PAOLA MASINO'S SHORT FICTION: ANOTHER VOICE IN THE COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF ITALIAN NEOREALISM

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Summary: Known for her fantastical and allegorical style and for her affiliation with “magic realism,” Paola Masino’s reputation rests chiefly on her novels, particularly *Nascita e morte della massaia*, and on works that are seemingly confined to female subjectivity and the private sphere. This article examines Masino’s short fiction to reveal a more public, *engagé*, side of the author. After a close reading of “Fame,” “Famiglia,” “Lino,” “Terzo anniversario” and “Paura,” it focuses on the two *racconti brevi* “Una parola che vola” and “Il nobile gallo” in order to highlight the neo-realist aspect of the pieces and to argue that Masino drew on allegories, fables, and parables to engage with history. It also maintains that Masino used her pen as a political tool to denounce the horror and suffering of war, to foster a commitment to the Resistance, and to call for the cultural and political reconstruction of Italy.

Paola Masino was a central figure in the Italian cultural and intellectual environment of the first part of the twentieth century, a time characterized by the historical events of the First World War, Fascism, World War II and its aftermath. A modernist writer, Masino investigates the relationship between individual consciousness and the external world while examining the subjective nature of human experience, frequently through a feminine lens.¹ In her novels, *Monte Ignoso* (1931), *Periferia* (1933) and *Nascita e morte della massaia* (1945), Masino explores the relationship between society and gender by focusing her attention on issues related to the private sphere and by challenging the patriarchal idealized models of femininity and motherhood advocated by the Catholic Church and the Fascist

¹Allison Cooper argues that in fact Masino’s work “is distinguishable from that of her peers for its innovative presentation of the modernist crisis of consciousness in light of the psychological and socio-political implications of gender” (“Gender, Identity, and the Return to Order in the Early Works of Paola Masino” 382). For more on Italian Modernism see *Italian Modernism*, and on modernist writers in an English-speaking setting see Weinstein, *Recovering Your Story*.

regime.² However, even a cursory reading of the author's corpus reveals that her interests are not limited to the domestic. Stories such as "Rivoluzione" and "Visita allo zoo," as well as the short fiction analyzed in this study, contain strong social and political views, demonstrating that Masino's concerns extended beyond such subjects as the family and women's issues.

In *Io, Massimo e gli altri. Autobiografia di una figlia del secolo*, an account of Masino's life constructed by Maria Vittoria Vittori from selected letters and diary entries, Vittori acknowledges the author's contributions to contemporary Italian culture and literature and places her among the most prominent voices of the first half of the twentieth century. Many of the documents reveal Masino's direct participation in the social and political vicissitudes of Italy, such as the diary entry that becomes the chapter "A Roma, città aperta," an intimate account of Masino's experience during the nine months of the occupation of Rome by German Nazi soldiers.³ Masino's engagement with history, reflected in the personal narrative compiled by Vittori, manifests itself in some of the short fiction published in the 1930s-40s. My study looks closely at the short stories "Fame" and "Famiglia"; the three autobiographical pieces "Lino," "Terzo anniversario" and "Paura," which when stitched together offer a historical tapestry of the struggle, resistance and suffering of the Italian people during Fascism, the war and its aftermath; and the *racconti brevi* "Una parola che vola" and "Il nobile gallo." With the exception of "Famiglia," which appears in *Racconto grosso e altri* (1941), all the narratives analyzed in this study belong to *Colloquio di notte*, a collection of Masino's short stories published posthumously by La Luna in 1994.⁴ I will argue that these works display features

²For an extended treatment of women by the Fascist regime see de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women* and Pichering-Iazzi's volume *Mothers of Invention*.

³In *Una carriera à rebours* Beatrice Manetti explains in a footnote Masino's and Bontempelli's political situation: "Il definitivo distacco dal regime fascista maturato in quegli anni da Bontempelli e il suo progressivo avvicinamento al Partito Comunista erano costati allo scrittore una condanna a morte emessa da Alessandro Pavolini, che nel settembre del 1943 era stato nominato segretario del Partito fascista repubblicano della Repubblica di Salò. Quanto a Paola, lo stesso Pavolini l'aveva inclusa nella lista degli intellettuali da deportare al nord, in seguito a un suo articolo intitolato *Gioventù fra due guerre*, uscito sul 'Popolo di Roma' il 22 agosto 1943" (50-51).

⁴"Lino" was published in *Città* (Rome, December 1944); "Terzo anniversario" and "Paura" appeared in *Milano Sera* (Milan, March and June 1946, respective-

of neorealism. In light of Italo Calvino's statement in the preface of the 1964 edition of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* that neorealism was not a school, but rather "un insieme di voci" (VIII), I propose that Masino's short narratives offer another powerful voice in the collective experience of Italian neorealism.⁵

The relationship between writing, society and the historical process, a key element of neorealism, is the focus of Roland Barthes' essay "Qu'est-ce que l'écriture."⁶ Barthes contends that literature is independent from language and style, arguing that language belongs to everyone: it is "la propriété indivise des hommes et non pas des écrivains," and for this reason it cannot be "le lieu d'un engagement social" (11). Style, on the other hand, leads to an autarkic language situated outside of art. Because style "ne plonge que dans la mythologie personnelle et secrète de l'auteur" (12), it breaks the "pacte qui lie l'écrivain à la société" (3). However, Barthes claims, "entre la langue et le style, il y a place pour une autre réalité

ly). "Una parola che vola" appeared in *Settimana* (Milan, March 1946) and "Il nobile gallo" in *Milano Sera* (Milan, January 1947).

⁵Italian neorealism draws on the realism of the 1930s, exemplified by Alberto Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* (1929) and Corrado Alvaro's *Gente in Aspromonte* (1930). Although the most authentic moment is thought to have occurred during the 1940s and 50s, texts that treated neorealist themes appeared before the war. Giulio Ferroni dates the genesis of neorealism to the late twenties: "Il termine *neorealismo* fu usato già verso la fine degli anni Venti per indicare recenti tendenze artistiche e letterarie sul modello del tedesco *Neue Sachlichkeit* (*Storia della letteratura italiana*, 386). Francesco de Nicola concurs, stressing the relationship between Fascism and Neorealism: "Le più profonde radici storiche e culturali del neorealismo si possono far risalire alla seconda metà degli anni Venti, quando il fascismo aveva cominciato a guardare con velleità programmatiche al lavoro e al ruolo degli intellettuali e degli artisti" (*Neorealismo*, 5). He cites among "[le opere] che possono intendersi come anticipatrici del neorealismo" Mario Puccini's *Cola o il ritratto dell'italiano* (1927); Corrado Alvaro's *Gente in Aspromonte* (1930); Carlo Bernari's *Tre operai* (1934) and Romano Bilenchì's *Il capofabbrica* (1935) (10-11). Other works written during the Fascist era that foreshadow literary neorealism include Cesare Pavese's *Lavorare stanca* (1936), Pavese's "precociously neo-realist collection," according to John Gatt-Rutter ("The Aftermath," 540), and Elio Vittorini's anti-fascist *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1938-39). As for cinema, Alessandro Blasetti's *La tavola dei poveri* (1932) and Raffaello Matarazzo's *Treno popolare* (1933) are often considered to be the precursors of neorealist cinema (Re, *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism*, 12).

⁶ Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, 11-17.

formelle: l'écriture" (14). According to the critic, for literary writing to occur there must be a social purpose that will connect the writer to his society and to the History of humankind: "l'écriture est un acte de solidarité historique [...]. Elle est le rapport entre la création et la société, elle est le langage littéraire transformé par sa destination sociale, elle est la forme saisie dans son intention humaine et liée ainsi aux grandes crises de l'Histoire" (14). The nexus of history, society and writing described above constitutes the fundamental *sine qua non* of neorealist narratives. Although Italian neorealism escapes strict definitions, neorealist works share recognizable features, first and foremost the writers' need to write about the shared experiences of World War II, the fall of Fascism, the civil war and the liberation of the country from Nazi occupation, as well as the ensuing post-war reconstruction efforts. This collective wish to bear witness to history—coupled with a strong sense of commitment—brought about the integration of social and political issues into literary representation. According to Barthes it is precisely this desire to communicate a common historical experience that transforms writing into "le choix d'un comportement humain, l'affirmation d'un certain Bien, engageant ainsi l'écrivain dans l'évidence et la communication d'un bonheur ou d'un malaise, et liant la forme à la fois normale et singulière de sa parole à la vaste Histoire d'autrui" (14).

From early on Paola Masino's works engaged with History as she drew on allegories, fables and parables to write texts critical of the Fascist regime. The short narrative "Fame" (1933), the tragic account of a father who, at the request of his young children, kills them rather than let them die of hunger, is a case in point. As Masino describes the economic crisis of 1929, she anticipates neorealist themes by intertwining themes of poverty and hunger—hence the title—with divine injustice to demystify Fascist propaganda and to challenge accepted definitions of morality. "Fame" opens with a provocative dialogue between the father, Bernardo, and his two small children, Chiara and Mario:

- La mamma è morta.
- Perché è morta?
- Di fame.
- Anche io ho fame ma non riesco a morire.

The focus on the mother's death and on the children's suffering establishes the dramatic and eerie setting of the story and allows Masino to introduce the father's horrific dilemma from the outset. Bernardo is described as a thirty-year-old man, although—adds the narrative voice—

"non si può capire, con il volto e le mani cancellati e sgualciti dalle prove e i pentimenti che Dio ha avuti cercando di dar loro una vita" (41). As the father's hardships are set against God's fallibility (suggested by the word "pentimenti"), the author instills in her story the same metaphysical gravity found in the novel *Monte Ignoso*. However, in spite of the parallels that can be drawn between the two characters—Emma's rebellion against God, for instance—Bernardo, the father of "Fame," goes a step further by assuming God-like powers and by tragically defying divine creation: "Tutto quello che si è fatto si può disfare," he tells his daughter, Chiara, adding that God could change the world for the better, but that he chooses not to do so because he is selfish and "se ne infischia" (43).

Masino brings up the polarity of good and evil by contrasting God's indifference toward human suffering and Bernardo's helplessness and misery. Clearly for the story to work the readers must identify with Bernardo's struggle from the onset. As the story unfolds the narrator goes to great lengths to dispel any ambiguity about the nature of the father's love and about the purity of his intention. This is achieved by describing the dramatic circumstances leading to the killings—the mother has already died of hunger and the children have had no nourishment for several days, not even "una goccia di latte" (44)—and by presenting death as the only possible merciful outcome for the children's suffering. Moreover, Masino is able to recast the killings into the ultimate loving and unselfish paternal sacrifice by skilfully imparting logic into an unthinkable act: after he kills Chiara, Bernardo reverently lays her body on the ground and lovingly kisses her fingers, and it is after a long, excruciating struggle that he strangles Mario "lentamente perché senta quanto lo ama, quanto grande è la forza orribile che gli è stata chiesta" (45).

As with neorealist works, the thematic and narrative structures of "Fame" tap into the oral tradition of story telling.⁷ Poverty and hunger, the father's moral dilemma, the brother/sister dyad (reminiscent of the Grimm brothers' Hansel and Gretel), and the depiction of the family setting out through the woods in the cold of the night toward an uncertain fate are all symbolic elements that convey the space and time of the fairy tale. However, unlike fairy tales, "Fame" does not provide the comfort and

⁷ Lucia Re argues that as the Resistance and the war provided "the 'eventfulness' and the 'raw material' of human life," neorealist works revitalized the oral tradition of storytelling "which had flourished in the predominantly peasant and artisanal culture of preindustrial Italy as an expression of communal life and its values" (43).

solace of a happy ending. On the contrary, because "Fame," like many of Masino's texts, is about ambiguity, paradox and irony, its dénouement subverts the fairy tale's structure by overturning the carefully crafted logical premise upon which the moral of the story was constructed. Bernardo, whose suffering is lessened "al pensiero di essersi sacrificato per i suoi bambini" (45), must go on living in order to honour his children. Suicide, explains the omniscient narrator, would mean regretting what he has done and blaming his children: "uccidersi è come rimproverarglielo, pentirsene" (46). And yet, Bernardo's wish to live and remember Chiara and Mario will not be granted: when he arrives at the police station and asks for a bowl of soup, he realizes that he can no longer swallow. The ultimate perverse divine joke, the father's punishment de-legitimizes his act, and the story ends with his desperate cry: "Fatemi mangiare, fatemi mangiare. Ora come faccio se non so più mangiare!" (46).

Although the theme of "Fame" is more existential than overtly political, it is clear that the story reflects the socio-historical circumstances of the time, suggesting that one of Masino's goals was to challenge the economic strategy of Fascism by underscoring the failure of its programme to benefit the lower classes. In the introduction to *Colloquio di notte*, Maria Vittoria Vittori notes that "Fame" was controversial among its readers and that Mussolini ordered the closing of *Le grandi firme* as a result of its publication.⁸ According to Vittori—who describes "Fame" as a story about "una paternità così sofferta nella carne e nello spirito da non negarsi al desiderio di autodistruzione espresso dai figli" (27)—the controversy lies mostly in the story's implacable logic and in the cruelty of the language: "il dramma—sociale e storico, certo, ma anche metafisico—è tutto concentrato in blocchi di pensiero e di linguaggio durissimi da sostenere" (28). Although I agree that "Fame" contains some of the most harrowing moments in Masino's fiction, I would suggest that what displeased

⁸"Fame" was first published by the small magazine *Espero* in February 1933. It became controversial in September 1938 when it was republished by *Le grandi firme*. Beatrice Manetti writes about the incident as well, adding that shortly after the closing of the magazine Masino and Bontempelli had to leave for Venice on an unofficial exile: "I rapporti col regime cominciarono a deteriorarsi: a novembre, dopo aver consumato il suo definitivo distacco dal fascismo, Bontempelli è espulso dal partito, sospeso per più di un anno da ogni attività e relegato in una sorta di confine ufficioso a Venezia, dove la coppia aveva già soggiornato nel corso dell'anno precedente alla pensione Calcina, e dove adesso si stabilisce a palazzo Contarini delle Figure" ("Biografia," 48).

Mussolini most was the author's stark depiction of the economic hardships and abject conditions in which the Italian people were forced to live. There is no doubt that with "Fame" Masino implicitly criticized the Fascist regime by exposing the "real" face of Italy, thus demystifying and shattering the positive image of the country set forth by Fascist propaganda.

If "Fame" can be understood as a response to Fascist attempts to distort history, the subtext of the metaphysical tale "Famiglia" can be seen as a criticism of the xenophobic tendencies of its most reactionary positions. Here again, Masino excels at offering a perfect mixture of realism and fantasy, bringing together elements of the fantastic, archetypal characters, and a medieval flavour. Narrated in the first person, it is the account of a young boy who, sent by his older sister to borrow basil from his upstairs neighbours, encounters Death in the guise of the Pada family. One of the most recurrent motifs in Masino's narrative, death is suggested in "Famiglia" by customary means such as the eerie setting ("dal loro appartamento non venivano rumori, voci, luci, odori" [150]), the unusual coldness in spite of the warm weather ("[...] quando cominciai a salire la rampa che portava al terzo piano, tutto il calore che avevo raccolto al sole si era sciolto e un certo freddo mi pungeva le spalle e il volto" [154]), and the boy's altered psychological state as he waits for the Padas to open the door ("[...] aspettai qualche minuto e in quei minuti fu come se mi addormentassi" [155]). Moreover, a clever emphasis on mundane, although highly symbolic objects, efficiently conveys the erasure of identity and time associated with death: the doorbell is broken and, contrary to the custom that "gli abitanti di quel genere di casamenti hanno nell'entrata almeno una seggiola e sempre un calendario" (my emphasis, 157), there is no chair or calendar in the Pada's home.

Clearly, because Masino assigns different roles and nationalities to each of its members, the Pada family is not to be interpreted as the traditional nuclear family but, rather, as the family of all humanity. Like wise sibyls, they speak cryptically, each in his and her own language: the young son, Alonso, in Spanish; his ten-year-old sister, Carlotta, in German; the grandfather, Macduff—reminiscent of the "uomo uccello" in *Nascita e morte della massaia*, in English; the father, Francesco, an incarnation of François Villon, in Old French; and Lisabetta, the sister-in-law, in Italian. The mother is depicted as the mother of all humankind: "Sembrava una riserva di membra umane in attesa di essere scelte e destinate a gente di varie razze. [...] Non pareva vivere, ma essere" (162), and she speaks "forse

caldeo o ebraico o sanscrito" (163).

The ostensible subject of "Famiglia" is death, but its symbolic content and representation lead to other interpretations. For instance, some textual details suggest concerns about the anti-Semitic laws the regime enacted in 1938 in an attempt to emulate Germany.⁹ The depiction of the housing complex as a prison, its star-shaped architecture, and the emphasis on the poverty and over-crowdedness of the living quarters are all evocative of ghetto life. An imagery of exclusion underlies the story as well: the Padas live as outcasts, and when the narrator and his family move to the apartment below they become themselves "dei tollerati, gente sospetta" (151). At the end of the story, foreseeing that his sister will denounce them, the narrator says that she is about to "compiere un'azione malvagia" (183). But it is the depiction of the family's expulsion from the building that is most suggestive of the treatment of Jews: Signora Pado "[p]ortava 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" (185-186). If, previously, the broken door bell could be understood as a metaphor for death, "il campanello di porcellana bianca" in the quote above brings to mind the yellow star that Jews were forced to wear. However, notwithstanding the multiple interpretations "Famiglia" opens itself to, Masino's message to all men to recognize their kinship through their shared suffering and humanity is loud and clear. Furthermore, in light of the fact that each member of the Pado family represents some of the major players in the European hostilities, the author's appeal to go beyond nationality—at a time when nationality was intricately intertwined with belligerence and atrocity—was very timely and powerful, even if, sadly, it went unheeded.

Shared humanity is also a central theme in "Lino," "Paura," and "Terzo anniversario," a triptych of first-person narratives which oscillate between testimony and autobiographical account.¹⁰ In these texts about

⁹Duggan states that according to those laws, "Italian Jews were banned from marrying 'Aryans', from holding jobs in the public sector, from joining the party, and from owning more than fifty hectares of land," adding that it "was extraordinary. Only a few years before Mussolini had explicitly denied the existence of any racial question in Italy; and for a long time he himself had had a Jewish mistress" (235).

¹⁰It must be noted that these narratives are neither entirely autobiographical nor purely fictional. In "Lino," for instance, the reference to the narrator's father's

the occupation and the liberation of Italy, Masino conflates her personal experience with the collective history of Italy.¹¹ In the story "Lino", the brutality of war and the arbitrariness of the State are set against acts of human solidarity and sacrifice.¹² The title character is a young boy who appears in the narrator's life during her father's funeral. The child is described as an angel, "un bimbo di pochi anni, con un volto minimo, bianco bianco, quasi trasparente, e cosparso di lentiggini, un corpo esiguo vestito di brandelli di differenti abiti, tranquillo," and as a "creatura, più che un fanciullo un proposito di fanciullo, una speranza di figlio" (71). Disappearing and reappearing in the narrator's life at crucial moments of vulnerability and despair, he offers hope and courage in the face of life's adversity. Interestingly, as Lino becomes the narrator's guardian angel, saving her from the authorities and providing food and protection for her children, he gradually replaces the father she has buried: "rievocando il padre io ne rivedevo il volto con gli azzurri occhi di quel bambino che mi aveva salvato la vita, ecco che pensando al bambino, io poggiavo sul suo

death is based on the actual death of Masino's father, whereas the narrator's maternity is fictional, as Masino never had children. Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson call this type of narrative "life writing," a term proposed by feminist critics who wanted to expand the boundaries of autobiography. According to Scarparo and Wilson, by crossing the line between fact and fiction, these writers "shape a place in-between, a space with elusive borders that fluctuate between the real and the imaginary..." (2).

¹¹The use of the first-person is unusual for Masino and is indicative of the author's empathy with her material. The war also provides the background for "Anniversario," another autobiographical piece not examined in this study and in which the desire to capture memories leads to a fantastic and surreal journey into the past. The voyage in time takes the protagonists (clearly Masino and her sister Valeria) to their mother's family home in Montignoso (the house that inspired the novel of the same name) to witness the wedding of their parents which took place in September 1905. As Masino intertwines fantasy (the wedding is obviously imagined) with history (the armistice and the Gothic Line are real), she obliquely criticizes the bourgeois class, noting that her family's wealth is only "un'agiatazza borghese e di cattivo gusto" (154). First published by *Mercurio* (Rome, 1948), "Anniversario" was re-printed in *Colloquio di notte* in 1994.

¹²As previously noted, "Lino" appeared in 1944 in *Città*, a literary weekly magazine founded on November 10, 1944 by Masino along with Goffredo Bellonci, Massimo Bontempelli, Ercole Maselli, Alberto Moravia, Guido Piovene and Alberto Savinio (for more details see Manetti, *Una carriera à rebours* 51).

volto il sorriso di mio padre" (75). The characterization of the parental figure, described as "l'unico panorama nel quale io sapessi muovermi con sicurezza e in fondo al quale intravedessi la speranza" (75) reflects the privileged role Masino's own father played in her life.¹³ Seen from this perspective, "Lino" is a beacon of hope for a better world as well as a fitting tribute to her father, Enrico Alfredo Masino, who died in Rome on October 15, 1943.

In "Lino" the narrator's personal loss, framed against the larger historical tragedy of the war, becomes one and the same with collective suffering.¹⁴ Further underscoring the close relationship between private and public realms, Masino depicts the apparatus of the state as a monstrous machine that devours people like an efficient Minotaur while the narrator becomes an archetypal Theseus figure struggling to escape death in a labyrinth of bureaucratic absurdity that has de-humanized people, grotesquely turning them into letters of the alphabet. Death is institutionalized through the surreal pantomime of the "capoufficio": "E questo P.M. dov'è? Perdio, mi occorre un P. subito! Subito una M. Procuratemi un altro P.M., se quello di turno non si trova. Le schede non possono aspettare! Ma come possono sparire due tanto importanti lettere dell'alfabeto? Io vi licenzio tutti. Vi metto tutti al muro!" (74). Families are torn apart: to escape from the authorities women and children have fled the city to hide in the surrounding countryside, while husbands and fathers are away, fighting in places where "si moriva per vivere o si viveva per morire: insomma dove si poteva essere uomini, non come qui dove si era soltanto segni d'un alfabeto che deve scomparire perché il nostro popolo non possa più avere un linguaggio per intenderci tra noi e preparare la riscossa" (79). As the narrator

¹³Paola Masino's love for her father is well-documented (see, for instance the letters and diary entries in *Io Massimo e gli altri. Autobiografia di una figlia del secolo*). On the author's relationship with her family, Marinella Mascia Galateria writes "[...] Paola era cresciuta nel 'cerchio di affetto' eroico, paziente, protettivo della madre e l'attenzione assidua, intelligente di un padre che aveva instillato nel suo spirito, fin dalla più tenera età, il valore assoluto di una cultura ad ampio spettro, un'educazione libera dagli schemi del conformismo [...] Un modello, quello paterno, che Paola aveva assunto in pieno e realizzato" (24).

¹⁴Writing about "Lino," Marinella Mascia Galateria notes: "Dalla tragedia individuale della morte del padre (Enrico Alfredo Masino era scomparso il 15 ottobre 1943 e Paola aveva ricevuto la notizia mentre era nascosta in casa di Stefano Pirandello) il racconto si allarga a quella dell'intera città: la morte non è più un'ossessione astratta, [...] è a portata di mano e riguarda tutti" (37).

alludes to the partisans' life *alla macchia*, bringing to the fore the fight for the liberation of Italy and the specter of censorship and repression, "Lino" takes on the double function of illuminating the fight of the Resistance and of condemning a state intent on silencing—even killing—its citizens by reducing them to categories and abstractions.

The impact of German occupation on ordinary people, a distinguishing feature of neorealist texts, is the focal point of "Terzo anniversario," a narrative anchored in time by a specific date: March 20, 1943 – that is, a few months before the fall of Fascism. In this short piece published in March 1946, Masino recounts the arrest and the subsequent murder of Adelmo Franceschi, her maid's husband, at the hands of the German soldiers. A simple shepherd, Adelmo has been jailed because "faceva la guardia alle bestie con un moschetto, che è proibito" (100). After a few days of captivity the German soldiers tell Adelmo's wife, Dina, that he will be freed in the afternoon. However, when she returns to the command post, "il foglio di grazia" in hand, she is informed that her husband "è stato fucilato oggi a mezzogiorno, con altri sette briganti" (101). Upon hearing of Adelmo's execution, and realizing that she has been duped, Dina's fear vanishes: transformed into "un ragazzo guerriero, ostinato, con le mascelle dure, gli zigomi alti e quella pelle arsa da un chiuso divorante ardore che accompagna le imprese definitive di una vita" (102), she demands and, to the narrator's surprise, gets Adelmo's body for burial. Masino extols Dina's humanity by creating a space of resistance based on hope and resilience, as suggested by the protagonist's last name (Speranza) and echoed in the life-affirming event of her pregnancy.

Consistent with neorealist representation, the struggle between good and evil is depicted in "Terzo anniversario" in clear Manichaean terms: Dina's exemplary courage is contrasted to the Nazi's cowardice and lack of moral rectitude, and the Germans' ethical behavior is set in a binary opposition to that of the Italians. To Dina's explanation that the Germans "hanno paura. Ammazzano perché hanno paura," the narrator adds: "I tedeschi sono patetici e crudeli, vuol dire vili," commenting that if the Italians are "superbi," they are never cowards: "Non sono vili le ragazze che si prostituiscono agli stranieri, né i bambini che lucidano le scarpe, né quelli che rubano" (102). Italians are "maleducati," adds the narrator, but unlike the Germans who "non vivono che di ordini e quando un ordine non li sorregge lo sgomento li fa imbestialire" (103), they are not afraid "di se stessi né di altri, ma soprattutto di un ordine astratto" (102-103).

Masino's contempt for the Germans can be found in "Paura," a story that alternates between memory and the time of the narration, and whose

central theme is expressed in the title. As Masino recounts her arrest in the streets of Rome by Nazi soldiers, she creates an interplay of different levels of time and consciousness by tying together a fear experienced in childhood and the fear of the here-and-now. The deft interweaving of past and present hinges on the consoling phrase uttered first by the mother to her child—"Tu, tu sei, Paola, che piangi così? Ti si sentiva dalla strada, povera creatura mia. Di che cosa avevi paura? Mi hanno fermata un momento..." (107)—and then, by the daughter to her mother: "Tu, tu sei, mamma, che piangi così? Ti si sentiva dalla strada, povera mamma mia. Di che cosa avevi paura? Mi hanno fermata un momento..." (107). From this point on, the narrative shifts from the third to the first-person singular, indicating the passage from the childhood nightmare to the present.

Masino employs a friar as a conduit to the recovery of the childhood memory and as a device to strengthen the relationship between present and past. A terrifying presence in the childhood nightmare, and the crystallization of the little girl's fears, he is portrayed as "un frate cappuccino, il terreo volto pieno di fosse scure, le labbra appena mosse in una preghiera" (106). Years later, when the Nazi soldiers round up a Capuchin friar in the streets of Rome along with the narrator, she describes him in almost identical terms: "quand'ecco arrivare, spinto da un tedesco con pistola in pugno, un frate cappuccino e appiattirsi al muro quasi in faccia a me, con le ossute mani congiunte alte sul capo in atto di preghiera, il volto terreo pieno di fosse scure" (108). The friar's presence triggers the narrator's memory and he becomes an evil omen: "Ecco — mi dissi — ora forse morirò perché solo i condannati davanti al patibolo rivivono in un attimo tutta la loro vita" (108). By reversing the order of the episodes and by employing the friar as a sort of "petite madeleine," Masino is able to convey the present and the past simultaneously, thus aptly capturing the exact moment when the fear felt by the adult narrator becomes one and the same as the fear felt by the child. Furthermore, as the chronology of the events is manipulated to emphasize the non-linearity of time (through the spontaneous fusion of the present and the past), Masino's narrator experiences what the Proustian narrator in *A la recherche du temps perdu* calls "le temps à l'état pur."¹⁵

"Paura" ends with the here-and-now. With the epiphany that "negli angoli altri uomini, come me, inermi, e altri uomini armati come lui. Ma tutti ben precisi, tutti entro le dimensioni umane; e il loro potere e la nostra debolezza non potevano togliere o aumentare nè a noi nè a loro un pol-

¹⁵For more on Proust's treatment of time see Richard Durán's article.

lice della nostra propria statura" (109), the narrator realizes that the friar is just a terrified man like herself, and her uncontrollable fear vanishes, replaced by acceptance and resignation. "Paura" shines an unsentimental light on the dark side of humanity and on the arbitrariness of fate, as the narrator's ironic final comment illustrates: "Forse gli dei amano lo scherzo, forse non vale la pena di uccidere della gente qualunque se non mostra almeno spavento, certo dopo poco una voce gridó: —Via tutti, quelli del portone. Sgombrate dal cortile senza voltarvi indietro!" (109).

The two very short works, "Una parola che vola" and "Il nobile gallo"—published in 1946 and 1947, respectively—appear to honour those who resisted the enemy while condemning those who embraced passivity and inertia. In "Una parola che vola" the devastation of war is expressed in a compelling manner through an imagery of death and destruction: the town has been reduced to "una carcassa scarnita," the plain is "sconvolta, arsa, nera, fumigante, irta di macigni, relitti di ferro, piedi stecchiti, carogne, baionette" (95); all the men have been killed and all trees have been destroyed. In this post-apocalyptic landscape the sole survivors are a few women. Using doves, the ultimate symbols of peace and innocence, and "l'erba dai vasi e barattoli casalinghi," the women send messages to the enemy:

E il primo colombo si posò proprio sul binocolo del comandante. A becco aperto affannava; portava un rametto d'alloro legato al collo, e alla zampina, in un minuscolo barattolo, un cartiglio con cui scritto: 'Pace!' E dietro lui un altro piccione, e un terzo, e un quarto, ognuno con una fogliolina verde al collo, chi di edera e chi di basilico, chi di geranio e chi di prezzemolo. (96)

The doves and their messages of peace—an ironic reminder of the war propaganda pamphlets—challenge the rhetoric of war and, as the conclusion points out, suggest that peace is the only acceptable solution. Faced with the victor's demand to surrender, the doves choose death: "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 ognuno su una baionetta. Ma questa volta non si posarono, vi si conficcarono, facendosi trapassare il morbido petto, fino al cuore nascosto" (97). Mediated through the symbol of the dove, women stand for ingenuity, human conscience and ultimate resistance. In "Una parola che vola," as in "Terzo anniversario" and "Lino," Masino pays tribute to women by creating a feminized (albeit symbolic) space for resistance. Furthermore, by making women central protagonists of her stories she gives them agency and brings them from the margins of

history into History.

The ideological structure of "Il nobile gallo"—a satirical tale informed by the vigour and enthusiasm people felt during the postwar reconstruction years—is even stronger than that of "Una parola che vola." Masino personifies animals (a weathercock, a cat and some swallows) to explore society's relationship with power and to call for change and renewal. Using a weathercock, portrayed as deluding himself and refusing to be engaged with history, the author brings attention to the elitist nature of power and lays bare the hypocrisies and passivity of those who never question the establishment. In her introduction to *Colloquio di notte*, Maria Vittoria Vittori writes that the weathercock is a symbol of the aristocratic class: "questa vecchia classe di privilegiati, di baroni, conti e duchi, fortunatamente usciti dalla guerra, che continuano a ripetere, e ripetersi, le vecchie cose, a vivere come se niente fosse accaduto" (31-32).¹⁶ Masino's reflection on the disintegration of the aristocracy is readily apparent in the title through the juxtaposition of the terms "nobile" and "gallo." As she sarcastically depicts the upper classes, the author's disdain is directed at all of those who have aided and abetted in maintaining the status quo for fear of jeopardizing their position, as the following quote illustrates:

Altre banderuole sui tetti vicini avevano ceduto al trascorrere delle stagioni, altre erano state portate via con qualche onore per finire i loro giorni in un museo, altre ancora, per divergenza d'idee, specialmente in questi ultimi tempi, si ostinavano a fingere che il vento sempre le spingesse a volgere la coda al gallo, con il solo risultato di screditare il mestiere. (112)

Masino underscores the obsolescence of the aristocracy revealing, through the shifting positions of the *banderuole*, how political alliances are closely linked to apathy and self-deceit (suggested by the verbs "ceduto" and "fingere"). Seen from this perspective, the weathervanes become metaphors for Italy's political past (as "il trascorrere delle stagioni" and "per finire in un museo," implies), as well as for the evolving Italian landscape of post-war politics, suggested by "specialmente in questi ultimi tempi."

¹⁶Vittori goes on, citing a letter Masino wrote to her mother on July 11, 1946 and in which she vehemently calls for the destruction of the aristocracy: "Davvero mi sembrano nefasti parassiti. Se bastasse il d.d.t. a distruggerli!" (32). It is worth noting that the author's ties with the aristocratic class are personal: her mother was a member of the prominent Sforza family and her sister Valeria married Count Giorgio Memmo.

The author uses the weathervanes to bring to the fore past and present political concerns (the old ruling class' ambiguous involvement with Fascism comes to mind), while challenging any historically reactionary power and official culture.¹⁷

In this political landscape characterized by irresponsibility and self-interest, the narrator's sympathy goes to the cat, described as "quell'anarchico animale escluso da ogni casta" (113). However, the cat dies "per aver mangiato pesce marcio" (113), suggesting that there are flaws in anarchy as well, and exposing Masino's guarded optimism in regards to Italy's political renewal out of the ruins of the war.¹⁸ The author's call to action, and to change, is conveyed by the swallows. Their warnings to the weathercock: "Scendi dal tuo piedistallo e salvati. Grossi nemi muovono dal Nord ma non è l'inverno" (113), allude to the German occupation of Northern Italy. The mention of *le nemi dal Nord* is an indirect reference to the danger posed by the occupying Nazi army as well as a reminder of the partisans' fight to liberate the cities ahead of the allies.¹⁹ In contrast, at the end of "Lino," Masino implicitly refers to the advancing liberating allied forces from Southern Italy: "Le donne presero in braccio i bambini e cominciarono a camminare tra le colline, verso il sud dove il cielo aveva un colore più denso" (my emphasis, 82). The story ends on a symbolic note: Spring ("i primi aliti della primavera" [82]) brings a sense of hope and renewal,

¹⁷As Masino condemns the aristocracy, one is reminded of King Victor Emmanuel and how in the final moments of the war, he fled Rome for Brindisi to escape the Nazis.

¹⁸"Il nobile gallo" was published in 1947, a time marked by "the triumph of continuity. The symbols, the rhetoric, and even the constitution changed; but most of the old personnel and many of the former institutions remained untouched. For those who had believed in a new moral order, the sense of disappointment was great; and their frustration was to prove a major source of instability in the years to come..." (Duggan 245).

¹⁹Masino wrote several poems about the war. One titled "Vento del Nord" is clearly about the war fought in Northern Italy by the partisans against the German occupying army. The following verses are the lament of a man who did not join the partisan fight: Gli amanti aprirono gli occhi:/ – Caro-/ lei piano diceva a lui nell'orecchio,/ – qui sei? –/ – Qui sono – ma aveva vergogna/ di essere lì a dirlo, l'amato. Pensava/ – Qui sono,/ e non appeso a un uncino,/ vestito di rabbia bavosa,/ scagliato qua là nella notte/ da questo vento/ a battere come una campana/ l'ora della nostra vendetta/ con i miei fratelli del Nord –/ – Questo vento, questo –/ sussuró allora l'amata,/ – è questo il vento del Nord? (*Poesie*, 90).

signalling at once the rebirth of nature and the forthcoming Liberation of the country.²⁰

Read against this historical background, “Il nobile gallo” becomes an allegory for the fall of Fascism and a biting indictment of Benito Mussolini. The pride and vanity of the cock (“Sul campanile alzava una zampa, con molta pretesa, un galletto di ferro arruginito,” 111) recalls the *Duce*’s egomaniacal persona, and the weathercock’s flawed reasoning (he boasts “Io sto saldo ai miei principi. [...] Mi piego solo per indicare ai venti la direzione che debbono prendere” [113]) is in line with Mussolini’s lack of common sense and ill-fated decisions. They both deceive themselves and the cock’s reverence for the “eccellentissimo marchese” brings to mind Mussolini’s subservience to Germany and his manipulation by Hitler. Mussolini and the cock even share the same fate: both die, destroyed by delusions of grandeur.²¹ In this light, the cock’s pride and stubbornness become metaphors for the ineptitude of a crumbling Fascist regime, whereas its blind loyalty can be read as an indictment of the Fascist man, or, for

²⁰In addition to “Il nobile gallo,” two other short narratives, “Rivoluzione” and “Visita allo zoo,” contain less-than-subtle political overtones. Both are scathing criticisms of the aristocracy and bourgeois ideology as Masino depicts the protagonists’ attempts to justify and cover up social injustice in an effort to maintain cultural and political hegemony. “Rivoluzione” appears in *Racconto Grosso*, and “Visita allo zoo” was published for the first time in *Colloquio di notte*. In *Una carriera à rebours*, Manetti describes in a footnote how “Visita allo zoo” was received by Masino’s peers: “Gli ambienti aristocratici e i salotti alto borghesi di Venezia e di Roma, al contrario, furono corsi da un brivido di raccapriccio alla notizia della ‘conversione’ comunista di Paola, come la stessa scrittrice ha raccontato in *Visita allo zoo*, un racconto composto presumibilmente intorno al 1946” (59). In the same footnote, Manetti cites a report stating that the author never became a member of the Communist party in order to maintain “la libertà di critica”. This created a situation where Masino was criticized by the left as well as by the right: “Io non ci capisco niente,” she writes her mother, “per quelli di destra sono di sinistra, per quelli di sinistra sono anarchica e a me pare soltanto di essere logica: di dare alle parole un significato unico e preciso” (*Una carriera à rebours*, 58). In an interview I conducted in Rome during the summer of 2006, Masino’s nephew, Alvise Memmo, confirmed that the main protagonist of “Rivoluzione” is his mother Valeria.

²¹It is worth noting that “un magnifico gallo verde” is present in the dream Masino has about her friend Pirandello on the first anniversary of his death (see Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, 60), and in *Monte Igoso* “un gallo tutto rosso” (73) appears in Barbara’s dream, foretelling her death.

that matter, any man whose goal is to maintain, and never question, the status quo.

"Il nobile gallo" illuminates the author's views in the immediate aftermath of World War II, a time when, according to Beatrice Manetti, "Paola è impegnata, come gran parte degli scrittori e degli intellettuali, nella denuncia, nella testimonianza, nella presa di coscienza di quanto è avvenuto" (*Una carriera à rebours*, 55). Clearly, like many of her contemporaries, the author felt compelled to write about the evils of totalitarianism and its outcome, the war. For her, as for many other authors of her time, neorealism provided "uno sfondo, un orizzonte di contenuti, di temi, di discussioni, e riguarda solo un momento della loro attività," (Ferroni 387). Although the Fascist dictatorship, the war and the Reconstruction years provided the background and the thematic content of the tales, they are not realist in technique and feature non-realist elements. Masino rejects conventional narrative, favoring the surreal, the fantastic and abstract representation, and her language, unlike the "nuovo linguaggio di tipo 'medio' che sembra quasi emanare da una voce anonima" (Ferroni, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, 385) is personal and literary. For Masino, writing is always an act of defiance and resistance and there is no discontinuity between these works and her *oeuvre* as a whole. On the contrary, as she draws on autobiographical experience to engage with history and to project a sense of individual responsibility, she creates tales whose themes are neorealist, but whose style, characterized by the juxtaposition and the blending of elements of reality and un-reality, is quintessentially Masinian.²²

All the narratives analyzed in this study take on moral and political issues and are informed by an ethics of writing based on social commitment. The evil of Fascism, the barbarity and arbitrariness of war emerge in all their problematic complexities from "Fame," a narrative that anticipates neorealist themes, to "Il nobile gallo," a piece that clearly presents, in an allegorical form, the issue of political and social commitment to change and reconstruction. As Masino denounces Fascism and calls for the cultural and political reconstruction of Italy, she sets tight connections among literary creativity, society and politics, thus exemplifying the "actes de soli-

²²Paola Masino's style remains essentially the same. This may be explained by the fact that she wrote and published primarily during the Fascist dictatorship. In fact, Masino stopped publishing literary texts shortly after the postwar period—her last book, *Poesie* was published in 1947, and "Ora intima," dated November 29, 1955, appears to be her last published literary work (See Vittori's Introduction to *Colloquio di notte*, 37).

darité historique” described by Roland Barthes. The strong historical relevance of the texts and the compelling depiction of the ongoing problems faced by Italy during Fascism, the war and the occupation make these narratives, to quote Italo Calvino, part of the “esplosione letteraria” (VI) that shaped Italian neorealism.

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