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A Woman's Loss of Imagination: Paola Masino's Magical Realism in *Nascita e morte della Massaia*

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Criticism on Paola Masino has flourished since the early 2000s. This increased attention has contributed towards reclaiming an author often overshadowed by the attention received by her partner, Massimo Bontempelli, the father of *realismo magico*. Masino experimented with a variety of styles—*realismo magico* was one of them—as she rejected strictly naturalistic forms of representation, preferring to co-opt myths and the supernatural. *Nascita e morte della Massaia* (1945) is Masino's most renowned literary effort, both for its critique of Fascist Italy and for its sophisticated stylistic effects. *Nascita*, while indebted to Bontempelli's theorizations, features all the chief characteristics listed in Faris's analysis of magical realism as an international phenomenon, and illustrates how magical realism offers strategies for evading censorship to those writing against totalitarianism regimes. At the same time, it is an example of how magical realism can be used to denounce socially imposed gender roles. My analysis shows how this narrative mode emerges on multiple levels within Masino's text.

KEYWORDS Masino, magical realism, *realismo magico*, Fascist censorship, subversive literature, magical realism and gender.

Introduction

Criticism on Paola Masino has flourished since the early 2000s.¹ This increase in attention has contributed to the retrieval of an author half-forgotten and too often undeservedly overshadowed by her partner, the father of *realismo magico*, Massimo Bontempelli. Masino experimented with

a variety of styles, while forcing myths and the supernatural to cohabit with reality (Bersani 1994, 218). Garbin (2013, 597) calls her writing “modern fantastic,” as it is characterized by a “blurring of boundaries between [...] dream and wakefulness, real and imaginary” that suggests “the arbitrariness of categorizations and definitions.”

Nascita e morte della Massaia (1945) is Masino’s most renowned literary effort, both for its sophisticated stylistic effects and for its critique of Fascism. It was written between 1938 and 1940.²

Neorealist writers tended to confront the postwar Italian identity crisis by resorting to a narrative style aimed at providing the reading public with recognizable signifiers. Hence the nature of non-mimetic forms of writing became functional in the works of those who did not embrace neorealism, but who also dealt with the topical subject of memory. For instance, some women writers of the postwar years, who had “grown up and matured under fascism and war, refused [the] traditional values” promoted by neorealism (Wood 1995, 8), and thus a cultural project that, besides many progressive precepts, also promoted traditional views of woman (Viganò’s *L’Agnese va a morire* [1949] and Cassola’s *La ragazza di Bube* [1959] are pertinent examples). Authors such as Morante and Romano reflected on memory as a product of one’s imagination, which contributes to the subjective writing of history (see Iacobbe 2006).³ Romano (1989, 39), who openly rejected neorealism, believed that fantasy and memory are one and the same. For Romano, all that is experienced, even imagination and dreams, is lived, hence acknowledged within the realm of memory. Therefore, imagination and dreams are real. Morante (1990, 1508), who defined neorealism as a “moda contemporanea del documentarismo,” deals with a similar idea, that of the imagination as memory: “che il segreto dell’arte sia qui? Ricordare come l’opera si è vista in uno stato di sogno [...]. Ché forse tutto l’inventare è ricordare” (1989, 20). She also declared that individual and contingent experiences are not enough for the novelist, whose investigations must produce universal meanings.

Seen from this perspective, Masino’s style in *Nascita* appears both to approximate Bontempelli’s *realismo magico* and to align with reflections on literature of her time that opposed the neorealist trend and its most traditional aspects, such as the celebration of woman’s self-abnegation (e.g. in *La ragazza di Bube*,⁴ or in works presenting woman’s participation in history through domestic chores, as in *L’Agnese va a morire*). Rather, Masino “investigates the relationship between individual consciousness and the external world [...] through a feminine

lens” (Rozier 2008, 145).⁵ which experiment with “a modernist realism infused with surrealist and expressionist elements” (Re 1995, 92). As a result, *Nascita* is subversive not because it provides us with answers or counter-ideologies, but because it poses questions and disorients the reader. Presented with unreliable narrating voices, which may even conflict with one another, readers cannot rely on the comforting and pre-digested morality that emerges from much neorealism.

Masino’s style in *Nascita*, though indebted to Bontempelli’s precept that “la vera norma dell’arte narrativa è [...] raccontare il sogno come se fosse realtà e la realtà come se fosse un sogno” (1974, 161), also features all the chief characteristics listed by Faris (2004) in her analysis of magical realism (to which I will refer from here on as MR) as an international phenomenon. The novel confirms that MR, which both renews and challenges the “realistic tradition” (14), presents dual literary impulses that simultaneously tend towards fantasy and mimesis, in a relation that is often one of complex interplay (Hume 1984, 20). However, the author’s intent is not to produce a chaotic narration that purposely resists meaning. On the contrary, and as we will see, Masino—by offering altered versions of elements from pre-existing literary codes of writing (i.e. surrealism, the fantastic) within a somewhat realistic setting—invites readers, in magical realist style, to seek interpretations and ascribe meanings.⁶ At the same time, *Nascita*’s challenges to the Fascist view of woman illustrates how MR offers to dissenting writers narrative strategies that enable them to attack the assumptions advanced by totalitarian regimes (Bowers 2004, 4), while simultaneously flying under the radar, so to speak, of the censor.

The subversive potential of MR, already present in some works by Bontempelli, was pivotal to the survival of *Nascita*, initially deemed too pessimistic by the Ministry of Popular Culture. While agreeing to certain modifications, Masino still managed to preserve crucial passages which convey her cynical portrayal of motherhood. In the final analysis, she succeeded in conveying that which is for her the primary function of literature: namely, its ideological implications and a critical relationship with the dominant ideology (Re 2016, 165). This was possible since her “surrealistic, nightmarish setting” obscured the meanings of the book (Bonsaver 2007, 259). That is, Masino employed MR as a self-censoring strategy that allowed her to evade the punishing hand of the censor despite the fact that the entire book “è imperniat[o] sul fatto che la maternità non è una virtù ma una condanna, almeno dalla Bibbia in poi” (Masino

(1995, 95); and this, of course, was not an acceptable posture during the 1930s and early 1940s. To this day, of the many, complex, and contradictory aspects of Fascism, questions of motherhood and of gender roles are a relatively challenging vantage from which to observe the regime's ideology. While Bontempelli focused, in his *realismo magico* trilogy,⁷ on the Fascist conception of motherhood as symbolic of the totalizing character of the Regime, Masino conveyed a critique of Fascism, but her reflections in *Nascita* also transcend the book's specific sociohistorical context. This novel is indeed an example of how MR can be used to denounce the imposition of socially constructed gender roles (Garbin 2013, 593): in it, Masino demystifies motherhood, focusing on women's historical collusion in the perpetuation of their condition. By contrast, parenthetically, in Bontempelli's *Il figlio di due madri*, motherhood is exalted (Airoldi Namer 1979, 99). This illustrates both how the inherently anti-hegemonic character of this mode (Chanady 1995) emerges on multiple levels within texts, and how Masino's novel, far more than a simple instance of *realismo magico*, manifests emblematic elements of MR as defined by Faris.

In order to conduct my analysis, first I will expand on Faris's taxonomy, including comparisons with elements of Bontempelli's *realismo magico*. Thus, I will provide a theoretical framework for my study of the novel in the sections to follow. I will then proceed with an analysis of the Massaia's isolation in the trunk; and I will demonstrate how Masino represents the Massaia as a development of a Bontempellian *anima candida* (this is a character who can, literally, see the hidden world of magic within reality, and thus refuses dogmatic views of that same reality). This analysis will be followed by an examination of the novel's critique of Fascist ideology regarding woman, and hence of Masino's MR as an anti-censorship strategy. Subsequently, I will explore the way in which her critique is carried out through a disruption of the narrative element of identity through the double.

Defining Elements of Magical Realism

MR tends to deal with specific historical moments, but its narratives offer reflections that typically transcend contingency. MR in general is not associated with specific times and places, and is conceived of as a narrative mode, not a genre (Bowers 2004, 3). Yet some recurring elements may be identified: "first, [...] an 'irreducible element' of magic" (Faris 2004, 7).

Simultaneously, magical realist narratives feature a “reliance on sensory data” (Faris 2002, 102),⁸ a preponderance of elements borrowed from literary realism, and thus “a strong presence of the phenomenal world” (Faris 2004, 7). In other words, MR offers a combination of fictional universes similar to our own, with irreducible elements which are portrayed matter-of-factly. Currelli (2014, 8) claims that in the narrative paradigms of Morovich (1906–1994), fantastical elements are treated as ordinary. Thus, the uncanny is not engendered by an out-of-place irreducible element, but by irreducible elements perfectly integrated within a predominantly realistic setting— which paradoxically heightens the incongruity. And all is told in “una maniera quasi cronachistica.” This definition applies to the beginning of *Nascita*: as a child “la Massaia era polverosa e sonnolenta. [...] 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” (Masino 2009, 5). The author’s pragmatic tone in describing an unbelievable fact (Cooper 2004, 384) is exemplary of how those same occurrences described as problematical in fantastic narratives “are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist” (Chanady 1985, 24). This leads us to Faris’s third element, as the reader may experience unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events. Furthermore, this perplexity is usually augmented by the author’s refusal to provide explanations as to the nature of the irreducible elements. This “authorial reticence” (Chanady 1985, 16) adds to the disruption of an objective or completely shareable reality. In this way, it becomes in Masino’s works (as in Bontempelli’s) a tool of self-censorship, a necessary tactic for those writing in regimes that limit freedom of expression. Readers are not furnished predetermined meanings or moralities, but must instead figure these out by themselves. This opening towards different possible interpretations inheres in MR and in its questioning of all established knowledge. It is also done with an eye toward the censor: authorial reticence prompts readers (including the censor) to understand what they want to, or can, in a story. MR relies on a constant skepticism introduced into our perception of the world; the realistic narrative presents matter-of-factly not only magic events, but also events that are, put simply, bizarre. Thus, we may speak more properly of disorientation, rather than of fantastic hesitation, as MR plays upon the reader’s belief system; and this disorientation tends to provoke resistance to reading the story in a predetermined way. Disorientation occurs in *Nascita* when Masino makes readers engage in literal interpretations of extraordinary facts (e.g. the girl’s life in the trunk), not by frightening or amazing them, but by utilizing a matter-of-fact tone. The trunk

is a literalized metaphor: this device (frequent, for instance, in the magical realist work of Rushdie) implies that signifiers can activate the materialization of what they refer to, establishing connections which in a realistic text would remain metaphorical (see Faris 2004, 63). The girl's alienation from her family, her being treated like a piece of furniture, is visually represented, and thus results in the transformation of a trunk (itself a piece of furniture) into an alternate world where the Massaia can escape conformism. This magical world, created by the girl's imagination, exists within the ordinary space of a conventional household, treated by the author as if it were something as real as the credible setting in which it exists. This is Faris's fourth element: the "merging of different realms," which is typically achieved through adopting the perspective of an "especially gifted perceiver" (Faris 2004, 63), itself a development of Bontempelli's *anima candida*.

For Bontempelli, the magic in *realismo magico* derives from a sense of wonder found within reality, which he rendered by adopting the perspective of two main subject categories: children and women,⁹ his *anime candide*. In Bontempelli, magic is evoked to counter conformism and social constraints. This anticipates Faris's claim that MR is often used "in the context of cultural crises," almost as if "magic is invoked" when rationality has failed (2004, 83). Hence, Bontempelli's *candore*, which is a necessary precondition for experiencing wonder, amounts to what magical realist writer Carpentier (1995, 86) describes as a heightened perception of reality and Zamora (2005) defines as the visualizing capacity of MR. For Bontempelli (1974, 59), wonder is the origin of philosophy:¹⁰ the *anima candida* will not accept the judgments of others without questioning them, and she can distinguish with her imagination what is natural from what is superimposed (1978, 812–813). She can thus achieve what Bontempelli defined as the *stato di grazia* in the 1942 eponymous collection.

Here, he refers to a predisposition to look at reality from angles and perspectives not imposed by a domineering social and/or political power: imagination is not a stylistic device, but rather a mental attitude (Airoldi Namer 1979, 136). Frequently incompatible with the demands of society, *candore* thus brings about marginalization (e.g. the Massaia in the trunk). Similarly, the gifted perceiver of MR is usually a character that lives at the margins of society, because of sex, gender, beliefs, ethnicity, etc. Their quasi-superhuman sight—which can thus be seen as a literalized metaphor for the character's inquisitiveness towards reality, or as a sort of third eye—allows the magic to infiltrate realistic portrayals in the text (hence crossing the boundaries

between two worlds, that of reality and that of magic) even where no irreducible element is being described.

Faris's fifth and final element stresses that MR's narrative strategies aim at disrupting the unities of identity, space, and time (the question of identity is particularly relevant to the present study, as we shall see).¹¹ In her analysis, she reflects on the modernist tendency of exploring the psychic complexity of characters' personality, which hints at the coexistence of a plurality of selves within one character. These ideas, she explains, are usually literalized in MR, which takes to extremes the modernist concern with multiplicity in the way it shapes its characters—and at times, its texts. In Masino's text, a series of splits is instrumental to her aim of rejecting and refuting what Re (2016, 165), drawing on Bakhtin, refers to as Fascist monologism: “[o]fficial monologism [...] pretends to possess a ready-made truth” (Bakhtin 1984, 110). In a context of ideological monologism, “the genuine interaction of consciousnesses is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well” (81). Therefore, “the dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed” (110) to monologism, in texts that encourage the emergences of several and diverging perspectives, rather than upholding a single one. Accordingly, *Nascita* features the double in many forms: the narrating voice itself is doubled, dissonant, and in continuous critical dialogue and tension with other voices, and with itself (Re 2016, 165).

The Massaia as a Child: A Gifted Perceiver of Magical Realism

The Massaia as a child is a variation of a Bontempellian *anima candida*—usually and purposely characterized by a lack of psychological depth. Only initially did Bontempelli condemn what he called “*freudismo, che respinge sempre più l’individuo verso gli abissi interiori*” (1974, 27). Masino, conversely, indulges in representations of her characters' minds, which also conveys her critique of society—as evidenced in the way she elaborates on questions of motherhood and death.

A gifted perceiver of MR, the Massaia is scorned and marginalized because of her inquisitive mind: “in tutto voleva trovare una ragione,” seeking “il profitto delle cose che gli altri spregiavano.” To everybody's dismay, for instance, “portava a casa manciate di terra perché nella terra avrebbero potuto esserci semi” (Masino 2009, 11). As her observations of all things

become more and more acute, she develops an obsession with death and with the transience of all that lives, human and non-human alike, finding correspondences in their shared impermanence: “la bambina non guardava l’aria, guardava a terra le cose che imputridiscono [...] come i secoli sulla vita umana.” The Massaia gradually comes to reflect on death “as detachment [...] from contingencies in order to connect the individual with a superior, more permanent order of things” (Valisa 2014, 121). Her life in the trunk thus becomes both a precondition for her free pursuit of knowledge (a quest for the meaning of life or, better still, for a reason for the inevitability of death: “tutto ha una ragione e io devo scoprirla” [Masino 2009, 11]) and its main cause. In this text, then, we can see how MR conveys a paradoxical interchange between “rising and tethering” (Faris 2004, 56). Accordingly, the child’s self-induced imprisonment in an absurdly and impossibly large trunk is simultaneously her jail (tethering) and her space of freedom (rising): she is “outside of history,” and thus of “power” (Valisa 2014, 117). Hence, the visualizing capacity of MR engenders the creation of a space where the girl can grow up feeding her imagination, the trunk, which is also a substitute for the mother’s womb.¹² And just as social norms do not apply to life in the trunk/womb, so ontological boundaries do not follow empirical rules either: from it, “esalava un odore di selva e rovine entro cui la bambina si formava” (Masino 2009, 7). Alienated from her family, the Massaia grows up in the trunk and becomes part of it: “[s]u lei cadeva la polvere dei soffitti e le si ammucchiava in forfora sul capo, molliche e residui di carte le entravano sotto le unghie, muschio nasceva tra le fessure del baule” (Masino 2009, 7). The irreducible element of the girl’s life in the trunk is—by Currelli’s and Chanady’s definitions—not perceived by the characters as extraordinary. On the contrary, the Massaia’s family are focused on the practical implications that the girl’s lifestyle will have on her destiny as an unkempt woman: they cannot see how extraordinary a person she is, just as they cannot see the extraordinariness of her life in the trunk: they are merely annoyed by it. The Massaia’s decision “to isolate herself from the world and to relinquish all care of herself,”¹³ which reflects “the primacy of thought [she] established over mundane concerns” (Valisa 2014, 117), is a source of disturbance to the familial order. Consequently, she is literally, by contemptuous negligence, reduced to a piece of furniture. This literalized metaphor is described with an irony that verges on sarcasm: “ogni mattina le cameriere le spolveravano il capo, le spazzavano i piedi, le sbattevano e ripiegavano addosso gli abiti” (Masino 2009, 8).

In twentieth-century Italian literature, especially during the interwar years, irony took on “un forte valore conoscitivo e diventa la misura del rapporto con il reale” (Sica 2010). For Bontempelli (1929, 134), irony entails a departure from realism, even though descriptions are realistically precise. As a result, what is represented is clear and unambiguous: through the lens of irony, everything seems to move, magically, away from our gaze, while being seen more clearly. This is evident in the scene above, where Masino offers a matter-of-fact description of the bizarre occurrence of the girl being treated, literally, like a cabinet. This detachment on the narrator’s part is meant to disorient the reader, who is thus prompted to accept that what is being described is actually taking place. Furthermore, since this bizarre scene does not suggest a straightforward meaning, the reader is also asked to engage in an interpretation of the odd episode, not to establish whether or not the latter is real (it is told in a realistically precise manner), but rather to assign meaning to it. This anticipates the idea that the combination of authorial reticence with authorial irony is an essential characteristic of MR (Cooper 1998, 34); this, in turn, offers an unusual mix of “acceptance and skepticism that characterizes the reader’s experience” (Faris 2004, 20).

Masino frequently uses irony, even sarcasm, to describe the Massaia’s peculiar behaviors, and authorial irony characterizes the more realistic passages of the novel. These are perhaps easier to interpret. Blunt comments such as “per eredità femminile, certo” (Masino 2009, 58) or “tutto questo rientra certo nella carriera di madre, intesa in modo sociale” (63)—which we will consider further below—might have appeared, at the time of publication, sarcastic to a dissenting mind, but could be taken literally by a Fascist supporter. In other places, especially when Masino represents her character’s thoughts and feelings, the author’s critique is disguised somewhat by her panache, which also requires “il coinvolgimento attivo del lettore” (Rozier 2016, 29) in the discovery of meaning.

An example is found in the following scene, rich in metaphors and evocative imageries, when the Massaia—a zombie arising from its tomb—says “mom” for the first time (Masino 2009, 14). The Massaia’s anguish at having left her trunk-womb to enter the unknown dimension of the external world, where she has to accept her own mother as her main point of reference, is represented by what appears to be an allusion to birth: “[p]iangendo aumentava in lei la sensazione di stare in un passaggio stretto, tra una foschia sanguigna, in un odore forte, [...] dal quale vuol liberarsi e più se ne vuole liberare più vi si immerge.” The girl’s suffering as she

metaphorically passes through the oppressing maternal womb, prompts her to engage in a bitter appraisal of motherhood: “perché fa questo dolore dire “mamma’?” The mother answers dismissively and with a touch of melodrama: “[e] tu mi chiami per questo? Lasciami almeno morire in pace.” For the mother, the word “mamma” is not a notion, but merely defines a role: “[s]e io dicessi mamma senza che questo corrispondesse a una persona sarei pazza.” For the girl, conversely, “mamma, [...] una cosa che è soltanto in se stessa [...] è uno strazio di tutto il mondo” (15). Left to her own devices, the girl concludes that “l’amore materno è sempre una forza lacerata” (15).

Resigned to this awareness, but still torn between filial guilt and a desire to remain free, the girl eventually consents to exit the trunk, and to make of herself an appealing potential bride. Her acceptance is symbolized and marked by a sort of baptism to get rid of the dirt on her body. This cleansing, an interminable series of baths, is described matter-of-factly and in vivid detail: “[s]ul pelo dell’acqua salivano bolle d’olio e peluzzi, si stendeva una pelle scura, [...] mentre quella della ragazza da marrone si andava facendo paonazza e le membra le si scioglievano e gonfiavano” (21). After the sixth bath, “l’acqua aveva una limpidezza ambigua, [come] l’olio ove bollirono i protomartiri” (22). More hyperbolic grotesqueries are invoked when the Massaia focusses on specific aspects of her body, as she sets out to keep her promise to become “normale” (23): her toenails “di selce dovevano essere. Come scavarle? [...] Poi ci sono i peli, sulle gambe. [...] Saranno bruciati [...]. Forse correranno i pompieri” (21–22). These hyperbolic descriptions are narrated in Masino’s dryly ironic tone, and the incongruity between the Massaia’s pragmatism and the ridiculously exaggerated toilette is also occasionally reinforced by the indirect free discourse: “Questo corpo è abbastanza interessante, ci si può lavorare sopra” (23). This matter-of-factness, tinged with irony, encourages a literal reading. And though surreal, these descriptions appear to have a meaning. Several intertextual references to Catholic imagery in the novel—along with the mother’s comment that the Massaia is “sporca tutta, di corpo e di pensiero” (15–16)—prompt us to read not only dirt as imagination but, consequently, imagination as sin. As a literalized metaphor, dirt was a protective shield for the girl who, because of her inadequate hygiene, was also rejected by a number of aspiring husbands (16–17). Thus, when the grotesque baptism that makes the Massaia “monda, finalmente” (22), symbolically delivers her from the sin of imagination (and after a carefully planned makeover), she becomes finally ready for her real birth: “[s]embro un neonato, mamma’ [...]. ‘E non è

questa la tua vera nascita? L'entrata nel tuo mondo di donna” (28). Outside the trunk, the girl normalizes herself; she conforms. Given in marriage to an uncle as old as her parents, she does not have children, but tries instead to become the perfect *Massaia*.

In *Nascita*, Masino reshapes the *Bildungsroman* to account for the artificial construction of woman, with her subordination stemming from an ontological difference that Masino sees as a mere linguistic construct: “adopera un linguaggio e suscitati in te l'individuo cui tal linguaggio appartiene” (Masino 2009, 199). This is a key theme in intentionally feminist texts, such as Carter's 1984 *Nights at the Circus*, that employ MR to challenge how gender identities are shaped by patriarchal discourses as “a consequence of anatomy” (Waugh 2001, 346). Accordingly, the episode of the girl's ludicrous “*lavori di restauro*” (Masino 2009, 22) is a visual literalization of how dominant discourses (e.g. religious, sociocultural) regulate the building of individual and social identities through the performative power of language (Di Lorenzo 2016, 80). We must here also refer to Foster's concept of “felt history” as analyzed by Faris (2004, 16), whereby history acquires agency when characters experience it on their own body. This phenomenon is particularized in MR narratives, engendering different thematic and stylistic outcomes.¹⁴ In our case, history acts as a normalizing force and the *Massaia*, when she succumbs to it, undergoes a self-inflicted process of bodily makeover, which is the result of patriarchal discourses' shaping of her identity: she “recognizes her body as a text” (Valisa 2014, 121). And, in agreeing to play her predetermined role, from being marginalized—but free—the *Massaia* “becomes part of, and ruled and described by [...] history and power” (121). Furthermore, history and power act on her through the person of her own mother rather than through the male characters in the story, thus clearly pointing to women's collusion in the preservation of the status quo.

Masino's Critique of (Fascist) Notions of Womanhood

After the events described above, Masino begins to sarcastically and critically address the Fascist equation of woman with motherhood. She describes the protagonist's inner conflicts and ensuing madness as a result of the standardization and control exercised by the regime on the female

body—something which the protagonist de facto (but, arguably, not intentionally) resists, by sublimating her culturally induced drive towards motherhood.

During and after her normalizing process, the Massaia takes Fascist rhetoric and idealism to the point of madness as she, childless, projects “una specie di malposto affetto materno” onto objects in her house, “quasi fossero parti del corpo del figlio” (Masino 2009, 55). Kneeling on the floor, “carezzava [...] la soglia di marmo, come una madre la fronte di un bimbo” (50); and “non ebbe ritegno [dal] leccare il pavimento” (168). These surreal and grotesque scenes must be interpreted by the reader, as Masino does not furnish clarification of her protagonist’s antics. Yet in contrast to the bizarre combinations of objects built by Surrealism, which programmatically resist interpretation, MR, projecting an initial aura of madness, tends to reveal its meanings after some inspection (Faris 2004, 34). For Di Lorenzo (2016, 79), the Massaia’s antics imply that motherhood is described as a condemnation, and her capitulation, manifest in her surreal obsession with her furniture, is a parodical critique of Fascist essentialist rhetoric: woman, mother to all those who can benefit from her innate motherhood (Gentile 1934, 24), is guardian of the household and, through it, she cares for the nation as well. The Massaia accordingly declares, once her transformation into a typical woman seems accomplished, that: “[l]a casa, come la patria, va difesa contro ogni logica” (Masino 2009, 197), thus parodying the Fascist woman–mother–homeland nexus (see Di Lorenzo 2016, 79). This meets with her husband’s approval, also rendered parodically as Masino plays with Fascist rhetoric: “o salvatrice del principio morale, manna benefica, spargitrice di generosità e consolazione!” (Masino 2009, 197).

The Massaia’s childlessness has been met with a variety of interpretations.¹⁵ For Rorandelli (2003, 86), the book reaffirms the joyful bond of the female body with procreation. Yet while the Massaia’s metamorphosis—her sublimation of motherhood through the transformation of her super-senses into a tedious devotion to domestic chores—challenges the assumptions of Fascist reductive perception of social and biological female existence, Masino was not attempting any ideological recuperation of the maternal body. In fact, there is no apparent or hidden suggestion of this in the novel. On the contrary, at the outset Masino comments on the way woman does not own her body, in light of her reproductive functions: “[n]el ventre provava come se le sconvolgersero e stringessero a manate le viscere,” fearing she would never be able to get rid “del corpo che le hanno messo addosso” (Masino 2009, 10).

Furthermore, the obsessive attention the Massaia pays to her furniture may also be seen as her desire to recuperate her childhood world: hoping to find magic in her surroundings just as when she was in the trunk, she becomes once more of all the frustrated housewives of humanity (see Laghezza 2014, 12). The synecdochal quality of this character conveys a critique of gender roles that transcends Fascism. In these passages, Masino uses personifications to convey the Massaia's attempts at recuperating her super-sight: "non le veniva dalle pareti [...] nessun sussurro. Qualche volta, è vero, un mobile si faceva sentire," but no metamorphosis transforms those "compagne di legno che rimanevano rigide [...] come mogli di generali" (Masino 2009, 53–4). Over time, she accepts that "erano mobili senza vita," just as she now is, and that "non ne volevano sapere di essere stati alberi vivi" (53). Yet she is not ready to accept the loss of that magic, which is no longer coming to her aid against conformism. Shortly after the episode cited above, the Massaia seems to recuperate a sense of magic by fusing herself with the natural world. Her maternal care of the houseplants activates her subjectivity by reigniting that lost imaginative power which, in turn, animates her surroundings. Bodily fusions with nature, frequent in MR (e.g. in the writing of Maria Luisa Bombal [1910–1980]), typically point to a recuperation of an independent female identity. Here, the visualizing capacity of MR conveys a *stato di grazia* that fuses the Massaia's body with nature (just as it was in the trunk): "ella entr[ò] in rapporto con i fiori" and "le braccia le si alzarono con le mani spalancate tra i rami a far da fronde, [...]. Il tronco le si contorse" while "un sugo resinoso [...] le incollava le mani. Tutta l'aveva impastata" (56). However, this *stato di grazia* is soon ruined by the progressive intrusion of her sense of housewifely duty mentioned above, which transforms her super-sight into an obsessive attention to dirt: "[a]vvenne che la massaia [...] si trovasse, per eredità femminile certo, a spolverare quella foglia [...]. Così a poco a poco non vide intorno a se che cose da governare" (58). In other words, her inclination towards caring for all things living is substituted by a culturally induced type of nurturing, itself the result of the tension between her conscious will to conform and her unconscious resistance to it.

Masino's irony is put to use in a critique of societal conventions, here denouncing the fabricated nature of notions of womanhood—Fascist and non-Fascist alike. When she comes out of the trunk, the Massaia loses her power of imagination (just as the wooden furniture no longer comes to life, after the wood has been turned into timber by men, for their purposes), and her super-sight, the origin of her philosophical thinking. This had once allowed her to interact in an

extraordinary way with ordinary objects and surroundings, but her decision to conform has destroyed the possibility of her finding magic within herself and in her environment (Manetti 2009, 148). This is summarized by Masino through another instance in which rising as opposed to tethering conveys a gendered perspective: “tutta la poesia del mondo è trascorsa per una donna, da quando [...] le mettete sulle spalle la casa,” while “voi [uomini] volate, noi stiamo a terra” (2009, 122).

The Double in *Nascita e morte della Massaia*

Masino’s insistence on the fabricated nature of womanhood, and of motherhood as a virtue, is also a trope of modernist derivation (and of the modernist obsession with the search for, or lack of, a truer self) that finds its roots in the Pirandellian philosophy of masks.¹⁶ As Cooper affirms, *Nascita* features an “innovative presentation of the modernist crisis of consciousness in light of the psychological and socio-political implications of gender” (2004, 382).

Representations of selfhood in modernist literature, Pirandello’s *Vitangelo Moscarda* to name just one, tend towards fragmentation. Indeed, there is a strong focus on a self that is heterogeneous, pluralist, but which was once thought unitary. An example of this process can be found in Bontempelli’s 1925 play, *Nostra Dea*. This work offers an illustration of the modernist obsession with the existence (or absence) of an original—more real—self in humans, beyond the layers of masks (dresses, in *Dea*’s case) that one has to put on, on a daily basis, in order to comply with social conventions. In accordance with modernist experimentation, in Bontempelli the inclusion of the double in the form of automata/marionettes in ordinary life implied challenging “the notion itself of reality, [...] perceived as an aesthetic construct” (Storchi 2006, 117). This surpassing of the traditional mimetic paradigm in favour of poiesis, in Bontempelli’s trilogy, became a self-censoring process that enabled him to avoid censorship.¹⁷ Through the irreducible element of a double motherhood in *Il figlio*, for instance, Bontempelli tackles the assumption that everything is knowable and controllable, thereby anticipating a foremost precept of MR: the idea that reality always surpasses our abilities to label or define, and that the purpose of literary creation is to acknowledge this impossibility by stimulating questions rather than giving answers to readers. *Il figlio*, which features a resurrected child with two mothers and a

quest to establish which of the two is the real one, is underpinned by the question: is true motherhood that of the flesh or that of the soul (Baldacci 1959, 433)? This novel hints at the impossibility of finding an answer to the question above, and thus challenges a unified definition of motherhood.¹⁸ Similarly, in *Nascita* a repetitive creation of doubles works against the idea of a single essence for women. Yet Masino's use of the double is arguably more successful than Bontempelli's because she achieves her goal of destabilizing the reader's ideas of unity in a far-reaching sense.

In MR, the splitting of the self can be a literalized metaphor with the emergence of an anti-self, following the convergence or clash of two disparate forms of thought, or two cultures (Faris 2004, 155). Hence the double, losing traditional connotations of good vs. evil, challenges binary ways of thinking and (in our case) binary conceptions of womanhood (mother/not mother). This corresponds with the mode's penchant for dualisms, which become the definition for any type of multiplication in the text, formal and thematic alike. Masino's novel is an example of non-mimetic writing of modernist derivation. Here, the double is present in the form of a mysterious character coming to life (a girl) as a result of the Massaia's split consciousness. Indeed, given that the girl is silenced just as the protagonist had earlier been, we may argue that the text throws into relief the repetition among generations of women, also pointing to women's collusion in the hierarchical structuring of society. This can be read as a critique of Fascism, but also as an engagement with women's condition throughout the history of the West. Unlike in Bontempelli's *Il figlio*, the double in *Nascita* is not subversive because it destabilizes held viewpoints on motherhood through the emergence of rebellious female voices. Once the Massaia has agreed to become an exemplary daughter and woman, the normalizing female voice is no longer the mother's, but belongs to the Massaia herself as she attempts to become (like) her own mother—who had been a willing player in the mechanism by which the subjugation of women is reproduced: “quella madre amorfa che l’aveva costruita quindi distrutta [...] incitandola alla riproduzione [...]. Tutto questo rientra certo nella carriera di madre, intesa in modo sociale” (Masino 2009, 63). So, when the Massaia meets her double, a young girl who claims “mi basto” in defense of her freedom (165), the frustrated housewife invites her to surrender her autonomy and to conform. The splitting, which reveals how the Massaia has become the persecutory double of her (old) self, with the girl as her alter ego, is a consequence of the lost magical power. Embittered to see her former self still full of imagination, the woman sets off to kill it, just as her

mother had tried with her. As was the case with many representations of selfhood in modernist literature, the focus here is on a heterogeneous self. That self, of course, was once thought monolithic. Moreover, the double is the projection of the protagonist's conformist fantasies. When this occurs (e.g. in chapter 9) the Massaia, it would seem, has generated a double of herself, not a daughter, only to transform that double into an ill-fated mother, a role that she could not (or perhaps would not) assume herself.

A drastic confusion surrounding identity throughout the novel is also rendered by Masino in her shifts from third- to first-person narration (the latter usually conveying a disapproving conformist standpoint) and vice versa, without warning or explanation— there is even a diary-style section in the novel. She even lets the narrating voice speak directly to readers, asking them to identify with the protagonist. The text is thus “structured between self and self as other, articulating the subject's relation to cultural laws and established rules” (Živković 2000, 125). This use of the double engages with the magical realist notion according to which “listening to their polyvocal textual voices will presumably teach us to listen to many points of view” (Faris 2004, 168). In Masino, an instability in perspective seems to imply that if no single reality exists, then there is no worldview which we may deem exact (see Davies 2000, 59), and the contrary view might appear to be as unstable as its opposite (in this schema): such instability opens itself up to the possibility of a counter-position, rather than opposition per se. Masino's text, while it is not an instrument in the hands of an official ideology, does not absolve a definitive ideological role of opposition either.

The double in Masino works to an extent towards enabling the emergence of a multiple, thus de-focalized, narrative. Uncertainty surrounding the narrating voice, and its multiplicity, is yet another manifestation of MR's challenge to boundaries in Masino's work. This further disorients the reader, who is not presented with a traditionally omniscient narration or with a reliable homodiegetic voice, but instead with an unpredictable series of shifts of (female) perspectives— a choice that challenges univocal visions of women's life, on the one hand. On the other, this instability and unreliability of viewpoints does not allow the reader to derive a definitive clear-cut ideology from the text, at least not one that we may ascribe to the author. In magical realist style, which takes to extremes the role of engaged literary creation, the responsibility of ascribing meanings mostly attaches to the reader (an aspect that also distances Masino from postwar neorealist narratives). By contesting the limited nature of mimetic representation itself, and thus

reality seen as an aesthetic construct, Masino's MR challenges established viewpoints—Fascist and otherwise—from a gendered perspective.

Conclusions

MR tends toward anti-hegemonic discourses in a very broad sense, which has prompted international “postcolonial, feminist and cross-cultural writers to embrace it as a means of expressing their ideas” (Bowers 2004, 63), at times reacting to specific regimes (Faris 2004, 142). Because of its world-wide diffusion, MR has always been resistant to categorization. The European variant of MR, represented by writers such as Bontempelli and Jünger (1895–1998), has been seen as fundamentally intellectual and linked to the philosophical tradition of Idealism (Weisgerber 1987, 26–7). This kind of MR depicts a hypothetical world, which is a verbal construct, a linguistic manipulation of reality. In the folkloric, mythic form, on the other hand, Latin America and the Caribbean have been described as intrinsically magic.¹⁹

Masino's text, presenting with a variety of narrative strategies, is certainly close to the way Bontempelli deliberately challenged existing literary canons, his main targets being Romanticism and Naturalism. Masino, because *Nascita* finally came forth after World War II, ended up offering an alternative to the realist revival. Her focus on the constructed nature of knowledge prompts us to regard her style as an example of a European and epistemological MR. Her interpretation of language, as she stages the making of what was considered a normal woman, informs considerations of knowledge, and causes readers to interrogate how these considerations structure both the Massaia's sense of reality and her notion of her own identity, and thus gender. Though she does not go as far as approaching the question of “fluidity” that would later inform the works of magical realist, feminist writers (such as Carter's 1977 *The Passion of New Eve*), Masino comparably examines gender issues and deconstructs traditionally held viewpoints and conventions (especially of motherhood) through use of the grotesque, which also traverses and underpins a parody of gender norms. Masino explores the connections between woman and nature, and also woman and her surroundings when the Massaia is still a child, identifying in this communion with the inanimate world a possibility of activating a different female gender identity. When her super-senses are triggered, the Massaia attempts to escape the normalizing

discourse of patriarchal authority in general (and of the regime more specifically), which she has inherited and internalized through her mother. In this way she challenges a rhetoric which Masino describes as built exclusively on the performative power of language, and not grounded on an actual ontological difference.

Overall, the novel presents several textbook elements of MR, something that has so far been ignored by the extant critical bibliography. With the present analysis I have offered a perspective on Masino's work which would acknowledge her pivotal contribution to what would later become such a debated narrative mode. Obviously a comprehensive analysis of her style in *Nascita* would entail the thorough study of additional elements (e.g. intertextuality and her use of Catholic imagery), but within the context of this article it has been my intention to focus on those aspects of her style that would allow me to show how, rather than being an isolated example of experimentation with diverging narrative modes, her book should actually be considered as a precursor of "the most important trend in contemporary international fiction" (Faris 2004, 42).

Notes

- 1 For instance: Airoidi-Namer 2000, Cesaretti 2007 and 2008, Cooper 2004, Di Lorenzo 2016, Garbin 2013, Gieri 2002, Laghezza 2014, Manetti 2016, Re 2005, Rozier 2008 and 2011.
- 2 The book was first published in installments in *Il tempo* between 1941 and 1942, and then in novel form in 1945 (after Masino was forced to rewrite it, following the loss of the original manuscript), but its rewriting and publication in 1945, a time when letters and the humanities were transitioning to neorealism, provokes some further observations.
- 3 Indeed, Masino's *Anniversario* (1948) presents magical realist elements as she deals with the notion of memory during the War, before the narrative plunges into a narration rooted in fantasy (see Rozier 2008, 153). Her engagement with history frequently produced, through non-mimetic writings, a critique of Fascism, such as *La fame*, of 1933. This was also the first of Masino's works to be heavily affected by censorship: Bompiani refused to include it in *Racconto grosso ed altri* (1941) (see in this regard Bonsaver 2007 and 2013).

- 4 This theme was also widely explored in neorealist films such as *Roma, città aperta* (1945) and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948).
- 5 This is also the case with her *Monte Ignoso* (1931) and *Periferia* (1933).
- 6 In other words, elements of the fantastic are used to stage the impracticability and end of the fantastic itself (Manetti 2008, 596–7).
- 7 These three works are *Il figlio di due madri* (1929), *Vita e morte di Adria e dei suoi figli* (1930), and *Gente nel tempo* (1937).
- 8 Masino's 1928 "Ricostruzione" (in *Decadenza della morte*, 1931) contains exemplary renderings such as: "[I]a giovane morta si alzò a sedere nella bara e guardò la tomba dove l'avevano chiusa. Ella era morta, sicuramente morta" (77).
- 9 See Bosetti 1997. Guerricchio (2001, 57) argues that Bontempelli's stupore is not present in Masino. Yet the loss of it is a thematic component of *Nascita*.
- 10 Correspondingly, Valisa (2014, 117) calls the *Massaia* a "young philosopher."
- 11 On the subversive rendering of space and time in Masino's works, see Re (2016, 166).
- 12 See Manetti (2014, 535).
- 13 When the third-person narration assumes the mother's viewpoint, Masino uses grotesque bodily images, insisting on distasteful details: the *Massaia* is "grassa e unta, con [...] punti neri sul naso" which she persistently tries to remove making her nose "gonfio e violaceo" while her mother "stillava [...] parole di ribrezzo" (12).
- 14 For Fresu, Bontempelli's automata are the product of a sociocultural paralysis that had invested the modern, Western subject. Bontempelli was describing a process of devitalization of the human being (Fresu 2008, 23), while staging the affectation of social conventions and human beings' enslavement to them.

- 15 For Rozier (2011, 257), the Massaia actively “refuses procreation,” thus “implicitly affirm[ing] a woman’s right over her own reproduction.” According to Di Lorenzo (2016, 75) this is far from apparent, for refusing entails will, something of which the Massaia appears to be deprived.
- 16 Pirandello’s characters have plural identities; they wear several masks. Some masks/roles are imposed on them, while on other occasions they choose the mask themselves (e.g. in *Uno, nessuno, centomila*). These masks/roles in his works point not only to the impossibility of authenticity as intrinsic to human nature, but to the innate lack of an original authenticity.
- 17 The choice to take the Fascist conception of gender roles as symbolic of the regime’s totalizing character arguably derived from the fact that, as in many other of its aspects (e.g. censorship), but perhaps even more blatantly, before the inauguration of pro-natalist policies (1927) the Duce’s attitude towards women’s emancipation had been ambiguous—Fascism had even advocated women’s right to vote in its early days.
- 18 In *Il figlio*, the resurrection of the child into another child’s body and the ensuing appearance of another mother eventually empowers both female characters—two anime candide—when they unite for the child’s sake and against the normalizing voice of the (male) institutions and of the father.
- 19 These geographical boundaries, first theorized by Echevarría in 1974, have been surpassed to an extent. Perhaps more importantly, the notion of an ontological MR now seems to point to two separate—but by no means mutually exclusive or incompatible—trends: one which is found predominantly in postcolonial literatures (see Faris 2004, 127), and one which more generally links MR with postmodernism in Western literature.

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