁰ For the example of Nunzia see Chapter 2.

⁵⁶¹ Elvio Guagnini, ‘Anna Maria Ortese giornalista, scrittrice di viaggi’, in Francesco De Nicola and Pier Antonio Zannoni, eds., *Convegno di studi su Anna Maria Ortese: Rapallo, sabato 16 maggio 1998* (Genoa: Sagep, 1999), p. 24.

⁵⁶² Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 226.

⁵⁶³ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 332.

⁵⁶⁴ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 306.

case of the extraordinary ones. In fact, the realistic nature of mimetic children built up by Ortese affords the reader immediate straightforward visualisation. There are, however, some examples of series of adjectives. In *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, children in the Granili are ‘stravolti nell’animo, con sorrisi corrotti o ebeti, furbi e desolati nello stesso tempo’.⁵⁶⁵ Sometimes, lists of adjectives, when referred to an ordinary child like Geronte Watteau, contain an ironic meaning: he is depicted as ‘ricco, bello, sano, capriccioso, autoritario, beffardo’;⁵⁶⁶ Julio, whom I have shown in Chapter 2 to be a violent, arrogant bully⁵⁶⁷ is sarcastically presented as ‘educatissimo – chi lo direbbe? –, molto corretto, molto taciturno’.⁵⁶⁸

4.1.3 *Il cane tuo è diventato una palombella*:⁵⁶⁹ Morante and Ortese compared

When analysing the strong link between children and animals in Ortese, it is valuable to make comparisons with Elsa Morante’s work, where animals and children not only appear side by side as in Ortese’s works, but are also presented in very similar, at times parallel, ways. It will be useful, therefore, to have a closer look at Morante’s depiction of the relationship between children and animal figures to highlight similarities with Ortese’s handling of the same relationship. The focus is on *La Storia* as this novel offers a wealth of examples of Morante’s animal-child representation and plenty of scope for discussion. In her essay ‘“*Soltanto l’animale è veramente innocente*” gli animali ne *La Storia*’,⁵⁷⁰ D’Angeli identifies three categories of animal characters in the novel. I shall use them as starting point for my discussion below.

⁵⁶⁵ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 93.

⁵⁶⁶ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 289.

⁵⁶⁷ I will also further explore the figure of Julio in Chapter 5.

⁵⁶⁸ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁶⁹ See Morante, ‘*La Storia*’, p. 455.

⁵⁷⁰ D’Angeli, ‘“*Soltanto l’animale è veramente innocente*”’, pp. 66-72.

The first is formed by animals who are real fully-rounded characters, the two dogs Blitz and Bella, for example. As is Alonso for Decio and Julio, Blitz is an inseparable companion for the two brothers, Nino and Usepe, and, like Usepe, he is a *bastardo*.⁵⁷¹ Usepe is distraught by Blitz's death, but an old lady manages to console him by explaining that Blitz has become a dove and is now flying with many other birds of his kind.⁵⁷² The idea of metamorphosis into a bird after death is also present, as seen above, in Ortese's 'Folletto a Genova', where dead Stellino flies away as a skylark.⁵⁷³ The second dog character in *La Storia* is the highly intelligent Bella.⁵⁷⁴ Morante makes Bella a central figure in the novel due to her motherly relationship with Usepe, for whom she is not a mere companion or pet, but a real mother.⁵⁷⁵ She is the one who takes care of Usepe during his epileptic attacks and nurses him during his final hours. The role played by Bella as mother to Usepe is very similar to that played by the puma as loving, caring father to Decio in *Alonso e i visionari*. However, I believe the choice of an animal as a parental figure has two

⁵⁷¹ He participates in family life; picking up Nino from school, awakening the family before the bombings. On Nino's departure for the war, Blitz becomes Usepe's best friend, whom Usepe only parts from to go food shopping with his mother. During one of his absences, the bombings destroy the building where the family lives and Blitz dies.

⁵⁷² See Morante, 'La Storia', p. 455: "Ah, cristiani e bestie, crepare è tutta una sorte", osservò l'altra, muovendo appena la testa con placida rassegnazione. Poi rivolta a Usepe, piena di gravità patriarcale e senza smorfie, lo confortò col discorso seguente: "Non piangere pupé, che il cane tuo s'è messo le ali, è diventato una palombella, e è volato in cielo".

⁵⁷³ The similarity between the two images suggested the choice of part of the metamorphosis of the dog into a *palombella* as a heading of this subsection.

⁵⁷⁴ From the very beginning she appears to be extremely sharp, understanding everything going on around her, responding quickly and effectively to human speech.

⁵⁷⁵ See Morante, 'La Storia', p. 813: 'Così, da oggi furono in tre nella casa di Via Bodoni; e, da questo medesimo giorno, Usepe ebbe due madri. Bella difatti – a differenza di Blitz – fino dal primo giorno s'era presa, per Usepe, d'un amore diverso che per Nino. Verso il grande Nino, essa si portava come una compagna schiava; e verso il piccolo Usepe, invece, come una protettrice e una sorvegliante. Ora, l'arrivo della sua nuova madre Bella fu una fortuna per Usepe: giacché attualmente la sua madre Iduzza non solo era vecchia (tanto che certi estranei, vedendola assieme a lui, la presumevano sua nonna) ma anche, nella condotta, strana e rimbambita'. See also Morante, 'La Storia', pp. 835-836: 'Non appena sbucati dal portone all'aria aperta, subito se li vedeva partire in corsa, scorribandando, zompano e scapriolando verso l'ignoto; e ai suoi richiami vociferanti, da lontano Bella in risposta premurosamente le abbaia: "Tutto bene. Non t'affannare e tornatene a casa. A Usepe ci penso io! Sono brava a tenere delle greggi di cento, duecento, trecento quadrupedi! E non mi credi capace di badare a un omettino?". Per forza, Ida finì con l'affidare del tutto Usepe a Bella. Essa sentiva con certezza che la propria fiducia non era sbagliata: e del resto, che altro avrebbe potuto fare?'

different meanings for the two authors. In making a dog a second mother for Useppe, Morante suggests that motherhood is not a human prerogative. According to Lazzari, it is a way to show that the simplest creatures, those most strongly linked to nature, are capable of unconditional love and that their instinct leads them to look after weaker individuals instead of trying to overcome them.⁵⁷⁶ By contrast, Ortese chooses an animal (and, I would stress, a wild, normally aggressive one) as a positive father figure to show precisely that animals are more loving, altruistic and generous than men. For Decio, the puma is a better father than his biological one, Decimo, a selfish, ambitious and narcissistic university professor. Decimo is only jealous of the puma's love for his son; instead of feeling guilty for being a bad father, he resents being replaced in this role by an inferior creature.⁵⁷⁷ Although I have concentrated the comparison on Morante's child-animal representation in *La Storia*, mention must be made of the dog Immacolatella in *L'isola di Arturo*. Immacolatella is Arturo's only friend and companion and the two manage to communicate easily, as do the other two child-animal pairs Useppe-Bella and Decio-Alonso. The spontaneous communication between child and animal is something both writers highlight: Useppe seems to be able to relate to animals, and dogs in particular, and to decipher their language,⁵⁷⁸ Immacolatella seems to understand Arturo's states of mind and has

⁵⁷⁶ Laura Lazzari, 'Le relazioni madre-figlia e madre-figlio in due romanzi di Elsa Morante: *La Storia* e *Menzogna e Sortilegio*', *Versants: Revue Suisse des Littératures Romanes/Rivista Svizzera di Letterature Romanze/Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Romanische Literaturen*, 52 (2006), 229-259, p. 251.

⁵⁷⁷ See Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 40: 'Era anche un sentimento meno buono: come scoprire che un servo, un inferiore, ama *nostro* padre, al di là della gerarchia, e ne è amato. Questo, un intellettuale della specie di Decimo non può sopportarlo. E non lo sopporta'.

⁵⁷⁸ See Morante, 'La Storia', p. 384: 'Quelle erano fortune indimenticabili, per Giuseppe: e forse fu in quei suoi duetti primitivi con Blitz, che imparò il linguaggio dei cani. Il quale, insieme con altri idiomi di animali, doveva restargli un acquisto valido finché fu vivo'. See also Morante, 'La Storia', pp. 812-813: 'La storia di quella sua latitanza restò sempre un segreto suo proprio, su cui lo stesso Useppe mai le fece domanda, nemmeno in séguito. Intanto, là nell'ingresso, con una vocina che sapeva di pánico, lui non faceva che ripeterle: "Bella... Bella..." e nient'altro, mentre lei gli andava tenendo un discorso d'amore che all'orecchio degli zotici suonerebbe appena: "Ggrui grrrui hump hump hump" ma del

established a code to communicate with him,⁵⁷⁹ and Decio and Alonso ‘creature simili, uguali si parlano con una voce sola, d’affetto felice, inesprimibile’.⁵⁸⁰

Children in *La Storia* are not the only humans capable of talking to animals. For mad Vilma (madness equates with otherness) the only pleasure in life is sitting at the Teatro Macello feeding cats with scraps of food especially collected for them. Her broken, inarticulate speech, incomprehensible to humans and noticeably similar to a child’s voice, seems to be understood and shared by cats:

Stava seduta in terra fra i gatti, e parlava con essi sempre in quel suo linguaggio rotto e inarticolato, che oggi però somigliava, nel timbro, a una voce di bambina. Da come le si accostavano e le rispondevano, era chiaro, a ogni modo, che i gatti comprendevano benissimo il suo linguaggio; e lei fra loro stava obliosa e beata, come chi è immerso in una conversazione celeste. (*La Storia*, p. 443)

The second category of animals identified by D’Angeli⁵⁸¹ in *La Storia* comprises animals used as terms of comparison with men, which presents a repertoire of images to highlight the human condition. However, calling this a category, as does D’Angeli, in effect reduces it to a mere stock of images. It is rather, something much more than a category. It is a stylistic device which Morante, like Ortese, adopts to strengthen even further the links with the human world of her ordinary, simple characters and that of animals. Like Ortese, Morante creates a subtle

quale la traduzione (superflua per Ueseppe) sarebbe “Adesso, al mondo mi rimani tu solo. E nessuno potrà mai separarci”.

⁵⁷⁹ See Morante, *L’isola di Arturo*, p. 46: ‘E vedendo che io non m’interessavo a lei, s’acostava impaziente, domandandomi coi suoi occhi marrone: “Che pensi in questo momento? Si può sapere che hai?” Come le donne, che quando un uomo è serio, spesso lo credono malato; oppure s’ingelosiscono, perché i suoi pensieri gravi sembrano, a loro, un tradimento della loro futilità. Io, come si farebbe con una donna, la scansavo dicendo: – Lasciami in pace un po’. Voglio pensare. Certe cose tu non le capisci. Va’ a giocare per conto tuo; ci rivediamo dopo –. [...] Si dirà: parlare tanto d’una cagna! Ma io, quand’ero un ragazzino, non avevo altri compagni che lei, e non si può negare ch’era straordinaria. Per conversare con me, aveva inventato una specie di linguaggio dei muti: con la coda, con gli occhi, con le sue pose, e molte note diverse della sua voce, sapeva dirmi ogni suo pensiero; e io la capivo’.

⁵⁸⁰ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 37.

⁵⁸¹ D’Angeli, pp. 66-72.

association between animal and children through the use of animal lexis and similes when describing children and, vice-versa, human lexis and similes when presenting animals. At birth Ueseppe ‘Si annunciò con un vagito così leggero che pareva un caprettino nato ultimo e scordato fra la paglia’,⁵⁸² Ueseppe’s hair is ‘a ciuffetti lisci, umidi e lustri, come quelli di certe anatre migratrici note col nome di *morette*’,⁵⁸³ after arguing with his mother, Nino runs away ‘come un gatto nottambulo cacciato a colpi di scopa’,⁵⁸⁴ Caruli’s way of walking is defined as ‘una camminata storta e buffa, come quella di certi cuccioli bastardi’.⁵⁸⁵ The canaries appear to Ueseppe to be chatting ‘Però invano si studiava di capire i loro discorsi, cantati e chiacchierati’.⁵⁸⁶

The third category identified by D’Angeli in *La Storia* is that of animals involved in a process which, from its starting point of animal-human comparison, eventually leads to confusion, a sort of merging of one into the other.⁵⁸⁷ The abundance of words related to the animal world when describing humans and vice-versa, and the large number of similes employed by Morante, binds some of the human characters and animals so strongly and definitely that they appear to undergo a process of metamorphosis. This is the case of the Jews deported to the concentration camps whose destiny is repeatedly compared to that of livestock on the way to be slaughtered. The metamorphosis is not described as really happening or as a shift in perception as for Ortese’s metamorphic characters, but is merely hinted at through constant, veiled comparisons throughout the novel. The first subtle association is established when Ueseppe, on a day out with his brother at the Tiburtina Station, sees the sad, defenceless look of a calf on a cattle car on its way to be

⁵⁸² Morante, ‘La Storia’, p. 365.

⁵⁸³ Morante, ‘La Storia’, p. 382.

⁵⁸⁴ Morante, ‘La Storia’, p. 357.

⁵⁸⁵ Morante, ‘La Storia’, p. 471.

⁵⁸⁶ Morante, ‘La Storia’, p. 475.

⁵⁸⁷ D’Angeli, pp. 66-72.

slaughtered.⁵⁸⁸ The most important episode in which the fate of the Jews is more explicitly associated with that of livestock is when at Tiburtina Station Ida and Useppe see cattle wagons crammed with Jews to be deported to concentration camps.⁵⁸⁹ However, the association continues later in the novel, when the Ghetto is compared to a stable and the survivors of the concentration camps are again seen as gentle animals on their way to the slaughterhouses.⁵⁹⁰ Useppe's association with animals is so strong that he can almost be considered metamorphic: his behaviour often mirrors that of animals (a lamb, a red panda-*panda minore*), he has the ability to communicate with and almost 'talk' to animals. Besides, having a dog as a second mother lends canine features, like the smell which leads some dogs to believe he is 'una specie di cucciolo canino'.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ See Morante, 'La Storia', p. 400: 'E l'unico viaggiatore visibile, sui pochi carri là in sosta, era un vitello, affacciato dalla piattaforma scoperta di un vagone. Stava là quieto, legato a un ferro, sporgendo appena la testa inerme (i due cornetti ancora teneri gliene erano stati estirpati); e dal collo, per una cordicella, gli pendeva una medagliuccia, all'apparenza di cartone, sulla quale forse era segnata l'ultima tappa del suo viaggio. Di questa, al viaggiatore non s'era data nessuna notizia; ma nei suoi occhi larghi e bagnati s'indovinava una prescienza oscura. [...] D'un tratto, lo sguardo di Giuseppe subì un mutamento strano e mai prima veduto, del quale, tuttavia, nessuno si accorse. Una specie di tristezza o di sospetto lo attraversò, come se una piccola tenda buia gli calasse davanti; e si tenne rivoltato indietro verso il vagone, di sopra le spalle di Ninnuzzu che ormai, con Blitz, marciava verso l'uscita'.

⁵⁸⁹ See Morante, 'La Storia', pp. 540-542: 'Verso la carreggiata obliqua di accesso ai binari, il suono aumentò di volume. Non era, come Ida s'era già indotta a credere, il grido degli animali ammucchiati nei trasporti, che a volte s'udiva echeggiare in questa zona. Era un vocio di folla umana, proveniente, pareva, dal fondo delle rampe, e Ida andò dietro a quel segnale, per quanto nessun assembramento di folla fosse visibile fra le rotaie di smistamento e di manovra che s'incrociavano sulla massicciata intorno a lei. [...] Erano forse una ventina di vagoni bestiame, alcuni spalancati e vuoti, altri sprangati con lunghe barre di ferro ai portelli esterni. Secondo il modello comune di quei trasporti, i carri non avevano nessuna finestra, se non una minuscola apertura a grata posta in alto. A qualcuna di quelle grate, si scorgevano due mani aggrappate o un paio di occhi fissi. [...] L'interno dei carri, scottati dal sole ancora estivo, rintonava sempre di quel vocio incessante. Nel suo disordine, s'accalcavano dei vagiti, degli alterchi, delle salmodie da processione, dei parlottii senza senso, delle voci senili che chiamavano la madre; delle altre che conversavano appartate, quasi cerimoniose, e delle altre che perfino ridacchiavano. E a tratti su tutto questo si levavano dei gridi sterili agghiaccianti; oppure altri, di una fisicità bestiale, esclamanti parole elementari come "bere!" "aria!"'.

⁵⁹⁰ See Morante, 'La Storia', p. 620: 'Si sapeva che gli Ebrei superstiti del Ghetto, sfuggiti per caso alla razzia del 16 ottobre, erano tornati quasi tutti alle loro case di qua dal Tevere, non avendo altro posto dove andare. Un sopravvissuto, parlandone in séguito, li paragonava agli animali segnati, che si affidano docili al recinto del macello, facendosi caldo coi fiati l'uno all'altro. E questa loro fiducia li fa giudicare incoscienti; ma il giudizio degli estranei (notava colui) non è spesso insulto?'.

⁵⁹¹ See Morante, 'La Storia', p. 835: 'Bella, da certi ragazzini del vicinato veniva nominata Pelozozzo. La si vedeva spesso indaffarata a grattarsi le pulci, e puzzava assai di cane. Anzi, questa sua puzza

4.2 *Amo e venero la Terra! È il mio Dio:*⁵⁹² Ortese's concept of nature

In this section, I should like to explore the author's idea of nature and mankind's relationship with the natural world in greater depth. To start with, the author's words below, condense three key points of Ortese's thoughts in this regard:

Io sono dalla parte di quanti credono nell'assoluta santità di un albero e di una bestia, nel diritto dell'albero, della bestia, di vivere serenamente, rispettati, tutto il loro tempo. Sono dalla parte della voce increata che si libera in ogni essere, e della dignità di ogni essere – al di là di tutte le barriere – e sono per il rispetto e l'amore che si deve loro. [...] Io rispondo che tutto è divino e intoccabile: e più sacri di ogni cosa sono le sorgenti, le nubi, i boschi e i loro piccoli abitanti. E l'uomo non può trasformare questo splendore in scatolame e merce, ma deve vivere e essere felice con altri sistemi, d'intelligenza e di pace, accanto a queste forze celesti. (*Corpo celeste*, p. 52)

La Terra è il mio amore. Amo e venero la Terra; e i suoi figli più modesti e discreti mi sollevano nel cuore onde di emozione che un tempo, forse, appartenevano alla sfera del sentimento filiale, infantile. Amo e venero la Terra! È il mio Dio. Penso alle mucche, ai vitelli, al toro; capre e pecore e perfino (il mio linguaggio resta banale) all'umile maiale, come a rappresentazioni celesti: mansuete, dolorose sempre, benevole sempre, magnifiche. Non vedo perché l'uomo debba pensare che gli appartengono, che sono suoi propri, che può distruggerli, usarli. (*Corpo celeste*, p. 124)

s'era attaccata pure a Useppe; tanto che a volte diversi cani gli giravano intorno annusandolo, forse nell'incertezza che lui pure fosse una specie di cucciolo canino'.

⁵⁹² Ortese, *Corpo Celeste*, p. 124.

Firstly, what emerges from both quotations is Ortese's unconditional love for all living creatures 'Io sono dalla parte di', 'Amo e venero la Terra. È il mio Dio'⁵⁹³ and her almost religious worship of nature, which she emphasises through the use of religious terms: 'assoluta santità', 'È il mio Dio', 'tutto è divino e intoccabile', 'più sacri'. Secondly, there is her condemnation of mankind's sense of ownership of the natural world, 'Non vedo perché l'uomo debba pensare che gli appartengono, che sono suoi propri, che può distruggerli, usarli'. Finally, a third aspect is the author's rejection of a society based on capitalism and consumerism 'l'uomo non può trasformare questo splendore in scatolame e merce'.

As regards the first two points seen in the quotations, Ortese's love and almost veneration for all natural beings runs parallel with her total denunciation of the domineering, abusive, violent relationship man has with nature. In the author's eyes, men are driven in their imperialistic attitude towards the natural world, exclusively by intelligence. Ortese defines intelligence as a human prerogative, totally opposed to reason, 'il contrappasso della ragione',⁵⁹⁴ aiming to establish man's dominion over all creatures. The absolute sovereignty of intelligence begins, for Ortese, with the French Revolution and during the Enlightenment, wrongly confused with reason, it became the basis of a society founded on the supremacy and dictatorial rule of mankind over the natural world.⁵⁹⁵ Thus, intelligence, always a rival of reason,

⁵⁹³ I chose this sentence as a heading for this subsection as it emblematically represents Ortese's love for nature.

⁵⁹⁴ Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, p. 138. The word 'contrappasso' used by Ortese seems to echo Dante's *Contrappasso*. I suggest she chose to use the dantesque term, instead of the more obvious Italian *l'opposto, il contrario*, to emphasise the negativity of intelligence. Intelligence is as harmful and painful for what she defines as reason, as the punishment inflicted on the souls in the *Divine Comedy*.

⁵⁹⁵ See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, pp. 142-143: 'Dal suo luglio, diciamo. Che coincide con un luglio effettivo: il 14 Luglio francese. La presa della Bastiglia. Allora fu dichiarata la sovranità divina dell'Intelligenza, usando però la parola Ragione. Ma non era – nessuno allora poteva saperlo – la Ragione, perché la Ragione non agisce, vede, solo l'Intelligenza agisce. E l'Intelligenza, paludata di Ragione, aveva giurato di agire, e fondare la libertà democratica: che non è la libertà del Respiro. È semplicemente la libertà di tutti, la libertà senza limite, che alla fine toglie il Respiro a tutti. [...]

becomes with the Enlightenment, the single complete and absolute power. A very informative essay, which examines Ortese's views on eighteenth-century thought, is Wood's 'Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese'. Here, Wood highlights Ortese's familiarity with the philosophy of the Enlightenment and awareness of the different concepts behind the use/misuse of the word reason 'from the classical humanist concept of a celestial world revealed in nature to the more earthly and pragmatic utilitarianism of the new economic philosophies'.⁵⁹⁶ Scientific thought declared the centrality and superiority of mankind and the total denial of the extraordinary. In *Il cardillo addolorato*, set in the eighteenth century, the mysterious and undecipherable entity of the *cardillo* stands for nature persecuted by Science and the Church, two centres of power usually at odds with each other, but brought together by Ortese as they both proclaim man's superiority over other creatures. Her voice is conveyed in the novel through the words of prince Neville who, despite being a man of his time, questions the absolute veracity of the change brought by the exponents of the new thought. Neville realises that the so-called 'Mutamento'⁵⁹⁷ was not real as it did not take into any account the respect, the love, the appreciation of the weaker and the Other. In her rejection of the answers supplied by science and the Enlightenment, Ortese's thought, as Wood also observes in her essay, is rooted in 'a

Invece, accadde questo. L'Intelligenza prese il potere: sì, in quella occasione, in quel tempo essa prese il potere. E iniziò la sua dittatura, si può dire: nefasta'.

⁵⁹⁶ Wood, 'Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese', p. 150.

⁵⁹⁷ See Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, pp. 393-394: 'Evidentemente, se anche lui, interrogato circa la propria devozione al Cardillo, non avrebbe saputo rispondere senza peccare di presunzione, o infilare sciocchezze – né avrebbe potuto appellarsi coerentemente a Rousseau o Voltaire e altri eminenti Maestri del Mutamento, in quanto vero Mutamento il loro pensiero non aveva portato (comprensione dell'ordine stellare gli sembrava il Mutamento). E avvertiva che questo, appunto, era mancato, nell'antico e nuovo farsi del mondo: il rispetto dell'alba, del pianto del Cardillo; e del suo ordine di restare fedeli – come i fanciulli dei boschi e le loro sorelle – al Nulla, al Poco, e alla pietà per il Nulla, alla compassione per l'abbandonato, al riguardo sommo per ogni Hieronymus Käppchen e la sua penna di gallina'.

tradition of dissident European thought⁵⁹⁸ and in particular comparable to that of Unamuno, whose ‘pressanti domande’⁵⁹⁹ Ortese refers to at the end of *L’Iguana*. Unamuno, like Ortese, disillusioned with the outcomes of rationalism and positivism, sets out to find the quixotic in life, rejecting the materialism of modernity. Ortese’s complete rejection of the Enlightenment and mankind’s superiority is based on the strong belief of unity of being. As Ortese declares programmatically in *Corpo celeste*, all natural entities from wheat to roses, from water to mountains, together with mankind, are one being, as other writers such as Emily Dickinson, John Keats and Borges before her had acknowledged.⁶⁰⁰ In the third chapter I talked about Ortese proximity to the thought of Emerson, which can also be perceived in the concept of the unity of being. Loreto points out :

⁵⁹⁸ Wood, ‘Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese’, p. 147.

⁵⁹⁹ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 184.

⁶⁰⁰ See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, pp. 123-124: ‘Anche il grano e la rosa sono l’uomo; e sono l’uomo tutta la terra e le sue acque senza fine e le sue montagne solitarie, in una prodigiosa moltiplicazione e varietà e squisitezza di forme. L’animo è oppresso, vorrei dire, davanti ai prodigi della molteplicità e bellezza della Terra e di tutti i suoi figli, fiori e animali che siano, davanti al loro segreto, al perché *del loro essere* qui, *in questo momento*: davanti al loro *essere inconoscibili ed essere sempre*. Un albero abbaglia per sempre la mente isolata e perenne di Emily Dickinson; un usignolo parla per sempre alla mente isolata e perenne di John Keats, così come la Tigre si rivela *per sempre* alla mente isolata e perenne di Borges. E che voglio dire con queste parole: *isolata, perenne?* Voglio dire la profondità e l’immutabilità di concezione (del vivere e del vedere) che sta dietro l’uomo, ed è la sua vera realtà: la realtà medesima, a ben guardare, che sta dietro la Natura e i suoi figli: [...] Ecco, *questi* poeti (ma poi, tutti gli altri autentici poeti) ci raccontano senza sosta l’*unità* del mondo, e ci raccontano il mondo come emozione e ragione di un Ignoto al quale tutti apparteniamo, così come la goccia di acqua azzurra appartiene all’immortale mare azzurro, e la foglia di acero alla immortale estensione di foreste e di piante da fiore e da frutto, che copre ancora la Terra’. In her article ‘Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese’ (pp. 151-152), Wood also suggests that Ortese may be familiar with Alexander Pope’s idea that the purpose of nature is not that of being an instrument of mere pleasure and delight for mankind (*Essay on Man 1732-1734*). Wood also supposes that, given Ortese’s declared passion for literature in English, she may also have been acquainted with William Wordsworth’s *The Green Linnet* (1807). Besides examining her position in relation to philosophy and literature, Wood also places Ortese in the Neoplatonic tradition. See Wood, ‘Fantasy, Narrative, and the Natural World in Anna Maria Ortese’, pp. 152-153. I shall not here discuss Ortese’s views from a philosophical perspective but only as concerns the theme of nature and man’s relationship to the natural world.

On the theme of the unity of being, I believe it is appropriate to mention Umberto Saba who, like Ortese, published poetry in *L’Italia Letteraria*. Umberto Saba too shares Ortese’s belief in the unity of being and in the equality of all creatures. In his poems, he often makes human-animal associations based both on conceptual and linguistic grounds. Two examples that spring to mind are ‘A mia moglie’ and ‘La capra’. See: Umberto Saba, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. by Arrigo Stara (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), p. 74 and p. 78.

come nella cosmologia emersoniana, l'Essere emana per gradi dall'Uno e arriva a dimorare nel molteplice. Lo Spirito abita la materia [...] per entrambi gli scrittori la Natura è forma condivisa dallo Spirito e dalle sue creature, che siano uomini o animali.⁶⁰¹

The unity of being is reinforced throughout her work; in *Alonso e i visionari*, for example, the original unity is represented by Decio and Alonso 'I due fratelli – stati una volta fratelli, ma che il progredire ulteriore, e insieme regredire, della specie umana aveva in seguito divisi – si ritrovavano'.⁶⁰² Another, earlier example of Ortese's credo in the unity of being is to be found in the short story 'Nebel (*racconto perduto*)' in *In sonno e in veglia*, considered below in this section. Ortese's love for the Earth in all its forms is reminiscent of Saint Francis of Assisi's *Cantico delle Creature*⁶⁰³ and it seems to me that, despite her rejection of religion as an institution, Ortese's views and those expressed by the Saint in the poem are very close. They both praise the beauty of nature in all its forms and see it as part of one, bigger entity. Saint Francis associates this common entity with God, with a God-Father-Creator. Ortese, on the other hand, believes in a more abstract unity of being without particularly referring to a common stem or origin. Nevertheless, the idea of a loving, caring Father who takes responsibility for the natural world is definitely present in Ortese. It is more specifically found in *L'Iguana*, embodied by the figure of Daddo, whose interest in Estrellita has a fatherly rather than a sexual nature. The name Daddo itself, seems to hint at the English word 'daddy', suggesting the idea of fatherhood. In many of her works, Ortese harshly criticises the Church which also contributes to the presumed superiority of mankind on the grounds that only man has an immortal soul. Ortese's

⁶⁰¹ Loreto, p. 253.

⁶⁰² Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 205.

⁶⁰³ Francesco d'Assisi, 'Cantico delle Creature' in Mario Pazzaglia, *Letteratura italiana: 1 dal Medioevo all'Umanesimo: testi e critica con lineamenti di storia letteraria*, 3rd edn (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1993), pp. 108-109.

mockery of the Church is particularly evident in *L'Iguana* with the exorcism that Archbishop Don Fidenzio Aureliano Bosio carries out on Estrellita. In the short story 'Nebel (*racconto perduto*)',⁶⁰⁴ Ortese also harshly criticises the Church on the issue of the creation's inferiority to mankind. One of the protagonists, Baron Claus von Nebel argues with his former teacher, a Jesuit priest, about the unity and equality of all beings and scornfully questions a God who rejects the perfection of all creatures and who probably was not even aware of what perfection was when he created it.⁶⁰⁵ The origin of the argument is Nebel's wish for a religious wedding with his white mare, who in the Jesuit's eyes is a 'creatura inferiore',⁶⁰⁶ 'una serva',⁶⁰⁷ while for the Baron 'la madre stessa delle Stelle, e Ispirazione – al di là della vita *come ci appare* – del primo Dio. Madre e sorella di Dio, quindi: *non serva*.'⁶⁰⁸ Just as for other Ortesian animal characters, here there is no happy ending; Nebel and his beloved mare will die in an accident, or maybe a joint suicide, in which the bride-to-be finally finds peace.⁶⁰⁹

To return to the third point emerging from the first two quotations opening this section, Ortese's rejection of man's supremacy by virtue of his intelligence is also

⁶⁰⁴ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 83-110.

⁶⁰⁵ See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, pp. 106-107: "«Egli, dunque,» quel pronome stava a indicare Dio stesso «Egli dunque,» con voce alta e scintillante, quasi non fosse profonda notte e non temesse lo svegliarsi di alcuno «Egli è così fatto che rifugge dalla perfezione stessa? L'aborre addirittura? Allora, Egli, padre mio, non dedicò la Sua opera – cioè *Creato* – alla Perfezione! Egli – devo sopporre – non era neppure a conoscenza di questa altezza. [...] M'importa [...] più ancora della Perfezione di Dio...Se Egli non è tale – quindi perfetto – e condanna, per tramite della Sua Chiesa, l'unico sentimento purissimo tra l'Umanità e la Fonte di ogni perfezione – condanna il divenire nell'Assoluto, e ammette solo la *norma* funerea del vivere – quale può essere questa sua pretesa Perfezione?"".

⁶⁰⁶ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 107.

⁶⁰⁷ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 107.

⁶⁰⁸ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 107. See also Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 107: "«Non una serva!» egli ora piangeva dirottamente «non una povera creatura sottoposta agli intendimenti delle Costellazioni, non almeno per me, padre: ma l'anima mia stessa, la mia uguale...la mia pari in nobiltà e tutto... la mia fanciulla in eterno. E intendo sposarla questa mattina stessa, in Chiesa, vestita di bianco... Per ornamento il velo stesso di Bruxelles non mai portato da Clara..."".

⁶⁰⁹ See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 109: 'Posava sul suo petto, in confidente abbandono, posava – stranezza di una caduta da duecento metri, ma per un pendio assai morbido – una lunga faccia bianca. E qui, sì, erano rivoli di diamanti... e ancora un lieve respiro, un brivido, nel suo nobile – non sapevi se di gioia o terrore – ma crediamo soprattutto di pace – nel suo nobile fronte animale'.

paralleled by a refusal of capitalism and by a condemnation of the contemporary greed for economic power and money. Ortese sees industrialisation and the materialism of modern society as another tragic consequence of the Enlightenment, which has made men and their needs come before everything else. She also disapproves of money, when used in large amounts, and when seen as the ultimate aim of all human striving and labour. Money, when dominating and ruling human life has a devastating effect on the world.⁶¹⁰ One could say that in her rejection of capitalism and profit, Ortese's ideas are Marxist, but on two occasions Ortese states that her views go beyond Marxist theories. In 'Piccolo drago', the author acknowledges that Marx unveiled one big fraud of our times, the artificial nature of capitalism, but accuses him of not having unmasked another lie: that the world is proclaimed as matter, when, instead, she believes it to be: 'Respiro, Sogno, Visione... Non è di alcuno'.⁶¹¹ In *Corpo Celeste* Ortese adds that her rejection of the 'dittatura economica, del *sole* economico'⁶¹² is also the refusal of the way science (including Marx) perceives man as an indirect or central protagonist of life, history and economics.⁶¹³ A society driven by intelligence and focused on profit has created a community where, to paraphrase Ortese's words, the children are a hindrance to their mothers, the elderly to their families, the poor to economic society, the foreigner to 'la

⁶¹⁰ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 178.

⁶¹¹ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 178.

⁶¹² Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, p. 122.

⁶¹³ See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, pp. 122-123: 'Il mio rifiuto della dittatura economica, del *sole* economico, è anche il rifiuto del giudizio che la scienza (e Marx è la scienza) dà dell'uomo: come valore centrale e insieme relativo. Per me non c'è nulla di *relativo* e nulla di *centrale*: l'uomo *non è* relativo (alla *storia*, per esempio, all'*economia*) perché la sua realtà profonda *non è* in queste cose, sebbene le valgano come esperienze; e *non è* centrale perché centrale è ogni creatura della vita. Davanti a un usignolo o a una tigre, ambedue meravigliosi, noi diamo giudizi di valore *esterni*, perciò gravemente ingiusti. A livello di sensibilità o di *notte*, al di fuori, voglio dire, dell'analisi del *giorno*, noi sentiamo benissimo che anche la Tigre e l'Usignolo *sono l'uomo*: sono qualcosa di esaltato, di perfetto e insieme di *sofferente*'.

società “salva””,⁶¹⁴ and the beast to humanity. Modernity is pushing these figures to the margins, causing social exclusion and injustice: ‘La Terra va diventando una fossa atroce per i *deboli*, i non aventi diritto’.⁶¹⁵ According to Ortese, just as race had particular connotations for Nazism, economic power is the new parameter of value in modern society: economic power is a new identity card leading to social recognition, without it there is no acceptance and one becomes a victim of the dominion of the strong and powerful over the weak and poor.

Having explored the negative view Ortese has of the relationship between man and nature and of modern society, there is a question that remains unanswered: is there, in Ortese’s view, hope for change? A partial response has been given in Chapter 2 talking about ‘Bambini della creazione’: the author expresses her hopes for a revolution aiming to set *i senza diritto* free: ‘essa riguarda la liberazione *degli altri popoli*’.⁶¹⁶ She intends to play an active role in this revolution, which she sees as the

⁶¹⁴ Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, p. 128.

⁶¹⁵ See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, p. 128: ‘Ostacolo, oggi, è il piccolo per la donna, il vecchio per la famiglia, il povero (il non avente) per la società economica, lo straniero per la società “salva” e infine la Bestia (la Santa Bestia, dovrei dire, perché ultima immagine della Legge Creatrice) per la Società umana. Tutte queste figure – noi lo vediamo, la cosa accade sotto i nostri occhi – sono sempre più respinte indietro, indietro, fino all’annullamento, e, prima, la dissacrazione, il disprezzo finale. La Terra va diventando una fossa atroce per i *deboli*, i non aventi diritto’. Her words remind me of Leopardi’s ‘Palinodia – Al marchese Gino Capponi’ in *Canti*, ll. 86-96, pp. 226-238 where Leopardi criticises his century, using, unlike Ortese, irony and humour. Despite the differences in tone, I find Leopardi’s lines very similar to Ortese’s words above. See Leopardi, *Canti*, p. 231:

‘Sempre il buono in tristezza, il vile in festa
Sempre e il ribaldo: incontro all’alme eccelse
In arme tutti congiurati i mondi
Fieno imperpetuo: al vero onor seguaci
Calunnia, odio e livor: cibo de’ forti
Il debole, cultor de’ ricchi e servo
Il digiuno mendico, in ogni forma
Di comun reggimento, o presso o lungi
Sien l’eclittica o i poli, eternamente
Sarà, se al gener nostro il proprio albergo
E la face del di non vengon meno’.

Also in *Corpo Celeste*, Ortese defines economic power as the new parameter of value in modern society: economic power is a new identity card leading to social recognition, without it there is no acceptance and one becomes a victim of the dominion of the strong and powerful over the weak and poor. See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, pp. 128-129.

⁶¹⁶ Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia* p. 157.

only possibility for men to redeem themselves. Everything must start from man's awareness and confession of his greatest sin: the submission and abuse of *i Popoli muti*.⁶¹⁷ A hope for the future is also evident in the short story 'L'ultima lezione del signor Sulitjema', where the pupils of teacher-bear Sulitjema, having been taught by a Beast, do not show the arrogance typical of the human race. Ten years after the publication of *In sonno e in veglia*, in the programmatic work *Corpo celeste*, Ortese seems less convinced of the possibility of change through revolution. Her tones are much more subdued and less emphatic. She does not exclude change as such but, instead of suggesting the means through which it could be achieved, she limits herself to focusing on the reasons why it should be done: the renewal of the conscience and the heart of man,⁶¹⁸ and a total re-thinking of nature and society.⁶¹⁹

In the previous section, I highlighted similarities (and differences) between Ortese and Morante in terms of their representation of children and animals. Here, regarding Ortese's view of nature, another comparison with Morante and her concept of the natural should be made. Just as for Ortese, the theme of nature and the longing for a society closer to nature are central also in Morante's works. The reference above to Morante considered *La Storia*, in this particular parallel the focus is on the novel *Aracoeli*, where the 'natural' is the key theme. The two authors' views are different. Ortese hopes for a different relationship between man and nature, where man and his needs, no longer central, will put an end to the abuse and marginalisation

⁶¹⁷ See Ortese, *In sonno e in veglia*, p. 158: 'Come e quando inizierà questa rivoluzione? Non lo so. Ma sarà la più grande, e da essa soltanto ricomincerà qualche speranza per la orgogliosa vita umana. Prima, no. Prima della confessione del maggiore ed eterno peccato, ch'è la sottomissione, l'uso e la degradazione di tutti i piccoli Popoli muti, da parte della *superiore* razza umana, per questa razza, essenzialmente distruttrice, non ci sarà speranza di sfuggire alla Nube'.

⁶¹⁸ See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, p. 131: 'Credo che riforme e rivoluzioni inizino di dentro, e abbiano una sola strada da percorrere: il rinnovamento della coscienza e del cuore dell'uomo. Tutte le riforme e le rivoluzioni che non abbiano per oggetto il rinnovamento, la rinascita della vita morale (prima che religiosa e politica) dell'uomo, sono illusorie, e destinate alla sconfitta in partenza'.

⁶¹⁹ In their *Storia della letteratura italiana*, Cecchi and Sapegno interpret Ortese's view of the writer as a witness of the agony of the poetics of reality. See Cecchi and Sapegno, p. 65.

of the natural world which began with the Enlightenment. Morante, on the other hand, longs for a simpler, more spontaneous, primitive society; in fact, she presents nature as opposite to the concept of 'culture',⁶²⁰ a term which she uses to indicate the set of rules imposed by society. According to Morante, only children, animals and humble people similar to those in her novels can provide a positive alternative to a modern society based on rules and conventions which prevent natural instincts and spontaneity.⁶²¹ An emblematic view of nature is the one that Morante creates through the character of Aracoeli in the homonymous novel. The protagonist, a peasant from an Andalusian village, marries a Piedmontese officer in the Italian navy and is then 'dropped' into Italian bourgeois society with all its rules and falseness, a world to which she will never adapt. Aracoeli represents the wild and the primitive, in fact, she comes from a remote village of Andalusia the very region which best represents, for Morante, uncontaminated, untouched nature, the mythic, ancestral South.⁶²² The

⁶²⁰ Morante uses the term 'cultura' in a different way to Ortese. For Ortese 'cultura' has two meanings; on the one hand, it is the archive of information and memory of an endless beauty which we tend to forget, underestimate and even reject, on the other, it represents the modern which is empty and lifeless. See Ortese, *Corpo celeste*, p. 126.

⁶²¹ Throughout her work, Morante expresses more optimism and higher hopes for a better future than Ortese with her pessimism and utopian ideas of a possible revolution. Morante sees in the humble, and particularly in the young, like Ueseppe and Arturo, the possible source of a new beginning, as in Ortese's early works with respect to the students of the teacher-bear in 'L'ultima lezione del signor Sulitjema'. In the trilogy of the *Bestie-Angelo*, however, the pessimistic outlook on the future prevails. The presence of such characters as Daddo, prince Neville and Stella Winter who are sensitive to the cause of nature, in which she also includes the extraordinary, does not help. Daddo dies in his last attempt to save the Iguana. Neville fully understands and accepts the truth of the *cardillo* and the nature of Hieronymus only in the end, after he has believed the lies of people who are unable and unwilling to understand the Other and the extraordinary. Stella Winter, closes her diary asking a God, who is not the conventional one, but an 'eccelso Spirito, autore di Cuccioli e altre visioni, e di anime angeliche come quella del viaggiatore dell'Arizona' for forgiveness 'per le nostre rozzezze' (See Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 245). These are, however, uncommon characters whose sensitivity and understanding isolate them from society and who voice Ortese's ideas.

⁶²² See Elisa Martínez Garrido, 'Between Italy and Spain: the Tragedy of History and the Salvific Power of Love in Elsa Morante and María Zambrano' in *Power of disturbance: Elsa Morante's Aracoeli*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Sara Fortuna (London: Legenda, 2009), p. 119: 'Spain, more specifically Andalusia, always represented for Elsa Morante the epitome of the mythic, uncontaminated land, the essential south. Andalusia belongs to the same mythical ancestral realm as Sicily and the Amalfi coastline, which are the locations of her previous works. But, for Morante, Andalusia is without doubt the nearest European version of the exoticism and archaism of India and Africa. The southern worlds are metaphoric variants of the wild, primitive innocence of a world in an uncontaminated natural state'.

South of the world, whether Spain, Andalusia, Procida or Sicily, is thus for Morante a symbol of an archaic and primitive world, of the intact essence of nature. It is not surprising then that three of her most famous works, *Menzogna e sortilegio*, *L'isola di Arturo* and *Aracoeli* should be set in the South, in Sicily, on the island of Procida and in Andalusia respectively. Similarly, the stories of Ortese's two novels mostly engaged with the theme of nature are also set in the South, *L'Iguana* on a wild Portuguese island (Ocaña, differently from the airy happy Procida, is gloomy and mysterious) and *Il cardillo addolorato*, where superstitions, legends and magic come together, in eighteenth-century Naples. Morante's nature, and its contrast with modern society, is not only symbolised through the choice of setting, but also by such characters as the emblematic figure of Aracoeli. Without tackling the discussion on Morante's view of nature associated to women as a gender and opposed to 'culture',⁶²³ we can somehow see Aracoeli's life as the subjugation first and then the rebellion of nature. The Andalusian peasant, an uneducated superstitious girl, is, in fact, almost 'colonised' by the blond Italian officer. In Italy she has to go through a process of taming and education, learning the language, the etiquette, the conventions, which she will never adjust to and will finally rebel against. Likewise, the Iguana is the symbol of a colonised nature, first appreciated and then abandoned, abused and mistreated. Estrellita's rebellion is much more subdued than Aracoeli's: it

⁶²³ In her essay, *Nature vs Culture: Repression, Rebellion and Madness in Elsa Morante's Aracoeli*, Adalgisa Giorgio reports the opposing views of several critics who commented on Morante's treatment of motherhood. Marise Jeuland-Meynaud maintains that Morante's female characters are reduced to instinct, irrationality and to the sole function of procreation, endorsing the nature/culture opposition of patriarchal ideology. According to this binary opposition, nature (women) is negative, inferior and powerless while culture (men) is associated with superiority and dominance. An opposing view is that of Robin Pickering-Iazzi who sees Ida in *La Storia* as a product of social conditioning and not the embodiment of a female essence. According to Giorgio, the discrepancy between the interpretations shows the complexity and elusiveness of Morante's treatment of gender issues. See Adalgisa Giorgio, 'Nature vs. Culture: Repression, Rebellion and Madness in Elsa Morante's Aracoeli', *MLN*, 109 (1994), 93-116.

consists in playing nasty tricks or disobeying her masters' orders in household duties and in her silence.

I shall close this section on Ortese's view of nature as I opened it, with a quotation, here from the very last pages of *Alonso e i visionari*:

Caro, eccelso Spirito, autore di Cuccioli e altre visioni, e di anime angeliche come quella del viaggiatore dell'Arizona, Tu – per tutti i sogni e i tradimenti sofferti dal nostro Jimmy, e anche dalla povera Bey, e infine da questo bimbo straniero, fratello di Decio che sembrava pregare continuamente che lo sopportassimo e perdonassimo –, caro Spirito, a tua volta Cucciolo del Cielo, abbi comprensione e perdono per le nostre rozzezze [...] riunisci, educa, illumina l'unicità del mondo, fa stringere tra di loro i popoli avversi, consola i vecchi randagi, salva la gioventù debole e sola, ammonisci i forti di non voler disporre di anima alcuna, e soprattutto di dare acqua e riposo ai cuccioli disperati. (*Alonso e i visionari*, p. 245)

This passage, with echoes of the Lord's Prayer, perfectly summarises Ortese's concept of the natural. First of all, there is her view of nature as *popoli altri* including animals, children, extraordinary/visionary creatures ('Cuccioli e altre visioni', 'bambino straniero'). Nature is also holy ('anime angeliche') and almost a spirit to be invoked, 'Cucciolo del Cielo'. Secondly, the unity of being: 'riunisci', 'illumina l'unicità del mondo'. Finally, the nostalgic thought of a society which respects, helps and rescues the weaker, a society without arrogance and domination which 'educa', 'fa stringere tra di loro i popoli avversi', 'consola i vecchi', 'salva la gioventù', which warns 'i forti' and gives 'acqua e riposo ai cuccioli disperati'.

4.3 *Tutto cozza come pianeti in fuga pazza per l'universo:*⁶²⁴ **nature in Masino**

In Paola Masino's narratives, the role played by the natural world is different and almost opposed to what is found in Ortese as it generally implies a negative connotation. Masino's nature is not weak, victimised, and fragile as seen above in Ortese, but a fierce, irrational, disruptive force able to affect and condition people's lives. As suggested by the heading of this section, there is an irrationality and destructiveness in natural forces, connected to the ancestral, the primitive, to fate, its power and inevitability, in the face of which man is totally defenceless.

4.3.1 *Io sono nata l'anno del terremoto di Messina:*⁶²⁵ **'Terremoto'**

The most emblematic example of Masino's image of nature and of man's helplessness before it, can be found in the short story 'Terremoto'. Masino's predilection of the image and uncontrollable power of the earthquake has an autobiographical origin:

Io sono nata l'anno del terremoto di Messina – 1908. Il terremoto è avvenuto in gennaio, io sono nata in maggio. La differenza di quei pochi mesi mi dà, nella violenza delle passioni contrastanti, qualche equilibrio, per quanto faticoso; equilibrio che si scorge soltanto dopo molto che l'ho vissuto, voltandosi a fare i calcoli. Sono grata al mio demone di avermi espressa in quell'anno di convulsione naturale; convulsione di elementi e non di uomini. Nascere durante una guerra mi sarebbe spiaciuto. Sono lieta del mio pensiero, di continuo mescolato alle ragioni del pianeta. (*Io, Massimo e gli altri*, p. 15)

In the short story, nature is depicted as violent, indiscriminately destructive, an earthquake that leaves behind shock, turmoil and death. It is night, men are asleep, but animals are wide awake; disturbed and agitated, they can sense that something is

⁶²⁴ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 43: 'Tutto cozza, come pianeti in fuga pazza per gli universi, si moltiplica o si annienta ma non si unisce e amalgama a creare un ordine o un'armonia'.

⁶²⁵ Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, p. 15.

about to happen. They are the only ones to perceive the approaching earthquake, while men carry on sleeping, undisturbed.⁶²⁶ In this scene, with man sleeping totally unaware of what lies in store, Masino suggests how false men's confident superiority actually is, being so detached from the natural world that they can neither foresee the tragedy nor attach any importance to animal warning signals. Woken by the noise, men still fail to accept what is happening around them and start accusing one another.⁶²⁷ The concept and message of this short story is of Leopardian memory and deliberately echoes, I believe, the message at the heart of Leopardi's *La ginestra o il fiore del deserto*.⁶²⁸ Like the solitary flower growing on the Vesuvio, men should be aware of their impotence in the face of overwhelming natural forces, they should lose the arrogance that has them believe they dominate the universe by right and should gain awareness of their frailty before such a natural disaster as the eruption of a volcano or the striking of an earthquake.⁶²⁹ By depicting men arguing and accusing

⁶²⁶ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 7: 'La notte era stata rara: pallida e provvisoria, piuttosto un crepuscolo. Anche le stelle mancavano e nebbia gialla stava a mezz'aria come una gran nube. Gli uomini avevano dormito di un sonno denso, gli animali vegliato irrequieti. All'alba la notte si cancellò tutta dal cielo e rimasero le nebbie gialle, basse sul paese. Gli uomini dormivano sempre, ma a un tratto, per le vie deserte dai monti nella campagna si videro lunghe file di animali aprirsi a raggi indietreggiando e fissavano un punto centrale che a ogni passo li seguiva e sempre era il terreno sotto i loro piedi'.

⁶²⁷ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 12: 'Svegli, subito avevano pensato agli avvenimenti quotidiani e uno contro l'altro, il marito alla moglie, i fratelli ai fratelli, i genitori ai figli, i padroni ai servi, gridavano di star fermi, non fare rumore'.

⁶²⁸ Leopardi, *Canti*, pp. 243-256.

⁶²⁹ Masino's criticism of an arrogant mankind who believes itself superior to the forces of nature, is a theme treated also by one of the writer's closest friends, Luigi Pirandello. In *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* (1925), the Sicilian author questions men's urge to domesticate nature and force it to adapt to the purposes and rules of human society. Nature is emblematically represented by a tiger donated by Rome Zoo to a film production company as, surprisingly enough, Pirandello says with a humorous tone, it did not behave appropriately. In fact, it kept trying to jump across a ditch at the zoo visitors. The film company needed to use the tiger in a scene which was to end with the actual shooting of the animal and no human deaths. Pirandello, through the voice of Serafino, condemns the arrogance of men who remove the animal from its habitat, expect it to behave in a certain way and finally sentence it to a vacuous death. The killing of the beast appears even more ridiculous and futile as it is part of cinematic fiction, see Luigi Pirandello, *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), pp. 51-52: 'Tu qua non puoi stare altrimenti. O così imprigionata, o bisogna che tu sia uccisa; perché la tua ferocia – lo intendiamo – è innocente: la natura l'ha messa in te, e tu, adoprandola, ubbidisci a lei e non puoi aver rimorsi. Noi non possiamo tollerare che tu, dopo un pasto sanguinoso, possa dormir tranquillamente. La tua stessa innocenza fa innocenti noi della tua uccisione, quand'è per nostra difesa. Possiamo ucciderti, e poi, come te, dormir tranquillamente. Ma là, nelle

one another, Masino seems to suggest there is a need for solidarity among human beings in accepting their limits when confronted by phenomena greater than they, in the same way as Leopardi does in his poem. To return to the earthquake, we can see how tardily the extent of the tragedy becomes clear to the protagonists. Incapable of doing anything to rationalise or contain the power of nature, they let themselves slip into madness, the only response they can offer to the earth's chaotic power:

A poco a poco, mentre l'aria si andava improvvisamente rialzando e il rumore si frangeva in uno sferragliare di treni monotoni, gli uomini impazzirono e si misero a gridare. Le madri lasciarono cadere i bambini per portarsi le mani alle orecchie e non sentire quel fracasso di denti metallici, i bambini si misero a dondolarsi ebeti in cadenza con la terra, gli uomini a cercare pose dove irrigidirsi. La pazzia è a un tratto il significato vero di un terremoto: prima del terrore e della morte, prima dell'inesorabilità e dell'ignoto che sono i ricordi certi di una simile catastrofe, c'è un attimo in cui l'uomo ha capito che morirà, ma non sa come, non sa quando; e allora ogni spigolo gli diventa un agguato, ogni trave un patibolo, ogni squarcio una sepoltura, vuole a ogni costo dare un ordine al suo terrore, i connotati alla morte. In quel momento lui sa di essere pazzo e ne gode quasi ciò lo rimettesse in equilibrio con la terra. La pazzia diventa l'unica difesa possibile all'uomo, lui che oramai sta con il capo piegato dentro il

terre selvagge, ove tu non ammetti che altri passi; non qua, non qua, ove tu non sei venuta da te, per tuo piacere. La bella innocenza ingenua della tua ferocia rende qua nauseosa l'iniquità della nostra. Vogliamo difenderci da te, dopo averti portata qua, per nostro piacere, e ti teniamo in prigione: questa non è più la tua ferocia; quest'è ferocia perfida! Ma sappiamo, non dubitare, sappiamo anche andare più in là, far di meglio: t'uccideremo per giuoco, stupidamente. Un cacciatore finto, in una caccia finta, tra alberi finti... Saremo degni in tutto, veramente, dello scenario inventato. Tigri, più tigri d'una tigre. E dire che il sentimento che questo *film* in preparazione vorrà destare negli spettatori, è il disprezzo della ferocia umana. Noi la metteremo in opra, questa ferocia per giuoco, e contiamo anche di guadagnarci, se ci riesce bene, una bella somma'. The link between Masino and Pirandello, although confined to this brief analogy in the treatment of man's cruel attitude of superiority towards nature, is particularly important. As I mentioned in the introduction, Pirandello was a very close friend of Masino's and, given the age gap, almost a source of inspiration, a mentor figure for the writer, alongside her father and her partner.

ventre per non farsi sordo e cieco nella polverosa rovina della terra.

(*Racconto grosso*, pp. 14-15)

The semantic area of madness is present throughout the above extract: ‘gli uomini impazzirono’, ‘La pazzia è a un tratto il significato vero di un terremoto’, ‘lui sa di essere pazzo’, ‘La pazzia diventa l’unica difesa possibile all’uomo’. A further suggestion is that madness is what re-establishes the balance between man and earth, which is also seen as irrational and unpredictable. I find it interesting to note also how the noise of a natural catastrophe is described in mechanical terms ‘sferragliare di treni’, ‘denti metallici’ as if recalling the unpleasant noises associated with industrialisation, to conjure up an association between modern society and unbearably loud noise driving people mad.

As in *Periferia*, also in ‘Terremoto’ Masino makes children behave as if they were older than their years, in a way which makes them seem more rational than adults. The dialogue between two young brothers presents the same sharp, graphic dimension as the conversations among the children of *Periferia*, who, despite their young age, tackle issues in life in a mature and disenchanted way, ‘Stavano seri e consapevoli, forse i soli esseri che ancora pensassero di dover morire’:⁶³⁰

– Si distraggono, per non pensare al terremoto –. Intanto mostrava con la mano una cupola che, intera, crollava. Si era lenta abbassata in mezzo ai tetti che parevano sorreggerla e una nuvola bianca stava al suo posto. – La chiesa – continuò il ragazzo; – là erano babbo e mamma, certo sono morti; ora siamo orfani –. Rimasero in silenzio a vedere la nuvola che si faceva sempre più bassa e densa, scompariva; finché, grave, il piccolo ripeté:

– Proprio orfani –. (*Racconto grosso*, pp. 16-17)

⁶³⁰ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 15.

Unlike adults who react to the tragedy of the earthquake irrationally, allowing madness to dominate, the two children look down on adults ‘Si distraggono, per non pensare al terremoto’, and analyse the situation rationally, ‘là erano babbo e mamma, certo sono morti; ora siamo orfani’, ‘Proprio orfani’, with a coldness and a pragmatism beyond their years.

In her text *Il mito e l'allegoria nella narrativa di Paola Masino*,⁶³¹ Louise Rozier perceives Masino’s presentation of the earthquake as based on the antinomy mankind-animals⁶³² defining what I have described as mankind’s false sense of superiority as lack of animal instinct.⁶³³ Rozier also adds that men have to be reconnected with their animal instinct in order to save themselves from natural disaster.⁶³⁴ Undoubtedly, men are lacking the intuition which, instead, animals show they possess. However, there are two characters who succeed in rediscovering their animal impulses while the rest remain human and refuse to detach themselves from conventions and the ordinary gritty aspects of daily life. Rozier is wrong to generalise men’s reacquisition of their animal instincts during the earthquake for the examples concern only two human figures. These characters are, in fact, not just human, they are parents and, unlike the other adults, do not give in to madness as they have a reason to keep calm to be reunited with their children. Their maternal and paternal instincts prevail over irrationality and this is what makes Masino associate them with animals. The truly maternal love seems to be an animal

⁶³¹ Rozier, pp. 82-83.

⁶³² See Rozier, p. 82: ‘Nel racconto, la descrizione si basa sull’antinomia uomini-animali e cultura-natura e si avvale di forti richiami biblici e di immagini apocalittiche per mettere in rilievo l’improvviso e fantasmagorico disgregarsi della natura’.

⁶³³ See Rozier, p. 83: ‘Contrapponendo i comportamenti degli uomini a quelli degli animali, la Masino mette l’accento sugli effetti negativi della civilizzazione. [...] Mentre gli uomini dormono, gli animali, spinti dall’istinto, si organizzano e si aiutano a vicenda’.

⁶³⁴ See Rozier, p. 84: ‘Per sopravvivere, gli uomini devono cambiare natura e diventano animali, “con i volti ridotti musi scansavano le pietre e i cadaveri”, sono costretti “a fiutare i passi prima di compierli”, acquistano forma vegetale o minerale, e le loro dita si trasformano in radici: “su tutto quel che posavano sembrava si nutrissero e prendessero natura di ferro, di pietra, di legno o di carne”’.

peculiarity rather than a human one. As Ortese did for children and animals, Masino stresses the resemblance between parents and animals (and not between mankind and animals as Rozier states) using for the description of the two characters metaphors and words related to the animal world: ‘usciti a carponi dalla chiesa, come scarafaggi cauti, tentando le macerie’,⁶³⁵ ‘con i volti ridotti musì scansavano le pietre e i cadaveri’,⁶³⁶ ‘li riduceva a fiutare i passi prima di compierli’,⁶³⁷ ‘Usavano le dita come radici e su tutto quel che posavano sembrava si nutrissero e prendessero natura di ferro, di pietra, di legno o di carne’,⁶³⁸ ‘con i gomiti fatti zampe e la bocca muso di talpa per trovare un corridoio fino alla tana dove sono i figli’,⁶³⁹ ‘il suo maschio, ancora accucciato a terra’.⁶⁴⁰ Furthermore, Rozier states that children do feel the threat posed by nature with the earthquake as their innocence allows them to be closer to the animal than to the adult world. ‘Anche i bambini, nella loro innocenza, sentono la minaccia della natura’, Rozier says.⁶⁴¹ Defining Masino’s children as being ‘innocent’, however, may be misleading for it takes us into a discussion on the definition of innocence in relation to childhood. I would rather describe the children as wiser or paradoxically more mature than their adult counterparts, like the children in *Periferia*.

As mentioned earlier, nature for Paola Masino is connected to the primitive and the ancestral and thus to the concept of birth, ‘nell’accanito strapparsi della terra pareva che il mondo volesse divellersi dall’atmosfera quale un figlio maturo dal grembo materno’.⁶⁴² In Masino’s writing, birth is always seen as a painful and negative

⁶³⁵ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 17.

⁶³⁶ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 18.

⁶³⁷ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 18.

⁶³⁸ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 18.

⁶³⁹ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 19.

⁶⁴⁰ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 20.

⁶⁴¹ Rozier, p. 83.

⁶⁴² Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 11.

experience, as suffering and disintegration, as I will explore in the next chapter. The destruction caused by the earthquake is also, for Masino, an opportunity to deal with the theme of death. She believes men avoid thinking about death and only when they realise they are going to die do they grasp the true meaning of life.⁶⁴³ The hope of new life after the tragedy is entrusted to an animal rather than to a human being when ‘si udì il canto di una gallina che aveva fatto l’uovo, il primo uovo dopo il terremoto, un uovo di un colore verdino, spaventato’.⁶⁴⁴ However, this does not really suggest appreciation of animal nature over the human, as in the case of Morante and Ortese, but rather a touch of, albeit cynical, humour.

4.3.2 *Fuoco vuoto dentro ossa nere:*⁶⁴⁵ *Monte Ignoso*

Masino’s perception of nature as fate, and more specifically tragic fate, is particularly evident in *Monte Ignoso*, where the destiny that dooms the protagonists to inevitable failure seems to be linked to the nature of the place itself. In *Monte Ignoso*, as in *Terremoto*, Masino appears to reiterate the link between nature, death and madness. The cruelty of nature emerges immediately through the descriptions of Monte Ignoso and its garden: the natural world never appears in its calm beauty or as a relaxing, idyllic setting. On the contrary, it always bears an element of negativity. The first example can be found in the initial description of the garden which is shown in its duplicity, calm, serene and picturesque during the day but also mysteriously

⁶⁴³ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 24-25: ‘L’eternità del tempo si era fatta sensibile e quel minuto di terremoto s’era messo nel cervello degli uomini come una palla di piombo a sconvolgere il pensiero per sempre. Se il trapasso dalla veglia al sonno, dalla vita alla morte fosse sensibile, quell’attimo avrebbe l’inesorabile continuità di un attimo di terremoto. Non la paura della morte fa apparire così infinito quel tempo. Alla morte non si pensa o si pensa come a una soluzione miracolosa di stabilità. Si pensa alla pazzia di una vita continua e così convulsa, alla terribilità delle passioni scoperte, alla verità. [...] Un minuto in cui gli uomini avevano imparato che cosa vuol dire essere ucciso, dunque avevano imparato il vero significato della vita. Ma molti non erano più a tempo a usarne, e gli altri subito lo avevano buttato via’.

⁶⁴⁴ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 25.

⁶⁴⁵ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 96.

dangerous at night, with ambiguous shadows and a labyrinth of perils.⁶⁴⁶ This ambivalent representation of nature at Monte Ignoso, allows Masino to warn her reader about the impending tragedy and the doom permeating the place and its inhabitants. The dark side of nature at night is, however, also associated with the prohibited, with sexuality and Emma's adulterous relationship: 'Nelle tenebre gli alberi sono falli ottusi, vulve gli abissi. La terra è questo Sesso ibrido che in una sacra idiozia attende un segno divino che lo faccia vivere'.⁶⁴⁷

Nature in *Monte Ignoso* is represented not only by the garden with its dark corners, but also by the animals, in particular the horses in Emma's stables. The horses are the only witnesses to Emma's encounters with her lover, their presence initially silent but not entirely reassuring: although asleep they seem agitated and contribute to creating a funeral atmosphere, as at a wake, with the carts looking like hearses.⁶⁴⁸ Only when Marco hangs himself, thinking he has killed Emma by kicking her in her stomach, do the horses wake up and act as if driven by madness or by an external force. The scene acquires apocalyptic dimensions in which violence (Emma's body lying on the floor), death (Marco's suicide), birth (one of the mares is heavily pregnant) and madness (the animals' reaction) all become one:⁶⁴⁹ these are

⁶⁴⁶ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, pp. 11-12: 'Dolci prati orlano il viale centrale, e barriere di alloro li chiudono. Sul muro di cinta si alzano le agavi; intorno alla scuderia fioriscono i gelsi e gli oleandri. Nel buio il giardino si era spezzato, non era più un'armonia di colori e disegni, ma un sovrapporsi pauroso di masse d'ombra e ondate di profumi. Era uno scaturire misterioso di gradini marmorei e di zampilli d'acqua; uno svolgersi d'insidie in un labirinto dalle pareti vive'.

⁶⁴⁷ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 43.

⁶⁴⁸ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 45: 'Sognavano, e ogni tanto nitrivano e si agitavano. Così nella scuderia si creava un'atmosfera di veglia funebre. I mucchi di fieno erano umidi con un odore forte come se traspirassero un sudore malato, la carrozza e i carri nell'angolo estremo della stalla sembravano furgoni mortuari'.

⁶⁴⁹ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, pp. 51-52: 'I piedi dell'impiccato sfioravano la testa della cavalla. La cavalla si svegliò sbuffando irrequieta. Si agitò, scalpitava, retrocesse; s'impennò sulle gambe posteriori, descrisse un semicerchio e si voltò per uscire dalla stalla dove sentiva una presenza misteriosa. Ma là davanti era il corpo steso di Emma. La bestia si fermò soffiando, invasa dal pazzo terrore. Anche gli altri cavalli si erano svegliati. Il furore che assalì gli animali non nasceva da nessun istinto: un vento di follia come solo può scoppiare in un manicomio, quando non c'è più causa, c'è la paura primordiale, unica, disumana. I cavalli montavano uno sull'altro, si mordevano, nitrivano alto

the same themes running through ‘Terremoto’. After such a picture of chaos, the horses get out of the stables and calm down to the point where they are totally unaware that the whole village has gathered to see the body: ‘I cavalli pascolavano tranquillamente lungo i viali del giardino in faccia alla folla curiosa’.⁶⁵⁰ The madness of the horses and their sudden calm in a moment of human pain and suffering shows how cruel and unpredictable Masino’s nature is, totally indifferent to human suffering. Horses appear also in *Nascita e morte della massaia*, where a young girl, a friend of the Massaia’s (and mirror image of the young Massaia herself), suffers from nightmarish visions of horses.⁶⁵¹ However, the disparity between the horses in her dreams and real ones makes it impossible for her to know what horses really are:

ammisi di aver scherzato, di saper benissimo che erano cavalli. Ma non era vero. Neanche ora so chi siano gli animali chiamati da voi, con nome altrui, cavalli. Forse per questo equivoco gli uomini credono che i cavalli siano pazzi. (*Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 186)

come se urlassero, e indietreggiavano e sbattevano contro i tramezzi e le pareti senza più sentire dolore. Videro il cadavere di Marco. Allora la scuderia sembrò crollare, squassata dalle radici. I cavalli ora sono membra senza nesso che si dibattono nel caos per ritrovare la propria unità, la propria vita, per rientrare in un ordine semplice e tranquillo. Anche Marco con il volto rovesciato, con le braccia, le gambe contratte, urtato e sbattuto dai cavalli di qua, di là, è membra disgiunte che cercano quiete. Solo Emma pare riposare tranquilla nella propria immobilità. Ma a poco a poco anche lei entrava in quel disordine: percepiva nel cervello un rombo strano, come un torrente che corre impetuoso. Il torrente travolge ogni cosa. Case crollano con schianti di tutti gli assiti, alberi cadono con tonfi sordi, sassi, rocce, montagne e uomini e animali. Tanti cavalli che nitriscono. Hanno le criniere bagnate sugli occhi e urlano ciechi e maciullano tutto sotto le zampe. Ululano come una donna in parto. Forse la cavalla abortisce. Si sente da quassù. Bisogna correre’.

⁶⁵⁰ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 58.

⁶⁵¹ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 185: “‘Ho paura dei cavalli’ disse la ragazza. “Da piccola pensavo tanto ai cavalli che me ne ero ammalata e li sognavo, tutti neri, che correvano nell’alba contro il cielo verde; alzavano i musi, aprivano le bocche color di fuoco e mi chiamavano. Ogni notte li vedevo più grandi e ogni notte perdevano una parte del loro corpo. Dapprima mi apparvero come in distanza, interi, con le zampe esili e gli zoccoli d’argento. La seconda volta si avvicinarono tanto che vedevo i loro ventri pulsare tra le cosce, ma l’orlo dei miei occhi li tagliava al garretto. La notte dopo mi stavano così addosso che li vedevo soltanto dalle ginocchia in su e le loro pupille fisse brillavano. Nel quarto, nel quinto, nel sesto sogno, sempre più perdevano di fianchi dorso spalla o collo e il muso e la criniera diventavano immani. L’ultima volta che vennero non avevano che il sopracciglio e le froge puntate allo Zenit che tutto risonava del mio nome urlato da loro. Poi li attesi per mesi ma non tornarono più’.

The nightmarish image of horses is to be found in paintings by John Henry Fuseli who portrayed sleeping women tormented by the image of the horse Mara, a figure in Norse mythology.⁶⁵² I believe Masino, a writer of vast and sound knowledge of both literature and art, was familiar with Fuseli's works. Her description of the girl's nightmare seems to have common features with *The Nightmare*.⁶⁵³ In the girl's dream, the setting is a greenish sky at sunrise 'il cielo verde', a colour found also in the dark green background of the painting. The most striking similarity between Masino's words and the image is the description of the big bulging shining eyes of the mare: 'le loro pupille fisse brillavano', also reminiscent of Fuseli's horse. The Massaia too, confesses to having had dreams about a highly intelligent horse. It is a colt, who, determined to defend his freedom, has eaten vitriol and become poisonous so that it can kill anyone with a bite.⁶⁵⁴ The girl's uncertainty about the identity of horses and the Massaia's dream leads me to believe that this is a reference to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726),⁶⁵⁵ and in particular to Part IV *A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms*, a novel Masino was very likely to be familiar with, given her sound knowledge of English literature. Set ashore by a mutinous crew, Gulliver finds himself in the country of the Houyhnhnms; they are highly intelligent, rational horses who cultivate reason and are governed solely by it, having

⁶⁵² The Middle English word 'nightmare' means an evil spirit thought to oppress people during sleep ('mare' meaning spirit). In Old English 'mearh', meant horse so it is very likely that the spirit referred to in the Middle English usage of 'nightmare' bore the shape of a horse. See *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, (Cologne: Könemann, 1993).

⁶⁵³ John Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, 1790/91, oil on canvas, Frankfurt: Goethe Museum, <<http://www.goethehaus-frankfurt.de/goethe-museum/room-3>> [accessed 3/07/2011].

⁶⁵⁴ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 186: "Il puledro che veniva a trovarmi nel baule" raccontò a sua volta la Massaia "non era certo pazzo, era astutissimo. Per poter difendere la propria libertà si era fatto velenoso nutrendosi di vetriolo e ormai con un morso uccideva. Era d'un bel colore rosso arancione a macchie bianche, come i funghi, per il veleno trangugiato".

⁶⁵⁵ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (London: Dent, 1966).

no knowledge of, or disposition towards, wickedness and malice.⁶⁵⁶ Here, Gulliver also encounters the Yahoos, repulsive creatures living and acting as dirty animals who Gulliver will soon realise, with shame and disgust, are humans just like him.⁶⁵⁷ Going back to the quotation above, the girl's failure to recognise horses and the 'equivoco' whereby men think that horses are mad, would appear to refer to Gulliver's initial perplexity in recognising the horses as the lords of the country and not as humble beasts.⁶⁵⁸ The colt that haunts the Massaia in her dreams, is, like the Houyhnhnms, very intelligent and not at all mad. However, unlike the Houyhnhnms, he uses the reason he is endowed with in a harmful way: he is poisonous. We could argue, however, that Masino's poisonous horse is wicked for a good cause: to defend his freedom. We can thus easily assume that the creature she depicts is a modern reinterpretation of Swift's civilised horses. Mankind with its invasive society and conventions seems to have transformed this otherwise peaceful and naturally good creature and to have forced it to become wicked for the sake of self-defence and self-preservation. While the horse has developed a strategy to protect itself from society and its rules, the Massaia has surrendered to them.

⁶⁵⁶ See Swift, p. 250: 'The word "Houyhnhnm," in their tongue, signifies a horse; and its etymology, "the perfection of nature.'" See also Swift, p. 285: 'As these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by nature with a general disposition to all virtues, and have no conceptions or ideas of what is evil in a rational creature; so their grand maxim is, to cultivate *reason*, and to be wholly governed by it. Neither is *reason* among them a point problematical as with us, where men can argue with plausibility on both sides of the question; but strikes you with immediate conviction; as it must needs do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discoloured by passion and interest'.

⁶⁵⁷ Living with the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver develops a high degree of admiration for the civilised horses and great repugnance for the rude and evil Yahoos. He feels so strongly about the Yahoos that, once back in England, Gulliver cannot stand the smell of, or any proximity to, his family and friends, whom he sees as Yahoos, while he indulges in the company of two horses.

⁶⁵⁸ See Swift, p. 243: 'I began to think that this house must belong to some person of great note among them; because there appeared so much ceremony before I could gain admittance. But, that a man of quality should be served all by horses, was beyond my comprehension. I feared my brain was disturbed by my sufferings and misfortunes: I roused my self, and looked about me in the room where I was left alone; this was furnished as the first, only after a more elegant manner. I rubbed mine eyes often, but the same objects still occurred. I pinched my arms and sides, to awake my self, hoping I might be in a dream. I then absolutely concluded, that all these appearances could be nothing else but necromancy and magick.'

Going back to the representation of nature in *Monte Ignoso*, the ambiguity of the garden is also perceived by Barbara, despite her young age. Before going to boarding school, Barbara asks Giovanni to write down for her everything they see in the garden. From a six-year-old child, one would expect an idyllic picture, with flowers, animals and a feeling of calm and harmony, but young Barbara wishes to note down the crude fierceness of Monte Ignoso.⁶⁵⁹ The link between nature and fate is particularly evident in the case of its inhabitants. Despite being in a far-away school, Barbara repeatedly admits feeling the constant presence of Monte Ignoso. It is not a merely physical place: for its people it also harbours the idea of impending doom. Its tragic nature is also stressed by the extreme weather conditions: at Monte Ignoso spring does not exist and all the other seasons are harsh.⁶⁶⁰ Only when Giovanni has found out the truth about Emma and her affair does spring arrive: the village seems to wake up from the spell and celebrations last all day and night. It seems the discovery of truth gives nature the chance to find a balance.⁶⁶¹

Another example of Masino's depiction of nature as a cruel and violent force can be found in 'Fame'. Here, the harsh winter landscape and cold weather seem to add greater hardship to the hunger that the characters are suffering from, showing

⁶⁵⁹ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 96: 'Ramo rosso cielo grigio dalla parte dove la fontana non scrive. Non c'è più terra. Tre aranci e una lucertola secchi su un tronco. Fuoco vuoto dentro ossa nere. Cavalli rossi criniere e pance gonfie. Pezzo di corda al muro della cavalla. Violacciocca d'oro sul tetto grondaia con muschio'. From Barbara's description of her home, I have quoted 'Fuoco vuoto dentro ossa nere' which synthesises the nature of the place and its colours: the red of blood and the black of death.

⁶⁶⁰ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, pp. 113-114: 'Monte Ignoso non conosce che l'autunno sanguinoso e l'inverno feroce. Non esiste la primavera, a Monte Ignoso, e l'estate è come un bollente inverno, è come l'inverno feroce e distruggitrice'.

⁶⁶¹ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, pp. 163-164: 'L'aria tutta, sopra il paese palpitava scorrendo come il sangue in un cuore. Per quell'aria volavano fiori imbottiti di sole che passavano sul capo degli uomini cantando e si disponevano lungo la curva del cielo in festoni. L'orizzonte lontano ne era fatto tepido e come imbevuto in un colore di rosa. I monti aridi s'erano alzati in piedi a contemplare il miracolo. Senza accorgersene sorridevano e le rocce che si erano ammucchiate sui loro volti durante la lunga immobilità, rotolavano nel torrente con scoppi giocondi. Al loro posto germogliavano cespugli odorosi e piante secolari'.

once again the completely detached and unsympathetic response of the natural world to human life:

Nessuno dei tre aveva un cappotto per coprirsi e fuori il bosco era tutto gelato. I raggi della luna tra gli scheletri degli alberi erano spade nude, cadevano a trafiggere la terra scivolando sul cielo vetrino, e questo martirio aveva uno stridore lieve. [...] All'aria ghiacciata i geloni dei bambini si aprirono e sanguinarono. [...] Camminano camminano, sempre sul suolo di cristallo, tra alberi pungenti.

(*Colloquio di notte*, p. 44)

The harshness of nature is conveyed by the graphic description and words associated with death and torture: 'I raggi della luna erano spade nude', 'tra gli scheletri degli alberi', 'trafiggere la terra', 'questo martirio', 'tra alberi pungenti'. In 'Fame', the cruel force of nature is ironically portrayed as a form of justice, far better than that of humans. In a school composition Mario, one of the two child protagonists, writes a brief description of the lion adding that he wishes it would eat his mother when she smacks him.⁶⁶² Once again, Masino shows her propensity for enriching her writings with a touch of macabre humour.

4.3.3 The symbolic dimension of nature in Masino

So far in this section I have explored Masino's depiction of nature as an ancestral, primitive force, linked to death, fate and madness. However, as her natural world has many facets, for Masino it provides a wealth of imagery and association. One other such use that the author makes of natural images is that of animals as symbols and the meaning attached to the elements (fire, earth, water and air). In Masino's fiction animals are carefully chosen symbols belonging to Christian iconography or to the

⁶⁶² See Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 42: 'Tema: Il leone. Svolgimento: – Il leone è il re degli animali, è bello, fulvo, con la criniera di riccioli. È carnivoro, vive nel deserto. I bambini lo possono vedere nei libri o al Giardino Zoologico. Io non l'ho mai visto ma vorrei tanto che si mangiasse mamma mia quando mi picchia'.

collective imaginary. An example of a Christian symbol from the animal world, is the lamb in 'Lino', an innocent creature eventually sacrificed for the family's survival (it is not clear whether it is killed or exchanged for meat). The lamb, a symbol of purity and sacrifice, provides the necessary food to get by in difficult times of war.

In 'Una parola che vola',⁶⁶³ Masino chooses carrier pigeons as messengers of peace. Pigeons would seem to be an original choice, compared to the more traditional image of the dove. Masino's preference, however, can be justified by the fact that their mission is to deliver a message physically, across a war-zone (and the pigeon is traditionally seen as a messenger). Tied to their legs, they carry a small container with the message 'Peace' written on it. Furthermore, as the dove traditionally carries a sprig in its beak, symbolising peace,⁶⁶⁴ Masino's pigeons carry a leaf of bay, basil, parsley, or whatever women could find in their kitchen, since all trees, as well as all men, have died. Faced with the demand of a 'resa incondizionata', the pigeons refuse to return to their sender, conscious that their message of peace has not been understood and welcomed; they opt instead for death⁶⁶⁵ testifying to the incommunicability and brutality brought on by war.

The symbolic use of animals often bears strong ironic connotations particularly in the works where Masino more explicitly attacks the hypocrisy of the society of her

⁶⁶³ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, pp. 95-97.

⁶⁶⁴ The white dove carrying an olive branch also belongs to Judaic and Christian iconography. In the Old Testament (Genesis 8:11), Noah sends a white dove looking for land after the Great Flood. The dove comes back with an olive branch to signify that the Flood has receded. The olive branch was also a symbol of peace in Roman times: when defeated, the Roman army would display tree branches as a gesture of peace.

⁶⁶⁵ See Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 97: 'E i piccioni spiccarono il volo, fecero un breve giro nell'aria con il capo rivolto al loro paese; poi di colpo si precipitarono di nuovo ogni uno su una baionetta. Ma questa volta non vi si posarono, vi si conficcarono, facendosi trapassare il morbido petto, fino al cuore nascosto. Minimi rivoli di sangue bagnarono le lame: allora il comandante alzò le sopracciglia: "Vada una staffetta a portare l'intimidazione di resa. I colombi li mangeremo stasera"'.
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time.⁶⁶⁶ In ‘Visita allo zoo’,⁶⁶⁷ the cruel treatment of a dog is compared by a countess talking to a British army officer to that reserved for human beings during the war:

- Ho sempre bisticciato con Schwarz per il modo con il quale fustigava il suo cane. Un così bel cane lupo, con una pelliccia splendida. Voi inglesi, invece, amate molto le bestie, vero?
- E gli uomini, *madame*, quando se lo meritano. (*Colloquio di notte* p. 167)

Similarly in the short story ‘Rivoluzione’,⁶⁶⁸ the robins stand for the superficiality and carelessness of the upper classes who put their entertainment (rearing robins) before the tragic events and the suffering around them:

- Le damigelle Opi.
- Care, care – questa volta la signora si volse e sollevò a mezzo dalla poltrona. – Come va la nuova covata? Le damigelle allevano pettirossi.
- Così è il mondo – si scrollò di nuovo il conte; – gli uomini allevano e proteggono i bambini degli animali e uccidono i propri. (*Racconto grosso*, p. 194)

Masino does not miss the opportunity to use an ironic tone in the depiction of some of her characters. The name Opi, seems to reproduce the cry of a bird, which in Italian is ‘pio pio pio pio’. If we pronounce ‘opi opi opi’ fast, we will end up saying ‘pio pio pio’.

In Masino’s fiction the elements, in particular fire, earth and water are recurrent topoi with a strong symbolic meaning; their presence is undoubtedly dominant in the novel *Monte Ignoso*, where they reflect or symbolise the psychological state of the protagonists. The image of fire is, for example, almost

⁶⁶⁶ See Chapter 5 for further treatment of this theme.

⁶⁶⁷ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, pp. 165-172.

⁶⁶⁸ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 189-208.

constantly present in *Monte Ignoso*. As suggested by the title itself, Monte Ignoso is not only the name of the geographical setting of the story, but also ‘un monte di fuoco’. It is a dormant volcano home to a village with the same name and to the protagonists’ red house overlooking it. The novel opens with Emma holding a candle and breaking the darkness with the red light of the flame. The fluctuating light and therefore the dichotomy light-darkness, also allows Masino to develop the theme of perdition and of Emma’s obscure secret: her adultery, her birth and her relations with the biblical figures. The idea of fire is not limited to the name of the place and to the representation of the flame, but it is constantly hinted at in the novel through the dominant presence of the colour red (it is the colour of the house as well as Emma’s and Barbara’s hair) and through the iconography of fire ‘sui monti fiammeggia la neve’.⁶⁶⁹ Fire is used by Masino to symbolise the spell of perdition and death cast on the red house dwellers.

In her fiction, Masino gives ample space also to the representation of earth. Airolodi Namer states that earth in particular has a disquieting note as it is the only one of the four elements which cannot be connoted directly in a positive way like fire, air and water. These last are, in fact, not conceived as symbols of visceral instincts, corruption and destruction, but stand for purity and purification.⁶⁷⁰ Earth is mostly associated with destruction, harshness and madness. As seen above, ‘Terremoto’ is an example of earth itself being the source of chaos and collective madness and the icy earth of ‘Fame’ is insensitive to the protagonists’ hardship. In

⁶⁶⁹ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 114.

⁶⁷⁰ See Airolodi Namer, p. 168: ‘La terra è l’unico dei quattro elementi prescientifici che non possa essere valorizzato direttamente in modo positivo, come invece lo sono il fuoco, l’aria, l’acqua, per i quali l’essere simboli di visceralità, corruzione, distruzione, verticalità discendente non è la condizione d’origine, bensì l’effetto del rovesciamento dei loro primigeni valori positivi di purezza, purificazione, verticalità ascendente. La terra, quanto a essa, non è mai immediatamente “pura”: lo diventa solo – al limite – dopo una lenta operazione alchemica’.

Monte Ignoso earth and soil are often described as a dry desert, symbols of human despair, hostility, hopelessness: ‘All’improvviso si era trovata in una terra deserta e nera’,⁶⁷¹ ‘intorno gli stanno deserti il cielo e la terra’,⁶⁷² ‘I prati sono secchi, gli alberi appassiscono’,⁶⁷³ ‘pascoli deserti’,⁶⁷⁴ ‘Non c’è più terra’.⁶⁷⁵ Another image is that of the rocky soil, which seems to symbolise the cruelty of earth towards human beings and their journey through life: ‘La strada divenne più ardua e petrosa’,⁶⁷⁶ ‘La natura rocciosa del luogo’,⁶⁷⁷ ‘le rocce rosse e violette che l’accompagnavano ai due lati del viottolo non l’ammonivano con i loro volti duri di non essere debole’.⁶⁷⁸ In the first part of *Nascita e morte della massaia* (when the Massaia is still a child), earth initially seems to have a positive connotation, but immediately afterwards it is associated with death. Child Massaia, still living in the trunk, used to bring home soil in the hope it contained seeds. But this positive consideration is followed by the possible negative results of the seeds, which could give birth to a tree used to hang assassins or even to an animal destined to be killed for its skin.⁶⁷⁹

Water is also a recurrent element in *Monte Ignoso*. As Rozier points out in the first part of the novel, before Barbara’s death, water is only hinted at and it is that of the garden fountains. However, in the second part, after Barbara’s death, water is

⁶⁷¹ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 73.

⁶⁷² Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 90.

⁶⁷³ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 114.

⁶⁷⁴ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 192.

⁶⁷⁵ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 95.

⁶⁷⁶ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 162.

⁶⁷⁷ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 189.

⁶⁷⁸ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 190.

⁶⁷⁹ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della Massaia*, pp. 19-20: ‘La bambina a poco a poco era venuta in tale stato di asprezza contro l’inutile che in tutto voleva trovare una ragione; sempre tesa a cercare il profitto delle cose che gli altri spregiavano. Portava in casa manciate di terra perché nella terra avrebbero potuto esserci semi. “Cose preziose” diceva alla famiglia esasperata. “Semi che stanno nascosti per difendersi e poter nascere. Forse da questi semi cresce un albero che vi serve a fare un patibolo per gli assassini, forse vi si sta formando un animale che voi squarterete per mettervi nella sua pelle al caldo.” Sul baule si ammucchiavano zolle di terra e le spazzature che la bambina riusciva a rubare negli angoli della casa, pezzi di filo, un po’ di laniccia’.

negatively connoted, being presented in the form of icy rivers and dirty ponds.⁶⁸⁰ The filthy water, the mud, the slimy texture of wet soil reminds the reader of the dirty secrets in the life of her parents which led to her death ‘i monti sudano a torrenti fangosi, gli uomini si chiudono nelle case e impazziscono o muoiono’,⁶⁸¹ ‘una pozzanghera d’acqua stagnante, e vi mise i piedi. Ne uscì infangata’,⁶⁸² ‘Si aiutava con le mani perché il terreno era coperto di muschio e di felci che la facevano scivolare’,⁶⁸³ ‘Si era fermato soltanto perché con un piede era scivolato in una pozzanghera fangosa’.⁶⁸⁴ As Rozier rightly explains, Masino turns the iconography of water as a symbol of purification, purity and birth into a symbol of pain and death. This is also to be found in *Nascita e morte della massaia*, where the meaning of the topos of the immersion in water as purification is reversed and becomes the beginning of death in life and the obligation to stick to the rules of an oppressive society. When young Massaia decides to get out of the trunk, she cleanses herself after years of dirt (and, ironically, from being different and ethically purer than those around her). After the sixth bath, the water, instead of being clean, turns out to be somehow sullied, ambiguous, thus anticipating the Massaia’s future life ‘Quando per la sesta volta ella uscì dall’acqua, l’acqua aveva una limpidezza ambigua, un fulgore sospetto, quali doveva avere l’olio ove bollirono i protomartiri’.⁶⁸⁵ Airolti Namer, points out that Masino never shows pure clean water in its fluidity, rather she presents other, lumpy liquids which seem to evoke the bleeding women experience

⁶⁸⁰ See Rozier, p. 39: ‘Nella seconda parte, l’acqua svolge un ruolo più importante. Non è più l’acqua pura artificialmente circoscritta nelle fontane di marmo del giardino, ma è l’acqua gelata del fiume e quella sporca delle pozzanghere. Anche qui la simbologia metafisica dell’acqua viene capovolta: in *Monte Ignoso* l’acqua non è simbolo di purificazione, di battesimo o di rinascita, ma è fonte di dolore, strumento di morte – basta ricordare le morti di Barbara e di Emma’.

⁶⁸¹ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 114.

⁶⁸² Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 186.

⁶⁸³ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 186.

⁶⁸⁴ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 202.

⁶⁸⁵ Masino, *Nascita e morte della Massaia*, p. 32.

during their monthly cycle.⁶⁸⁶ According to Airoidi Namer, the association of liquidity with menstruation reflects Masino's sympathy for the hypothesis of *emboîtement*:

del ripiegamento verso le intime profondità degli oggetti e degli esseri – della caverna e del ventre, che “gema” il mestruo, a cui si ricollega eccezionalmente un movimento di ipotetica risalita nella temporalità della generazione, ossia del passaggio, di ventre in ventre, fino a raggiungere l’attimo dell’accoppiamento primigenio.⁶⁸⁷

In Ortese these elements are also present, although they do not have, by any means, the same relevance or the same suggestive power as in Masino, where water, earth and fire, in particular, are central to her depiction of nature. In the trilogy the elements are certainly present and distributed across the three novels. *L'Iguana* is the novel with the largest number of images of water and earth, reflecting the amphibious nature of the protagonist. Water is depicted as the explorer's ocean, through which Daddo sails in search of lands to buy, as well as the sea around Ocaña, which isolates the island condemning it to loneliness and decay. Water is, however, also represented by the well, where Daddo will die in the attempt to save Estrellita/Perdita. The well, with its stagnating water, almost acquires the function of a mirror generating the ambiguity which allows Daddo to see Estrellita, not as an iguana but as a young human servant, Perdita. The hostile earth in Ocaña is described from the very beginning as ‘uno squallido corno di roccia affiorante dal mare, e semibruciato. Là, probabilmente, solo radici e serpenti esistevano’.⁶⁸⁸ Everything on the island is gloomy, arid and decayed. *Il cardillo addolorato* is much more of an

⁶⁸⁶ Airoidi Namer, p. 170: ‘La Masino non evoca mai la liquidità dell’acqua trasparente, bensì il fluire lento e denso di materie grumose come il sangue mensile delle donne la cui evocazione corrisponde all’altro schema dominante – assieme a quello della discesa e della caduta – dell’immaginario della scrittrice (soprattutto nel primo e nel terzo romanzo e in qualche novella)’.

⁶⁸⁷ Airoidi Namer, p. 170.

⁶⁸⁸ Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 24.

airy novel where eighteenth-century Naples has a suspended, magical dimension. Air is particularly present in the depiction of young girls often associated with birds. Deceased Floridia is shown ‘come fosse una creatura dell’aria’⁶⁸⁹ ‘la sua religione erano i figli dell’aria, per quanto si recasse anche, ingenuamente, in chiesa. Ma solo gli uccelli adorava’.⁶⁹⁰ Palummella Sasà, who can fly, is often compared to a bird. The singing of the *cardillo*, is recurrently imitated by many ‘Oò! Oò! Oò! oppure in Ahà! Ahà! Ahà!’.⁶⁹¹ The *cardillo* is not, in fact, a physical presence but a voice in the air, reminding humans of what is lost – communion with the extraordinary. Finally, in *Alonso e i visionari* fire seems to be the dominating element, appearing as a symbol both of the arid, red lands of Arizona, home to the puma, and of the animal’s red and yellow coat. Fire burns in the eyes of the dog owned by Stella Winter when it looks at Prof. Op ‘Ma dagli occhi della Carla – fuoco – non si sarebbe detto che amasse giocare col professore di H.’;⁶⁹² often burning in the fireplace, it is suggestive of comfort and warmth but also ambiguity ‘Il fuoco, per la furia dell’aria, sembrava rattivarsi.[...] E palpitavano grandi ombre sul muro, dietro le spalle di Op’,⁶⁹³ ‘Il fuoco era quasi spento’,⁶⁹⁴ ‘ordinò al suo servo (ne ha ora uno personale) l’accensione del camino della sala’.⁶⁹⁵

4.4 Natural landscapes in Masino and Ortese

To complete my overview of Masino’s and Ortese’s depiction of the natural world, I believe it is important to mention the different kinds of landscape portrayed by the

⁶⁸⁹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 62.

⁶⁹⁰ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 82.

⁶⁹¹ Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 160.

⁶⁹² Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 46.

⁶⁹³ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 50.

⁶⁹⁴ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 51.

⁶⁹⁵ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 122.

two authors. In fact, the environment where children and animals live and operate has a great influence on their appearance, well-being and behaviour and affects the themes they help develop. The presence and function of extraordinary children and animals thus goes hand in hand with the spaces and locations they operate in. Close analysis of the texts reveals five dominant landscapes, which I have identified as the interior landscape, the surrealist landscape, the industrial landscape, the fairy-tale landscape and the colonial landscape. The interior landscape is the umbrella term which I have chosen for all the secluded, dark and hidden spaces where the Other, the magic, the extraordinary finds its home and its refuge. The surrealist and fairy-tale landscapes are presented by the two writers as alternative forms of natural landscape that do not cause surprise or shock in the characters who inhabit or visit them. The industrial and colonial landscapes, on the other hand, help convey the authors' critical views of the relationship between modernity and the natural order and develop the theme of victimisation of weaker beings. This variety of scenarios in Masino's and Ortese's works not only allows the authors to better develop their privileged themes through the depiction of the relationship between characters and their environment, but also provides them with the opportunity to enhance their intertextual discourse with literature, art and history. Looking closely at Masino's and Ortese's representation of landscapes and comparing them, several common features can be found but noticeable also is the idiosyncratic flavour of their writing.

4.4.1 The interior landscape: *la dimensione del nascosto*⁶⁹⁶

Masino's and Ortese's texts abound in the presence of secluded houses, shelters, kitchens, boxes, wardrobes, basements, hidden corners and wells, which are the privileged spaces inhabited by extraordinary children and animals. Here I will only

⁶⁹⁶ Bentini, p. 203.

give a few emblematic examples, as providing an exhaustive list of settings is not the focus of this section.

Among the most significant interior landscapes in Masino's works are the dens where Lino and the protagonist's family seek and find shelter:

una valle mammelluta di colline argillose dentro ognuna delle quali era scavata una tana. Lontana sul cielo si vedeva la cupola di una chiesa; erba sotto i nostri piedi. Lino entrò diritto in uno di quei pertugi e si buttò a dormire su un mucchio di foglie. Anche noi facemmo lo stesso. [...] Da ogni collina sbucavano bambini e donne, uscivano dalle tane fili di fumo e un brusio d'alveare: non voci forti, non grida. Tutto il terreno era sonoro sotto i nostri passi e strani suoni lo correvano, come pianti remoti, sospiri, ninnananne, muovere di pentole, correre d'acqua. (*Colloquio di notte*, pp. 79-80)

These natural cavities are a safe haven for women and children, the weakest categories in society, persecuted by the Capoufficio, left to their own devices by war and the absence of men. These spaces are caves hidden in the mountains which are repeatedly compared to animal dens: 'una tana', 'sbucavano', 'uscivano dalle tane', 'un brusio d'alveare'. They offer refuge, protection and at the same time a melancholy yet peaceful dimension conveyed by the words 'non voci forti, non grida', 'pianti remoti, sospiri, ninnananne'. In this respect, women, children and extraordinary creatures, like Lino, are associated not only on an ontological level (weaker, marginalised beings) but also on a physical one (they share the same space).

Another Masinian example of interior space inhabited by the extraordinary is the young Massaia's trunk. For the girl, the trunk represents her natural habitat, her own way of being and of living, the rejection of society with its conventions and the

only chance of being herself.⁶⁹⁷ Once she leaves it, her previous dwelling is mocked and scorned by members of her family and the guests invited to the ball in her honour, who cannot understand her old form of living. During her adult life she will often remember and long for her trunk, the place where she used to feel fulfilled and live uncontaminated by the empty and hypocritical social rules.

Interior landscapes populated by extraordinary beings are also recurrent in Ortese's works. For *monaciello* Nicola, as I explained in Chapter 2, the wardrobe in an abandoned room becomes the place of the first encounter between the young girl and the extraordinary boy:

Un lettino vuoto, una cassa coperta di polvere, un armadio. La mia attenzione fu attratta da questo. Era alto, in legno chiaro, senza serratura. Sulla sua sommità erano disposte sedie vecchie, spalliere di letto, altri imbrogli. Apersi pian piano... Che bellezza! Trovai tutto ciò che ti ho detto si trovava negli armadi dei monacielli: un tavolino con una candela, un pezzo di pane, un mazzo di carte, qualche bicchiere. A terra c'erano dei fiammiferi. Un insieme di miseria, di abbandono, di malinconia, che tuttavia mi piaceva. (*Il Monaciello di Napoli-Il Fantasma*, p. 29)

Lisa Bentini analyses the meaning of the wardrobe, pointing out the symbolic ambiguity of the *armadio* standing, on one hand, for 'incubo della reclusione',⁶⁹⁸ on the other, 'luogo di accesso al sogno'.⁶⁹⁹ In fact, Bentini states 'gli armadi, insieme alle dispense e i ripostigli' are places where 'il meraviglioso si mescola al

⁶⁹⁷ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della Massaia*, p. 13: 'Distesa in un baule che le fungeva da armadio, letto, credenza, tavola e stanza, pieno di brandelli di coperte, di tozzi di pane, di libri e relitti di funerali (quali fiori di latta di una corona, borchie di bare, veli di vedove, nastri bianchi con su scritto in oro "AL CARO ANGIOLETTO", eccetera)'.

⁶⁹⁸ Bentini, p. 213.

⁶⁹⁹ Bentini, p. 213.

terrifico'.⁷⁰⁰ The boy, like other servants and metamorphic servants (Estrellita-the iguana, Anna-the monkey) also dwells in the kitchen where he unwillingly carries out household chores. According to Bentini, the kitchen in Ortese is mostly lived in by half human/half beast creatures as it is the place mostly associated with a low social status and the idea of submission and oppression.⁷⁰¹

Other extremely important interiors for extraordinary creatures are boxes and the basement. The cardboard box is where Stellino dies and where Hieronymus spends the last few days of his life before being killed. The basement has particular relevance in *L'Iguana* and *Alonso e i visionari*. In *L'Iguana* this underground, dark, oppressive space is Estrellita's room, where she is confined and mistreated. The entrance to the basement occurs, unsurprisingly, through a wardrobe symbolising for Ortese, as explained before, the way which leads to the encounter with the extraordinary:

Non aveva mai visto, il conte, neppure visitando certi scantinati di Milano, caverne di questo genere. Vi era una specie di tana scavata dalle volpi, che finiva in un punto assai piccolo, e contro questo punto era schiacciato un letto, se tale può chiamarsi un mucchio di sudici sacchi, con sopra una striscia di tela. Questo era il luogo dove la servetta dormiva, in una tenebra assoluta. [...] Portando ancora in giro l'ala bianca della sua ritrosa lanterna, uscirono dalle tenebre altri oggetti o simboli di oggetti: un giornale, per esempio, disteso a terra, e abbastanza pulito, malgrado la data fosse remotissima (con notizie di una *revolucao* al Messico), fungeva da tavolo, presentando in bell'ordine: un pezzetto di specchio, un piattino sbrecciato ma pulito, contenente alcune nocelle, semi abbrustoliti e...nient'altro. Ma più

⁷⁰⁰ Bentini, p. 212.

⁷⁰¹ Bentini, p. 205.

accanto, in una rientranza circolare del muro, vero e proprio accenno di pozzo, si vedeva una serie di pacchettini. (*L'Iguana*, pp. 55-56)

The dark 'tenebra assoluta', the bare, suffocating environment described as 'una specie di tana scavata dalle volpi', represents well the oppression, slavery and inferiority Estrellita is condemned to. Bentini sees the basement, as well as the well (also mentioned above and recurrently present in the novel), as places where Ortesian characters are buried alive.⁷⁰² In *Alonso e i visionari* the basement is once again extraordinary creatures' privileged dwelling (for example, the water bowl left by Stella Winter for the spirit of Alonso). Bentini's interpretation of underground settings is extremely articulate. In fact, she puts forward the idea that these places are linked to the Neapolitan cult of the dead, hiding places of criminals⁷⁰³ and, in the case of the aqueduct, the reign of the *pozzaro*, a figure who truly existed merging into the legendary one of the *monaciello*.⁷⁰⁴ Again the reference is to a host of silent, invisible and forgotten creatures who claim to be recognised, remembered in order to be given a dignity.

In conclusion, it is the secluded, dark, inhumane nature of these interior landscapes that makes them privileged places for the Other. They mirror the

⁷⁰² See Bentini, p. 208.

⁷⁰³ See Bentini pp. 210-211: 'Questa idea del sottosuolo non è soltanto un motivo ricorrente nell'opera della scrittrice, ma anche un fatto reale. Un enorme "scantinato", costituito da cunicoli e passaggi segreti, sorregge la topografia della città partenopea. Nei sotterranei di Napoli si nasconde una vera e propria "città parallela" scavata senza soluzione di continuità per quasi tremila anni nel tufo giallo, milioni di metri quadrati di vuoto che attraversano quasi tutti i quartieri a diverse profondità. Intorno a questa città del sottosuolo cresce "il familiare e pietoso culto dei morti" di cui l'Ortese parla diffusamente nel *Cardillo*; si tratta del culto delle Anime del Purgatorio. Discarica e covo dei malavitosi – l'Ortese stessa fa riferimento ad un popolo sotterraneo mandante della malavita – la Napoli del sottosuolo è anche un vero e proprio ossario, luogo dove sono stati accatastati e occultati i cadaveri sfigurati dalle epidemie di peste che colpirono la città nella metà del Seicento fino all'Ottocento. Per la gente del luogo le ossa anonime, gettate nelle caverne lontane dal suolo consacrato, sono diventate la "materializzazione" delle anime "abbandonate", le anime purganti'.

⁷⁰⁴ See Bentini p. 213: 'Quasi ogni abitazione a Napoli era dotata di un pozzo, dove si prelevava l'acqua: il compito di penetrare nelle profondità spettava al pozzaro, un omino di bassa statura – in modo da facilitare il movimento nei cunicoli – vestito con un impermeabile e un cappellino nero. Con il tempo a Napoli la figura del pozzaro si sovrappone a quella antica del monaciello: il bambino col cappello nero accede così ai sottosuoli delle città, dette anche "le tristi città del cuore", i "sotterranei dell'Essere".'

condition of marginalisation and victimisation that extraordinary beings, together with the weakest in society, are subject to. In Bentini's words:

Nelle case dei tre romanzi si è scoperta una seconda casa che come uno scrigno custodisce i lamenti, le grida, i singhiozzi degli avanzi del mondo. [...] In tutti questi luoghi angusti e bui sono rinchiusi, murate, segregate le creature d'aria e del sottosuolo. Creature del dolore o, meglio, suoi travestimenti. E la casa con le sue mura, le sue stanze, i suoi corridoi, diviene l'ospite complice di queste trasformazioni.⁷⁰⁵

4.4.2 The surrealist landscape: *inoltrarono in una valle piena di statue*⁷⁰⁶

In both Masino's and Ortese's works there are landscapes which I suggest possess the strong surrealist flavour of de Chirico's pictures, especially of his metaphysical paintings, and, after all, Masino was a close friend of Giorgio de Chirico's and of his brother Savinio. Such settings are to be found in *Nascita e morte della massaia* and, in a shorter scene of *Il cardillo addolorato*. In *Nascita e morte della massaia*, one landscape in particular is noticeable for its typically surrealist features. On a journey where she meets different characters, the Massaia is in a car with the *giovane bruno*, the *bracconiere* and an old lady when, at dawn, they leave the familiar landscape to enter 'panorami arbitrari':⁷⁰⁷

Inoltrarono in una valle piena di statue.⁷⁰⁸ Sembrano ritratti benché alcune siano altissime e non se ne arrivi a indovinare la forma; altre, piú basse, rappresentano sí figure umane, ma con raggi ali aureole intorno al capo e alle spalle, e certe sono animali che piangono o sorridono, poi vi sono blocchi di quarzo a catena come le onde del mare, lastre sottilissime che tentano riprodurre il cielo, e i sassi della

⁷⁰⁵ Bentini, pp. 219-220.

⁷⁰⁶ Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 153.

⁷⁰⁷ Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 153.

⁷⁰⁸ I chose this sentence as the heading to the subsection on the surrealist landscape as I believe it is the one that makes the reader immediately think of a painting by de Chirico.

via hanno apparenza di stelle, soli, lune. (*Nascita e morte della massaia*, pp. 153-154)

The landscape of statues in an outdoor space is, to my mind, a clear reminder of de Chirico's several paintings referred to as *Le piazze d'Italia*, where Greek sculptures populate empty squares. The dark colours of an approaching red dawn in Masino's description⁷⁰⁹ also seem to recall de Chirico's colours of the metaphysical outdoors always accompanied by a strong presence of dark shadows.⁷¹⁰ The analogy with de Chirico has also been commented upon by Cesare Garboli in his introduction to the 1970's edition of *Nascita e morte della massaia*,⁷¹¹ where he emphasises the similarities between the characters in the novel and de Chirico's mannequins. He points out that Masino's characters do not possess a natural appearance, a name or a face, but are more like masks or puppets and suggest the silent and disturbing presence of de Chirico's mannequins.⁷¹²

⁷⁰⁹ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 154: 'I quattro viaggiatori si aggiravano ancora tra la pietrosa popolazione della valle quando l'aurora maturata colò rossa dal volto del cielo a quello delle statue che mandarono un gemito: in quello stesso punto il giovane fermò la macchina, si portò le mani alle orecchie; chinò la fronte sul volante, disse: "Ho sonno," e già russava'.

⁷¹⁰ A few emblematic examples of de Chirico's metaphysical outdoors with statues which the Masinian text seems to recall are:

De Chirico, *Melanconia/Solitudine*, 1912, oil on canvas, London: Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art. See also Paolo Baldacci and Gerd Roos, eds., *De Chirico* (Venice: Marsilio, 2007), pp. 78-79.

De Chirico, *Souvenir d'Italie*, 1912, oil on canvas, Vienna: Rothschild Family Collections. See also Achille Bonito Oliva, ed., *La natura secondo de Chirico* (Milan: Motta, 2010), p. 63.

De Chirico, *Paesaggio romano/Piazza d'Italia*, 1922, tempera on canvas, private collection. See also Baldacci and Roos, eds., pp. 164-165.

De Chirico, *Piazza d'Italia con Arianna*, second half of the 1930s, Rome: Fondazione Carla Fendi. See also Bonito Oliva, ed., pp. 80-81.

⁷¹¹ Cesare Garboli, 'Introduzione', in *Nascita e morte della massaia*, 2nd edn (Milan: Bompiani, 1970), pp. 5-10.

⁷¹² See Garboli, pp. 6-7: 'La Masino sdegna l'aria naturale. I suoi personaggi non possiedono nome né volto, simili a maschere, a fantocci di cera, o ai manichini che c'intrattengono a interrogare la loro muta e inquietante presenza simbolica nei dipinti del primo De Chirico. [...] Ma di regola il surrealismo di questa scrittrice si esercita intorno a situazioni domestiche e familiari, stravolge gli aspetti del quotidiano, come una strada comune che a un tratto, svoltato l'angolo, ci presenti in piena campagna un giardino di statue o una fabbrica lunare'. Among de Chirico's most famous works representing mannequins, I should mention:

De Chirico, *Le muse inquietanti*, 1925, oil on canvas, Rome: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. See also Bonito Oliva, ed., p. 71.

De Chirico, *Ettore e Andromaca*, 1924, oil on canvas, private collection. See also Baldacci and Roos, eds., pp. 118-119.

Elements of Surrealism can also be found, even though to a lesser extent, in Ortese's *Il cardillo addolorato*, where one of the characters, Albert, Elmina's first husband, is a sculptor. In this case, however, the statues are indoors conjuring up, instead, an association with de Chirico's metaphysical paintings with an interior setting. The first image of Albert's studio is that of a wide, dimly-lit room on the ground floor of the couple's house, full of marble blocks and tools arranged tidily. From the very second day of his marriage, Albert spends his days here carving small children's heads, striving after sublime beauty.⁷¹³ Only after the death of his son, Babà, will Albert achieve his artistic objective and create a perfect child's head. However, the second image of the sculptor's studio has a totally different appearance: an untidy, neglected, storage space where statues and old objects sit gathering dust. It is in this description of the artist's studio, as a 'deposito di cose finite', as an ensemble of unrelated objects, that we can perceive the flavour of a painting by de Chirico:⁷¹⁴

De Chirico, *Il condottiero*, 1925, oil on canvas, private collection. See also Baldacci and Roos, eds., pp. 118-119.

De Chirico, *Il trovatore*, 1922, tempera on canvas, private collection. See also Baldacci and Roos, eds., pp. 114-115.

⁷¹³ See Ortese, *Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 137: 'Si trattava di un bimbo ricciuto, che non rassomigliava ad alcuno dei conoscenti o amici dello scultore, e assolutamente neppure a Neville (come avrebbe potuto essere in una sua immaginaria infanzia), ma che, a detta di tutti, ricordava a ciascuno *qualche cosa* appena intravista o subito perduta e per sempre amata. Il volto era bello, molto bello, di grazia irreali, ma non era la bellezza, in quel volto (che l'artista voleva intitolare *La Joie*), ciò che più veramente colpiva, quanto una espressione di disperata attesa, o visione di un bene insopportabile per i sensi umani, che quegli occhi miravano; [...] Albert aveva già scolpito, dal giorno stesso del matrimonio (che aveva passato lavorando), almeno settanta "varianti", e sempre era tormentato dal pensiero di non avere ancora *espresso tutto*'.

⁷¹⁴ I am thinking in particular of the de Chirico of the *interni metafisici*:

De Chirico, *Malinconia ermetica*, 1919, oil on canvas, Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. See also Bonito Oliva, ed., p. 185.

De Chirico, *Interno metafisico con paesaggio romantico*, 1968, oil on canvas, Rome: Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico. See also Bonito Oliva, ed., p. 129.

De Chirico, *Interno metafisico con nudo anatomico*, signed 1948 (datable 1968), oil on canvas, Rome: Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico. See also Bonito Oliva, ed., p. 152.

De Chirico, *Interno metafisico con profilo di statua*, signed 1962 (datable c. 1967), oil on canvas, Rome: Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico. See also Bonito Oliva, ed., p. 175.

De Chirico, *Dialogo silenzioso*, 1973, oil on canvas, private collection. See also Baldacci and Roos, eds., pp. 244-245.

Nella stanza delle statue, detta ancora, impropriamente, “studio” (ma tale non era già da molti anni, era solo un deposito di cose *finite*, nel senso di perdute al tempo per sempre, in quanto nessuno sarebbe tornato più a lavorarvi), i due signori, sempre immersi in questo vago sbalordimento, fatto di estasi per l’uno, di malinconia e stupore per l’altro, e per tutti e due di una confusa percezione del passaggio del tempo e delle cose, si soffermarono più a lungo, ritrovando tutte le statue, i busti, ma soprattutto le famose testine che erano state passione e cruccio dell’artista prima che iniziasse (o era già iniziata con quella passione e cruccio?) la sua malattia, e tutte ricordavano il povero Babà. (*Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 208)

4.4.3 The industrial landscape: *sembrava il grande albergo d’una città d’affari*⁷¹⁵

Both Masino and Ortese dedicate space to the portrayal of industrial landscapes, which, I believe, are deliberately chosen as the antithesis of the natural world (including thereby also the surrealist and fairy-tale landscape, for these do not stand out as shocking, foreign environments). The best examples of industrial landscapes are in Masino’s *Nascita e morte di una massaia*, *Periferia* and in Ortese’s *Il mare non bagna Napoli*.

Leaving the metaphysical landscape of statues, the Massaia enters an industrial city:

Poiché, a stento, si fu rialzata, intravide poco lontana la macchia densa di una gran fabbrica [...] Sembrava il grande albergo d’una città d’affari;⁷¹⁶ un viavai di gente ne entrava e ne usciva, meccanismi si arrampicavano sui muri, fuochi si accendevano sulle terrazze, acque

⁷¹⁵ Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, pp. 155-156.

⁷¹⁶ The sentence, chosen as the heading for the subsection on the industrial landscape, suggests the modern, business life of an anthill in which people move frantically. This is why I chose it to connect Masino’s *fabbrica* with Ortese’s Granili.

correvano lungo le fondamenta. Avvicinandosi un poco la donna si accorse che quanto aveva dinanzi era la più bislacca architettura che le fosse mai occorso di vedere, un aggruppamento di stili e di materiali quasi fosse il deposito dei pezzi che compongono le città, qua alzarsi un grattacielo, più giù abbattersi una colonna, a destra ergersi una cupola, a sinistra scavarsi meandri, e dondolare campanili o pendere da un chiodo capanne di eschimesi con dentro i loro abitanti o stare su un davanzale come gabbie di canarini, e sporgere sul fianco la carena tarlata di un barcone, salire a spirale una torre monca e sgretolata. Su e giù per quella, entro e fuori la nave, lungo le gronde e i cornicioni si movevano uomini d'ogni età e d'ogni razza e l'uno non ristava dal togliere pietre a quanto il vicino andava costruendo, l'altro dall'abbattere quel che suo malgrado veniva compiuto, un terzo ancora ricominciava l'opera che aveva appena finita. (*Nascita e morte della massaia*, pp. 155-156)

In this strange town, a paradigm of industrialisation and contemporary urban environment, people are at the same time building and destroying what has just been built. I agree with Rozier who sees in the description of the *gran fabbrica*⁷¹⁷ a strong criticism of industrial society and repetitive mechanical work which encourages alienation and a lack of communication.⁷¹⁸ I would add, however, that in Masino's sights there are also the natural, intrinsic wickedness and evil of mankind which lead men to harm others. In reading Masino's *fabbrica*, where construction and destruction stand side by side, a passage of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*⁷¹⁹ comes to

⁷¹⁷ Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 155.

⁷¹⁸ See Rozier, pp. 130-131: 'la denuncia è rivolta contro la civiltà industriale, il rapporto dell'uomo con il mondo del lavoro, e mette a fuoco l'alienazione e l'incomunicabilità che derivano dall'innaturalità della condizione del lavoro [...] D'altro canto, la denuncia dei gesti meccanici e ripetitivi di un'umanità intenta a un lavoro senza senso, si riconnette all'alienazione della condizione convenzionale della donna – i lavori casalinghi come metafora di prigionia e di esistenza alienata – e ribadisce l'assurdità e la crudeltà del destino di uomini e di donne prigionieri di uno stesso sistema sociale opprimente'.

⁷¹⁹ Joseph Conrad, *The Congo Diary and Heart of Darkness* (Milan: Garzanti, 1997).

mind, where the narrator, Marlow, perceives the construction work brought by Western civilisation into the heart of nature (Africa) as destruction and degradation. The hills damaged by dynamite and the chasms created to build the railway are seen as mere devastation; as in Masino's description, construction and destruction go hand in hand. Conrad, like Masino, who sees this industrial city as 'il deposito dei pezzi che compongono le città', also describes the symbols of industrialisation as mechanical, useless tools: 'a boiler wallowing in the grass',⁷²⁰ 'an undersized railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air',⁷²¹ 'pieces of decaying machinery',⁷²² 'a stack of rusty rails',⁷²³ judging mechanical work to be unreal and aimless. In this place morals do not exist: people swear, threaten each other and have sex in front of seated children who cheer and support as if they were at a football match.⁷²⁴ This scenario is thus very similar in concept to Ortese's Granili in 'La città involontaria'. However, while Masino's description of the industrial landscape feels like the product of hallucination or nightmarish dreams, Ortese's version is much more realistic and concrete, closer to a news report. Ortese, in fact, opens the short story with precise details of the building, its dimensions, the interior and the exterior and the number of people living there. In Ortese's industrial city, just like in Masino's, morals are non-existent: the children encountered by Ortese-narrator, like those met by the Massaia, entertain themselves watching sexual intercourse between adults or by inflicting violence on one another. From this picture it emerges that both

⁷²⁰ Conrad, p. 48.

⁷²¹ Conrad, p. 48.

⁷²² Conrad, p. 48.

⁷²³ Conrad, p. 48.

⁷²⁴ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, pp. 156-157: 'Giunta in mezzo allo straordinario popolo la Massaia senti che ognuno compiendo il proprio lavoro bestemmiava e minacciava gli altri o li spiava per derubarli e accusare di furto l'innocente chiamando a testimone il Dio, e se una donna passava si accoppiavano pubblicamente con lei davanti ai fanciulli che quella conduceva con sé per mano, e i fanciulli stavano a guardare senza innocenza seduti in giro, anzi incitavano o applaudivano o fischiavano come si usa alle partite di calcio'.

authors see the industrial landscape in a negative light: the modern, industrial city is degraded and degrading, alienating and amoral, profoundly affecting the lives of the people who live there, especially that of children.

Another example of Masino's depiction of the modern industrial landscape can be found at the end of *Periferia*. Here Masino describes the expansion of the city through construction.⁷²⁵ This melancholy scene is perceived through the eyes of one of the young protagonists of the novel, Nena, who in vain tries to stop the construction of a new residential street on the land where she plays with other children. The personification of the city makes this passage nostalgically touching and conveys a sense of loss and degradation:

– Il quartiere nuovo è questo e più là c'è il mio campo di Sant'Anna.

Io non ve lo do per farci le case.

– È già preso. Tutto espropriato. Se vuoi un campo te lo cerchi più lontano. Dove noi ci stanchiamo di fare il viale.

– Ma noi – domandò Nena con angoscia – io e i miei amici, dove giochiamo, se qui diventa centro? Mi hanno lasciato il quartiere in consegna e quando tornano non mi trovano più o mi trovano ma non trovano più i loro posti nelle strade.

– Le strade che ci sono non le sfacciamo – disse l'operaio che non aveva capito. – Anzi ve ne facciamo delle altre, di lusso, per passeggiare la domenica. La città deve crescere come voi. Voi mangiate pane, lei terra.

⁷²⁵ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 227: 'Tutta la piccola valle e il pendio che dai prati più alti vi conduce sono corsi da carri, da camion, da uomini fangosi. Altri uomini quasi nudi tra un fumo leggero impastano mucchi di calce fresca, altri scavano dentro il cuore dei prati e non si vedono già più che le loro teste dondolare su dal suolo, come abbandonate su una ferma corrente; altri ancora girano argani o inchiodano tavole e chi scarica mattoni da un carro, chi vuota un camion che porta sacchi di cemento, chi incita un cavallo, chi lo ritiene, chi chiama, chi canta, chi fischia, chi batte il piccone, chi dal fondo della valle grida un ordine a uno che già sta per scomparire sui prati alti oltre il pendio. Dappertutto l'erba è sporca e spezzata, diventata fanghiglia o morta in una tunica di gesso bianco. Le orme degli uomini miste di terra e calce fresche fumigano, segnano nuove strade dall'alto al basso e in tutti i sensi lungo la Marrana'.

– No – disse Nena esasperata – dove crescere da un'altra parte. Io non mangio il pane suo, lei mangia la mia terra. (*Periferia*, p. 228)

The novel closes with Nena destroying the building site, kicking, throwing, mixing materials and breaking tools in a desperate attempt to fight 'gli uomini e la loro città'.⁷²⁶ The images of the area and of the construction work are not depicted by Masino as a negative phenomenon, as a form of violence perpetrated by man on nature. Her descriptions of modernity are not as negatively judgemental as those given by Ortese. Here the melancholy tone does not refer to a natural world invaded and usurped by man, but to a childhood stolen by adulthood. The residential area under construction robs the children of their playground, of the spaces which were necessary for their games and vital for their growing and learning process.

4.4.4 The fairy-tale landscape: *Signor orco non mi seminare con le carote*⁷²⁷

The best example of fairy-tale landscape can be found in Masino's *Periferia*, a novel which paradoxically distinguishes itself for its realistic and graphic nature. This particular environment appears in two episodes where it is presented as a natural and harmonious scenario which does not arouse any sense of discomfort or estrangement in the characters entering it from the external realistic world. An example of fairy-tale landscape in *Periferia* is Signor Stefano's villa and garden: the villa, its extensive park, garden and lake are described as magical and mysterious, just like the castle of the fables. A path, the darkness of the trees, the silver colour of the sky, the house sheltered by the woods are elements which cannot but remind us of classic fairy tales.⁷²⁸ The quotation opening this subsection,⁷²⁹ shows Carlo populating this

⁷²⁶ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 230.

⁷²⁷ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 42.

⁷²⁸ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 41: 'Il viale portava a una volta scurissima di lecci; tanta era la notte là sotto che se il vento l'agitava e scomponeva il cielo crepuscolare tra gli squarci appariva come una lamina di lucidissimo argento. Carlo pensò all'orco e si mise a correre. Oltre [...] vi si diresse e si trovò in un giardino aperto e in fondo al giardino c'era una villa nascosta da palmizi e magnolie. Una

scenario with the fairy-tale figure of the ogre. Carlo and the children do not find this place extraordinary or unreal nor do they identify it as a fairy-tale scenario as such. They seem to accept it as another, natural reality, where fiction becomes reality and where being scared by the presence of the ogre is perfectly acceptable. It is the reader who can decipher the intertextual echoes, the characters cannot.

Ortese's *L'Iguana* also has many features of the fairy-tale text, but the story falls more appropriately under 'colonial landscapes' as I believe the similarities with travel and colonisation are a dominant feature. There is, however, a similarity and a difference between the hybrid genre of *L'Iguana* and the genre of fairy tales worthy of note. Estrellita has many traits in common with Cinderella: they are both servants, mistreated by a family of three (the stepmother and two stepsisters in Cinderella, the three brothers in Ortese's novel) and they both find a prince who loves them, Daddo, in Estrellita's case. There are also aspects which distinguish *L'Iguana* from the traditional fairy tale. First of all, Estrellita is not a beautiful girl. Secondly, for Ortese's Cinderella there is no happy ending.

4.4.5 The colonial landscape: *Robinson di York fu felice in regioni come*

*queste*⁷³⁰

The best example of colonial landscape is Ortese's Portuguese island Ocaña in *L'Iguana*. Before exploring the island with its symbolic meanings and intertextual references, a brief look at the journey that the protagonist embarks on before he

finestra in basso era illuminata. Ma Carlo entrò in un sentiero laterale che lui pensava tornasse al cancello di via delle Isole senza ripassare sotto i lecci cupi. Il sentiero finiva quasi subito in prati sparsi qua e là di allori. Questi prati sembravano far argine a un altro prato vasto e tondo e più scuro della nuda terra. Nel mezzo vi si levava altissimo un folto d'alberi'.

⁷²⁹ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 42:

‘– Ora ti semino.

Carlo singhiozzò:

– Signor orco non mi seminare con le carote. A me non mi piacciono le carote.

Il vecchio disse burbero:

– Non sono un orco, sono un giardiniere’.

⁷³⁰ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 118.

discovers Ocaña is useful. Rich, but naïve aristocrat Carlo Ludovico Aleardo di Grees, dei Duchi di Estremadura-Aleardi count of Milan, also known as Daddo, makes a voyage round the Mediterranean with two purposes in mind. Firstly, he wishes to identify an island to purchase, thus fulfilling his mother's business expansion plans; secondly, he hopes to find an unpublished exotic script for his friend Boro Adelchi to publish. Daddo sets sail from Genoa on the ship *Luisa* together with the lazy sailor Salvato, aiming to sail through the Straits of Gibraltar, round Cape St. Vincent and along the Portuguese coast up to the Bay of Biscay in search of an island. The first port of call is Palos de la Frontera, where Daddo leaves his ship on the Rio Tinto to go to Seville. After a few days he sets out again and reaches Lisbon on May 5th. At 1 a.m. on May 7th, Daddo sights land:

si presentò lontanissimo, in quella luminosità, un punto verde bruno, a forma di corno, o ciambella spezzata, che non risultava sulla carta. Chiese al marinaio di che potesse trattarsi (aveva pensato, in un primo momento, a un branco di cetacei, dato che quel punto, per quanto piccolo, presentava delle gibbosità), e Salvato gli rispose che poteva sbagliarsi, ma sembrava proprio l'isola di Ocaña; e dicendo questo non aveva l'aria (del resto non l'aveva mai, e dipendeva dalla sua pigrizia) di chi ardesse dalla curiosità, e tenesse come grazia il poterla soddisfare. Anzi! (*L'Iguana*, p. 23)

From this overview it is clear that Daddo's travels are full of references to Christopher Columbus's journeys to the Americas. First of all, the mention of Genoa, the explorer's birthplace; secondly, Palos de la Frontera, the Andalusian port, which Columbus sailed from on his first voyage to the Americas; and Seville, where Columbus is said to be buried. Ortese's description of Daddo's route is very detailed, including both geographical coordinates and dates which, as I have said, echo those of

Columbus. What we do not know is the year of Daddo's journey, even though the author clearly sets it in her contemporary Italy, as shown by the explicit hints to the Cold War: 'malgrado l'eterna questione tra Russia e America'⁷³¹ and the references to the dynamics of the Italian publishing industry. Salvato informs his master that Ocaña is not reported on maps, as it is considered the land of the Devil, but Daddo nonetheless, and despite an unpleasant sense of foreboding, decides to cast anchor off what he himself perceives to be a not normal island. The arrival at Ocaña represents the turning point for a radical change in the geography and time of the events of Daddo's adventures: he enters, in the words of La Penna, 'a strangely anachronistic pre-Columbian geography',⁷³² where the 'initial precise chronology gives way to an internalized perception of time'.⁷³³ Time, in particular, remains very vague and dilated, an emblematic example is given by the date on one of Ilario's letters, '*Ocaña, addì 37 ottobre, Secolo Attuale*',⁷³⁴ written to his beloved monkey Perdita. The geographical references to the colonial nature of the island and to various places in the Americas are, in fact, some of the elements which Ortese uses to develop her colonial discourse. Firstly, Ocaña is named after the town of Ocaña near Toledo, in accordance with the custom of calling colonies after a place in the mother country. However, the reason why Ortese chooses this name hides an intertextual reference to the Spanish poet Jorge Manrique's work *Coplas por la muerte de su padre*, quoted in *L'Iguana* itself.⁷³⁵ Manrique's father Don Rodrigo Manrique died in his villa in Ocaña. Secondly, Ortese exploits the movements of the colonial élite of Ocaña to mention various places in the Americas as symbols of the colonised new world. Don

⁷³¹ Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 22.

⁷³² La Penna, p. 166.

⁷³³ La Penna, p. 167.

⁷³⁴ Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 46.

⁷³⁵ Ortese quotes directly from Jorge Manrique's *Coplas por la muerte de su padre*. See Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 114 and p. 122.

Ilario, for example, was born in the island of Tortuga in the Antilles, the son of an impoverished Portuguese aristocrat and a wealthy Anglo-Saxon mother bearing the surname Hamilton.⁷³⁶ After losing the property in Tortuga, an island colonised in turn by the Spanish, English and French, Ilario's parents wish to move to another icon of the colonisation of the New World, Havana. Archbishop Don Fidenzio Aureliano Bosio, who will set foot on the island with the Hopins, and whom Daddo recognises as a Lombard, is the Archbishop of Merida, in Venezuela. However, it is also interesting to notice how Ortese refers, not only to the discovery and colonisation of the Americas, but, through the Hopins, also seems to hint at a modern form of colonisation by the United States.⁷³⁷ Highlighting the symbiosis between the world's and the US's middle classes, Ortese seems to hint at the contemporary influence of US-superpower on the rest of the world as a form of more subtle, yet influential colonisation.

The depiction of the colonial landscape in *L'Iguana*, besides constantly referring to the colonial discourse, merges with another intertextual layer, that of travel writing. Like her models, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Ortese outlines the detailed itinerary of the explorer and the geography of the

⁷³⁶ See Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 44: 'Don Ilario, vedendo l'attenzione con cui il suo nuovo amico fissava il dipinto, e aparendogli negli occhi un dolce e peraltro rapido sorriso, spiegò che quella signora, da alcuni anni defunta, era sua madre, una Hamilton'. The phrasing 'una Hamilton' seems to allude at the prestige of a surname that may have counted famous people among its bearers. It is not clear who Ortese may be referring to, one candidate is Sir Henry Hamilton Johnston (1858-1927), British explorer, botanist, writer and colonial administrator in Africa; this would, in fact, be in keeping with the colonial theme. Another hypothesis could be Lady Emma Hamilton (1765-1815), mistress, dancer, entertainer, wife to Sir William Hamilton and lover of Horatio Nelson, whom she lived with in a ménage à trois. The daughter of a blacksmith, Emma Hamilton, born Lyon, was able to ascend to the higher ranks of society. She is the subject of many portraits by British painter George Romney. Ortese may have chosen her to hint at the promiscuity of Ilario's mother.

⁷³⁷ See Ortese, *L'Iguana*, p. 89: 'Erano (vedi un po', Lettore, come il segreto delle cose è spesso assai più modesto di quanto l'infantile immaginazione dell'Universo intenderebbe, per non so quali fini, dimostrare), erano niente più che una compitissima e molto dabbene famigliola del ceto medio mondiale, cioè americano, in quanto tutte le famigliole, oggi, sono americane, e in quella l'origine yankee era evidentissima'.

new territory. As Stevenson does in *Treasure Island* (1883),⁷³⁸ Ortese, in Chapter IX, accompanies the description of the half-moon shape of Ocaña with a map.⁷³⁹ According to Lanslots, the shape of the island seems to recall the reflection of the moon on the sea, the moon being the planet able to influence the mood of the characters and hence be the cause of their melancholic nature.⁷⁴⁰ The fact that it curls up towards the West, for Lanslots, is its way of protecting itself from the light of the East, from the light of God, choosing darkness, that is, the Devil.⁷⁴¹ Wood maintains that Ocaña can be seen as the Garden of Eden after the Fall, once a splendid and happy place, now a run-down, abandoned one.⁷⁴²

There is also another example of colonial landscape in Ortese's works with strong echoes from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719),⁷⁴³ this is the short story 'La vita primitiva'⁷⁴⁴ in *Angelici Dolori*. Here, young eighteen-year-old Anna and her sixteen-year-old brother Giovanni move to a remote part of New Zealand's coast as they wish to start an honest, primitive life far from the 'terribile e invadente Civiltà'⁷⁴⁵ at war. Here, in true colonial style, the two orphans employ 'alcuni negri poderosi, e ottimi per ingenuità e classica allegria'⁷⁴⁶ to transport wood and provision to the isolated spot where they build a hut. One of the indigenous workers wishes to remain with them and be their servant: 'Si professava servo fedele, diceva tante amabili cose, poveretto, in un gergo pressoché goffo e incomprensibile'.⁷⁴⁷ The two want to remain alone and they are very grateful, almost moved at the prospect of

⁷³⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (London : Penguin, 1994).

⁷³⁹ See Ortese, *L'Iguana*, pp. 82-83.

⁷⁴⁰ Lanslots, p. 107.

⁷⁴¹ Lanslots, p. 110.

⁷⁴² Wood, "Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made on", p. 175.

⁷⁴³ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin, 2001)

⁷⁴⁴ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, pp. 105-119.

⁷⁴⁵ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 112.

⁷⁴⁶ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 106.

⁷⁴⁷ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 107.

starting their ‘vita primitiva’: ‘noi eravamo poveri fratelli primitivi, gente nobile e randagia che sparirebbe ignorata dalla terra.’⁷⁴⁸ However, European customs prevail in their style of life: they pray, they keep a wooden Crucifix on the walls, they set the table, at night Anna tucks her brother in for fear he might catch a cold as he used to in Europe. Giovanni seems to love his new life, while Anna soon starts feeling melancholic and homesick for her house in Europe and her first love. When Giovanni also starts missing home, Anna comments, clearly referring to Defoe’s novel: ‘Eppure, Robinson di York fu felice in regioni come queste, e in una situazione, per la verità, nettamente inferiore alla nostra... quanto agli agi’.⁷⁴⁹ The two conclude that they have an innate ‘coscienza del Bello’,⁷⁵⁰ which shows that primitive life is just an illusion.⁷⁵¹

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the theme of nature is a key and highly articulate topic in Masino’s and particularly in Ortese’s works. I have explored the two authors’ almost opposite views of nature, which to Ortese appears as a defenceless victim of modernity and mankind, while for Masino seems to be a cruel, primitive,

⁷⁴⁸ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 110.

⁷⁴⁹ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 118.

⁷⁵⁰ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 119.

⁷⁵¹ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, pp. 118-119: “Eppure, Robinson di York fu felice in regioni come queste, e in una situazione, per la verità, nettamente inferiore alla nostra...quanto agli agi”.

“Sì, Anna, lo so. Ma forse egli non aveva la... la...”. E il nobile giovanetto si turbava.

“La coscienza del Bello?”.

“Appunto. Noialtri...”.

“Tu!” obiettai con un sorriso. Ma subito il sorriso si spense, e, divenuta pallida, io reclinavo la testa, pensando.

“Che hai?” domandò Giovanni timidamente.

Non risposi.

Sentivo per la prima volta, precisamente, irrimediabilmente, la superficialità infernale di questa situazione. E che anche l’affetto per Enrico era, in me, una amata esagerazione; l’amore per il Primitivo un meditato tormento. Tutto in me – affetti, speranze, dolcezze, meravigliose sofferenze – era l’artificioso frutto di una fantasia perdutoamente invaghita del bello, della mirabile Compostezza, sorgente, splendida come un fiore, dal gioco brutale dei moti e delle attività umane?”.

powerful force leading to destruction and madness. I have also shown how, in the description of landscapes, there are several points of contact between the writers who, particularly when depicting the decay and moral degradation of industrial society, adopt very similar images. The theme of nature is undoubtedly stronger in Ortese's fiction where it acquires a much more intrinsic value through her creation of metamorphic children and animals. Such characters allow her to develop, in addition to the theme of victimisation and the extraordinary, also that of the relationship between mankind and the natural world. Furthermore, in terms of description and choice of characters, they lead to the inevitable comparison with Morante, an author who also employs animal and child figures to develop a discourse on a future, more natural, society.

Once again, as in previous chapters, the theme of nature in all its aspects and perspectives is an opportunity for the two authors to create a web of references to other literary and figurative works. This is a common element in Masino and Ortese which can be perceived across themes and throughout their work. I will continue to highlight it in the next and final chapter.

Chapter 5

*Ora eccoli qua in piedi, ognuno nella loro parte*⁷⁵²

Unmasking society

Introduction

In this final chapter, I should like to concentrate on a further function children and animal characters have: to unmask the society of Masino's and Ortese's time, dismantling its façade of hypocrisy and *perbenismo*. The quotation I chose for the title 'Ora eccoli qua in piedi, ognuno nella loro parte'⁷⁵³ is taken from the section of *Nascita e morte della massaia* where the protagonist, at her coming-out ball, is resigned to joining a big act, a play in which everyone has a part and nobody is allowed to be themselves. While in the trunk, the girl had accomplished the much more arduous task of being her true self, now, upon entering society, she will be forced to wear a mask like everyone else and be the character society wants her to be. As in Chapter 2, here also, I shall extend my observations to ordinary children and animals as they contribute equally to the development of this thematic area. Society in Masino comes in for much harsh criticism, an almost constantly present topos in her narratives. For this reason, more prominence and space will be dedicated here to the analysis of Masino's works rather than to Ortese's.

Focusing on Masino's unmasking of four different concealed truths, the study naturally falls into four main sections. The first concentrates on the hidden

⁷⁵² I chose to include this sentence in the title as I believe it carries the essence of what this chapter is about: the authors' (and Masino's in particular) wish to unveil the truth behind these masks, the reality behind the appearance. This is a typically Pirandellian theme – and it would be surprising were Masino not to have been influenced by her friend and master. See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 42.

⁷⁵³ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 42: 'Ora eccoli qua in piedi, ognuno nella loro parte; nessuno ha bisogno di suggeritore. Allora eccomi qua anche io, anche io senza dubbi, perché recitare la parte che d'ora in poi mi è stata assegnata è facile. Difficile era quanto avevo conquistato finora, a costo della mia vita, a costo della mia morte. Abbandono tutto, perché sono una buona figlia o forse una mal riuscita creatura umana con aspirazioni fallaci, con ideali che non hanno raggiunto il vertice'.

degradation of the traditional family and of the ideal of the middle class *famiglia per bene*, so highly promoted by the Fascist regime as the basis of society. The second will explore the world of games, through which several realities can be revealed – that of children who do not live in a happy fantasy world of their own, but are aware of and affected by adults and their behaviour; the reality of the child as an ambiguous, and, at times, cruel creature; and that of adults who behave, think and play like children. The third section of the chapter will take a look at how Masino ridicules the hypocrisy and emptiness of social convention making use of humour and caricature. The fourth and final section will focus on how both Masino and Ortese mock the idea of the *superuomo*, presenting a man in crisis: affected by madness, by a sort of Peter Pan syndrome or completely trapped in an arrogance which will lead to dramatic consequences.

5.1 The degradation of family unity

5.1.1 *Che brutta cosa sono i babbi e le mamme:*⁷⁵⁴ *Periferia*

Family, the backbone of Italian society, acquired an even stronger importance during the Fascist regime whose propaganda glorified the ideal of perfect family unit as the basis of society as a whole.⁷⁵⁵ The Duce himself was perceived and referred to as the Father of the Nation. Orphans, who had lost their fathers on the battlefield, were

⁷⁵⁴ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 91.

⁷⁵⁵ See Piero Meldini, *Sposa e madre esemplare: ideologia e politica della donna e della famiglia durante il Fascismo* (Rimini; Florence: Guaraldi, 1975), p. 46: ‘L’ideologia fascista della famiglia rappresenta, per l’appunto, una reazione alla crisi del modello familiare patriarcale e autoritario, dipendente da un lato – come segnala Reich – dalla recisione del legame fra struttura della famiglia e modo di produzione, in conseguenza della decadenza dell’agricoltura, dell’artigianato e del piccolo commercio, e, dall’altro, dall’ingresso della donna nel mondo del lavoro: reazione che si presenta come un tentativo di restaurare la struttura economica e l’organizzazione sociale alla base della famiglia patriarcale (battaglia ruralistica, incoraggiamento dell’artigianato, lotta all’urbanesimo, campagna demografica, richiamo della donna dal lavoro extradomestico, ecc.), e destinata a fallire clamorosamente, cioè a convertirsi in pura e semplice propaganda, per le esigenze stesse dello sviluppo capitalistico’.

encouraged to see the Duce as a parent and to write him letters asking for presents, favours or simply demonstrating their affection.⁷⁵⁶ The Fascist family ideal envisaged a unit headed by a hard-working male figure,⁷⁵⁷ a dedicated loving housewife⁷⁵⁸ and obedient children:

L'uomo e la donna integrali, assoluti, compongono, coi figli che necessariamente e copiosamente ne nasceranno, l'ideale di famiglia del radicalismo fascista, magistralmente prefigurato, nei suoi esiti utopici, dal Baccigalupi: "La famiglia [...] – egli scrive – è una comunità che ha per fine la prole" (già aveva stabilito, infatti, che essa "deve essere in funzione dei figli"); la famiglia "si fonda sul sangue" (purezza razziale dei coniugi) ed è la "sorgente della razza"; "ogni potere spetta al capo-famiglia".⁷⁵⁹

The best and the most complete example of Masino's challenge to this stereotype is *Periferia*. The whole novel is, in fact, a harsh portrayal of the degradation lying behind the façade of stable, wealthy middle-class family life. The heading of this subsection 'Che brutta cosa sono i babbi e le mamme'⁷⁶⁰ refers precisely to the views that the young protagonists have of their dysfunctional families, so *per bene* on the outside, so tormented and damaged inside. The novel is set in *quartiere* Pannosa, a middle-class residential area outside an unnamed city (probably Rome), built up around a large *piazza* and two main roads intersecting in the middle: it is the

⁷⁵⁶ Antonio Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino: infanzia e nazione dalla Grande Guerra a Salò* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005).

⁷⁵⁷ See Meldini, p. 45: 'È necessario – scrive il Pompei – "valorizzare i padri di famiglia"; occorre – aggiunge il Palazzi – "rinsaldare l'autorità dell'uomo in seno alla famiglia, fargli sentire il peso e l'onore che egli ha di esserne il capo e la colonna"'.
⁷⁵⁸ On the fascist views on women see Meldini, p. 35: 'la radicale inconciliabilità dei sessi; l'inferiorità spirituale ed intellettuale della donna; la sua completa estraneità alla dimensione sociale e politica; la sua insopprimibile vocazione al ruolo di casalinga e di madre'.

⁷⁵⁹ Meldini, p. 125.

⁷⁶⁰ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 91: '– Che brutta cosa sono i babbi e le mamme – sospirò Fulvia. – Non fanno che urlare tra loro e poi urlano anche con noi'.

prototype of newly-built residential outlying areas.⁷⁶¹ The importance of the setting is highlighted by the fact that the whole of the first chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the place. Here, Masino seems to want to immerse her readers in an apparently safe and wealthy environment and to make them feel comfortable, only to strip away the certainties and sense of security immediately afterwards. Suspicion that all is not as it seems, that beneath the surface lies a very different reality, soon creeps into the reader's mind, cleverly insinuated by Masino:

Quartiere Pannosa è stato costruito per gli impiegati dello Stato, militari e borghesi. Le sue strade sono file di villini con giardinetti coltivati a ghiaiolina bianca e glicine; di case a cinque piani velate da una leggera tinta uovo sbattuto, di cancelli e porte con una targhetta d'ottone brillante su cui all'infinito si legge: Comm. Cav. Rag. Col. Gr. Uff. Avv. Ten. S. Ten. Prof. Dott. A fianco alle targhette c'è il campanello di porcellana bianca, o, ai cancelli, la campanella di ferro battuto. Gli abitanti di tali case hanno bisogno di poche botteghe e oneste. Se le sono allineate con ordine nelle facciate dei due casamenti che chiudono a nord la prospettiva di piazza Pannosa, sotto le terrazze che in colonne di cemento precipitano dal primo piano al suolo. (Le ringhiere in alto sono adorne di glicine). Sotto la terrazza di destra ha due vetrine e l'entrata la Cooperativa, al suo fianco la Merceria e la Latteria hanno ciascuna un'entrata che serve anche da vetrina. Sotto la terrazza di sinistra sono Sale e Tabacchi, Macellaio, Carbonaio, Fruttivendolo. (*Periferia*, pp. 8-9)

For Mascia Galateria, this initial description, far from being an example of nineteenth-century realism, resembles more closely the stage directions of a play; the

⁷⁶¹ The description of *quartiere* Pannosa contains a strong biographical flavour. The author, in fact, based the description on a similar area in Rome (between Via degli Appennini and Piazza Caprera) where she spent part of her childhood years and where, like *Periferia*'s children, she used to play in the streets with other youngsters from the neighbourhood. See Bernardini Napoletano and Galateria, *Paola Masino*, p. 18.

whole structure of *Periferia*, with its clearly divided chapters, and the prevalence of dialogue, does make the novel similar to the script of a play. I do not see it, however, as a mere set of stage directions. In my opinion, its main function is to encourage the reader to look beyond misleading appearances. A key instrument used for this purpose by Masino is the subtle humorous tone which underpins the whole description. In the passage above, the residents' titles listed without commas, in their shortened forms, 'Comm. Cav. Rag. Col. Gr. Uff. Avv. Ten. S.Ten. Prof. Dott.', produce a comic note. In fact, they seem to highlight the meaninglessness of the people behind the titles engraved on the shiny nameplate and the superficial pride they take in showing off their status. Furthermore, Masino mocks the apparent suburban perfection of *quartiere* Pannosa by comparing the neutral colours of houses with the bland colour of a 'uovo sbattuto', and by stressing the reflection of the inhabitants' *perbenismo* on the shops' respectability and layout 'poche botteghe e oneste' and 'Se le sono allineate con ordine'. The ironic tone is also enhanced in the above quotation by the use of a large number of diminutives such as 'villini', 'giardinetti', 'ghiaiolina', 'targhetta'. The humour is still clearly heard when *quartiere* Pannosa becomes the destination of a Sunday excursion for many families aspiring to become the next privileged dwellers of the new bourgeois residential havens under construction. Parents, hoping to live in a similar area, try to hide their ambitious, bourgeois dreams and jealousy and pretend their visit to *quartiere* Pannosa is completely casual and disinterested.⁷⁶² However, the families' day out in

⁷⁶² See Masino, *Periferia*, pp. 10-11: 'Verso le tre del pomeriggio le famiglie escono caute nel sole tepido e fanno finta di non sapere dove andare. Ai bambini hanno insegnato a ripetere fino alla follia: "Papà andiamo al Cinema". "Papà c'è Charlot". "Papà andiamo al Cinema". Allora il padre dice: "Ma che cinema! Faremo una passeggiata igienica". E la moglie timida ed eccitata: "Se andassimo a vedere il nuovo quartiere?" Intanto tutti s'erano avviati da un pezzo e come per incanto sono già alla fermata dell'autobus. Ma il padre non viene meno al suo compito: ferma la famiglia con un gesto largo della mano e sentenza: – Dove andate? Aspettate un momento. Se dobbiamo andare a quartiere Pannosa, bisogna pensare se si deve prendere l'autobus. E quale? Lui lo sa, tutti lo sanno, che devono prendere

quartiere Pannosa, turns into something sinister and unexpected, the atmosphere seems to become gloomy and unpleasant, a real disappointment. This is when Masino starts to sow the seed of doubt in her readers' minds to alert them that not everything is as perfect and as tidy as would appear. Doors and shutters are closed, nobody is around enjoying Sunday or welcoming prospective residents.

The subtle humour prepares the reader for the next, much starker exposure of reality. In fact, from the second chapter we meet the protagonists, the children of *quartiere* Pannosa and, through them, their dysfunctional families. In Chapter 2 above, when talking about domestic victimisation, I already gave a few examples from *Periferia*, briefly explaining the type of violence some of the children are subject to and the physical and psychological consequences they suffer. To complete the picture, a wider account of the children's family life and the effects it has on them is given below.

Armando's family is never explicitly referred to in the novel: his father is never mentioned and his mother only in relation to the beatings she gratuitously inflicts on him.⁷⁶³ In the first chapter, when parents call back their respective children in the evening, Armando's mother's voice is referred to as 'una voce di donna' who 'grida

l'autobus 25 rosso e che l'autobus 25 rosso ferma proprio lì dove la famiglia sta piantata sugli otto piedi verniciati di nero. Fanno finta di niente e si mettono a discutere: frattanto l'autobus arriva e loro danno gomitate agli altri passeggeri per montare prima e sedersi vicino al finestrino. Arrivano, scendono in piazza Pannosa, subito si accorgono che non s'erano sbagliati, che l'appuntamento è lì, che una folla, la loro folla, si muove piano piano in giro per la piazza. Passandosi vicino si ammiccano; tutti, prima di spargersi per le vie laterali, guardando le terrazze con le ringhiere intrecciate di glicine avranno detto ai compagni: "Io ci metterei una lampadina e l'estate ci mangerei"

⁷⁶³ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 18: '– Oh, ma come ti battono, Armando? Con le mani oppure hanno una frusta? – domanda Anna, pallida.

– Con tutto – dice Armando sorridendo.

– Ma con tutto che cosa? – domanda ancora Anna torcendosi le mani.

– Con la cinghia, con le mani, con la bocca.

– Come con la bocca?

– A morsi. L'altro giorno mi ha dato tanti morsi nella schiena, lungo quell'osso. Il dottore ha detto che sono state tutte le botte sulla testa a farmi così mezzo cieco'.

furiosa'.⁷⁶⁴ He understands that his mother's behaviour is atrocious and unjustifiable, but does not react; he accepts his condition with resignation hoping in justice after death when he expects to be rewarded in Heaven, while his mother will go to Hell. Even his friends are aware of the miserable life Armando is leading, and define him as an unhappy child who can only find consolation in being sympathised with.⁷⁶⁵

The family of Fran, Ella and Carlo hides a secret. The issue here is not violence, but betrayal and falsehood: the mother is having an affair with a family friend, Giorgio. Under the false pretence of being a good family friend, Giorgio buys presents for the children and addresses his lover with the formal *Lei* in front of her husband, whom he addresses with the *tu*. The two lovers mistakenly believe that the children do not understand their complicity nor notice their secret meetings and stolen kisses. They are totally careless, irresponsible adults who do not seem aware of the impact that their behaviour has on the children, their only worry being that they might be caught. But Carlo, Ella and Fran do understand, hear and see. The only one unable to accept this truth, because of the pain it causes him and because of his loyalty to his father, is Fran.

A less dysfunctional family is Dich's, son to an English father and an Italian mother, Romana. The father's presence is hinted at only twice: the first time when

⁷⁶⁴ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 14.

⁷⁶⁵ See Masino, *Periferia*, pp. 18-19: '– Armando è proprio il tipo del bambino infelice: che non ci vede e sorride – constatò Ella. – È la prima volta che ne vedo uno.

– E un bambino idrocefalo l'hai mai visto? [...]

– Con i bambini idrocefali non si può giocare bene – disse Fran – non servono a niente. È molto meglio un bambino infelice: noi ogni tanto abbiamo pietà di lui, ma lui può muoversi e giocare, e poi capisce che abbiamo pietà di lui e questo fa piacere.

– Oppure potrebbe scappare e diventare un bambino smarrito. Sarebbe anche più bello – aggiunse Anna.

– Non si può scappare da un momento all'altro – disse Fran. – Queste cose le fanno senza pensarci soltanto i bambini felici che si annoiano. [...] Ma se lui scappa deve scappare davvero e allora può anche morire'.

they move to the area and he calls the porters in an ‘accento strano’,⁷⁶⁶ the second time when, finding his wife and son asleep on the sofa, he awakes them with a gentle kiss. It is interesting to note that Dich’s father, although hardly ever present, is the only positive father figure in the novel. I believe the fact that he is a foreigner contributes to his positive role: being an outsider, he is not part of a narrow-minded bourgeois Italian society.

As mentioned above, in Chapter 2, the most dysfunctional family is, without doubt, that of Giovanni and Maria, where the children and their mother have to endure a miserable life because of a penny-pinching, authoritarian, violent father. They have to make do with little food, for the father, obsessed with money, insists on being in charge of household finance in case his wife steals from him. Maria and Giovanni have no toys and are not allowed to celebrate Christmas with the other children for fear that they may realise what they are missing.⁷⁶⁷ Furthermore, the father is also extremely violent towards his wife and son. Giovanni suffers because of his mother’s unhappiness;⁷⁶⁸ he confides in Romana who will help him run away

⁷⁶⁶ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 19.

⁷⁶⁷ See Masino, *Periferia*, pp. 73-74: ‘– Non ho ancora la dote. Babbo me la sta facendo. Mi ha regalata una cassetta come quelle dell’elemosina che sono in chiesa, e a ogni persona che viene a trovarci, come se giocassi alla messa, gli chiedo un soldo. In fondo alla settimana c’è sempre una mezza liretta che si mette nel salvadanaio e alla fine dell’anno il salvadanaio si porta alla banca. Anche ora, a Natale, ci andiamo alla banca, a vedere la cassetta dei tesori.

– Che cosa è la cassetta dei tesori?

– Una cassetta dove sono le posate di argento e due candelieri e due pavoni grandi preziosi da mettere sulla tavola e gli anelli di famiglia e perfino una collana di perle.

– E perchè tua mamma non se la mette?

– Mamma non lo sa nemmeno che c’è. Lei babbo non ce la porta mica a vedere, se no si mette in testa che siamo ricchi e non fa più economia. Lei è come Giovanni, gli piace molto spendere. Giovanni ha detto che appena babbo muore con i soldi compra l’automobile. E per sapere il segreto di Carlo ora sta cercando le due lire, ma io se le trovo preferisco non sapere il segreto e farmi la dote.

– E a Natale vi fanno i regali?

– Mai, mai. Babbo non vuol neppure che andiamo a vedere i negozi o all’albero degli altri bambini; perchè se no, dice, ci viene voglia’.

⁷⁶⁸ See Masino, *Periferia*, pp. 92-93: ‘– Ha paura di babbo. Mamma è entrata in camera e mi si è buttata addosso urlando e io l’abbracciavo. Allora babbo l’ha presa per un braccio e ha detto: “Non far scene. Vedi quanto mi costa questo mascalzone. Ora mi tocca chiamare un medico a ricucirlo”. Mamma urlava sempre, diceva: “Io le ammazzo queste creature piuttosto che vederle soffrire così”. Io

with his mother and find shelter at one of her friends' house. In this respect, Giovanni is the only child who is able to see himself and his mother as victims and attempt to resolve the situation. On the other hand, Maria, brainwashed by her father, has acquired his mentality and the same obsession with money. When Giovanni confesses to her that he is going to run away with their mother, the only thing Maria is worried about is that the two might steal her savings, secretly stored in an alms box. Furthermore, at church, Maria cons the congregation and is caught collecting charity money which she intends to keep for her dowry. Maria's relationship with food is the psychological consequence of the way her father brought her up. At Romana's Christmas party, when Giovanni cries while tasting forbidden cakes and flavours, Maria manifests severe signs of eating disorder:

Solo Maria era rimasta presso la tavola e ora in fretta senza che nessuno la vedesse si riempiva la bocca di confetti, masticava, trangugiava. Poi, come se nulla fosse, raggiunse gli altri. Ma dopo un minuto eccola di nuovo nella stanza da pranzo presso i vassoi devastati a riempirsi la bocca di cioccolatini. Così per tre o quattro volte, finchè si sentì presa da nausea violente, ma non poteva rinunciare a quella gioia nuova e tremenda. Prendeva un confetto, lo masticava rapidamente, lo sputava, e poi un altro e un altro e un altro e tutto sputava piuttosto che sottrarsi al piacere di avvolgersi, sommergersi nei sapori sconosciuti. E il nascondersi per fare la cosa sudicia e il mangiare e lo sputare cibo dei ricchi, cibo che lei non ha

ho provato a dire che non soffrivo per non farla piangere ma il sangue mi veniva in bocca e lei continuava a gridare: "Sì, le ammazzo, questa e quella che porto. Abbiamo fame! Ho fame! Ho fame! Assassino!" E si è messa a battere con la pancia contro lo spigolo del letto. Sai che mamma è malata, ha la pancia un po' grossa in questi tempi. A vederla sbattere così sembrava che si spaccasse da un momento all'altro e io mi sono messo a piangere e il sangue mi colava dagli occhi nelle orecchie. Ma babbo l'ha presa da dietro per le braccia e gli si eran scoperti i denti come dice Maria e ha detto piano piano: "Lo sai che ti potrei far mettere in prigione per quello che stai facendo? Sta attenta a non ricominciare e fila subito a chiamare il dottore per quel ladro di tuo figlio. Non mi maraviglierei a sapere che ha rubato perchè gliel'hai detto tu. Marsc!" E l'ha messa fuori della porta. Babbo dice sempre marsc'.

pagato, le dava una gioia ancora più violenta. La cupidigia le faceva
un volto vecchio. (*Periferia*, pp. 80-81)

The quotation above shows that Masino reveals the almost brutal violence of Maria's compulsive behaviour in all its lurid detail through the use of powerfully negative terms such as 'nausee violente', 'la cosa sudicia', 'sputare', 'una gioia [...] violenta', 'la cupidigia', 'un volto vecchio' to emphasise the girl's mental instability and greed.

An almost positive example of 'family' seems to be Nena's, the greengrocer's daughter. Despite being unconventional for the times (a mother of three by three different men in the early 1930's was hardly morally acceptable), her family appears to be the result of a happy or at least successful union. However, Nena is an aggressive and overconfident girl, rude to everyone and always willing to spoil the fun.⁷⁶⁹ Behind a mask of self-confidence, she hides a deep feeling of envy for other middle-class children and in particular for Lisa, whom she sees as symbol of the perfect girl. With characters like Nena and Luca, Masino shows up a childhood bearing already the corrupt traits one can find in adulthood, in the case of Nena, envy and a revengeful spirit. Whereas the other children of *Periferia* are victims of adult behaviour (Armando, Giovanni) or suffer its psychological consequences (Anna, Fulvia, Fran and Maria), Luca and Nena appear naturally wicked.

From this brief outline of *Periferia's* dysfunctional families, it is evident that Paola Masino's aim is to reveal the cracks in the ideology proposed and praised by the regime. Masino chooses a very effective way to do this: she plunges her readers

⁷⁶⁹ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 115: 'Intanto si era avvicinata anche Nena. Nena dal giorno che aveva detto il fatto loro ai bambini, si mischiava alla compagnia come una padrona e faceva quanti più dispetti poteva. Se giocavano a nascondersi, con aria distratta come se parlasse a se stessa diceva al cercatore dove gli altri erano andati e subito il gioco perdeva ogni interesse, se si rincorrevano lei veniva a buttarsi tra le gambe dell'inseguito e si scusava con un ghigno per essere caduta, quando facevano a campana trovava indispensabile, come ora, mangiare un'arancia o una banana e buttar loro le bucce tra i piedi.

Dich la guardava ogni tanto digrignando i denti e Nena diceva calma come se parlasse a se stessa:
– Intanto se qualcuno mi tocca i tre papà miei hanno detto che lo sbuzzano'.

into a secure, distinguished middle class environment, making us feel comfortable and safe and then shatters that sense of tranquillity and serenity by giving voice to the children. It is, thus, from the inside, from the point of view of the children, that Masino sheds light on what is concealed in the home. Parents, as I have said, never appear: ‘gli adulti sono relegati nell’intimo, quasi mai esplorato, delle case (da dove condizionano comunque la vita dei figli con l’inaudita violenza dei loro gesti)’.⁷⁷⁰ It is interesting to note, that school and Fascist child organisations, like the Opera Nazionale Balilla, play hardly any role in their lives. School is only briefly hinted at when Armando says his teacher will fail him and when Luca plays truant. In both episodes it is referred to in a negative way. Leandro Gellona, in a 1933 review on *Periferia*, accuses Masino precisely of not taking into account the role of the Fascist regime in the sound upbringing of children:

Il loro mondo è la strada. La scuola, che è pure gran parte del mondo piccino, vi è nominata una sol volta: al massimo due. Dell’opera Nazionale Balilla che inquadra tutti i bambini d’Italia non v’è neppure un cenno lontano o vago.

Non esiste per la Masino.

Eppure è stata proiettata, nel frattempo, la pellicola *Camicia Nera* dove, il Forzano, in un quadro fugace ha rappresentato i bimbi d’un tempo, scamiciati padroni del marciapiede e quelli d’oggi inquadrati, istruiti, disciplinati dall’Opera Nazionale Balilla.

Si può all’anno XI far vivere dei bambini italiani contemporanei senza che, almeno di riflesso, sentano l’influenza dell’O.N.B.?⁷⁷¹

Clearly, Gellona’s judgement and views are completely fossilised in his adherence to the party spirit. I believe that through the clearly deliberate absence of school and

⁷⁷⁰ Airoidi Namer, p. 177.

⁷⁷¹ Gellona.

Fascist organisations in the protagonists' lives, Masino implicitly sets natural street education of a sort against education founded on factual and propagandist knowledge, which is irrelevant to the growing-up process. In his critical review of *Periferia*, Adriano Grande questions the fact that in such a large group of children none of them has a normal, sound family. This, for Grande, makes the novel hardly credible.⁷⁷²

5.1.2 Motherhood, suffering and death: 'Latte', 'Figlio'

Masino's interest in unmasking the degradation of the conventional family is also evident in two stories⁷⁷³ included in *Racconto Grosso*, 'Latte'⁷⁷⁴ and 'Figlio', dedicated to different aspects of the breakdown in family and parent-child relationships. Both contain a negative image of the experience of motherhood. In Airoidi Namer's words:

L'alveo materno non è che un pericoloso luogo di passaggio e ricorrente è l'abbinamento generare-uccidere, culla e bara, fare e disfare i figli, generarli alla vita e partorirli alla morte.⁷⁷⁵

In particular, 'Latte' touches the theme of the ingratitude of one's offspring, while 'Figlio', as seen in Chapter 3, deals with the issue of abortion.

In 'Latte', family disruption is represented by the exposure of a son's ingratitude towards his old mother. Signora Zanni, an honest widow of humble background, has led a harsh life and made enormous sacrifices to provide for her son, Antonio, who behaves like a dutiful loving son until he marries. The mother welcomes her daughter-in-law, handing over to her the charge of the household, but

⁷⁷² Grande.

⁷⁷³ The short story 'Famiglia' included in *Racconto Grosso* also deals with a family. However, the theme of this short story, already analysed in Chapter 3, is not the degradation of the family. I will therefore not analyse this here.

⁷⁷⁴ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 91-106.

⁷⁷⁵ Airoidi Namer, p. 171.

the girl becomes hostile, stirring Antonio up against his mother. The son is progressively brainwashed by his wife, who depicts the old woman as a burden and finally persuades him to send her to a hospice, after clearing his debt. The son believes that a jar full of milk is a good way to pay back his mother for what she gave him in childhood, and an appropriate method to settle arrears: ‘– Se io ti dessi un orcio di latte ti avrei reso quello che mi desti e potrei mandarti, tranquillo, via da questa casa’.⁷⁷⁶ Hurt by this proposal, Mrs Zanni turns to her priest, who advises her to accept the jar of milk, but to ask her son to put his arm in up to the shoulder to remember the arm that constantly supported him while he was sucking her milk. Antonio is pleased she is willing to agree. However, when he takes his arm out, it is covered with blood:

– Vuoi vedere, mamma? Non ti ho ingannata – e in così dire rapidamente tolse dall’orcio il braccio e lo alzò in aria per mostrarglielo. Allora la moglie dal suo angolo lanciò un urlo feroce e la madre si coprse il volto con lo scialle. La mano e il braccio di Antonio erano rossi di sangue che gocciava con un rumore sordo sul suo capo e intorno a lui, per terra. [...]

– Come potevo saperlo? A vederlo è latte, latte, latte soltanto.

(*Racconto grosso*, pp. 105-106)

As in other Masinian works, liquids, in this case milk, are never pure and clean, but always recall the lumpiness and redness of menstrual blood. Through the image of blood, Antonio understands that the debt to his mother goes far beyond a few drops of milk: being a mother does not imply merely nourishing the child (the milk), but

⁷⁷⁶ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 101.

gratuitous pain,⁷⁷⁷ sacrifice and self-annihilation (the blood),⁷⁷⁸ re-paid with ingratitude and disrespect. Besides motherhood, Masino also touches on other degrading aspects of family life in this short story. Firstly, she depicts the traditional rivalry and antagonism between mother and daughter-in-law taking it to the extreme, where the girl verbally abuses the old woman and manages to persuade her husband to send his mother away. Secondly, we re-encounter the Masinian topos of the absent-father figure. As seen above for other Masinian families, fathers are either never present (most of the fathers in *Periferia*) or, when they are, they appear as madmen (Giovanni in *Monte Ignoso*) or negative, violent role models (Giovanni and Maria's father in *Periferia*). In this case, instead, the father is portrayed in a positive light, as a victim of his son. One year after the birth of his child, finding himself completely deprived of the love and attention of his wife, who is entirely dedicated to the baby, he dies.⁷⁷⁹ Thus the son, as Louise Rozier also points out, ends up being guilty of two murders: his father's, and, in wanting her to leave her house, also his mother's.⁷⁸⁰ Furthermore, in the whole story Rozier reads a mythical dimension which is worked out through the presence of symbolic objects such as the jar of milk, a double metaphor of maternal nourishment and abandonment, and the scissors in a red velvet case, which Antonio gives his mother as a present, symbols of blood and

⁷⁷⁷ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 95: 'Il bambino crebbe e amava molto sua madre e per la madre l'amore del figlio era come una pena in mezzo al cuore tanto era sempre vivo e palese e senza assopimento'.

⁷⁷⁸ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 99: 'Poiché tutta la vita dell'uomo non è che memoria, si può dire che la madre aveva davvero cominciato a vivere soltanto da quando il figlio s'era sposato; prima non era stata che lo strumento della vita di lui'.

⁷⁷⁹ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 94: 'Ma divenne presto la madre del figlio benedetto del ragioniere Zanni e dal giorno che ebbe partorito si buttò a essere mamma tanto che il timido ragioniere non trovando più in casa ove riversare il suo pavido affetto, né mobile o fiore o raggio di sole che non fosse sempre e tutto accaparrato e sommerso nell'amore che la madre aveva per il figlio, triste triste di giorno in giorno si sentiva sempre più freddo, e quando il bambino compì un anno, il padre, ridotto esiguo e viscido come un pezzetto di ghiaccio che si scioglie, lasciò il mondo'.

⁷⁸⁰ Rozier, p. 92.

the cutting of the umbilical cord, that is of life and separation of mother and child.⁷⁸¹ I would also add that there is not only a mythical, but also a religious dimension, which, unlike in other Masinian works,⁷⁸² has a positive connotation here: going to Church, for Signora Zanni, means finding comfort and support. Furthermore, the priest's advice, taken as an act of faith hardly understood and barely questioned, proves miraculous.

In *Racconto Grosso* there is a second story in which Masino exposes the degradation of the family unit: 'Figlio'.⁷⁸³ Here I shall consider only the view that Masino gives of abortion and, most relevantly, of motherhood. It is important to start by saying that there is no anti-abortion propaganda. Although portrayed as a vile crime, abortion is depicted in such a negative light as to introduce an ontological discourse on matter and form, being and non-being, rather than to provoke a sociological, ethical discussion on life and the human right to put an end to it. The narrator's tone in the depiction of abortion as a kind of assassination, despite being extremely explicit, gives out no personal participation or individual moral judgement on the issue. This is why I believe that the topic is used by the author as a springboard to develop other themes, among which, that of motherhood, rather than to divulge her personal views. Significantly, the words 'abortion' or 'termination' appear nowhere in the story; in their place, Masino uses more violent terms which I believe make the description even more vivid for the reader, removing at the same time all suggestion of an anti-abortion pamphlet written out of personal conviction.

⁷⁸¹ Rozier, p. 92.

⁷⁸² In Masino's works, Church and religion are not often mentioned, but when they are, they are generally given a negative presentation. In *Monte Ignoso*, for example, the biblical figures and the portrait of the priest are depicted as almost diabolic presences in Emma's life. A more positive image of a clergy man is that of the Capuchin father in 'Paura'.

⁷⁸³ I analysed the protagonist of this story in Chapter 3 where I also looked at its richness in meaning: the theme of being/not being, sight, the loss and acquisition of identity, matter and form.

Here are a few examples: ‘Un delitto premeditato’,⁷⁸⁴ ‘costruzione macabra’,⁷⁸⁵ ‘lo scempio’,⁷⁸⁶ ‘distruggere un altro uomo’,⁷⁸⁷ ‘disfare’⁷⁸⁸ ‘un estraneo avrebbe frugato e sbranato quanto avevano espresso’,⁷⁸⁹ ‘quel ventre che è già una bara’.⁷⁹⁰ I should also point out that Masino, here, does not criticise conception outside wedlock either (let us not forget that although she herself had no children, her partner had a son from his previous marriage). What Masino faults is that conception should occur not for love of a child, but simply from two lovers’ greed, pleasure and arrogance in feeling free to generate and to destroy life.⁷⁹¹ As we have seen elsewhere in Masino’s narrative writing, here too, the role of the man is a negative one; the man makes the decisions, which the woman accepts as final, and then he leaves her without assuming any responsibility in the process (again, Masino depicts an absent father). Louise Rozier describes this man as an ‘inetto’ who plays a secondary role in the short story.⁷⁹² This may be a valid interpretation if one only reads the words: ‘l’uomo l’aveva aiutata nella costruzione macabra’⁷⁹³ and ‘vado se no m’avvilisco troppo’,⁷⁹⁴ which hint at a merely secondary function in planning the logistics of the termination and suggest total moral weakness (‘m’avvilisco’). On the contrary, I believe that the

⁷⁸⁴ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 109.

⁷⁸⁵ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 109.

⁷⁸⁶ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 110.

⁷⁸⁷ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 112.

⁷⁸⁸ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 112.

⁷⁸⁹ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 112.

⁷⁹⁰ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 113.

⁷⁹¹ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 110-111: ‘Che quel figlio non doveva nascere era sempre stata per loro una certezza, pure si erano accaniti a farlo e ogni ora infeconda li aveva umiliati fino alle lacrime. Diceva il padre: – Perché dovevo privarmi della mia qualità d’uomo: di realizzare un altro uomo con la donna che amo? Se avessi sprecato la mia forza di maschio con te sarei stato uno scioperato, un vanitoso. Con te lavoravo e faticavo, dovevo dimostrarti con tanto sangue, con tanto sudore, il miracolo di un figlio’.

Note that the very act of making love is described as painful effort rather than intimacy, affection or instinct. Depicting sexual intercourse almost as a duty, Masino may wish to show how everything is ruled by laws. By aborting the child, the two are subtracting themselves from the ultimate law, that of creation.

⁷⁹² Rozier, p. 93: ‘la figura paterna continua ad assumere un ruolo secondario e viene presentato in tutta la sua inettitudine’.

⁷⁹³ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 109.

⁷⁹⁴ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 113.

male lover has a far more negative, evil and opportunistic side to him; he has a primary role in the decision-making and takes advantage of his lover's utter adoration and obedience. He is the one who really decides to terminate the pregnancy: '– Bisogna che il bambino non nasca – riprese l'uomo. – Lo sai.'⁷⁹⁵ counting on the woman's complicity based on her almost religious veneration of him: 'La ragazza ubbidiva al suo maschio come si prega',⁷⁹⁶ 'Sempre capiva che quello che faceva con il suo uomo era necessario'.⁷⁹⁷ At one point, Masino does suggest doubt in the girl's mind, but this is not strong enough for her to even contemplate going against the man's will:

Stava raccolta e attentissima con una gran paura in mezzo agli occhi di distrarsi, di volgere da lui il capo un attimo e mettersi ad ascoltare il figlio remoto e cupo nel ventre, portarlo nel mondo come un ricatto al padre. (*Racconto Grosso*, p. 112)

Her 'gran paura in mezzo agli occhi di distrarsi' shows she agrees out of an act of obedience rather than sound conviction. This reveals that the man, rather than an *inetto*, is an opportunistic manipulator. At the same time, Masino does not depict the girl's action as the mere result of her partner's manipulative influence; the girl is treated entirely as the selfish accomplice in the murder.⁷⁹⁸ She is indeed confused, and to herself tries to justify her choice (it is for the best, her lover and herself deserve a normal life, she can have another child in the future). However, even

⁷⁹⁵ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 111.

⁷⁹⁶ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 111.

⁷⁹⁷ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 112.

⁷⁹⁸ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 111: 'L'uomo da solo, la donna da sola, non erano mai riusciti a capire la necessità di attendere, di risparmiarsi, di usare la vita con avarizia e a ragion veduta: uniti sentivano di dover essere nascosti pazienti massacrati'. In this last quote the distinction between 'l'uomo da solo, la donna da sola' shows that, although the man has an almost hypnotic influence on the girl, she is equally responsible for the murder.

though she is not entirely convinced of their validity (she is aware she will never be able to reproduce the very same baby again),⁷⁹⁹ she carries her action forward.

As I have shown for 'Latte', also in 'Figlio', the idea of motherhood is a negative one, connected with pain, suffering and death. The association motherhood-pain is present from the very moment of conception:

La madre giovanetta lo accolse in sè con un gran sfinimento, come di chi si avvia a sorreggere l'agonia d'una persona amata. Quel figlio le veniva come una sfida a se medesima, creatura che lei e il suo uomo avevano accettata pur sapendo di doverla uccidere. (*Racconto grosso*, p. 109)

and is emphasised through terms from to the semantic area of hardship and suffering: 'gran sfinimento', 'l'agonia', 'una sfida', 'doverla uccidere'. More than once pregnancy is depicted as if the child stole life from the mother: the fetus, inside her womb grows with her juices 'con i succhi di lei',⁸⁰⁰ almost sucking life out of her; similarly while talking to her second son Secondo, the woman says 'tu che ti sei fatto a mie spese'.⁸⁰¹ However, in 'Figlio' the pain of motherhood is linked not just to the fatigue of pregnancy and the children's ingratitude as in 'Latte', but also to the mother's neglect of her duties and the inevitable punishment which awaits for avoiding the law of creation.⁸⁰² After termination the girl is not the same; her sense

⁷⁹⁹ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 113-114: 'Forte, sale scale e scale, cerca chi distrugga la sua razza, senza palpiti nel ventre, quel ventre che è già una bara, e oltre il figlio lei vi ha sepolto la speranza dell'immaginazione. Perché mai più, per quante creature generi, potrà inventare quest'una che prima le ha impresso il grembo, le ha chiesto un prestito minimo di vita e lei già glielo toglie. [...] Si fa paurosa e ripete fino all'idiozia: – Presto ti rifarò, allora che potrò portarti bene per il mondo. – Cerca dimostrare al figlio che crearsi è avvenimento quotidiano e facile, accidentale quasi. Ma sa che è menzogna inutile'.

⁸⁰⁰ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 111.

⁸⁰¹ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 127.

⁸⁰² See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 110-111: '– Come potevo rifiutarmi a questo orgoglio, tuo e mio, di esserci trovati compagni a spalla a spalla, nelle necessità di fare vita per il mondo? – continuava la madre. Erano scuse, vere ma inservibili. Perché ora dentro il ventre della donna stava il figlio a farsi con i succhi di lei, senza occhi senza bocca senza mani né piedi né vene né cuore, proprio

of guilt lasts forever, she goes through a painful period feeling she cannot give life any more and her maternal instinct compels her to love other people's children. Growing old, she starts to suspect that the roots of a life conceived cannot be completely eliminated, but could return in search of nourishment. The first hint of this intuition comes to her when her son, Secondo, encounters *rosso* and she understands he is her aborted son: '– Le sue ragioni di vita certo restano in me, ché quelle non si possono strappare. E se avrò altri figli forse se ne nutriranno'.⁸⁰³ At the end of the story she accepts *rosso* as her baby, even after he murders Secondo, and she steps in to carry out her mother role for both of them.⁸⁰⁴

5.1.3 *A due per volta li fa:*⁸⁰⁵ *Nascita e morte della massaia*

Masino's view of motherhood as a painful experience is expressed in a very articulate way in the novel *Nascita e morte della massaia*, despite the fact the book contains only two images of children.⁸⁰⁶ The first is that of young Massaia, the other, to be found towards the end of the novel, is that of the twelve children the *uomo bruno* had with the Massaia's young lookalike. These children have no identity, they all bear the Massaia's real name (which remains unknown) and they are all identical, as if mass-produced. The creation of puppet-like characters without a name, face or identity, (also in 'Figlio', where only Secondo bears a name, albeit a number) is, as previously explained, the main feature of the novel. However, here, the lack of identity has a deeper significance, as it symbolises

ancora solo un'idea metodicamente fissa nella volontà di nascere, e le parole dell'uomo e della donna, fino a oggi, l'avevano convinto a maturarsi'.

⁸⁰³ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 121.

⁸⁰⁴ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 145: '– Dormi, tu, ora, tu il figlio mio. Non fare brutti sogni. Poi se ne andava cauta in punta di piedi, trascinandosi dietro il cadavere'.

⁸⁰⁵ Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 260.

⁸⁰⁶ The novel provides an intricate discourse on women and the role of women during the Fascist era. However, exploring this topic would be to lose sight of the main theme of the section and of the thesis. I will, therefore, only consider motherhood in *Nascita e morte della massaia*.

Masino's perception of birth as the fragmentation of the parents' and particularly the mother's body:

Erano un uomo tanto grasso che si poteva credere fossero tre persone strettamente abbracciate, seduto a terra, da cui si staccavano correndo e cui correndo tornavano pezzi di tutta quella carne in sembianza di bambini. (*Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 258)

“Cara” le gridò di slancio la Massaia chinandosi ad abbracciarla, ma subito sentì che l'altra la odiava profondamente. Era ridotta una catasta di ossa dove si agguattavano gli occhi spaventati, grossi. Portava al seno due lattanti.

“A due per volta li fa” sghignazzò ancora l'uomo.

La Massaia contò i bambini.

“Quanti. Quanti nomi. Come si chiamano?”

“Come te” rispose la madre. “Tutti come te. Sono dodici. Così ha voluto.”

“Tutti? E come fanno a capire quando ne chiamate uno o l'altro?”

“Non capiscono” ruggì il padre “non vengono affatto o vengono tutti insieme. (*Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 260)

In the first quotation, the image of the children that 'si staccavano' and then 'tornavano pezzi' of their father's large body, captures very well the idea of offspring consisting of physical parts of a fragmented whole, the parental body. The ghostly image of the mother in the second quotation, on the other hand, shows up the effects on the mother's body: the woman has two children at a time, her body is nothing but bones 'catasta di ossa dove si agguattavano gli occhi spaventati, grossi'. The heading of this subsection comes from this second passage. Masino's idea of motherhood as the disintegration of the individual is present from the very beginning of the novel when the Massaia herself states that what makes her scared of maternity is not the

fear of the physical pain of labour, but the concern about the ‘dirompersi dell’individuo’,⁸⁰⁷ the shattering of the heart, the brain and the body into many small pieces ‘distributed’ to the children.⁸⁰⁸ Her sterility is thus both physical and spiritual. Tristana Rorandelli’s article, ‘Nascita e morte della Massaia di Paola Masino e la questione del corpo materno nel fascismo’,⁸⁰⁹ is interesting here for the author analyses how motherhood is presented in the novel, contextualising it in the socio-cultural Fascist perception of maternity. In her study, Rorandelli explores the Fascist view of the female body, a view which considered it as being naturally predisposed to maternity, a means to achieving two political objectives: to increase the population and supply a larger number of soldiers to help realise Fascist colonial ambitions. During the years of the regime, therefore, as Rorandelli points out, we witness a socialisation and mechanisation of the female body in the name of demographic and international politics. The Massaia’s fear of motherhood derives from this Fascist concept of the female body as a mere means to serve the expansion and glory of the Nation. Masino is not the only woman writer of her time to protest against this concept of women and maternity. Others, such as Sibilla Aleramo or Alba de Céspedes, offer, as Rorandelli points out, opposed ideas of the female body, emotions, sexuality and maternity. The singularity of Masino’s protest in *Nascita e morte della massaia* is that, instead of proposing a model explicitly contrasting the dominant one, she uses a subtle irony to undermine it. The caricaturesque *uomo*

⁸⁰⁷ Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, p. 233.

⁸⁰⁸ See Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*, pp. 232-233: ‘Parlavo del mio cuore, dell’animo mio, che, mentre durante la puerizia e l’adolescenza, attesero e convocarono e proclamarono la maternità, appena fui donna la scacciarono da me stessa come il più grave dei soprusi; il pensarne mi era un rovello, quasi mi avessero detto che quel cuore, quel cervello, quel corpo, saranno spaccati in pezzi minuti e distribuiti a creature ignote, i figli futuri. Castigo del peccato non è il dolore del parto; castigo è questo dirompersi dell’individuo, questa comunione forzosa, smemorarsi e trovare uno scopo fuori dalla tua ragione in quella di un altro essere e non di tutti gli esseri egualmente’.

⁸⁰⁹ Rorandelli.

bruno and the young under-nourished mother mentioned above, amply support Rorandelli's point about the use of irony.

5.1.4 *Cercare le madri, appariva follia*:⁸¹⁰ Ortese's degraded Neapolitan families

In Ortese the theme of family and the degradation of the family unit is not a core topic as in Masino, where it is developed in a sophisticated and articulate way. However, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, a realistic and graphic novel, does present images of decay and disruption of family bonds. The works dealing with the extraordinary (from *Angelici dolori* to the trilogy) also present examples of disrupted families, but the theme is not explored by the writer. The dysfunction of Elminia's family in *Il cardillo addolorato* or Decimo's tormented relationship with his two sons in *Alonso e i visionari* are simply instrumental to the plot, rather than being a theme that the author chooses to dwell upon.

In the short story 'Oro a Forcella' (introduced in Chapter 2 above with the discussion of the exploitation of two children by their mother at the pawn office), the first-person narrator walks along Forcella and San Biagio dei Librai, two of Naples' busiest and most densely-populated thoroughfares, while on her way to a pawnbroker's. In this squalid, dingy setting, which is crawling with beggars, children are very present and shown not only watching people come and go, but also taking an active part in the build-up to chaos. They live rough in the streets, in utter poverty, half naked and are often compared to rats.⁸¹¹ Their families are

⁸¹⁰ Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 66.

⁸¹¹ See Ortese *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 65-66: 'Sgomentava soprattutto il numero dei bambini, forza scaturita dall'inconscio, niente affatto controllata e benedetta, a chi osservasse l'alone nero che circondava le loro teste. Ogni tanto ne usciva qualcuno da un buco a livello del marciapiede, muoveva qualche passetto fuori, come un topo, e subito rientrava'. The image of the rat, in this case, is not used negatively to symbolise a repulsive animal living in dirty areas (Ortese's love for animals is all-encompassing). The rat suggests the idea of an animal living hidden underground shunning contact above and surfacing rarely.

neither portrayed nor even hinted at, mothers appear sporadically, but the mother-child relationship does not seem to be made of love, affection and care:

Cercare le madri, appariva follia. Di tanto in tanto ne usciva qualcuna da dietro la ruota di un carro, gridando orribilmente afferrava per il polso il bambino, lo trascinava in una tana da cui poi fuggivano urli e pianti, e si vedeva un pettine brandito in aria, o una bacinella di ferro appoggiata su una sedia, dove lo sfortunato era costretto a piegare la sua dolorosa faccia. (*Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 66-67)

The first sentence, ‘Cercare le madri, appariva follia’, which I have also used in the heading for this subsection, conveys the idea of the surrounding degradation where children are left alone, unsupervised and dirty in the streets, and hints also at loose customs, which have led to many orphans being abandoned. The few mothers present appear aggressive and violent when carrying out the simplest of maternal duties such as brushing their children’s hair: ‘gridando orribilmente afferrava per il polso il bambino’, ‘un pettine brandito in aria’. Once again, they are compared to rats: ‘lo trascinava in una tana’. Paradoxically enough, the shops are peaceful and full of images of a mother and a son: the Virgin and the child Jesus.

In Chapter 2, three child figures from the short story ‘La città involontaria’ were considered: Luigino, Scarpetella and Nunzia. However, there are more children in the Granili and they all appear to be either orphans, like Luigino, or to belong to an absent, careless family. The only positive family unit is that of *maestro* Cutolo, who lives there with his two beautiful and polite children and his wife, who works as a household maid. Cutolo raises his children in accordance with God’s word and feels sorry for those who do not have the same opportunity. He would like to teach the other children the principles of religion and set them on the right path, but the

children of the Granili are not interested.⁸¹² Life in the street is a prison from which they cannot escape.

5.2 Playtime

“Provare a giocare” non vuol dire nulla. Giocare è uno stato d’animo non è un’azione. Alcuni bambini o uomini o vecchi giocano, come altri soffrono, altri sono felici, altri vivono rigidamente gioie e dolori perchè pensano che tutto non è che dovere. Il gioco è tutto arbitrio, ma arbitrio cosciente che si crea appassionate gioie mirabili dolori come un nulla basta a precipitarlo altrove o a infrangerlo come un sogno, ma senza risveglio. Perchè giocare vuol dire essere sempre distratti da se medesimi. (*Periferia*, p. 175)

I have chosen to start this section on games with this quotation from *Periferia* to show the concept Masino had of playtime. Playing is not a simple pastime which can be deliberately started “‘Provare a giocare’ non vuol dire nulla’, it is a psychological predisposition, a mood ‘uno stato d’animo’, not an action that can be undertaken whenever one wishes. However, once the mood is right and the rules of the games have been agreed, children, within those limits, ‘arbitrio cosciente’, are free and distracted from themselves. A similar definition of games can be found in Pirandello’s *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*:

Scenografi, macchinisti, apparatori, falegnami, muratori e stuccatori, elettricisti, sarti e sarte, modiste, fioraj, tant’altri operaj addetti alla calzoleria, alla cappelleria, all’armeria, ai magazzini della mobilia

⁸¹² See Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 85: “‘Amo tanto i bambini, qui ci sarebbe tanto da fare’” proseguì con tristezza ansiosa il Cutolo, guardando verso la porta. “In questa casa ce ne saranno almeno ottocento, di questi birichini, ma non conoscono la santa obbedienza, purtroppo non sono educati. Talvolta io li chiamo, vorrei insegnare loro i principi della nostra santa religione, qualche canzoncina ideale, così, per raffinarli. Ma si rifiutano, si rifiutano sempre””.

antica e moderna, al guardaroba, son tutti affaccendati, ma non sul serio e neppure per giuoco.

Solo i fanciulli han la divina fortuna di prendere sul serio i loro giuochi. La meraviglia è in loro; la rovesciano su le cose con cui giuocano, e se ne lasciano ingannare. Non è più un giuoco; è una realtà meravigliosa.⁸¹³

As for Masino's children: 'giocare vuol dire essere sempre distratti da se medesimi', similarly, for Pirandello's children, playing means losing oneself in the realm of imagination 'e se ne lasciano ingannare. Non è più un giuoco; è una realtà meravigliosa.' It is interesting to note that, despite the similarity between the two concepts of playing as entering another reality and living it to the full, Pirandello restricts this possibility only to children when he states: 'Solo i fanciulli han la divina fortuna di prendere sul serio i loro giuochi', while Masino admits adults and the elderly play as well: 'Alcuni bambini o uomini o vecchi giocano'. People of any age can, according to Masino, have access to the world of games and live them with the same intensity as other people suffer, rejoice or live life dutifully. This theme is explored below, in the subsection devoted to childish adults. In discussing Masino's concept of games it is important to note that, although Masinian children are fully immersed in their games and live them as a different, imaginary reality, this does not mean that the new, artificial world they enter is completely detached from the real life they live outside playtime. Games, especially in *Periferia*, are in fact constantly

⁸¹³ Pirandello, p. 48. In *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*, the fantasy world of children's games is compared to the imaginary world created by the cinema through the camera lens. While the imaginary reality of games is lived and perceived as real by children, that of the cinema is seen as fake, artificial by those who work in it, for they do not do it in earnest. Implicitly Pirandello takes a stand against the progressively predominant popularity of cinema over stage performances in which actors, in close contact with their audience and without the mediation of a machine, draw their spectators into another reality. The quotation in the text continues as follows, Pirandello, p. 48: 'Qui è tutto il contrario. Non si lavora per giuoco, perché nessuno ha voglia di giocare. Ma come prendere sul serio un lavoro, che altro scopo non ha, se non d'ingannare – non se stessi – ma gli altri? E ingannare, mettendo sù le più stupide finzioni, a cui la macchina è incaricata di dare la realtà meravigliosa?'

contaminated by the children's reality and they become an opportunity for the children to voice their fears, their outlook on life and often to share painful experiences.

The world of games is not only represented in *Periferia*, but appears in both authors' works and it is through playtime that we really perceive the complexity of insight which both Masino and Ortese have into the world of children. First of all, both authors challenge the idea that children are simple naive beings, unaware of what happens around them, who do not understand the world of adults and live in happy ignorance in an imaginary world of their own. Both, in fact, show exactly the opposite: children do see, hear and understand (maybe not fully, but well enough) what is happening around them, they are affected by the environment they live in and by their parents' behaviour. Their reactions to circumstances can be seen in their games and talk. Secondly, the game theme allows Masino and Ortese to reveal the truth behind the romantic vision of childhood as an innocent phase in life, and show that children are not entirely good-natured, but often ambiguous creatures, with sinister and cruel traits. Thirdly, the two authors portray a group of often marginalised adults, mocked or even bullied by society: they are adults who behave like children, adults with a Peter Pan syndrome of sorts or some form of madness.⁸¹⁴

5.2.1 *Io lo so. Io sto attenta a quello che accade*⁸¹⁵

As seen in section one above, *Periferia* gives us an outstanding portrait of children playing together and talking about life and their family during playtime. The novel consists of fourteen chapters, one for each month of the year and two introductory ones. Each month has its specific weather conditions, moods and associated games.

⁸¹⁴ In Chapter 2 I presented one of these 'childish adults'. Nanni is shown as a victim of social conventions which do not allow him to be what he really is and oblige him to live in 'his reality'.

⁸¹⁵ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 80; p. 94.

The children's behaviour, conversations and games clearly show how much of the adult world children can assimilate. For this reason I chose to head this subsection with two sentences uttered by Ella on two separate occasions when she is with her friends. She says 'Io lo so'⁸¹⁶ when sharing with her brothers the awareness of her mother's affair with Giorgio, and she states 'Io sto attenta a quello che accade'⁸¹⁷ when she reveals that it is parents who bring presents at Christmas. Throughout the stories, family life and perceptions of adulthood are interpreted and given voice almost constantly during play. For this reason, I would disagree with Airoidi Namer when she describes games as a form of escapism.⁸¹⁸ Far from being a way to forget daily experiences and its brutality, they are a means to understand life. I would disagree also with Giovanni Ansaldo who, in his review of *Periferia*, denies adult influence on children, saying that their development takes place independently, away from the adult world and its possible influence.⁸¹⁹ Two of many examples should serve to support my point. The first from January, when games are characterised by the snow which provides entertainment but also distress. The children and the new arrival, Luca, build a snowman. Fran wants it to be a hero, but Carlo thinks he looks like Giorgio, their mother's lover. The following day, the children build a bride for

⁸¹⁶ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 94: '– No – disse Ella – così si fa quando ci si è già baciati. Io lo so. Mamma si mette sempre così sul petto di Giorgio dopo che si sono baciati. – Sì – disse Carlo. – L'ho visti anche io. Sembrano proprio loro –. E rise'.

⁸¹⁷ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 80: '– Il Natale – disse Ella – il Natale sei tu Romana. Credi che no lo sappia io, che il Natale sono i padri e le madri? Io sto attenta a quello che accade'.

⁸¹⁸ See Airoidi Namer, p. 179: 'In realtà, il libro propone due antidoti all'estremizzata pazzia dell'incubo quotidiano celato dalle facciate rispettabili del quartiere medio borghese: l'uno consiste nell'evasione in un mondo virtuale di follia immaginifica, l'altro nell'invenzione (per neutralizzare l'azione nefasta di donne infelici e/o crudeli) di una sorta di madre ideale, di una bambina adulta ovvero di un'adulta (quasi completamente) infantile, madre/sorella del proprio figlio (e poco importa che sia anche moglie di un 'qualcuno' che non compare mai)'.

⁸¹⁹ See Giovanni Ansaldo, 'I ragazzi e i "grandi"', *Il Lavoro*, 1 June 1933: 'Essa fa vedere, invece, come la vita dei ragazzi, la vita vera, la vita profonda, si svolga lontana dalle peripezie dei "grandi"; e come le loro idee e le loro esperienze si formino per vie proprie. [...] I "grandi" non influiscono affatto, perchè non hanno niente da dire, nè da insegnare. I ragazzi sono uomini; uomini completissimi e complicatissimi, con tutte le passioni umane, e con tutti i giri e i rigiri e gli attorcimenti delle passioni umane: uomini, soltanto, fisicamente non del tutto sviluppati, e un po' deboli'.

their snowman and Ella and Carlo see Giorgio and their mother in the two figures. Clearly the children are neither escaping from their family life nor avoiding its influence, but trying to understand it and to interpret it through games. Hurt and full of anger, Fran destroys the two snowmen in a fit of rage:

Ma Fran era diventato pallidissimo e precipitatosi improvviso sulle due statue a calci, a pugni, a testate le sfondò, le abbattè al suolo, poi vi montò sopra e le calpestava: come impazzato a grandi manate spargeva in aria la neve che era stato corpo di quell'immagine orribile e dove quella neve, dopo un breve volo, cadeva, lui si precipitava a calpestarla ancora, a schiacciarla e distruggerla dentro la terra nera. Quando le due statue furono livellate al suolo, con voce imperiosa, da uomo, Fran disse:

– Io aspetto che nevichi ancora, perchè qua deve tornare pulito.

(Periferia, p. 94)

Fran's fury manifests his suffering for his mother's behaviour and shows how much he loves and wishes to protect his father. Furthermore, the word 'pulito' reveals his perception of the affair as an impure, dirty act. The second example is an episode which occurs in February with the children in Carnival costume. Armando dresses up as a martyr, a reflection of the gratuitous violence and abuse he is subjected to on a daily basis:

Mamma quando mi ha visto vestito così ha detto che la pigliavo in giro e mi ha dato questo schiaffo, qui a sinistra. Questo è proprio vero non ce l' ho dipinto. Si vede anche meglio. Le frustrate e i lividi un po' sono vecchi e un po' dipinti, ma non fanno lo stesso effetto. Invece il suo schiaffo è proprio bello, ci sono rimaste le cinque dita più bianche e gonfie gonfie. Se volete potete toccarle. Non c'è trucco.

– Ti ha preso in pieno – constatò Dich – ci vuole una certa abilità. Ha

le mani molto grosse. (*Periferia*, p. 101)

Armando's costume is not at all a form of escapism from his reality of daily abuse, on the contrary, it is a way of sharing it and discussing it with his playmates. Furthermore, his choice of the martyr outfit, and his mother's contribution to the 'credibility' of the costume, once more prove that the children's games occur in close contact with their negative adult models.

The games played in *quartiere* Pannosa are both the traditional group games such as hopscotch or hide-and-seek, as well as those invented by the children themselves. Carlo creates the game 'Cleopatra e il matto',⁸²⁰ which does not stir up much enthusiasm and so is replaced by Anna's idea of acting out the play *Hamlet*, or, rather a version of what the children believe to be its plot.⁸²¹ Anna is the stage manager and gives everyone their part. The nature of the drama and their attempt to reconstruct it in their own manner, lead the children to talk about issues which one would not expect children to be dealing in so a profound way; they range from madness⁸²² to God⁸²³ or as, below, child birth:

⁸²⁰ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 51.

⁸²¹ From a literary point of view, the insertion of this scene from *Hamlet* shows the hybrid nature of the Masinian text which often interweaves great literature of the past into her narrative. Not surprisingly, the play chosen for their performance is the great Shakespearean tragedy, whose main themes are madness, hidden family secrets, doubts about the existence of a life after death and a play within the play where the boundaries between fiction and reality become blurred.

The fact that it is *Hamlet*, in particular, which the children act out may also be a reference to a tradition within the de Chirico family. Giorgio de Chirico portrayed his brother Alberto Savinio twice dressed up as Hamlet, see Baldacci and Roos, eds., p. 68: 'Il ritratto del fratello Alberto inguainato in una calzamaglia nera con pizzi al collo e ai polsi – in costume di Amleto secondo la tradizione familiare.' See also de Chirico, *Ritratto del fratello*, 1909, oil on canvas, Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie. See also Baldacci and Roos, eds., p. 68. De Chirico's mother had a habit of dressing up her two sons and particularly Alberto after the fashion of the Elizabethan era, see Giorgio de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), p. 42: 'Mio fratello era il "bello" della famiglia e nostra madre ne era molto fiera; lo vestiva con grandi baveri di trina che spiccavano sulla casacca di un blu oltremare'.

⁸²² See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 59:

'AMLETO – Povera Ofelia, come mai sei impazzita?
OFELIA – I dispiaceri di famiglia, signore. Pazienza.
AMLETO – Ma non hai nessuno che ti sorvegli?

ELLA – Ma perchè i bambini maschi nascono dagli uomini e le bambine femmine nascono dalle donne. Se tu sei un maschio ti deve fare un maschio.

ANNA (*arrossisce e sorride imbarazzata*) – Questo non lo sapevo proprio. Credevo che facessero tutto quelle donne che si vedono in giro con un gran pancione.

ELLA – E gli uomini con il pancione non li hai mai visti? Quelli che ce l'hanno a fare, secondo te? Mica per bellezza, no? A me interessano molto questi problemi della natura. (*Periferia*, pp. 55-56)

This extract shows up, on the one hand Ella's and Anna's attempt to discuss the dynamics of child birth within their limited knowledge of life and, on the other, the lack of interaction and communication with the adult world, which is so withdrawn into itself, that it never provides the children with the explanations they require about the simple facts of life. Even in the sad reality of *quartiere* Pannosa's children, Masino cannot but tint the dialogues with a touch of humour: 'E gli uomini con il pancione non li hai mai visti? Quelli che ce l'hanno a fare, secondo te? Mica per bellezza, no?'

As regards the children's transformation of a play into a game, it is interesting to compare it to Elsa Morante's 'Il gioco segreto'⁸²⁴ in the collection *Lo scialle*

OFELIA – Mamma lavora tutto il giorno. Papà è morto in guerra. Non ho nessuno'.

⁸²³ See Masino, *Periferia*, pp. 61-62:

‘– Ma sì – disse Anna – è meglio che ci siano i cattivi. Così è venuto Gesù, e la sua è una storia molto bella. Lui, sai, era piccolo e giocava con gli altri bambini in mezzo alla strada e col fango facevano uccellini che poi mettevano a seccare al sole; e quelli degli altri bambini quando erano secchi si spaccavano, ma quelli di Gesù aprivano le ali e volavano in cielo cantando.

– Non è mica una gran bravura per uno che è figlio di Dio – disse Dich.

– Ma è già una bravura essere figlio di Dio – rispose Anna.

– E poi – aggiunse Ella – è stato molto bravo a morire. A lui che era immortale certo gli ci è voluto il doppio che a uno di noi.

– Di che cosa è morto? – volle sapere Carlo.

– Di essere figlio di Dio – rispose Fran tetro.

– Ma – gridò Carlo indignatissimo – era un egoista questo Dio. Ogni babbo buono muore lui invece del suo bambino. E anche le mamme’.

⁸²⁴ Morante, *Lo scialle andaluso*, pp. 75-94.

andaluso. Antonia, Giovanni and Piero are the three children of the *marchese* and *marchesa* whose names are never mentioned. Parents are absent⁸²⁵ and the three siblings live in utter isolation in a palace where they have easy access to a vast library. Books become a source of imagination and inspiration for their games. They play at night when everyone is asleep. Rehearsing as though on a stage, they act out the roles of the protagonists of a story of chivalry to the extent that reality and imagination merge.⁸²⁶ The game seems slowly to go beyond the children's reality to such an extent that, once found out and told off by the *marchesa*, Antonia overreacts with a crisis of fits and convulsions. She falls ill and Giovanni runs away, worsening his already bad health. Giovanni and Antonia used to play the part of two lovers, Isabella and Giovanni, and their relationship within the game along with the physical pain they suffer once discovered, seem to hint at the awakening of sexuality, perhaps even of an incestuous form. Neither Ortese nor Masino touches upon the theme of sexuality at a young age. Even in *Periferia*, where the children are very uninhibited and tackle all sorts of subjects, their most intimate relationship is the engagement between Fran and Lisa which, far from bearing any sexual or affective implication, is simply a way to imitate an adult convention. Morante, on the other hand, does treat sexuality and in 'L'uomo dagli occhiali',⁸²⁷ another short story from *Lo scialle andaluso*, she also hints at the theme of the sexual abuse of children.

⁸²⁵ See Morante, *Lo scialle andaluso*, pp. 81-82: 'La *marchesa*, occupata nelle sue funzioni di economista, non sorvegliava troppo l'educazione e l'istruzione dei fanciulli. Le bastava che tacessero e non si muovessero'.

⁸²⁶ See Morante, *Lo scialle andaluso*, p. 83: 'I loro personaggi uscirono del tutto dalla nebbia dell'invenzione, con suono d'armi e fruscio di vesti. Acquistarono un corpo di carne ed una voce, e per i fanciulli cominciò una doppia vita. [...] Così viva era la forza della finzione, che ciascuno dimenticava la propria persona reale'.

⁸²⁷ Morante, *Lo scialle andaluso*, pp. 19-29.

It is also interesting to note how, in their games, children not only tackle concepts they cannot fully grasp, but also use words without knowing what they mean:

Dubita che le stelle sian di fuoco, Ofelia, ma non dubitare che ti voglio tanto bene. Sei tu casta?

LISA – Che cosa è casta, Anna?

ANNA (*che aveva guardato nel dizionario*) – Istituto politico o religioso. Di' di sì.

OFELIA – Sì, Amleto. (*Periferia*, p. 58)

Anna has clearly looked up the word, but the dictionary terminology also proves inaccessible to the girl. By picking up the obscure and unfriendly definition, once again, Masino appears to be criticising conventional sources of knowledge traditionally offered to children such as school or dictionaries. On the pretext of using unfamiliar vocabulary, she also introduces a swear word, lending a touch of humour for the reader. During Carnival, outspoken and jealous Nena sees beautiful Lisa dressed up as a bride and swears at her. This leaves Lisa and the other children, who were all expecting a compliment, puzzled at Nena's comment:

Alzandosi sulle punte dei piedi le si avvicinò per quanto poteva, arricciò le labbra come per raccogliere una parola che le fosse scivolata. Lisa e i fanciulli si piegarono verso di lei sorridendo impacciati come chi non si sente degno della lode che riceve.

La bambina protese il mento aguzzo, disse calma:

– Un troiaio.

[...]

E se ne andò.

– Troiaio – ripeté Lisa dopo un po' di tempo – forse Ella lo sa che cosa vuol dire. (*Periferia*, p. 104)

Besides describing an episode with humour, this quotation shows that the class divide is also present amongst the children. Nena, the greengrocer's daughter uses a swearword which the other middle class children do not understand. Once again, the influence of the adult can be perceived: Nena is probably accustomed to a more down-to-earth lexis than her peers who belong to a higher social class.

5.2.2 *A fare il male si gode sempre, ma passa subito e viene sempre più voglia*⁸²⁸

As previously mentioned, through the characters of Luca and Nena in *Periferia*, the author dismantles the romantic ideal of the child as an almost angelic creature and reveals that there are some who are naturally cruel. This earned Masino some harsh criticism from her contemporaries. Gellona accused Masino of presenting children who are older than their years and who just follow their instincts, when instead they cannot but be innocent creatures and a source of purification for adults.⁸²⁹ Likewise, in a review of *Periferia*, Grande accuses Masino of forcing her literary talent too much by stressing 'tutto quello che di abnorme o di inconsciamente "perverso" si può in loro trovare'.⁸³⁰

E' palese nell'autrice il proposito di darci un libro crudo e realistico, senza limitazioni mentali di nessun genere: il proposito di parlarci dei bambini proprio "come sono". Sempre innocenti i bambini, si sa: e anche i piccoli personaggi di "Periferia" non perdono mai un briciolo della propria innocenza; seppure troppo sovente ci si accorge che essi non ci vengono rappresentati proprio "come sono", bensì come

⁸²⁸ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 85.

⁸²⁹ See Gellona: 'I bimbi sono, per noi, uomini e donne, qualcosa di sacro e puro che va conservato qual' è (*sic in the original text*) per la nostra stessa salvezza spirituale e morale. Senza i bimbi gli uomini sarebbero più cattivi ed incontinenti di quello che sono. Guardare negli occhi puri d'un bimbo è purificarsi. Seguire il ragionamento tenue ma limpido d'un bimbo vuol dire dipanare l'arrufio stesso delle nostre idee tumultuose. Accostarsi all'ingenua freschezza di un bimbo è come immergersi in un fresco bagno d'innocenza che placa ogni rancore e cancella ogni perfido pensiero. La Masino, invece, nel suo romanzo, dove i protagonisti appartengono al mondo piccino, ci presenta dei bambini non solo più grandi di loro, ma di noi stessi, uomini. I loro ragionamenti sono sconcertanti; la loro esistenza non conosce che il marciapiede. I loro istinti non hanno freno'.

⁸³⁰ Grande.

l'autrice deliberatamente vuole che siano: e, ciò che essa vuole che siano, qualche volta è un poco offensivo per la poesia dell'innocenza.⁸³¹

The self-explanatory heading of this subsection contains an emblematic remark from Luca in which he shows he is not just naughty, but really cruel.⁸³² Luca is not only violent and arrogant in his bullying attitude, but he is also capable of atrocious crimes. After Giovanni has run away with his mother, he sends Luca a letter giving him permission to kill his father, which the child had always offered to do. Up to this point, the reader believes the boy is joking, but it soon becomes clear he really intends to carry it through, which surprises even Romana. Luca is about to commit the murder but stops because his victim is laughing in a psychologically disturbing way. Luca believes one cannot kill someone who laughs: 'Io non avevo mai sentito ridere così. Come uno che non può fare altro, come uno che piange quando tutto è finito. Tutto di dentro. Per se solo.'⁸³³

Besides physical violence, the children can also mete out psychological and verbal harassment. Nena asks Armando to find the sea, knowing that the boy cannot see without his spectacles, and then tells him to drink salty sea water, which he naïvely tries to do. Negative traits or behavioural patterns are, however, not confined to these two characters but are shared by the majority of the children in *Periferia*, who all bear a certain ambiguity. At times, they all possess a degree of violence, jealousy, selfishness, falsity, and masochism, which seem to hint at what they will be like when adults. An example of the wicked side of an apparently good child like

⁸³¹ Grande.

⁸³² See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 85: 'Mi piacerebbe tanto avere un babbo e una mamma che si accorgono che io faccio male. Fare il male da solo fa fatica. Certo c'è più bravura.

– Si soffre molto a fare il male? – domandò Anna.

– Si gode sempre, ma passa subito e viene sempre più voglia'.

⁸³³ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 190.

Dich, can be found at the beginning of the novel, when he moves to the square with his family. Fulvia and Dich start a fierce fight and everyone, including two adults, gets ready for what they consider a show.⁸³⁴ The language used is extremely strong, as if, through a careful choice of words, Masino wanted to highlight the violent nature of children, be they boys or girls. When, after the fight, Fulvia bursts into tears, saying that Dich took advantage of her only because she is younger and a female, all the children, even those who supported her, end up deserting her, ‘si allontanarono qualche passo per non essere disturbati dal pianto ridicolo’.⁸³⁵ This suggests that loyalty amongst children, despite being more common than in the adult world, is not always present.

In *Monte Ignoso*, Masino gives us two important examples of childhood’s cruel nature. The first is that of the village children at Barbara’s party:

Una bambina prepotente allineò le più piccole in fila e faceva la maestra picchiandole con allegria. [...] – Ma i due orfani guardavano fisso una rosa, senza avere il coraggio di coglierla. Allora Giovanni la staccò per loro. Tre fanciulli guerrieri sopraggiunsero di corsa e si gettarono sugli orfani rubando la rosa, poi partirono schiamazzando. [...] Ora che si erano accorti di essere i padroni, diventavano sicuri e prepotenti. Si udì qualche brutta parola, venivano intorno a Emma liberamente, urtavano Barbara e le rubavano la sua merenda, parlavano in tono sprezzante con Giovanni. (*Monte Ignoso*, pp. 81-83)

Here the youngsters display negative traits usually associated with adulthood rather than childhood such as, the pleasure gained by inflicting gratuitous violence ‘picchiandole con allegria’, prepotence ‘fanciulli guerrieri’, arrogance ‘si erano accorti di essere i padroni’ and scorn ‘parlavano in tono sprezzante’. The second

⁸³⁴ See Masino, *Periferia*, pp. 23-25.

⁸³⁵ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 26.

instance is where a group of children in a big city are following and harassing an old beggar, whom Barbara believes to be a priest. They mock the man ‘– È un vecchio scemo. I bambini si divertono con lui, come con una bestia’,⁸³⁶ and frighten him without respect for old age or his frailty.⁸³⁷ Both examples give us a view of childhood which is far from being the age of innocence, but rather is full of prevarication and violence, already paving the way to adulthood as Adriano Grande notices in his overall critical review of *Periferia*:

E non si tratta di quella infanzia, idoleggiata e nostalgica, degli scrittori di ricordi: ma dell’infanzia vera, quella che abbiamo attorno nei nostri figli e che pochi si preoccupano di guardare profondamente: quella che prelude alla vita maggiore e ne reca in germe le disposizioni al bene e al male, determinate per sempre, o mutevoli.⁸³⁸

Although Ortese generally classes children in the category of victimised *popoli muti* together with animals and extraordinary creatures, she also presents cases of ambiguous children possessing traits of cruelty. However, while Masino represents children like Luca or Nena who are naturally wicked and mean, Ortese’s description of similar figures is always accompanied by a sort of subtle justification of their behaviour, which can be difficult circumstances, a degraded environment, or lack of love or hope. The implicit explanation for their misdeeds tones down the negativity, which, instead, is undiluted in Masino’s descriptions. In the trilogy, some of the young characters are at the same time both victim and victimiser as they seem to possess a dual nature: that of sweet, innocent beings, as well as of evil creatures. In

⁸³⁶ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 118.

⁸³⁷ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, pp. 119-120: ‘E i bambini schiamazzavano dietro allo scemo chiamandolo Monsignore, come se l’insultassero. Barbara ormai non poteva più farli tacere e non aveva il coraggio di avanzare per paura del cane ringhioso. L’uomo camminava a gran passi senza voltarsi e faceva con le braccia gesti furiosi quasi volesse picchiare la terra e il cielo, ma non poteva difendersi. Gli avevano tolto il bastone e ora glielo mostravano canzonandolo’.

⁸³⁸ Grande.

Chapter 2, I have shown the bad side of Julio in *Alonso e i visionari*, of Alessandrina Duprè in *Il cardillo addolorato* who target Alonso and Hieronymus respectively. In Chapter 4, I have shown how Estrellita in *L'Iguana* at times rebels against her condition playing tricks on her masters or by taking refuge in silence. Despite their meanness, characters such as Julio, Alessandra Dupré and Estrellita are portrayed as children-animals who suffer from a total lack of parental love. This is justification enough for the reader to 'forgive them' and sympathise with them. A parallel between Ortese's and Morante's depiction of animals in *La Storia* has been drawn above. In *La Storia* also there is an 'evil' character, the cat Rossella. Vicious and unloved by the people in the air-raid shelter, 'Secondo l'opinione generale, essa era un tipo di mala vita, cattiva e doppia'.⁸³⁹ The only character she seems to care for is Carlo Vivaldi/Davide Segre, who, instead, rejects her. Rossella gives birth to a kitten and tries to feed him, but having no milk she abandons him to inevitable death. Her behaviour towards her little one is accurately and touchingly described by Morante: 'Né quella sera, né il giorno dopo, non si fece piú rivedere, mentre il gattino agonizzava in mezzo alla paglia'.⁸⁴⁰ Rossella is not only a bad mother, but a murderer also, brutally killing the two canaries Peppiniello and Peppiniella after they have flown out of their cage. As with Estrellita in Ortese's *L'Iguana*, Morante's animals also do not always have positive features. However, it could be argued that Rossella's very nature has been violated by war: she is hungry, can't feed her little one, and has to defend herself by any means, even from the prospect of being eaten by humans.

Many of the children in Ortese's most realistic fiction, such as *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, lack manners and morals. They are wicked and wild, but this is also a result of circumstance, living as they do in an environment of decay and degradation.

⁸³⁹ Morante, 'La Storia', p. 476.

⁸⁴⁰ Morante, 'La Storia', p. 557.

In 'La città involontaria', during the narrator's encounter with maestro Cutolo, we also see gratuitous violence in children:

Mentre parlava, all'uscio rimasto aperto avevano fatto capolino alcune teste d'individui dai sette ai dieci anni. Una decina d'occhi attentissimi, quali rossi e mezzo chiusi, quali pieni di un'avidità animale, giravano in certe orbite incassate. Uno di essi stringeva qualcosa in mano, e aveva un viso particolarmente forte, intelligente. A un tratto, uno dei fratelli Cutolo si mise a urlare e a saltare come un pazzo, tenendosi un piede in mano: "O*i ma', oi ma'!*"; aveva ricevuto una sassata, e nello stesso tempo, così silenziosamente com'erano apparse, quelle quattro o cinque figure disparvero. (*Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 85)

In the Granili, violence is a pastime for the children who are surrounded by decay and entertain no hope for the future. The environment has an almost dehumanising influence on them as we notice from the fact Ortese never mentions the word children, referring to them as: 'alcune teste d'individui', 'Una decina d'occhi', 'quelle quattro o cinque figure'.

'Il silenzio della ragione' also presents glimpses of youngsters who defy the canon of the 'pure and innocent child'. Once again, these are children who are negatively affected by their poor circumstances, rough conditions and lack of hope. The author is sitting on a tram which drives past the trees of Villa Comunale, a park created in the first part of the eighteenth century. Children play in different areas of the park, according to their social class. While middle class children ride their bikes or mopeds along the paths, those belonging to the lower classes hide in the shadows to relieve themselves or to torture animals. Furthermore, from the tram, the author sees some children run towards the windows to show off their genitals, others killing animals or using public spaces as toilets. Boredom and lack of opportunity reign

supreme.⁸⁴¹ As in the other short stories, lower class children possess neither education nor decency and the people around, in this case the passengers, are so used to such degradation, that they do not seem to take any notice. Andrea Baldi explores the condition of this frustrated youth, interpreting their rude gestures as a desperate call for attention, a protest that they do exist and they are alive.⁸⁴² The next encounter with children in ‘Il silenzio della ragione’ is when, from Luigi Compagnone’s window, the author sees a group of poor young people begging alms during Saint Anthony’s week. A little girl at the head of the group, having seen Compagnone, bows and spits at his window, for no reason.⁸⁴³ Once again, her gesture has no

⁸⁴¹ See Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 103-104: ‘Cinque ragazzi di età indefinibile erano seduti su un muretto, aspettando con volti assolutamente inespressivi che la vettura passasse. Quando questa fu alla loro altezza, uno di loro si alzò in piedi, e rapidamente, imitato dagli altri, si sbottonò il davanti dei calzoni. Poi, tenendo il sesso tra le dita, come un fiore, si misero a correre sul muro, tentando di seguire il tram, con richiami striduli, dolenti, appassionati, che volevano attrarre la nostra attenzione su tutto quanto essi possedevano. Non una delle persone ch’erano sedute da quel lato della vettura, e avevano visto, discusse la cosa, e neppure sorrise. Il conducente, che si era alzato un momento in piedi, temendo di mettere sotto qualcuno, tornò a sedersi, sospirando di noia, e affrettò l’andatura, così che presto i cinque infelici disparvero. Ma ne apparivano degli altri, sempre con le stesse facce pallide e intente, e si temeva di capire i motivi di quella malata intensità. Due avevano impiccato una bestiola a un ramo, altri erano intenti a trafiggere una farfalla. Qualcuno orinava qua e là. Non avevano occupazioni ragionevoli. Una pazzia tenera li sollevava. C’era perfino chi levava qualche breve inno alla Vergine’.

⁸⁴² See Baldi, ‘Storie di ordinaria agonia’, pp. 69-70: ‘Questa avvilita esibizione di virilità celebra una prematura perdita dell’innocenza, preludio ai rituali grotteschi della maturità, in sintonia con la perenne messinscena di brutture, miserie e irrazionalità, che gli astanti fingono di ignorare, cercando riparo dietro lo schermo dell’indifferenza. [...] Replica di un canovaccio logoro, l’improvvisato *strip-tease* è archiviato come inconveniente fastidioso, occorrenza trascurabile nell’epidemia di “malata intensità” che serpeggia nei bassifondi partenopei. In assenza di “occupazioni ragionevoli”, questa gioventù sviata non può che compiere atti ostili, indulgendo anche a violenze contro gli animali. Il ricorso primitivo alla fisicità e all’aggressività tenta di levare un grido di ribellione: serrato ogni spiraglio allo svago e alla sana espressione di sé, simili pantomime raggelano la corporeità in una sterile dichiarazione di potenza, giacché a questi ragazzi non rimane che invocare, nello sguardo degli osservatori, un riconoscimento minimo del loro esistere’.

⁸⁴³ See Ortese, *Il mare non bagna Napoli*, pp. 131-132: ‘Veniva avanti, per via Galiani, un gruppo di ragazzetti del vicino borgo marinaio, scalzi e arditi, e li precedeva una bimba di forse sette anni, completamente rapata, vestita di un solo cencio grigio, che le veniva fin sui piedi, lasciando scoperto il petto, a modo di una dama. Questa, che doveva essere una specie di capo della turba, portava in mano un bastone, in cima al quale splendeva debolmente, tutta dorata, una piccolissima immagine di sant’Antonio. Essendo ancora la settimana in cui era stata celebrata la festa del santo, andavano lei ed i compagni chiedendo in suo nome un’offerta ai passanti. E così passeggiando, ed elemosinando, emettevano un grido pieno di risa, una supplica buffonesca e desolata insieme, parafrasando uno dei tanti inni cristiani alla Vergine [...] la ragazzina, come un mostro da baraccone assalito da un capriccio improvviso, lasciò rapidamente il gruppo e, con una mano tesa, sudicia, falsamente implorante, la bocca senza denti aperta in una risata muta, avendo intravisto il giovane, salì di corsa i pochi scalini, si accostò ai vetri, con la gonna in mano, facendo un inchino. Quindi sputò.

justification, it is just the result of a sudden, irrational impulse. These are Ortese's children, poor creatures living in a state of utter misery and destitution.

Whether understandable, as in the case of Ortese's evil child characters, or inborn, as in the case of their Masinian counterparts, the negative view of childhood offered by the two authors clearly challenges the romantic canon.

5.2.3 Childish adults

Masino and Ortese offer us a thorough, articulate portrait of childhood. In Masino, however, unlike in Ortese, there is another childhood picture represented by a group of characters whom I have named 'childish adults'. As the term childish adults suggests, they are not children, but adults who either because they suffer from madness or because they are trapped in childhood, behave like children and/or are convinced they are little. These figures totally reverse society's stereotypical adult roles, which became even more rigid during the regime. In the Fascist era the adult, especially the parent, was supposed to be a role model in terms of values and behaviour, the father being the bread-winner, and the mother the domestic angel and care-giver. But with these 'childish adult' characters, we are presented instead with adults who play games, live in a world of fantasy and imagination and take on no responsibility. The reason why Masino creates and regularly makes use of childish adults is to unmask and denounce the hypocrisy of a society unable to accept the Other, that is to say, those who are different and lie outside the norm.⁸⁴⁴ Their hybrid nature makes them, in fact, complete outsiders in the very society and environment in

La saliva scendeva ora lungo il vetro, e Luigi la guardava. Insieme, ascoltavamo il rumore di quei passi scalzi e quelle risa infantili, corrotte e dolci, che si allontanavano'.

⁸⁴⁴ We should not forget that Masino's critical views on society's ideal of family are, to a certain extent, connected to her biographical experience of Otherness and the consequent feeling of exclusion. In times when marriage, motherhood and good housekeeping were imperative for a respectable woman, she was the unmarried working partner of an older separated man (Bontempelli) with a son. Her 'nonconformist' status led her to experience exclusion and isolation even from her parents, who eventually accepted her.

which they live. They are border-line characters who are never entirely accepted by either their peers or by children.

Masino frequently resorts to the use of such figures, the most relevant examples being Nanni, in 'I Pellirosse', Giovanni in *Monte Ignoso*, and Romana and Signor Stefano in *Periferia*. Looking closely at these figures and at their double nature as adult and child, I have come to identify their idiosyncrasy as the ability to dream, to imagine and to play without pretending, like parents with their offspring, but believing in their games just as children normally do. As a rule, adults do not possess the faculty of imagination, generally a child's prerogative.

In *Periferia* there is almost total opposition between childhood and adulthood: in children's eyes adults are hostile, violent, corrupt and incomprehensible and, therefore, banned from their 'private' play-space. I say 'almost total opposition' because *Periferia* also presents two characters for whom the border between childhood and adulthood becomes blurred. They are Romana and Signor Stefano who are the only ones to be allowed into the children's circle. Romana is the pillar of Dich's family, yet she is more of a friend than a mother to her son. Romana's child-like nature is clear from the very beginning when she plays with her son Dich:

Allora andava da sua mamma e le diceva, come a un amico: "Romana, facciamo un po' ai pugni". Mamma rideva, si rimboccava le maniche, infilava i guantoni e si preparava a massacrare suo figlio. Ma era quasi sempre lei che cadeva in terra fingendo per dieci secondi di non potersi rialzare. Se erano stanchi di darsi pugni Romana preparava crema e dolci per sè e per Dich. Poi mangiavano tutti e due nello stesso piatto facendosi molti dispetti. Romana rubava un biscotto a Dich, Dich le spiacciava un cucchiaino di crema sul collo; allora

ricominciavano a darsi pugni finchè cadevano abbracciati sul divano e
si addormentavano. (*Periferia*, pp. 70-71)

Masino emphasises Romana's childish way of thinking by using terms which are usually the product of a child's enthusiasm for games: 'si preparava a massacrare suo figlio', 'facendosi molti dispetti', 'rubava un biscotto'. Her childish nature allows her to be the only adult accepted in the group for she believes in games, she knows how to have fun and is able to be a trustworthy accomplice in their misconduct.⁸⁴⁵ In one particular episode, Romana's ambiguous identity is the cause of a crisis for one of the young girls, Ella. Ella has had her first period and her friend Anna refuses to play with her, considering her dirty and seeing her as a member of the adult world, to be kept out of the children's circle. Ella complains that Romana, despite being a woman like her, is allowed to play with the group, but Anna does not agree. They go to her house but Romana, in a fancy-dress costume, appears dressed up as a child. 'Romana aveva le calze e le sottane corte, un fiocco tra i capelli, scarpette senza tacco, una bambola in mano e un dito in bocca, proprio come una bambina piccola',⁸⁴⁶ thus generating a deep identity crisis in young Ella.⁸⁴⁷ There are times when Romana is

⁸⁴⁵ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 71: 'Romana amava molto anche gli altri bambini e li aiutava a fare quelle cose che i genitori non vogliono si facciano, spesso si mascherava per recitare con loro, preparava buoni dolci, gridava di paura quando Armando faceva il fantasma. I bambini per esprimere la loro soddisfazione, la chiamavano Romana, come Dich, e le davano del tu, ma non si fidavano ancora di farla giocare davvero. Dich vedendo che Romana ne soffriva si portò garante: "Potete farla giocare. Non dà noia. Gioca seriamente, senza fare finta di essere una persona piccola. L'ho lasciata venire anche sul carro dei mobili. Si diverte con nulla"'.
⁸⁴⁶ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 109.

⁸⁴⁷ See Masino, *Periferia*, pp. 109-110: 'Romana aveva le calze e le sottane corte, un fiocco tra i capelli, scarpette senza tacco, una bambola in mano e un dito in bocca, proprio come una bambina piccola. Dopo un attimo di stupore Anna le si precipitò tra le braccia e prese a baciarla furiosamente. – Lo sapevo – gridava – che tu non potevi essere così sporca come dice Ella. Tu sei una di noi, proprio come me. Cara Romana! Cara Romana! cacciala via, cacciatela via quella bugiarda. Non fatela più giocare. E' una grande, una signorina. Romana non capiva, i bambini non capivano. Nessuno si moveva. Ma Ella a vedere Romana miracolosamente tornata bambina, era rimasta atterrita. Ora le pare d'impazzire; quello che le sta accadendo certo è una disgrazia, come ha detto Anna, una cosa mostruosa, lei sola in tutto l'universo è diventata un essere immondo che non ha più diritto di avvicinarsi agli uomini. Lei credeva che anche Romana fosse così, e se ne sentiva consolata, aiutata, invece no, non è vero, Romana è come quei fanciulli, pulita come Carlo, come Fran, come Anna, e lei

perceived as an adult and knows how to behave as a mother, for example, when she assists Maria during the course of an epileptic fit. She even knows when to use her childishness for adult purposes: when Giovanni and his mother run away, she keeps the rest of the children distracted saying: ‘Giochiamo giochiamo. È maggio, bisogna correre’.⁸⁴⁸ However, at times she appears naïve and irresponsible: when Luca wants to poison Giovanni’s father, Romana does nothing to stop him as her son blackmails her with these words ‘Non vuoi mica fare la spia, no?’.⁸⁴⁹ Unlike Nanni, Romana is not entirely conscious of being an adult and appears a hybrid: a grown-up woman and yet a child with her willingness to play and her appetite for cakes and sweets.

The other childish adult in the novel is Stefano, an aristocrat who lives in a villa near *quartiere* Pannosa with his mother. Stefano is mad and his psychological instability brings him to believe in what does not exist: he is convinced he owns a monkey called Cleopatra. Carlo, who accidentally enters his villa and runs into him, spends time with Stefano and Cleopatra. Later, the boy takes the other children to his villa and offers Cleopatra her favourite drink, rum. Stefano, only a marginal figure, is, however, significant in Masino’s representation of childhood: he is an adult who behaves like a child not just to escape reality or because of his immaturity, but as a consequence of his madness. The roots of his mental problems are, however, not explored. Stefano is entirely convinced of Cleopatra’s existence and behaves in a natural way, as if the monkey were there. When he plays with the children, imagining that they are all pirates on a ship, he has no difficulty in engaging in the game as if it were real. They pretend to be on an imaginary boat and to sail the sea, under the guide of Captain Stefano. Stefano does not have any sense of responsibility

stava per insudiciarli tutti, perchè lei è un essere maledetto, ma non lo sapeva, pensava che fosse la natura: è mamma che me l’ha detto per non scoraggiarmi, forse’.

⁸⁴⁸ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 168.

⁸⁴⁹ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 188.

and allows the children to get drunk as if this were something absolutely normal and acceptable for those he sees as members of his crew, unable to tell fiction from reality.⁸⁵⁰ The power of Stefano's imagination is similar to that of a child's, the big difference being one of age. While for child Carlo and his friend, having a vivid imagination is normal, for an adult, unless mad like Stefano, it is not.⁸⁵¹ Besides the age gap there is also another substantial difference between the power of imagination in children and in madmen: while a child's imagination allows him to keep the two levels (reality and fiction) separate and to switch from one to the other, living them both intensely, folly does not allow the mad mind to distinguish between reality and imagination.

Giovanni in *Monte Ignoso* can be compared to Signor Stefano as regards the cause of his childishness: madness. Like him, Giovanni cannot distinguish fiction from reality, games from real life. However, unlike the marginal figure in *Periferia*, Giovanni is a key character in the novel and the dynamics of his madness are fully explored. Giovanni is described right from the beginning as a weak, childish man: 'Pure l'espressione, i modi, le mani, le parole, tutto di lui era d'un'infantilità

⁸⁵⁰ See Masino, *Periferia*, p.137:

– Ecco che Cleopatra è ubriaca.

– Anche noi! – gridò l'equipaggio giubilante alzando le mani. Davvero erano ubriachi. Carlo riebbe il fiasco per ultimo e con religione lo stava scolando fino all'ultima stilla perciò non poté dire nulla. Ma quando ebbe finito di bere si guardò un po' intorno, si stese in terra e s'addormentò.

– È ubriaco anche il secondo – disse il capitano, mettendosi a ridere a crepappele'.

⁸⁵¹ Leopardi often dwelt on the power of the imagination of children, establishing the equation *fanciullezza dell'uomo* (age of imagination) and *fanciullezza dell'umanità* (age of myth). The imaginative power of children and of the childhood of mankind decreases for Leopardi with age: adults lose the ability to imagine. Emblematic this section of Leopardi's *Canzone Ad Angelo Mai*, *Canti*, p. 57:

'Solo il nulla s'accresce. A noi ti vieta
Il vero appena è giunto,
O caro immaginar; da te s'apparta
Nostra mente in eterno; allo stupendo
Poter tuo primo ne sottraggono gli anni;
E il conforto però de' nostri affanni'.

Here, 'Il vero', reason, the knowledge of borders and limits exclude the ability to imagine 'O caro immaginar; da te s'apparta Nostra mente in eterno' once adulthood is reached 'Poter tuo primo ne sottraggono gli anni'. Through his madness, Stefano steps out of reason and retains the power of imagination, which allows him to see what, with the eyes of reason, grown-ups cannot see.

dolorosa di bambino che sa che gli uomini muoiono, che tutto scorre'.⁸⁵² The cause of his immaturity, and later insanity, is to be found in the relationship with his mother, Giulia, a mean, wicked woman hated by everyone in the village. Giovanni's mental illness starts off with an innocent game with his daughter Barbara, where the child pretends to be his mother as girls normally do with dolls.⁸⁵³ However, it is soon evident that Giovanni is not just playing a game:

– Questo – e Barbara prese Giovanni per la mano. – Lui è mio figlio,
e io sono la sua mamma. Posso anche sculacciarlo. È il nostro gioco.
– Un gioco – ripeté Giovanni, e lo ripeté molte volte perché non ne
era persuaso. (*Monte Ignoso*, p. 69)

Barbara is clearly aware of the purely fictional nature of the mother-son role: 'È il nostro gioco', she says, but Giovanni 'non ne era persuaso'. Giovanni keeps calling Barbara, *mamma* even when he is not playing. Fiction becomes reality to Giovanni as he is trying to create for himself a new childhood, with the pure, loving and caring mother he never had. Airoidi Namer also stresses: 'non più per gioco ma per una sorta di identificazione regressiva Giovanni rinnegherà la madre "cattiva" confondendola con la propria "buona" figlia [...] Giovanni scivola nell'allucinazione che pervertisce la gerarchia delle generazioni'.⁸⁵⁴ At Barbara's party with the village youngsters, he takes part in the games with enthusiasm and he still calls Barbara *mamma* in front of the children who admire the way the father plays with his daughter. However, once aware of the fact that he is in earnest and not acting, he

⁸⁵² Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 27.

⁸⁵³ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 67: 'Il loro gioco consisteva nel fingere che Barbara fosse la mamma di Giovanni. Barbara lo sgridava, lo puniva, l'accarezzava, gli faceva ripetere le lezioni, lo faceva mangiare e dormire con grande serietà e divertendosi enormemente. – Giovanni, dimmi la poesia che hai imparata a scuola – e perché lui non la sapeva lo mandava in un angolo, per castigo: intanto lei preparava il mangiare con foglie sassi e terra, e raccontava a una visitatrice immaginaria le proprie sventure: – Ah, signora, sapesse che pena quel bambino! Non studia mai le lezioni. La maestra è disperata. Mi toccherà metterlo in collegio. – Giovanni provava una strana gioia a questo gioco, ubbidiva senza neppure pensare che avrebbe potuto non ubbidire?'

⁸⁵⁴ Airoidi Namer, p. 173.

suddenly turns distant and alienated. He is no longer playing a game, he has entered the realm of madness.⁸⁵⁵ The exchange of roles continues when Barbara announces she is going to boarding-school: ‘Ci voglio venire anch’io. Non voglio stare qui solo, con quella donna’;⁸⁵⁶ when she is about to leave, his madness has tragic manifestations as he does not listen to Barbara’s request to stop playing and insults her: ‘Finiscila di canzonarmi, vecchiaccia egoista! Mi chiami babbo, me, che sono tuo figlio, per ricordarmi che si deve morire?’.⁸⁵⁷ At Barbara’s bedside, having locked Emma out of the hospital room, Giovanni once again gives proof of his illness, wanting to be the only one present at his ‘mother’s’ death.⁸⁵⁸ Back at Monte Ignoso, Emma wants to take revenge on him for stopping her from being at Barbara’s side at the end of her life; she forces Giovanni to stay in an unfurnished room, making him sleep on the floor and giving him scraps of food to eat. Giovanni’s condition deteriorates and, despite Emma’s attempts to make him see sense, he still believes Barbara is his mother and he denies ever having had children. Only when Emma admits having had a lover, does Giovanni seem to remember the past ‘– Tu, la madre dei miei figli; tu la madre dei miei figli!’⁸⁵⁹ and, disgusted, he sets off on an aimless journey. When he falls asleep on his way, he has a dream in which roles seem to be restored; when he meets Emma in the woods, he will eventually strangle her. Paola Masino’s portrait of Giovanni is a complex one, as the reader is torn between disdain and sympathy for a character whose mental instability is the result of a childhood

⁸⁵⁵ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 85: ‘A poco a poco scendeva a colmarlo una dolcezza tepida che gli penetrava il cervello, glielo saturava, maturava; lo aprì, come il sole un fiore, alla conoscenza della verità. Batté le mani in aria, i tacchi in terra, ballava facendosi largo tra i fanciulli, rideva urlava, anche lui, forza giovane della vita: – Sono piccolo piccolo! Sono suo figlio! Suo figlio! – Poi cadde a terra sempre urlando e battendo le mani’.

⁸⁵⁶ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 97.

⁸⁵⁷ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 100.

⁸⁵⁸ See Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 138: ‘– Mamma, mamma mia non morire. Non lasciarmi solo. Che cosa farò io senza te? E Barbara gli carezzò la testa con gesto materno e anche lei si mise a piangere’.

⁸⁵⁹ Masino, *Monte Ignoso*, p. 159.

undermined by a negative mother figure. His will to reconstruct a happy childhood for himself appears as a twisted game. However, the description of Giovanni's mother, Giulia, as an evil woman makes the reader quite sympathetic towards him. It is when his madness turns into cruelty towards his daughter that sympathy gives way to scorn. Once again the reader is led to feel sorry for him when Emma treats her mad husband like an animal. Giovanni's childishness is a serious illness, it is not the outcome of natural immaturity, as in Romana, or visionary folly as in Signor Stefano, or a secret imaginary world as it is for Nanni; in his case it is rooted in past childhood experiences. Furthermore, it is interesting to underline how Paola Masino, once again, for the second time, associates madness with a male, rather than a female, character.⁸⁶⁰

5.2.4 The language of games in children's and childish adults' playtime

Both in the case of children and childish adults, Masino's representation of the world of games is accurate; the author minutely describes the etiquette, the rules of games and uses the specific, technical terms required. This is particularly evident in *Periferia* where, as we have seen, playtime is the main scenario of the whole novel and where the protagonists are children or childish adults. The whole of *Periferia* is characterised by the language and the jargon of games and childhood inventions. It is interesting to observe the use Masino makes of this.

Firstly, the narrator herself minutely describes the rules of each game, dedicating entire pages to near technical explanations. This, on the one hand, helps the reader enter the children's world and to understand it from the inside. On the other hand, the technique shows how much fairer and clearer the world of childhood is compared to

⁸⁶⁰ Ghezzi, 'Fiamme e follia', p. 49.

that of adults, as it is governed by fewer simpler rules. Here is one of many examples:

“Campana” o “il mondo” o “le case” è un gioco difficile e appassionante, un gioco serio da bambini arrivati. Il disegno, diviso in tante caselle numerate, ne è vario: a circolo o a cono, a rettangolo o a croce. I bambini hanno un turno, ma ognuno gioca finchè non commette errori e per ognuno il gioco riprende al punto dove lui si era sbagliato. Si comincia tirando un sasso nella casella numero uno; poi, saltando su un solo piede, lo si sospinge di casella in casella fino ad avere percorsa l’intera campana. (*Periferia*, pp. 113-114)

Secondly, as already mentioned, each chapter corresponds to a month of the year, whose climate and atmosphere influence the games, as Masino herself points out at the beginning of each chapter and also in a section where for each month, she explains all the typical games the children play.⁸⁶¹ Thirdly, Masino shows both standard games and games made up by the children themselves, as seen above with *Hamlet* or in the example below in which Carlo, having met Cleopatra and Signor Stefano, invents a game about them:

– Giochiamo a Cleopatra e il matto.

Nessuno sapeva che cosa fosse Cleopatra e il matto.

Carlo spiegò:

– Si fa così: uno è un lago, uno un muro con una porta, uno quello che a forza di camminare si è sperduto, uno un matto che ha una cosa che si chiama Cleopatra che è come una magia, si può dire; tutto quello

⁸⁶¹ See Masino, *Periferia*, p. 116: ‘Come marzo la campana, ogni mese fa fiorire un suo giuoco. In aprile quando il sangue è leggero e impetuoso si salta a corda, s’insegue il cerchio, ci si getta da uno all’altro il pallone. In maggio sbocciano giochi che sembrano danze, composti in passi lievi, in molli abbracci, in canti sospiriosi dove si parla di donne belle, amore, morte: è *arrivato l’ambasciatore, madame Dorè, oh mio bel castello*. In giugno comincia il caldo e i giochi si prolungano nel crepuscolo lento. Sono giochi fermi, muti, pensierosi: *il lupo e gli agnelli, le belle statuine, morè, ciciorlando*’.

che Cleopatra vuole è; se uno dice “Cleopatra”, ha tutto, è sempre
salvo. Tutti gli altri sono alberi. (*Periferia*, pp. 51-52)

In both traditional and newly-created games, children reflect on their life experiences, in the case of the example above, Carlo has a chance to re-elaborate on his adventure at Signor Stefano’s villa.

The jargon of games, when used for adults, creates a strong sense of dissonance, which, depending on the character, can convey an ironic, pitiful, or merry tone. In the short story ‘I Pellirosse’, Masino resorts to the specific language of the games which have as main characters American Indians and cowboys, and which revolve around wars, tribal rituals and death. Masino refers to the violence among tribes and uses those names which have become part of the collective imaginary through Western films and comics: ‘gli Aricara erano travolti dalle frecce della banda Siù’,⁸⁶² ‘accadde [...] che [...] quell’avversario, nella persona del Capo Aquila Muta, venisse a sederglisi sul petto’.⁸⁶³ These words, belonging to the world of American Indians, as interpreted by the media, are used by the protagonist, Nanni, in his interventions in direct speech as well as by the third-person omniscient narrator who seems to accept Nanni’s fictional, American Indian world as his reality. This terminology concerns all aspects of his life, including love and family. Nanni is laughed at for saying to his lovers: ‘– Dormi al mio fianco, tu, mia *squaw*’;⁸⁶⁴ his wife, to reproach him about the family budget, says ‘– Ehi, Capo, i soldi sono finiti. – Al che lui mestamente: – Mia *squaw*, porterò al Monte il mio orologio’.⁸⁶⁵ In Nanni’s case, the widespread use of the language of games conveys a strong pitiful tone and contributes to the creation of a melancholic figure.

⁸⁶² Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 118.

⁸⁶³ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 118.

⁸⁶⁴ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 119.

⁸⁶⁵ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 120.

In the depiction of Signor Stefano in *Periferia*, Masino once again employs the language of children's games and, in particular, the language used by or associated with pirates. The children pretend, in fact, to be setting sail on a boat and encountering pirates. Stefano is obviously the Captain. 'I marinai la volevano impiccare perchè trovavano sempre il barile del rum vuoto',⁸⁶⁶ '– Cara vecchia carcassa– [...] no, non ti abbandonerò ancora, benchè tu abbia diritto al riposo.'⁸⁶⁷ '– Eh, vecchia canaglia! –'.⁸⁶⁸

In *Periferia*, Romana's jargon is very frequently taken from the language of games as her childish nature leads to a desire to take part in the children's games as a member of her son's group of playmates: '– Giochiamo a freccia – disse Romana. – Quest'anno non l'abbiamo mai fatto. [...] – Scappano Dich, Ella, Carlo, Luca, Anna; cercano Fran, Armando'.⁸⁶⁹

When referring to Giovanni, Masino employs the language of little girls playing with dolls, acting as if they were mothers, feeding and looking after their little ones.

Ortese, also, uses the language of games, although not as frequently as Masino. In the bibliographical short story 'Il capitano', from *Angelici dolori*, Ortese and her brothers set up tents on the terrace of their house under the leadership of one of the brothers, whom they call Capitano.⁸⁷⁰ In their camp, we often hear the language of 'Cowboys and Indians'. For example, the word *squaw* recurs in the text to refer to the newly-wedded wife of Anna Maria's older brother (who no longer takes part in their games) and to the women in the house, who expect the children to dismantle the

⁸⁶⁶ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 46.

⁸⁶⁷ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 134.

⁸⁶⁸ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 135.

⁸⁶⁹ Masino, *Periferia*, p. 169.

⁸⁷⁰ Ortese, *Angelici dolori*, p. 55.

camp. Another example is the description of the Iguana-child playing the game *La settimana*, also mentioned in *Periferia* and popular in the two authors' days. Like Masino, Ortese explains the rules in detail thus creating an atmosphere of contrasts: the child (not a real child, though) is playing a popular game in the middle of the night.⁸⁷¹

5.3 Hypocrisy and social conventions

5.3.1 *Come si fa a non andare al cinema? Con tanta miseria che c'è in giro...*⁸⁷²

In Chapter 2 I introduced Masino's criticism of the distorted conventions of her time through the two victims of society's expectations: Nanni and the young Massaia. We could say that all of *Nascita e morte della massaia* is a parody of Fascist views on the role of the perfect housewife and the exemplary mother. Her negative opinion of the contemporary social system is, however, neither limited to the role of women, nor to this novel; Masino's short stories are excellent examples of her attitude towards a society where she targets a variety of events, habits and institutions such as war, marriage, the church.⁸⁷³

In 'Visita allo zoo' from *Colloquio di notte* and 'Rivoluzione' from *Racconto Grosso*, Masino unmasks the hypocrisy, selfishness and superficiality of the upper

⁸⁷¹ See Ortese, *L'Iguana*, pp. 76-77: 'La giovane Estrellita (ché ormai sulla sua giovinezza, anzi la cruda infanzia, non rimaneva dubbio), aveva tracciato sul terreno, con una pietra appuntita, quel recinto rettangolare che tante volte il Lettore avrà visto fare dai fanciulli, e col quale egli pure, da bimbo, avrà passato delle ore... Tale recinto è a sua volta diviso in altri sei, più un settimo situato all'estremità del rettangolo, e, questo, di forma semicircolare; e l'intero gioco, che consiste nel saltare su un piede solo da un quadrato all'altro, senza toccare la linea di divisione, e facendosi precedere da un sassolino, è chiamato "La settimana". Gioco ingenuo, e mille volte più ingenuo, se non bizzarro, se giocato durante la notte da una creatura come l'Iguana, che egli aveva già visto patire e sospirare e contare denari, con tutta la soffocazione e il tremendo silenzio di un'adulta. Quasi la notte, liberandola dalla presenza degli esseri atroci che la circondavano, svegliasse in qualche modo un suo patrimonio di felicità, l'Iguana, con piccoli saltelli, passava leggermente da un quadrato all'altro'.

⁸⁷² Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 165.

⁸⁷³ As the present thesis concentrates on themes developed through children and animal figures, an analysis of Masino's views on society will consider the two short stories 'Visita allo zoo' from *Colloquio di notte* and 'Rivoluzione' from *Racconto Grosso*.

classes who, even in the tough time of the immediate *dopoguerra*, only think about their own comforts and pleasures. Masino makes fun of those who frequent the *salotti*, ridiculing their gossip and behaviour, presenting the individuals as caricatures. The result is that the reader cannot help laughing at these characters, although it is a bitter-sweet laugh. The title illustrates my point; the words are said by Contessa Orsola at the cinema and express her total lack of understanding of the harsh post-war times.⁸⁷⁴ In ‘Visita allo Zoo’ Contessa Orsola is eager to meet Contessa Irene’s sister, Silvia, a Communist and, therefore, a rare breed amongst the upper-classes. Orsola begs Irene to invite her sister to a tea party and Irene manages to persuade Silvia by making her believe it is a charity event organised to raise funds for war-stricken homeless people. However, Irene, aware of the type of guest, asks Silvia to avoid discussing politics. The tea-party is the perfect setting to allow Masino to gradually unmask the prejudice and hypocrisy of the upper classes, using the presence of Silvia and her political views as a pretext. Prejudice is mainly against the Communists and the hypocrisy is evident in the fact that the members of the upper classes easily switch from being friends with the Germans to hob-nobbing with the Allies after the Liberation:

– Come si può andare in circolare? Con quei fetori e quella sporcizia?

Ma perché non si lavano questi comunisti?

– Io mi lavo, signora, e sono comunista. (*Colloquio di notte*, p. 171)

– Orsola – gemè – ho tanta fame. Che cosa ci hai preparato di buono?

– Vedrai – battè le mani Orsola alzandosi (e tutti con lei si alzarono),

– vedrai. Quel *gateau* che piacque tanto al mio generalone *boche* e che

⁸⁷⁴ See Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 165: ‘– Come si fa a non andare al cinema? Con tanta miseria che c’è in giro, affamati, disoccupati, se non provi il bisogno di svagarti, di non pensarci, vuol dire proprio che hai un cuore di sasso’.

spero piaccia oggi altrettanto ai nostri nuovi ospiti. Tedeschi e inglesi sono cugini, non è vero? Tutti anglosassoni. E come tali hanno molti gusti in comune.

– Meno quello della crudeltà, *madame* – s’inchinò il capitano Smith.

(*Colloquio di notte*, p. 167)

The content is clearly humorous. The first extract highlights prejudice against the Communists’ personal hygiene, ‘Ma perché non si lavano questi comunisti?’ and the resulting inconvenience they cause on public transport. The second extract shows the ease with which Italian high society stepped from one side to the other: ‘Quel *gateau* che piacque tanto al mio generalone *boche* e che spero piaccia oggi altrettanto ai nostri nuovi ospiti.’ It is interesting to notice the presence of French words like ‘*gateau*’, ‘*madame*’ and ‘*boche*’, deliberately printed in italics to draw the reader’s attention to them. Uttered both by the Contessa and Captain Smith, they add a sense of elegance and a touch of affectation to their speech, typical of the higher social ranks. Masino’s irony can be perceived also from the fact that the Contessa refers to the German general, who used to be her guest, as *boche*, the derogatory term with which the French referred to a German during the wars. However, the negative connotation of the word is accompanied by the more affectionate ‘generalone’ as if to demonstrate her goodhearted openness to all her guests. The climax of Masino’s mockery in this short story is reached in a dialogue which sees children as the protagonists. A lady, described by another guest as the perfect mother, is offered some *bignè*:

– Si affretti a prenderne – suggerì il generale – prima che si debba smettere di farne. Non ha visto che cosa già scrivono sui muri? “Lo zucchero ai bambini tubercolosi”.

– Com'è giusto – sospirò la signora dei confetti. – Io che son madre posso dirlo. La mia passeggiata mattutina è sempre immalinconita da quei bambini smunti che guardano con avidità le mostre di dolci. Quasi quasi mi pèrito a entrare per prendere quelle due o tre sfogliatelle senza le quali non starei davvero in piedi. Lo faccio proprio per le mie figliole che si raccomandano ogni momento: “Mamma, curati; che cosa faremmo senza di te?”. I bambini, certo, sono importanti, ma anche le mamme ci vogliono.

– Soprattutto – ammise Silvia – le mamme future. Quelle bambine tubercolose che non arriveranno a generare, o genereranno altri tubercolosi.

– Non sarà per le paste che mangio io – squittì la signora.

(*Colloquio di notte*, p. 169)

In this quotation the woman is once again presented as a caricature, and Masino's humour does not only transpire through the woman's comments and views revealing selfishness and lack of consideration for others, but also through her childlike way of talking: 'squittì'. This is also the childish mannerism of the Contessa in the previous quotations 'gemè', 'battè le mani'. Even the waiter, seems to have absorbed his masters' sense of superiority and indifference to those affected by the war. When Silvia wishes to take all the leftovers to the children in need, Quirino, the waiter, wraps them up but categorically turns down her request for further help with the delivery of the food: '– La signora mi scusi – rispose Quirino piantandosi sull'attenti e alzando il mento, – ho la mia dignità. Non posso abbassarmi a servire quei pezzenti'.⁸⁷⁵

The short story 'Rivoluzione' is quite similar to 'Visita allo zoo' in terms of humour and setting since it also takes place in a *salotto*, where the aristocracy, the

⁸⁷⁵ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 171.

military and bourgeois upper classes mingle. First of all, it is important to stress that the hostess, like the Massaia, does not have a name and is referred to as *la signora*. Masino's tendency to create anonymous characters, almost mannequins, reflects the universality of the image she wishes to convey: she may be talking about one lady in particular but also of many others.⁸⁷⁶ The conversation originates from the lady's reading, before the guests arrive, of an article reporting the shooting of eight children by the revolutionaries. The children were shot while acting out a revolution in their game and only those who played '*i governativi*'⁸⁷⁷ were killed.⁸⁷⁸ The lady of the house appears upset by this news. She imagines the scene and pictures the children thinking that that was also part of their game. Her participation in the tragedy is so excessively heartfelt that it seems fake and theatrical.⁸⁷⁹ As the guests arrive, they express their views on present and past revolutions. Once again, they are all presented as caricatured figures who show no sincere shock at the news, which for them is just an excuse for polite conversation and the manifestation of insincere pity:

⁸⁷⁶ The caricatured mannequins depicted by Masino remind me of de Chirico's representation of the upper classes in: de Chirico, *Nobili e borghesi*, 1933, tempera and watercolour on cartoons, Rovereto: MART – Museo d'Arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto. See also Bonito Oliva, ed., p. 148.

⁸⁷⁷ Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 191.

⁸⁷⁸ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, p. 191: 'La signora lesse: OTTO BAMBINI FUCILATI DAGLI INSORTI.

Era scritto a caratteri cubitali sulla prima pagina del giornale: il solo titolo invadeva sette colonne e sotto il comunicato telefonico, da un continente remoto: *Ieri gli insorti, trovati alcuni bambini, dai sette ai dieci anni, che giocavano tra loro alla rivoluzione, presi quelli che rappresentavano i governativi, li addossavano al muro e li fucilavano*'.

⁸⁷⁹ See Masino, *Racconto grosso*, pp. 191-192: 'La signora ebbe uno spasimo nel ventre, strinse le gambe, abbassò il giornale e chiuse gli occhi. Per un momento ebbe chiari davanti gli otto bambini poggiati al muro e certo credevano ancora di giocare, con i fucili di legno minacciano i fucili veri, gridano: – Pum! Pum! – e cadono. Uno tra loro ne distingueva meglio, minuscolo con il grembiolino a quadretti (come ne portano le sue bambine), che rideva agitando le piccole mani verso lei e i soldati. La signora ebbe un'altra contrazione nel grembo, più acuta, accavallò le gambe e aprì gli occhi per distogliersi dalla visione. Ma rilesse la notizia piano, assaporandola. Ora immagina che forse anche i bambini ribelli avranno creduto a un gioco dei grandi e avranno applaudito alla morte così ben riuscita dei compagni'.

– Colpa dei genitori, Donna Germella? Io immagino il pianto di quelle mamme – e la signora si raccolse le ginocchia tra le braccia, presa ancora alle viscere dallo spasimo ambiguo.

– Quelle madri – scandí Donna Germella – certo non piangono. Quelle madri a loro volta staranno uccidendo. Lasciate dire a me che me ne intendo. (*Racconto grosso*, p. 196)

The comic effect here is emphasised by the lady's exaggerated sympathy and pity: 'la signora si raccolse le ginocchia tra le braccia, presa ancora alle viscere dallo spasimo ambiguo.' Two of the guests in this *salotto* are the damigelle Opi who rear robins; these are two of the most grotesque and most successfully portrayed caricatures in Masino's narratives:

Allora finalmente le damigelle Opi, che parevano fatte di abete non verniciato, tanto ogni linfa di passioni era loro mancata, dissero con voce acutissima e fragile:

– Noi dobbiamo andare. E' l'ora in cui i nostri uccellini mangiano. E nessuna rivoluzione può non fare venire un'ora quando è tempo che scocchi, non è vero, Conestabile Fucus? (*Racconto grosso*, p. 206)

The humour lies in their wooden, emotionless appearance 'parevano fatte di abete non verniciato, tanto ogni linfa di passione era loro mancata' as well as in the onomatopoeia of their surname which recalls the chirping of their robins. One can imagine two middle-aged, spinsters who can think only of their pets to compensate for the lack of emotions and love in their lives.

5.3.2 Seeking new markets and new emotions: the Milanese

In all her works Ortese criticises modernisation and contemporary society in a serious way. There are, however, a few occasions, the most prominent of which is to be found in *L'Iguana*, when she uses humour and irony. At the very beginning of this novel the narrator introduces the Milanese to the readers, ridiculing them but

benevolently. As I have suggested in the heading for this subsection, Ortese mocks their entrepreneurial spirit as well as their parallel desire to experience primitive, basic emotions which they have lost in their modern, hectic lifestyle:

Come tu sai, Lettore, ogni anno, quando è primavera, i Milanesi partono per il mondo in cerca di terre da comprare. Per costruirvi case e alberghi, naturalmente, e più in là, forse, anche case popolari; ma soprattutto corrono in cerca di quelle espressioni ancora rimaste intatte della “natura”, di ciò che essi intendono per natura: un misto di libertà e passionalità, con non poca sensualità e una sfumatura di follia, di cui, causa la rigidità della moderna vita a Milano, appaiono assetati.

(L'Iguana, p. 15)

Here Ortese depicts the Milanese as the emblem of modernity: their lives are dominated by financial objectives but their economic power is counterpointed by the wish to go back to basics, to rediscover the primitive emotions of which they are ‘assetati’:

Non è forse il caso della maggioranza dei Milanesi, che, stretti dalla vita aziendale, ancora non hanno viaggiato né visto niente, e, in più, hanno curiosità rudimentali; ma certo che una minoranza, quella, infine, che dà lustro alla città, è fatta così, e non si deve pensare, tuttavia, che manchino in mezzo ad essa elementi ingenui, puri, raziocinanti, il meglio, insomma, dell’antica Lombardia. Tutt’altro.

(L'Iguana, pp. 15-16)

In this second extract, the irony in the depiction of the Milanese lies in the fact that they do not travel not because of lack of money, but because they are ‘stretti dalla vita aziendale’ and so do not possess any thirst for new emotions. This description, published in 1965, has a strong contemporary flavour; Milan continues to occupy the role of financial capital of the country and its people stereotyped as hardworking

entrepreneurs. Daddo, a naïve, good-hearted aristocratic architect, belongs to that section of the Milanese upper classes who, in spring, leave the city in search of land to buy and to build on, in his case to construct villas and maritime clubs for the summer holidays of the Milanese jet-set. However, Daddo, unlike his money-driven mother and the other Milanese, is, deep down, indifferent to material goods; his journey has the flavour of an exploration rather than an ambitious, profit-making expedition, as Ortese points out when reporting his plan ‘là, probabilmente, qualche isolotto si sarebbe avvistato, che non era di alcuno, e comprarlo non avrebbe recato offesa’.⁸⁸⁰ We can perceive a degree of irony also in the figure of Boro Adelchi, a young, extremely ambitious publisher in chronic financial trouble. The first hint of irony is to be found in the intertextual links with Alessandro Manzoni: the surname Adelchi and the meeting point with Daddo, Via Manzoni. Through the character of Boro Adelchi, Ortese hints at her personal problems with the Italian publishing sector, more interested in sales than in quality, a law of the market which Ortese always had to struggle to understand and accept. Adelchi asks Daddo to bring him back something new, possibly ‘anormale’,⁸⁸¹ ‘qualche poema, qualche *canto*, più che altro, dove si esprima la rivolta dell’oppresso’.⁸⁸² The concept that the Lombards and their editorial industry had of the oppressed and of revolution is that oppression is the lack of opportunity to express feelings, but they took no account of the fact that, when oppression is real, the oppressed cannot have feelings or self-consciousness,⁸⁸³

⁸⁸⁰ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 21.

⁸⁸¹ Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 17.

⁸⁸² Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 17.

⁸⁸³ See Ortese, *L’Iguana*, pp. 17-18: ‘E, a questo punto, vale la pena di accennare a una strana confusione che dominava allora la cultura lombarda, e condizionava perciò l’editoria, su ciò che si deve intendere per oppressione e conseguente rivolta. Sia la prima che la seconda apparivano ai Lombardi, probabilmente in polemica con la minacciosa ideologia marxista, niente più che una faccenda di sentimenti e di libertà di esprimerli, dimenticando che dove non ci sono denari (stante le antiche convenzioni del mondo), o dove il denaro può comprare tutto, dove c’è penuria e ignoranza grande, là neppure i sentimenti, o la voglia di esprimerli, esistono; e, insomma, i Lombardi avevano

let alone freedom of expression.⁸⁸⁴ In depicting Daddo and Adelchi, Ortese again uses a slightly humorous tone by reproducing the Lombard habit of putting the article in front of male names, therefore, the two Milanese characters are referred to as ‘il Daddo’ and ‘l’Adelchi’.

5.4 Stripping/Demolishing the *superuomo*

To turn now to how, by portraying a very different image of the male, the two authors challenge the ideal of the *superuomo* and in particular that of the *superuomo dannunziano*, deeply rooted in the literature of the time, here is how Carlo Salinari perfectly captures the idea of D’Annunzio’s *superuomo*, a personal revisitation of Friedrich Nietzsche’s vision:

culto dell’*energia dominatrice* sia che si manifesti come forza (e violenza) o come capacità di godimento o come bellezza; ricerca della propria tradizione storica nella civiltà pagana, greco-romana, e in quella rinascimentale; concezione aristocratica del mondo e conseguente disprezzo della massa, della plebe.⁸⁸⁵

All the elements described in the above extract are subverted in Masino’s and Ortese’s narratives, where male protagonists, besides being rather few, are shown as the very opposite. The men in Masino are usually peripheral, childish or mad figures. Among the fathers, we find Anna and Fulvia’s who wants to commit suicide and

per certo che un mondo oppresso abbia qualcosa da dire, mentre, se l’oppressione è antica e autentica, l’oppresso non esiste neppure, o non ha più coscienza di esserlo, ma solo esiste, sebbene senza una vera coscienza, l’oppressore, che a volte, per vezzo, simula i modi che sarebbero legittimi della vittima, se ancora esistesse’.

⁸⁸⁴ See Ortese, *L’Iguana*, p. 18: ‘Ma queste, naturalmente, erano sottigliezze o fisime impossibili da sottoporre alla fame che gli editori mostravano di cose stuzzicanti il languido appetito del pubblico. Simili ragionamenti avrebbero compromesso il ritmo della produzione, dove invece il capovolgimento in termini francamente tradizionali, e perciò rassicuranti, del conflitto cui s’è accennato, allora assai di moda, garantiva approvazioni, eccitamento, simpatie, e quindi vendite, e quindi, daccapo! i cari denari’.

⁸⁸⁵ Carlo Salinari quoted in Vincenzo De Caprio and Stefano Giovanardi, *I testi della letteratura italiana: il Novecento* (Milan: Einaudi scuola, 1994), p. 146.

Ella, Carlo and Fran's who is betrayed by his wife; both of them are suffering figures. Maria and Giovanni's is a violent and despotic man. The other fathers are absent or unmentioned except for Dich's, of whom we catch only a short, but positive, glimpse. As we have seen Signor Stefano is very far from being a *superuomo*. In *Monte Ignoso* Giovanni is also affected by madness and regresses into childhood, while Nanni in 'I Pellirosse' is a childish adult, constantly teased and never taken seriously by those around him.

5.4.1 *Sapeva di fabbricare il buio; e le stelle non erano che suoi valletti...*⁸⁸⁶

An interesting character who, because of his male arrogance and dominating instinct, is to be considered a parody of the *superuomo* is the weathercock in 'Il nobile gallo' in *Colloquio di notte*. The cock has traditionally stood for arrogance and stubbornness, but this weathercock is particularly self-confident: 'Era un bipede nato altezzoso tre secoli or sono, con mentalità feudale come allora si conveniva',⁸⁸⁷ he believes his physically high position also corresponds to a high hierarchical status. He interprets all the attention and care he receives as a sign of his nobility. Generations of birds and animals had sat around him to bring him news, 'Perfino il tracotante *Homo Sapiens* in veste di muratore o di fabbro, di sagrestano o campanaio, erano saliti fino a lui per rendergli servizio'⁸⁸⁸ and even a historian had climbed up to study him. The cock plays God: he thinks he is responsible for the creation of time, checks on the stars as if they were his servants and believes himself immortal because he has never been killed by a human. The heading of this subsection is one of the cock's reflections.⁸⁸⁹ One day a group of swallows warn him to take to the

⁸⁸⁶ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 112.

⁸⁸⁷ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 111.

⁸⁸⁸ Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 111.

⁸⁸⁹ See Masino, *Colloquio di notte*, p. 112: 'Quando la sera abbassava le cigolanti palpebre sugli occhi sapeva di fabbricare il buio; e le stelle non erano che suoi valletti sicché ogni tanto, a mezzo la notte,

South as strange clouds (war) are approaching, but he refuses. His mechanism suddenly stops with war, but not his ego: when planes start bombing the houses of the children who used to throw stones at him, he rejoices. Men fight and die in front of him but he is still full of himself and does not understand the pain and sorrow around him, he is only annoyed with the blood staining his body. One day a bomb hits him, without, however, putting a complete end to his arrogance:

– Bum! – gli rispose una bomba scoppiando sul campanile e la banderuola schizzò per aria in minutissimi pezzi. Tuttavia ogni pezzo, seguendo una sua curva nel cielo, si rallegrava: – Ora il mondo, preso esempio da me, dovrà tutto volare in frantumi.

Ma, percorsa la traiettoria, le minute schegge dovettero scendere giù, precipitare sempre più in basso fino alla terra calpestata dal volgo: quale cadde in una chiavica, quale nel fango, quale nel corpo molle dei morti. Offese di venire a contatto con sì vile materia, pur spegnendosi – Flop – esalavano ancora sdegnose: – Flop. Flop.

(*Colloquio di notte*, p. 115)

His ego has no limits: when he breaks up into pieces, he is drawn to think that the whole world will then follow his example and when his metal splinters fall on the dirty ground, they feel ‘Offese di venire a contatto con sì vile materia’ in the ‘terra calpestata dal volgo’ and are ‘sdegnose’. His attitude of superiority is clearly a mockery of what in his description of the *superuomo dannunziano*, Salinari defined as ‘concezione aristocratica del mondo e conseguente disprezzo della massa, della plebe’.⁸⁹⁰ It is also interesting that for her parody of the *superuomo*, Masino has chosen an animal rather than a human being. I suggest she intended to give the story

dava una sbirciatina per assicurarsi che fossero tutte ai loro posti: nè più nè meno faceva ai suoi di l'eccellentissimo signor marchese alzandosi a sorvegliare il servidorame che scivolava assonnato lungo gli stipiti delle anticamere’.

⁸⁹⁰ See note 885.

the flavour of Aesop's fables which had animals as protagonists and contained a moral. Although Masino's 'Il nobile gallo' does not have an explicit moral ending, the message is easily grasped by an adult reader.

5.4.2 *Che appetiti, che sordità, che sfrontatezza incantevole, che impeto di fiere*⁸⁹¹

Ortese presents the idea of the *superuomo* quite explicitly in *Alonso e i visionari*, where Professor Antonio Decimo, father of two, is very proud of his elder son, Julio, while showing indifference towards his younger son Decio. In Decimo's eyes, Julio embodies the ideal of the modern man, celebrated by D'Annunzio, as clearly emerges from a passage of strong D'Annunzian flavour from which I have taken the heading to this section, where Decimo exalts Julio and his generation of strong, brave, ruthless young men:⁸⁹² 'egli va diventando l'uomo senza barriere (non frontiere: barriere) che io temevo non avesse mai la forza o il talento (tale forza è *talento*) di realizzare',⁸⁹³ 'assolutamente più nulla, come la stravagante "pietà", raccomandata dalla cultura borghese, che ponga un freno al suo superbo, baldanzoso

⁸⁹¹ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 129.

⁸⁹² See Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, pp. 129-130: 'Ah, quale inaudita vivacità, che rigoglio di mai veduta fiorente foresta, che trasversale lucidità di fiumi azzurri, fioriti di tronchi vaganti e dentati di caimani, essi – tali figlioli – portano in sé, oggi, in questa Europa quasi alla fine del millennio. E che appetiti, che sordità, che sfrontatezza incantevole, che impeto di fiere è nell'animo loro. Ne parlo con ammirato ribrezzo. I miei vaghi e indifferenti pensieri su Julio fanciullo si sono fatti ardente e balzante certezza: egli va diventando l'uomo senza barriere (non frontiere: barriere) che io temevo non avesse mai la forza o il talento (tale forza è *talento*) di realizzare. Splendido, splendido Julio. La sua avvenenza, o addirittura bellezza, di cui in famiglia non è alcun esempio, non essendo sua madre, come sai, una eccezione, ed essendo suo padre un uomo di modesta apparenza, è quasi irrisoria di fronte all'esplosione del suo io istintivo, cieco, e pur tanto veggente: libero per sempre – intendi? – dal concetto di responsabilità, o paternità, che è il male del mondo. Abbiamo vinto, Jimmy, Jimmy Opfering, se preferisci; la nostra filosofia della libertà ha dato i suoi frutti d'oro. Questo è un gran giorno! Quella fiera che io auspicavo egli fosse – e divenisse l'umanità tutta dai dodici ai ventotto anni – egli ora è diventato. Oh, impeccabile e ineccepibile in tutto, naturalmente; ma nulla – intendi? – assolutamente più nulla, come la stravagante "pietà", raccomandata dalla cultura borghese, che ponga un freno al suo superbo, baldanzoso io. E con lui, ormai, è tutta questa molle, tigrata generazione che sembra aver dimenticato, per sua fortuna, la meschinità, le barriere di fango poste al secolo, e alla sua fame di godimenti, dalla disperazione operaia (o sottosuoli della vita), da tutta una "cultura" scioccamente impegnata. Stiano essi, gli "operai" come anche gli altri addetti ai lavori pesanti, dove stavano. Godano i fanciulli privilegiati la vita in tutto il suo lusso, barbarie, dissennatezza. Austerità nelle parole: assoluta sfrenatezza nel prendersi la vita. La responsabilità è finalmente vinta. Mai un limite! E mi auguro che presto la cosa sia per molti, per molti, "lusso voluttà calma", e qualsiasi sangue di "inferiore" vada pure versato a questo fine'.

⁸⁹³ See note 892.

io',⁸⁹⁴ 'Mai un limite! E mi auguro che presto la cosa sia per molti, per molti, "lusso voluttà calma", e qualsiasi sangue di "inferiore" vada pure versato a questo fine'.⁸⁹⁵ According to Decimo's portrayal of his son, Julio is the emblem of modern, omnipotent man: arrogant, violent, selfish, aesthetically perfect and strong-minded, and so, in tune with Salinari's description of the *superuomo dannunziano*. His name, Julio, like that of his father's Decimo, also harks back to the classical tradition of Roman emperors, as the *superuomo dannunziano* described by Salinari 'ricerca della propria tradizione storica nella civiltà pagana, greco-romana'.⁸⁹⁶ However, the arrival of Alonso seems to draw the best out of Julio, witness the kindness and the value of the friendship which he establishes with the puma. To his father's discontent, Julio becomes, for a period, a kind, educated, sensitive child going 'con bontà vicino al cucciolo. Una bontà che, s'intende, in lui, è rara. Quale serietà nello sguardo dei fanciulli, in alcuni momenti. Si inginocchiò, gli parlò all'orecchio'.⁸⁹⁷ The father approves neither of the tender bond between the boy and the puppy nor of his transformation into a good, polite boy. However, like other children in this chapter and previously seen in Chapter 2, Julio is an ambiguous figure with a nasty streak in him,⁸⁹⁸ as we can see when he subjects Alonso to mean and painful tricks such as putting salt in his water or mentioning his beloved brother Decio, just 'for fun'.

⁸⁹⁴ See note 892.

⁸⁹⁵ See note 892.

⁸⁹⁶ Salinari, p. 146.

⁸⁹⁷ Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, pp. 53-54.

⁸⁹⁸ See Ortese, *Alonso e i visionari*, p. 132: 'Talora Julio, con la innocente crudeltà dei giovani, passa davanti alla sua stanzetta di invalido cantando *Decio! Decio!* – e vedessi allora come la vecchia carogna (ché tanto simile mi pare davvero all'antica anima umana, all'azzurra bontà di Dio), vedessi come si trascina faticosamente sulla soglia. Sai che non mangia quasi più, altro che cucchiari di non so quale polvere dolorosa per i reumi, che il domestico di Julio gli porta ogni mattina, e subito richiudendo la porta perché non prenda molta aria. E l'acqua è quasi sempre salata e sporca: ma con che stanca pazienza egli la beve. A volte, viene l'ordine (da Julio) di portargliela via! Ma è semplicemente uno scherzo. E subito la ciotola rotta riappare nello stanzino. Due volte, almeno ultimamente, il disgraziato si è avvicinato, profittando dell'uscio lasciato aperto, a Julio, per una carezza, ché sempre si ricorda dei loro candidi rapporti di fanciulli, e sempre ne ha ricevuto l'impronta di una scarpa su quelle striminzite gambe di belva malata, o sul petto, che è tutto un sudiciume di acqua e medicine incrostate'.

Decimo's ambitions for Julio have, in the end, a negative impact on the child-teenager-man; rather than a *superuomo*, he is an unhappy youngster who will end up becoming involved in crime (probably terrorism) and will die young.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to give a detailed overview of how Masino and Ortese, (but principally Masino, for whom unveiling the truth behind the façade is a priority), criticise the society of their time, unmasking its hidden secrets, hypocrisy, prejudice, conventions and ideals. What emerges is the hidden degradation of the middle class *famiglia per bene* and the carelessness of poor Neapolitan families, together with the painfulness and distortingly ungratifying role of the mother. The world of games allows the authors to define their idea of childhood, defying a canon which would have children blissfully unaware of the world around them, and childhood as the most innocent and pure stage in man's life. In such a portrayal, Masino is more categorical in her creation of naturally evil child characters, while Ortese always seems to imply that circumstances have contributed to producing the evil traits of her young protagonists. Masino's representation of games also brings to light the original figures of childish adults in the depiction of whom Masino shows a gift for characterisation, found also in the caricatured characters she uses to mock the upper classes. Here, Masino uses parody, irony and humour to attack the lack of values of the wealthy in society, techniques that Ortese rarely uses. Both authors also challenge the idea of the *superuomo*, for whom, once again, Masino does not spare her irony.

This chapter concludes the analysis of the thematic areas Masino and Ortese develop through their use of children and animals, and particularly through their portrayal of extraordinary ones. What remains now is to draw general conclusions.

Conclusions

The construction and disruption of *due figlie del secolo* and their extraordinary children and animals

Before I summarise my conclusions, I wish to consider the two concepts referred to in the title above through the words ‘construction and disruption’ and the ‘*due figlie del secolo*’. The underlying concepts have been, in fact, the keys to the analysis developed over the four chapters of this study and are key also to a full comprehension of the conclusions reached here. The words ‘construction and disruption’ condense the fundamental roles played by extraordinary children and animals. On the one hand, to enable the authors to construct and develop themes, arguments, statements of poetics and references to other works and, on the other hand, to allow them to ‘disrupt’, mock, challenge and unmask a society trapped in worthless values, appearances and conventions. The second concept underlies the decision to refer to Masino and Ortese as ‘*due figlie del secolo*’, a variation on the title of Masino’s autobiography, *Io, Massimo e gli altri: autobiografia di una figlia del secolo*.⁸⁹⁹ I chose Vittori’s words as fitting to both authors, to refer to the close, yet difficult relationship both Masino and Ortese have with their time, a relationship which is constantly reflected in their narratives and which extraordinary children and animals contribute to represent. As seen in my thesis, Ortese, an introvert, closed and reserved, feels alienated by modern society which, being founded on scientific thought, puts man and his needs first. Masino, an extrovert, a female intellectual at the centre of a vibrant circle of artists, instead feels trapped by the rigid social conventions, the hypocritical etiquette of her time and the ideology of the Fascist era.

⁸⁹⁹ At the end of Chapter 1, I also modified the title *Io, Massimo e gli altri: autobiografia di una figlia del secolo* referring to the two authors as ‘*due diverse figlie di un secolo*’.

Despite their two different personalities and ways of life, the two authors share a sense of estrangement *vis à vis* the society in which they live, an estrangement they express in different ways, yet both making use of extraordinary children and animal figures. With these two concepts underpinning my thesis in mind, I shall now draw my conclusions highlighting the contribution and new findings of my study.

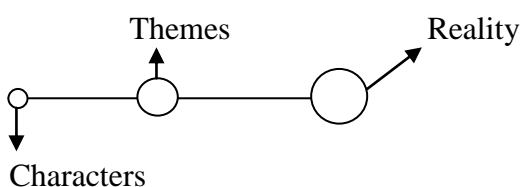
1. From characters to themes: constructing a reality and disrupting another

The first important contribution my thesis has made to scholarly research is of having identified and brought together characters which had previously been overlooked, partially analysed or explored in depth, but in isolation. This is, in fact, the first investigation that has spotted and categorised the numerous images of youngsters and animals employed by Masino and Ortese and analysed them both in terms of the way they are depicted and of their function. In my character analysis, I tried to capture the essence of these extraordinary figures, their original features, their life on the border between the familiar and the unknown, between reality and legends, between the everyday and a dream-like dimension. As a term of comparison, I also addressed the representation of their ordinary counterparts, like the children of *Periferia* or those of *Il mare non bagna Napoli*. Despite inhabiting the vivid harshness of a tangible reality, these realistic characters make us at times question their nature and wonder about their ability to cross the line between the ordinary and the extraordinary, whether through games, sophisticated reasoning or an almost metamorphic appearance.

It is also the first time that Masino's and Ortese's evident predilection for children and animal characters has been looked at together, in order to highlight similarities between the two authors. Masino and Ortese knew each other well, and,

despite their differences, they appreciated each other's talent. The extent of their mutual influence has not been measured, but it can definitely be gleaned from the representation of certain characters and themes. A few emblematic examples are short-sighted Eugenia and Armando, the names chosen for the depiction of angelic figures, Lino and Lin, and the use of the image of the *pellierossa* to suggest the condition of adults who feel inadequate in the face of life.

My thesis did not only aim to cast light on the representation and function of characters, but also on the themes that the authors wished to deal with through the employment of extraordinary children and animals. This research project is thus innovative also in this respect: it identifies a consistent feature in the writing of Masino and Ortese which, despite its evidence, has remained understudied. Summing up what emerges from the four main chapters, I can conclude that the core of the thematic contribution of these characters in Masino's and Ortese's works is closely linked to the two writers' perceptions, views and experiences of reality. Were I to synthesise graphically the process of my analysis, I would draw a horizontal line to be seen from left to right, representing the two authors' narratives studied, with three equidistant circles along it: a small one at the beginning of the line representing the characters, a middle-sized one in the centre for the macro thematic areas and a bigger one at the other end of the line representing reality.



Extraordinary children and animals enable the authors to deal with their favourite themes through which they communicate their vision and relationship with reality.

On the one hand, embracing the extraordinary reflects Masino's and Ortese's wish to demonstrate the existence of a reality beyond the senses, conveying a supernatural and visionary dimension.⁹⁰⁰ Ortese's poetics of reality is clear and articulate as she sees it as an entity made up of several layers, one of which is populated by *monacielli*, elves and spirits. This reality is also her homeland as she herself declares in *Corpo Celeste*:

*Spiriti! Folletti! Spiriti di Padri morti, di Bambini perduti, di piante
che sognano, di farfalle che ci guardano! Di anime all'alba (gli
Uccelli) che ci salutano cantando... È questa, dunque, la sua patria?
Sì, è questa. (Corpo celeste, p. 157)*

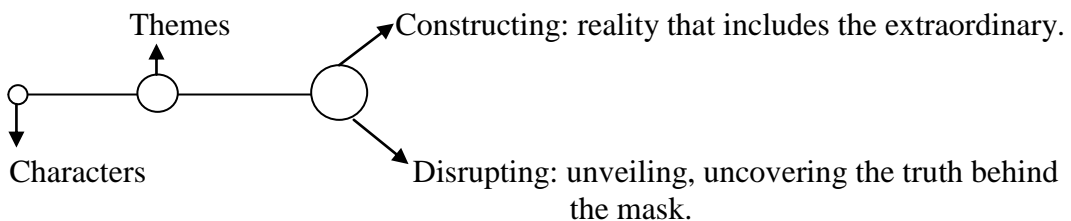
Masino, on the contrary, has neither a set programmatic view of reality nor an organised poetics for it. However, as I have shown from her texts, the presence of the extraordinary is striking and is found in most of her narratives. The novel where the extraordinary is the least present is *Periferia*, where, however, it is in some small way represented by Cleopatra and by the children's absorption in their games, where everyday reality and imagination merge to create a new dimension. It is interesting to note that, whereas Ortese identifies her reality with what is beyond the senses and populates it with concrete characters, Masino seems to identify it with more abstract concepts such as fate or the irrational and the cruel force of nature which have a strong impact on all characters, even those who, like Lino, possess extraordinary traits.

On the other hand, Masino's and Ortese's interest in the extraordinary responds to their intention to unveil what lies beyond appearances, the truth behind the mask, the rotten reality hidden behind the façade of modernity or *perbenismo*. Firstly, both authors expose the victimisation of the weakest, portraying it in different forms and

⁹⁰⁰ See Chapter 3.

through different agents. Secondly, they both reveal the conflictual relationship between mankind and the natural world. The mistreatment and abuse of nature is a pillar of Ortese's poetics. The destructiveness of nature, seriously undervalued by mankind's arrogance, is, instead, at the heart of Masino's interests. Finally, they both uncover the hidden truth behind the veil of their contemporary society characterised by hypocrisy, violence, fake conventions and vacuous ideals.

Going back to the concept of 'construction and disruption', from the conclusions I have just presented, it is clear the same terms can be applied to both Masino's and Ortese's depiction of reality. The two authors, in fact, represent the real precisely by 'constructing' a reality which includes the extraordinary and 'disrupting' the surface under which a very different, degraded and pretentious reality is hidden. To represent this final statement graphically, I have used the same diagram illustrated above, dividing the final circle into two:



2. The exploration of new territories: childhood and a web of references

Turning now to a consideration of two other important aspects of Masino's and Ortese's narratives which emerge from my analysis – a complex representation of childhood and a thick web of references to other works – I shall begin with the representation of childhood and with Ortese's words, which, in terms of the message they convey, could equally well have been written by Masino:

È consuetudine di molti narratori di storie intese a trattenere facili lettori su vicende di adulti, è superficiale consuetudine, riferendo di scene, dialoghi e possibili pensieri in corso tra costoro, trattare della eventuale presenza, in dette scene, di un piccino, come di un elemento assolutamente privo di interesse, quando non del tutto casuale. Ma la consuetudine non è sempre giusta, e non lo è in questo caso, dato che non sempre i fanciulli presenti in dette scene ne recepiscono i particolari (spesso insani e turbolenti!) con quella ilare indifferenza che tutta una convenzione sulla sanità e felicità dei fanciulli a detti narratori impone. Né sani né felici sono, a nostro giudizio, nella loro massima parte, i fanciulli, né protetti da sentimenti elementari. Con orecchie dappertutto, essi spiano, dalle loro seggioline, e perfino da sotto i tavoli, lo svolgersi delle scene di questo gran mondo. (*Il cardillo addolorato*, p. 191)

With a strong programmatic flavour, Ortese criticises the representation of children in literature and the idea of childhood as a happy, carefree time in an individual's life. Unaware of what goes on around them, children are conventionally shown to be living as if wrapped up in a fantasy world of their own. She criticises the habit many authors fall into, 'È consuetudine di molti narratori', of ignoring the impact that adult life has on children 'non sempre i fanciulli presenti in dette scene ne recepiscono i particolari (spesso insani e turbolenti!) con quella ilare indifferenza', a habit born of an unreal, stereotypical image of youngsters 'che tutta una convenzione sulla sanità e felicità dei fanciulli a detti narratori impone'. Through their extraordinary children, as well as their ordinary ones, Masino and Ortese give a radically different image of childhood which distances itself categorically from that of the canon. Children are present, they are aware, they listen to adults' conversations, can see what is going on around them, understand, although at times not completely, but sufficiently well, the

decay, violence and falsity of the grown-ups. All this makes them suffer, influences their games and strongly affects their lives. Furthermore, Masino's and Ortese's depiction of childhood is far from the romantic view of innocence. The two authors, in fact, also present us with youngsters who are naturally bad, envious, stingy and even violent. In his review of *Periferia*, Luigi Chiarini writes:

I loro chiari e puri occhi non guardano al male con quella ingenua, seppur dolorosa, stupefazione dei bimbi, ma piuttosto con un sorriso amaro e scettico di chi ha fatto il callo al male e alle sofferenze.⁹⁰¹

This critic's view of *Periferia*'s children is very similar to the description given by Ortese in 'La città involontaria':

Questa infanzia, non aveva d'infantile che gli anni. Pel resto, erano piccoli uomini e donne, già a conoscenza di tutto, il principio come la fine delle cose, già consunti dai vizi, dall'ozio, dalla miseria più insostenibile, malati nel corpo e stravolti nell'animo, con sorrisi corrotti o ebeti, furbi e desolati nello stesso tempo. (*Il mare non bagna Napoli*, p. 93)

In its consideration of childhood, my thesis responds to a gap in scholarly literature regarding the representation of childhood in Italian contemporary literature, with consideration given to only a few, selected authors, among whom Elsa Morante.

The other original contribution I believe my thesis has made is to have highlighted the adoption of extraordinary children and animals as a means for establishing a thick web of links with other literary, artistic, popular works or characters. This reflects the authors' wish to intertwine their poetic discourse with that of the great masters so as to make their message and poetics universal, as I have shown in the case of the Pada's family. In some cases it is an exhortation for society

⁹⁰¹ Chiarini.

to treasure popular and collective heritage, like the figure of the *monaciello* of the Neapolitan tradition or the many legendary figures of Celtic folklore. However, it is also a form of erudition, a means, especially in Masino's case where intertextuality is very evident, to showcase her vast literary and artistic knowledge.

In Conclusion

My thesis, moving from the micro (character analysis) to the macro (themes), has opened the doors to the hitherto not fully explored thematic richness of Masino's and Ortese's oeuvre, a richness which the authors build up through a process of construction of a reality much more complex than that which can be perceived by the senses, and of disruption of the society in which they were both ill-at-ease. It is in the constructive and destructive nature of their writing that Masino and Ortese show their unique ability to experiment with characters, plots, topics and genres and to create a narrative which, for its originality, is impossible to categorise or fit into a specific genre or movement. Their flair for experimentalism is what makes these two writers, despite the conflictual relationship with their time, *due figlie del Novecento*, a century of unprecedented innovation, rapid progress, contradiction and alienation.

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