NUTRITION AS DISSOLUTION:
PAOLA MASINO'S *NASCITA E MORTE DELLA MASSAIA*

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"The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*)

"Pensava e si mangiava le unghie; finite le unghie e i pensieri, masticava tozzi di pane e sfogliava libri in cerca di altro nutrimento" (P. Masino, *Nascita e morte della massaia*)

Summary: Many scholars agree that Paola Masino's novel *Nascita e morte della massaia* is to be read as an allegory protesting Fascism censorship and suppression of women's creative powers, a sort of literal grave-stone and defeat of the possibility of feminine imagination and creativity. By focusing on the implications of the alimentary discourse in the novel and on its "anorexic" protagonist, my essay wishes to complement the former reading. I suggest that an additional, perhaps less dramatic and tragic message may stem out of this depiction of a failure and a defeat. That is, a message that alludes to a fundamental faith in the resiliency of the powers of imagination and artistic creativity may actually, although marginally, be traced in the novel.

Among the welcomed effects caused by the relatively recent expansion (also) among specialists of Italian culture and literature, of an interest in academic disciplines such as Gender, Cultural and Women's Studies is the rediscovery of modernist writer Paola Masino (1908-89) and her unconventional literary production. Unavoidably overshadowed during the span of her artistic career by the achievements of two modernist giants close to her such as Massimo Bontempelli (1878-1960) and Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936),¹ Masino's peculiar position within the canon of modern Italian literature is slowly beginning to emerge thanks to the efforts of a number of excellent scholars who have emphasized her own originality and atypicalness.

Lucia Re, for example, in a study dealing with Fascist theorizations of gender, notes how her novels "clearly belong to a different and unusual experimental register, a modernist realism infused with surrealist and

¹ Bontempelli was her life-time companion and Pirandello a life-time friend.

expressionist elements”² and, in an even more recent essay, focuses on the political relation between hunger, food and antifascism in her last novel *Nascita e morte della massaia* (1939; published in 1945; henceforth cited as *Nascita*).³ Fulvia Airolti Namer, after pointing out Masino’s “particolarissimo ‘realismo magico’ [...] nell’ambito del ‘novecentismo’,”⁴ individuates more in detail a pattern of recurrent chthonic *topoi* and descending, visceral, feminine motifs in her novels. Tristana Rorandelli, in turn, by addressing the themes of the female body and of maternity during Fascism, convincingly demonstrates that *Nascita* subtly questions Fascism’s reductive and narrow conception of womanhood. Lastly, Allison Cooper confirms Masino’s “radical transformation of traditional narrative elements [...] departure from the classic conventions of storytelling” and “challenge to traditional narrative structure”, and suggests that her work (*Monte Igoso*, in particular) “reacts to and critiques the post-war search for epistemological ‘certainties’ and the very notion of a return to order and tradition.”⁵

Just this quick glance at the latest critical essays devoted to Masino’s fiction reveals both the variety of approaches it lends itself to, its multifaceted complexity and, ultimately, its relevance in providing a more complete picture of a modernist discourse (both Italian and European) that has too often limited itself to considering a crystallized list of canonical male authors. As T.S. Eliot’s quote at the beginning of this article already indicates, however, my own interest in Masino in general and in her last novel in particular, results from the fact that together with its evident, specifically Italian and historically contextualized, gendered perspective, *Nascita* seems also to address a number of broader, eminently modernist motifs.

Nascita depicts the surreal portrait of a woman who—reacting in a

²Re, “Futurism and Fascism,” 203.

³Re interprets the novel as an “audace atto di accusa contro il fascismo” and observes that “Tale atto trova nel campo metaforico del cibo e del nutrimento in relazione al corpo e al ruolo femminile il suo più efficace e suggestivo strumento” (Re, “Fame, cibo e antifascismo nella *Massaia*,” 165). Differently from Re, who shares my interest in the alimentary motif in Masino’s novel, in my article I purposely marginalize the political and the gender aspect and I privilege the aesthetic/hermeneutical one. (I discovered her stimulating essay only after my first draft had been accepted for publication.)

⁴Namer, “La terra e la discesa,” 165.

⁵Cooper, “Gender, Identity, and the Return to Order,” 379-84. For additional, recent criticism on Masino see also: Blleloch, “From Trunk to Grave”; Gieri, “Paola Masino”; Cirillo, *Nei dintorni del surrealismo*.

paroxysmal way to her mother's exclamation: "Verrà il giorno in cui m'avrai fatta morire di crepacuore" (*Nascita*, 13)—initially refuses to "come to light" and chooses instead to live the first part of her abject life in a dirty trunk scattered with books and organic/inorganic debris, feeding herself with "groncioli", pieces of stale bread, and, figuratively, with those same books.⁶ Emerging from her "baule" (only to please her mother's wish), after a hilarious, implausibly successful but also inevitably doomed-to-fail attempt at behaving as a perfect bourgeois, married housewife, she goes through a process of ascetic refusal and renunciation, ("si spogliò sempre più dei suoi beni materiali e delle sue possibilità spirituali per distribuirle a chi ne aveva più bisogno di lei"; *Nascita*, 242). In time, she expresses a will to "smaterialirsi" and "annullarsi" ("Si sentiva sempre più distratta e leggiera e senza più attesa," *Nascita*, 270), until the day of her long-wished-for, actual death (back into her original trunk-womb-sarcophagus).⁷

While building on the contributions of gender studies and feminist scholars, what I would like to suggest in the following pages is, nonetheless, a reading of *Nascita* which aims to emphasize those traits and concerns that the text may share with a more encompassing and non-compartmentalized (i.e. not exclusively gender-restricted) modernist aesthetic. This, perhaps, may appear a counterproductive or even impossible task since we are dealing with a novel which—as noted—deals mainly, and in a "mock-heroic" register, with the stifling condition of women during Fascism (the anonymous *massaia* of the title, as a sort of "Everywoman"), their progressive deprivation of freedom, sexuality and creative impulses and final reduction to a "perfetta macchina domestica" whose only liberation is death.

⁶In a situation which may partially recall the one of Kafka's Gregor Samsa, the *massaia*, by eating "groncioli", equally "refuses to eat the food which establishes and maintains the family as a single body." Since, like Gregor, she eats "what the family has rejected as inedible", "[s]he becomes inedible to the family, an unclean and monstrosus non-form..." (Anderson, "Anorexia and Modernism," 31-32): "Dopo anni di tale martirio la sua vita divenne ancora più estranea ai familiari [...] la famiglia non badava più a lei che come a un mobile" (*Nascita*, 16). Anderson's subsequent observation that "in attempting to deny the body, the modernist produces an antibody which withdraws from the traditional arena of male privilege, authority, and responsibility" (37) moreover, seems to aptly fit into the general context of *Nascita*.

⁷Maud Ellmann, dealing with Richardson's *Clarissa*, notes that "writing is itself a process of sarcophagy, because Clarissa's epistles consume the very body that indites them" (83). Similarly, while the *massaia's* body is "eaten" by the trunk, her own story proliferates.

And yet both the general plot-line of *Nascita* and the presence in the text of certain motifs and questions which, in several other occasions, have been successfully associated with a quintessential modernist rhetoric, indicate that this approach may not be completely out of place. Think, for example, of the issue of “self-sacrifice” and “continual extinction of personality” mentioned by Eliot; of the specific trope of the book as a kind of food (and, conversely, of food as a kind of language) that emerges in the first page of *Nascita* and, more generally, of the sub-theme regarding the semantic field of productivity (or lack of it), be it food, babies for the *patria* or, self-reflexively, language itself. Think also of the “autobiographical obsession” that characterizes *Nascita*,⁸ at the *massaià*’s own progressive, ascetic gestures of renunciation, death-wishes and silences (Masino, “morì quella stessa notte, senza aver più aperto bocca o chiuso gli occhi.” *Nascita*, 277) and of the pattern of self-consumption a scholar such as Leslie Heywood correspondingly individuates in relation to Kafka’s short stories, one which—she remarks—absorbs “the writer into [the] text” and simultaneously gives birth to a text that has consumed him.⁹ Consider then, in the same light, the connection individuated between similar forms of corporeal self-effacement and the notion of a modernist “language crisis.”¹⁰ And, finally, add to all this that the allusive, esoteric and allegorical prose that characterizes so many modernist texts seems privileged also by Masino.¹¹

As a matter of fact, issues similar to those arguably characterizing Masino’s aesthetics and poetics not only seem to have haunted, in their own peculiar way, the artistic vision of key modernist figures such as Eliot and Kafka but, to remain in Italy, besides the frequently mentioned Bontempelli and Pirandello, even the vision of A. Palazzeschi and the futurist avant-garde.¹² Particular situations in Palazzeschi’s *Il codice di Perelà* or *:riflessi* may

⁸Writing about *Nascita*, M. Mascia Galateria notes that “Un’ossessione profondamente autobiografica e vera fin nei minimi particolari, diventa la storia di un fallimento.” (Mascia Galateria, “L’autobiografia trasfigurata di Paola Masino,” 3).

⁹Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 77.

¹⁰Anderson, “Anorexia and Modernism,” 29.

¹¹Giacomoni, “*Nascita* riguarda le casalinghe,” 10.

¹²Masino’s (and Bontempelli’s) indebtedness to the more irrational, esoteric sides of the futurist avant-garde is worth further exploration. Masino’s links to the Futurist avant-garde, after all, were already noted by C.E. Gadda in his biting review of *Monte Ignoto* (1931), when he wrote that Masino’s style is “ai limiti di un futurismo deteriore, tutto notazione dell’immediato percepire e niente espressione del profondo apprendere” (in Namer, “La terra e la discesa,” 185).

come to mind which, in turn, according to what has been defined a fundamentally modernist “anorexic logic,”¹³ allude to various instances of “enclosures” and subsequent, enigmatic corporeal obliterations in relation to questions of aesthetics and artistic creativity.¹⁴ At the same time, it does not seem inconceivable, when dealing with a novel such as *Nascita* and its “imprisoned” protagonist, to also think of the equally surreal situation of the voluntarily caged, self-starving protagonist in *Ein Hungerkünstler* who, as Ellmann observes, “has to starve in order to perfect the work of art.”¹⁵

If, as Rorandelli noted, the *massaia*’s behavior intends to criticize Fascism’s notorious promotion of women as “reproductive machines” geared to provide children for the “Mother” country and, we should add, to implicitly undermine and dissent from its autarchic, bourgeois food politics,¹⁶ it may also allude to the protagonist’s (and, by extension, her author’s) own effort and struggle to deal with “creation” in a wider sense.

It is this sort of “anorexic logic”—one that “is being used [...] to describe the self-consuming process of the modernist writer/text”¹⁷ and is said to be “central to canonical modernist ideas about literary creativity”¹⁸—that I intend to trace and discuss in its own, particular manifestations in

Additionally—and although the contexts are different—it is at least noteworthy to quickly remember that 1. if “Da bambina la massaia era polverosa e sonnolenta” (*Nascita*, 13), a “casalinga polverosa” is also the protagonist of Rosa Rosà’s *Una donna con tre anime* (1917); and that a comparison between the *massaia* and “l’automa-femmina” della marinettiana *Elettricità sessuale* has already been suggested by Namer (Namer, “La terra e la discesa,” 166).

¹³Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 80.

¹⁴And it should be immediately clarified that such a “logic” does not necessarily affect or pertain to only one gender. It is by no means gender-restrictive. It can actually “either deny sexual difference or fuse male and female identities in a complex androgynous form” (Anderson, “Anorexia and Modernism,” 37). On this topic, see Cesaretti, “Palazzeschi’s *Riflessi* or Writing as Erasure” and Idem, “Consuming Texts.” For a detailed analysis of the notion of *emboîtement* in Masino, see Namer, “La terra e la discesa.”

¹⁵Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists*, 59.

¹⁶In this regard, we should remember that Masino’s “infernal” short story *Fame*, (“la storia di tre bambini affamati che chiedono al padre di ucciderli. Egli li strangola, poi va a costituirsi: racconterà tutta la storia in cambio di un piatto di minestrina”), created a scandal in 1938. When “Zavattini la pubblicò su *Grandi firme*: la rivista stessa fu soppressa.” (Namer, “La terra e la discesa,” 177n).

¹⁷Anderson, “Anorexia and Modernism,” 35.

¹⁸Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 80.

Masino's novel. That is, by focusing on the widespread food-imagery in the text, on the progressive "extinction of personality" which marks the life of the *massaia*, and on the contradictory opposition between notions of productivity and sterility, I intend to suggest that *Nascita* too, perhaps in spite of some of its most apparent textual evidences, may also be read as an allegory for the difficulties associated with literary creation and, ultimately, follows a "logic" which is somehow analogous to (or a variation of) that characterizing other modernist texts, insofar as "self-consumption has cleared the way for the production of 'purified' art."¹⁹

Masino's last novel is often interpreted by critics as a "storia di un fallimento senza ritorno,"²⁰ correlating to the limitations of the feminine condition under Fascism; as the exploration of an impasse, of a double impossibility consisting of the urge to rebel and the pressure to conform;²¹ as the representation of the tragic, reductive loss of "identità individuale a favore della propria funzione familiare e sociale."²² In short, many scholars agree that the novel may be regarded as an allegory in part protesting Fascism censorship and suppression of women's creative powers, a sort of literal gravestone and defeat of the possibility of feminine imagination and creativity. Re's affirmation: "La Masino dà quindi un'impronta specificatamente politica e di genere al tema dell' 'artista alla fame' (o della fame) ereditato da Kafka. La Massaia non solo non trova il nutrimento spirituale di cui l'artista ha bisogno, ma, dovendo materialmente dare nutrimento, l'essere artista le è precluso,"²³ well summarizes this kind of approach and reading.

These interpretations, as they appropriately place *Nascita* in its historic-cultural context, undoubtedly capture the fundamental components and the spirit of the text. However, just as the novel subtly and ironically questions "il discorso fascista sulle donne"²⁴ and explores the dramatically reductive and weak role of women during the decades of the regime, it effects an additional and successful (counter-) discourse, actualized in the text itself, produced, as it was, by a woman in those same years. In our estimate, it is conceivable that an additional, perhaps less dramatic and tragic message may stem out of this depiction of a "failure", a "preclusion" and a

¹⁹Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 77.

²⁰Mascia Galateria, "L'autobiografia trasfigurata di Paola Masino," 6.

²¹Re, *Mothers of Invention*, 92-94.

²²Rorandelli, "*Nascita e morte della massaia* di Paola Masino," 85.

²³Re, *Il cibo e le donne*, 180n.

²⁴Rorandelli, "*Nascita e morte della massaia* di Paola Masino," 93n.

“defeat”: a message that alludes to a fundamental faith in the resiliency of the powers of imagination and artistic creativity may actually, although marginally, be traced in the novel.

While exploring this possibility, it may be useful to look at the deeper implications of notions of “failure” and “defeat”. That is, I would like to further reflect about the possibility that, at least at a tropological level, precisely this failure, this literal “dying through words”²⁵ contributes to a certain extent both to the final authority of the *massaià*’s discourse and, more tangentially, to a sort of figurative re-birth; to a fundamental confidence in the lasting and empowering capacities of language and fiction (“fino alla nascita nuova” *Nascita*, 76).²⁶

As the title itself indicates, metaphorical notions of birth and creativity as opposed to those of death and sterility provide the backbone for Masino’s novel. The fact that the *massaià*’s mother, for example, when her daughter eventually dies back in her trunk, “urlava come quand’ella era nata” seems to confirm and intensify, at the end of the novel, the confusion and the overlapping of two events (death/birth) and two ideas (dissolution /pro-creation) that are antithetical and that, nonetheless, are linked through the narration.

A couple of more similarly “antithetical” considerations should be made before approaching the text more closely. The first is that “the writing of a book has always traditionally been compared to the birth process” and that “for psychoanalysis the book is a maternal symbol”, one that—as Georges Bataille put it—is actually “the equivalent of the womb.”²⁷ The second is that, besides her controversial relation with food, the most powerful “starving” and truly “anorexic” attitude at the core of the *massaià*’s behaviour derives precisely from her firm refusal to procreate, her extremely negative vision of motherhood, which she perceives as an annihilation and disintegration of the self, a literal “dirompersi dell’individuo” (*Nascita*, 233) and,

²⁵Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 83.

²⁶The idea that a pattern of suffering and renunciation is related to a (feminine) discursive authority is discussed in Frega, *Speaking in Hunger*. As a consequence, it does not really seem that an emphasis on motifs of corporeal sacrifice, mutilation and food refusal in *Nascita* is in contradiction with the logic of a narrative text that someone may call “femminista”. What I am suggesting, is that it may be precisely the “redemptive” quality of such an emphasis that finally allows the female (or, if you wish, even feminist) voice to be regenerated and thus even more powerfully heard.

²⁷Lukacher, *Maternal Fictions*, 181-82.

eventually, the discovery of her sterility.²⁸ Investigating and, possibly, reconciling at both the literal and figurative levels, the contradictory co-existence and tension in the text between, on the one hand, the impulse to “give birth and creating” and, on the other, the apparent negation of that same impulse, will constitute the principal objective of the rest of this essay.

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“Le parole hanno un valore e voi vi ostinate a non riconoscerglielo” (*Nascita*, 28), the *massaia* tells her simple-minded mother at the beginning of the novel, a few moments before getting out of her trunk. Later on, we shall significantly find her first “avverti[re] il proprio annullamento, che è il modo piú certo di affermarsi” (*Nascita*, 66) and then asking herself: “che cosa è questo morire se non tornare a un solo grembo che tutto contiene e tutto esprime, il morto e il vivo a un tempo, il nascituro e il trapassato? E il suo esprimersi che sarà dunque? se non una cosa che non abbia comunque materia? un fiato? un suono? una parola, il verbo?” (*Nascita*, 76).

It seems, indeed, of crucial importance for readers of Masino's novel to understand the meaning implicit in “to affirm oneself through one's cancellation.” In addition, it is important also to reflect on the protagonist's ruminations about death, birth, life and, ultimately, the possibility of expression and representation. The reader could begin by simply observing, for example, that while the *massaia* rejects the idea of procreation, she also wishes to return to the womb-like trunk, where she existed in the first place, and, thus, if Bataille is right in his book-womb association, practically to “get back to her book(s)”, to the dreaming and the peculiar artistic nutrition they were able to provide for her.

It should be also immediately clear, after all, that the novel, in spite of its protagonist's refusal of “normal” food, motherhood and her professed sterility, still manages to show off an (over)abundant, inventive variety of linguistic and narrative devices (or, “ingredients”). Sections characterized by third person narration, theatrical dialogue, first person diary entries, “interpolated narratives”²⁹ alternate one with another and, in the end, materially produce and successfully “give birth” to the text itself.

If, moreover, the reader recalls the autobiographical nature of the text

²⁸The close relationship between the refusal of fertility and anorexia is well-known from both a scientific and literary perspective. Besides S. Skubal's assertion that “the anorexic can't be mother” (Skubal, *Word of Mouth*, 74) see for instance Lanslots' similar remark that “l'altra conseguenza dell'anorexia è il rifiuto della fertilità e consecutivamente della maternità” in “Un assaggio,” 377.

and that after its composition Masino significantly will renounce writing, retire into her private life (her own “trunk”?) and practically give up all her artistic ambitions (“[after *Nascita*] ho scritto ancora qualche poesia carica di morte. Quanto al resto, ho avuto troppo da fare: ho dovuto vivere e lavorare.”),³⁰ Masino’s last novel could be overall interpreted (also) as a sort of emblematic “last supper”, eerily similar in its consequences and lasting effects to those following the final meal the *massaia* cooks and supervises near the conclusion of her existential parable.

Under this light, which wishes to see the *massaia* as a double for the figure of the modernist artist and her creative agony, the novel may resemble the representation of a final attempt at coordinating and displaying a literary (as parallel to a culinary) “production”. It is a sort of “creative gorging” for the protagonist and her author before the actual withdrawing and “starving” (physical and metaphorical) that will actually follow both the preparation of the fictional meal (which, appropriately, is defined “una disfatta della Massaia” (*Nascita*, 218), after which her “volontà caparbie di annullamento” (*Nascita*, 242) are intensified) and the real completion of the writing. As we are trying to argue, however, it is also such a “disfatta” that may simultaneously provide the *massaia* with a more authoritative and convincing voice and constitute the premise for the birth of her literary (and other meta-literary) discourse(s).

At this point, however, given our “anorexic” framework, it is time to lend a closer look at the *massaia*’s particular relation with food and, more in general, at the multifaceted alimentary discourse which pervades the text.³¹ As the quotation at the beginning of this study indicates, among the first pieces of information the reader receives about the protagonist are: first, that the act of thinking and the one of an autophagic self-consumption (or self-mutilation) are intimately linked (“Pensava e si mangiava le

²⁹Re, “Fascist Theories of ‘Woman,’” 92.

³⁰http://www.letteraturaalfemminile.it/paola_masino.htm

³¹Van den Bossche reminds us that “Il fatto che un personaggio mangi una determinata cosa è altamente emblematico per il suo rapporto con il mondo; gli conferisce una precisa collocazione spaziotemporale, rivela la sua appartenenza sociale, è significativa per la sua posizione ideologica, e offre indizi sul suo stato fisiologico e psichico.” (Van den Bossche, “Il cibo nella narrativa del Novecento: appunti per una tipologia,” 488). Additionally, from a more specific gendered perspective, Muzzarelli and Re observe that “nel rapporto della donna con se stessa, nella definizione della sua identità e del suo potere e nella sua capacità di espressione estetica, il cibo risulta avere un ruolo fondamentale e fondante” (Muzzarelli and Re, *Il cibo e le donne*, 14).

unghie" (*Nascita*, 13);³² second, that her nutrition is both physical and intellectual ("masticava tozzi di pane e sfogliava libri in cerca di altro nutrimento" (*Nascita*, 14) and, third, that, given the kind of food she eats, she obviously places more importance on her intellectual feeding than her physiological one. A strong connection between the alimentary ingestion and the literary/artistic production is thus established in the opening section of the novel.

The next, food-related element that stands out in these initial pages is that the flesh of the *massaia's* body is compared to the edible meat one can find at the market or at the butcher: "il suo corpo era carne come quella esposta sui banchi dei mercati o appesa nei negozi dei macellai" (*Nascita*, 14). The perception that the protagonist has of herself as some sort of food to be consumed is subtly re-confirmed when we discover that her family, for Easter, pushes her "come un mobile [...] nella stanza da pranzo tra le torte pasquali e i vassoi di uova sode, a che il prete la benedicesse, povera creatura" (*Nascita*, 16).

If it is true that in the former passage she is specifically compared and perceived by her family as a piece of furniture and not, explicitly, as a piece of food, it is also true that the absurdly ridiculous process the young *massaia* needs to undergo before entering the dining-room ("la lavavano con la soda, le davano cera sui capelli, petrolio alle giunture, guardavano che la pelle del volto e delle mani non fosse tarlata, le accomodavano una ghirlanda di violaccicche sul capo e intorno al collo e ai polsi gale di carta velina azzurra o rosa" *Nascita*, 16) is strongly reminiscent also of the preparation of a specially decorated dish and of the gestures needed to execute a particular recipe for a festive day. Her anatomically detailed, well-washed, oiled, checked-for-faults and garnished body may actually resemble rather a "sacrificial lamb", an Easter roast ready for the oven, than an inanimate and limbless "mobile".

As a matter of fact, such an association will be unequivocally sanctioned a few passages later, where, once she is "done", not only is she placed in the dining-room, among other prepared dishes and alimentary items ("torte pasquali [...] uova sode"), waiting for the traditional food blessing from a priest but, at the conclusion of this section, the image of a real lamb slaughtered for food makes its official appearance in the narration ("Come

³²On this, see also Anderson's remark: "When the self can no longer ingest and digest the world as food, can no longer turn the raw matter of sensation into abstract concepts, judgments, and generalizations, the subject is thrown back on itself for nourishment, becoming both brute matter and pure spirit" (Anderson, "Anorexia and Modernism," 31).

da un agnello sgozzato si ricava il cibo, così voleva che subito dal tramonto nascesse una cosa utile” *Nascita*, 19). The text is telling us that the *massaia* is precisely that sacrificial lamb and, as such, she also represents a kind of symbolic, sacrificial food consumed in order to achieve a still vague higher purpose and objective. The prophetic allusion to a *massaia* who is also a *messia* is hard to miss here. In both instances, self-sacrifice, death (and a form of resurrection) will be essential steps in the creative process and necessary to achieve a most effective spreading of the “word”.

A couple more references dealing with images of metaphorical nutrition reinforce this sacrificial motif in the initial chapter of the novel. A remark such as “Ci hanno chiamato chi sa da dove su questo pianeta e ora dobbiamo alimentarlo” re-proposes more clearly the idea that human beings in general and the *massaia*, in particular, are here specifically to sustain, and therefore, “feed” the planet.

When the narrator informs us that:

Al mercato cominciò ad amare il cibo perché era un modo nuovo che le si presentava di dare e prendere la morte. Guardava i ventri concavi dei buoi appesi con uncini di ferro alle travi delle macellerie. Dondolavano piano, privi dei loro organi; questi pendevano lì vicino non più legati al loro alveo naturale ma a strane radici di metallo [...] La bambina traeva la conclusione che anche lei nel suo interno doveva avere qualche cosa di cui il mondo aveva bisogno... (*Nascita*, 17-18)

the *massaia's* topsy-turvy, paradoxical understanding of food as a “death-provider” emerges and clashes together with its standard, life-sustaining and nutritive quality.

By associating the hanging oxen with their open wombs and their mutilated organs to her own body, she not only implies that her flesh may have a similar feeding function, establishing an analogy between food and her own self and anticipating her negative vision of maternity as a “dirompersi dell’ individuo”, but also that at least part of what the world needs will be provided precisely by her eventual sacrifice and consumption.

As a consequence, she describes as “terribile” both the feeling of immortality she has on the occasion of her visits to the butcher and, similarly, her sensation of “non arrivare mai, per quanto faccia, a liberarsi in modo definitivo del corpo che le hanno messo addosso”. Like the meat of the (dead) oxen will be consumed and eliminated in order to fulfill its necessary, vital function, so the *massaia's* own body will eventually need to be disintegrated and be reduced to dust in order to achieve some useful purpose. What may be equally useful to notice, at this point, (beyond the

usual, implicit sarcasm of the narrative voice), is not only that this Deleuzian representation of a "body without organs" 'incarnates' precisely that condition of dispossession of the bodily self that feminist scholars have linked to women's own historical condition, but also that, in turn, it is reminiscent of the importance Bataille, (writing about the ear of Van Gogh), assigns to "self-mutilation as a sacrifice analogous to, and symbolic of, the artist's activity."³³

For Bataille, as Rosalind Krauss puts it, "the beginning of art [coincides with] the representation of sacrifice, the symbolic correlative of the mutilation of the human body."³⁴ He continues (with a most appropriate culinary image) by also observing that sacrifice "eats up what could have remained in the chain of useful works" and that it:

restores to the sacred world that which servile usage has degraded, profaned. Servile usage has made a *thing*, and *object*, of that which profoundly partakes of the *subject*, participates intimately in its nature [...] In the world of things, man himself becomes [...] one of these things. From this fall, in all ages man seeks to escape. In his unfamiliar myths and cruel rites man is, from the first, in search of a lost intimacy.³⁵

We certainly do not wish to suggest that the same level of continuity and complexity that the French philosopher establishes between self-mutilation and Van Gogh's art exists also with reference to the situation of the protagonist of Masino's novel. Nonetheless, at the same time, (adapting Bataille's insights to our circumstances) it is tempting to at least observe that the *massaia's* "sacrificial journey" from trunk to grave, from enclosure to a sort of paradoxical freedom, could be read precisely as an attempt to escape a process of objectification and commoditization, which reduces everyone and everything to their utility and tries to re-establish instead a condition of original and creative "intimacy".

In effect, through the *massaia*, Masino seems inclined to wish to break a condition which, in turn, by breaking the chain of "useful" work as represented, for example, by cooking and eating, is also the premise for any artistic accomplishment. The autophagic gesture of the *massaia*, the perception others have of her as a "mobile" and her own self-perception as a sort of sacrificial food (in both instances, always a product or a "thing"),

³³Michaud, "The Real as a Primal Scene," 42.

³⁴Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 82. "Painting is born with man's refusal to reproduce himself, and out of an act of self-mutilation" (*ivi*, 83)

³⁵Michaud, "The Real as a Primal Scene," 42.

the refusal to see herself as a complete body, not to mention her ideas on notions of usefulness and uselessness, may indeed reinforce the impression that Bataille's observations on the relationship between sacrifice and artistic creation are indeed relevant also in Masino's novel.

The *massaià's* position "contro l'inutile", by the way, seems particularly revealing if read in this Bataillean context. She is not against the concept of "uselessness" in absolute terms. In other words, she is not in a negative "stato di asprezza" towards such a notion in the way the capitalist world of bourgeois production would be. The fact that she is "sempre tesa a cercare il profitto delle cose che gli altri spregiavano" (*Nascita*, 19) indicates, on the contrary, that her effort, in this perhaps similar to the one of a stereotypical artist, is actually aimed at finding some positive value (a profit) precisely in what the majority of people despise; that is, in that which—like any artistic artifact—the others consider useless, a waste of time and effort and not a part of the chain of production.³⁶

The fact that at this initial, still "intimate" stage, old books and "groncoli" constitute her literal and symbolic food is perhaps less of a surprise now. She "eats" them in order to draw some kind of profit out of them, and this is something that the people who surround her are unable to do. If the trunk is an actual womb-like extension of her mother, books—as Bataille also suggested—are an essential component of this environment where she can dream and imagine. They constitute a sort of umbilical cord which is necessary for such activities ("leggeva fino all'alba" *Nascita*, 16). When she finally agrees to get out of the trunk, such a nutritive lifeline is abruptly cut off and, as she eventually states, she feels "imbalsamata, dentro" (*Nascita*, 264).

From now on, books and artistic works in general (by Strawinski, Goethe, Shakespeare, Leopardi, Rousseau, Tolstoi, Cervantes and Beethoven) are tragically able only to provide her with hints on home economics rather than truly inspire her and feed her imagination. Her exit from the trunk sanctions the end of her possibility of dreaming and, sig-

³⁶To those who may question my use of a misogynous and male modernist paradigm (such as Bataille and Eliot) in order to underline the importance of Masino as a modernist, female writer, I respectfully ask: "Why not?" Isn't my final argument made stronger and even more convincing if it is supported not only by traditional feminist scholarship but also (and especially) by a theoretical framework provided by two eminent representatives of the "other side"? I would imagine that even the most relentless feminist critic should be actually pleased if some of the ideas produced by such a paradigm are appropriated and "exploited" with the specific goal of further valorizing and appreciating the quality of a female writer.

nificantly, coincides with her progressive exposure to normal food such as the “piatti di spaghetti e larghe pizze alla napoletana” (*Nascita*, 49) served at the party organized to celebrate her “mock-resurrection”. In like manner, she is also exposed to the clichéd gestures and stereotyped discourses commonly generated during family meals (*Nascita*, 72) and to the elaborate culinary skills a truly competent fascist housewife needs to master (“Le insegnerò io un modo eccellente di preparare il merluzzo; suo marito ne diventerà ghiotto” *Nascita*, 73).

All these new foods and alimentary information provide no nourishment for the *massaia*, who does not assimilate them either physiologically or intellectually. The preparation of food becomes a necessary duty associated with “lavori forzati” (*Nascita*, 84)’ cooking is an unavoidable task (“la cucina [...] è una necessità non un evento; un evento, per quanto storico, può evitarsi, la cucina non si può evitare” *Nascita*, 101). In this scenario, it is not surprising that a question such as “Di che si nutriva?”, aimed at discovering the *massaia*’s new diet as a newly-wed in her “giornate deserte e ferme” (*Nascita*, 63), is destined to remain without an answer and that, as the day of the final meal she has to organize approaches, we actually find out that “Da sei giorni [...] fermenta e crea, non dorme, mangia e dimagrisce” (*Nascita*, 95). The appropriation of the requested culinary expertise corresponds to both her progressive consumption and to the withering away of any form of creativity that is not associated with a sterile food preparation: “Dove allora prenderanno posto i pensieri fecondi? Dove, oggi che possiedo divani di piuma e fiori chiusi nelle serre, dove farò io sedere gli elfi che da piccina mi sorridevano tra le muffe del corpo?” (*Nascita*, 78).

Her original diet based on stale bread and books corresponded to an abject state of deformity but, nonetheless, it was able to form and organically stimulate her dreams and creativity. Normal food, on the other hand, is only a sign of a forced conformism to a certain, pre-defined domestic lifestyle and rather than sustaining her, it will eventually be conducive to her death wishes and, thus, to her return into the “baule”.

The fantastic episode in which the *massaia* meets her younger alter-ego and offers her to eat a selection of dishes in her upscale dining-room seems not only to reinforce the relationship between the alimentary and the literary discourse, but also to illustrate how both the older and the younger versions of the *massaia* unavoidably lose a crucial part of themselves (i.e. their irrational, creative side) once they are conquered by the over-abundant signs of bourgeois food and gastronomy.

Due camerieri si movevano rapidi e offrivano vassoi pieni di odorose materie colorate che la Massaia chiamava maccheroni, fagiano, fagio-

lini, purea, panna, crema, pesche, moscato e canditi, ma che la ragazza rifiutò tutte con tenacia e impaccio, diventando sempre più pallida per fame [...]

‘Non ti lascio muovere da tavola se non hai mangiato. Se no chiamerò il marito che sa ogni trucco per condurre chiunque alla normalità.’

A questa minaccia la ragazza disse: ‘Groncioli’[...]

‘Portate pezzi di pane secco’ urlò la Massaia esasperata ai camerieri. ‘Molto pane secco. Tutto il pane secco che c’è in casa.’

Vi fu nella stanza una pausa piena di sgomento. Poi il maggiordomo fece un passo avanti: ‘La Signora mi scusi, non c’è pane secco in casa. [...] La distribuzione del pane è regolata in modo che non ne avanzi, che non ci sia inutile spreco [...] Il pane secco non si può fare, Signora. [...] Il pane secco, se la Signorina permette, non è che vecchio romanticismo.’

‘Allora’ disse la ragazza ‘morirò di fame.’

‘Anche questo è romanticismo.’

‘Però’ disse la ragazza ‘mi fa piacere e mi nutre e i vostri cibi giovani fanno un gran chiasso di colori senza nessuna sostanza’ (*Nascita*, 173-5)

“Pane secco”, the only kind of food that pleases the “ragazza” and she wishes to eat, is labeled “vecchio romanticismo”—(as is, by the way, the gesture of “starving to death”)—and, as such, it is said not to belong to the category of “cibo razionale e sostanzioso” (*Nascita*, 174).

Similar to the “ism” and the artistic ideal “pane secco” is derogatorily compared to, this food is a sort of “irrational” substance, one that, for example, requires an understanding of time different from the one the “maggiordomo” displays, that cannot be made following a sudden request (unless it is “di cartone dipinto”, a cardboard fake) and, finally, that cannot exist in an utilitarian economy of bourgeois production where everything is perfectly scheduled, regulated and measured in order to avoid waste. Like a true, creative work of art, “pane secco” represents a sort of “useless waste” in the chain of production and consumption, and yet both its particular nutritive qualities and its appeal for the “ragazza” stem precisely out of this alternative status.³⁷

At the same time, eating “groncioli” and starving are not easy when everyone else around is having a feast (or, out of the allegory, pursuing one’s own serious artistic vision rather than compromise and going with the flow and the fashion of the times). Such gestures require persistence and sacrifice. As the *massaia* will later tell her younger double: “anche tu mangeresti il loro cibo, perché morire di fame, credilo, è un’impresa tanto

³⁷ It is also tempting to establish some sort of connection between “pane secco” and the host. Both foods, in fact, possess an en-lightening and salvific quality.

lunga che prima di averla compiuta hai troppe volte il modo di pentirtene" (*Nascita*, 200). The difficulty of this undertaking is the reason why the "signorina" temporarily gives up her ascetic disposition and ends up eating those "cibi giovani" which—like a cheap painting—display "noisy", clashing, flamboyant colors and yet have "no substance".³⁸

La sera stessa, a tavola fra moglie e marito, la signorina mangiò di gusto la crema di asparagi e chiese due volte il fagiano, ma c'era l'aragosta e fu contenta di impararne il sapore. Si riempì inoltre le tasche di grissini per aver di che masticare fino al giorno dopo. (*Nascita*, 176)

The symbolic price to pay for indulging in such an "abbuffata" and acting only according to rational and utilitarian directions (as her saving of "grissini" suggests), however, is to become too full and, thus,—to invoke the painting allusion once more—also to lose all the promise and potential a white, empty canvas may offer. Different from "groncioli", the socio-culturally charged, over-abundant, elaborated products of bourgeois cuisine have undoubtedly the effect of "filling the void" but also, at the same time, to paradoxically eliminate one's essential "hunger" (as a metaphor for "desire") for dreaming or creating in personal and original ways.

The narrative takes a crucial turn as soon as the final products of such a cuisine have been completed and the guests are almost ready to sit at the table for their meal. It is at this point, in fact, that the *massaia* performs the symbolic gesture of taking her elegant clothes off ("questi vestiti non sono più adatti per me" 218) and put a simple cloth ("sacco") on, thus literalizing her "disfatta" and (by becoming officially insane) simultaneously leaving behind the rational, bourgeois persona she has unwillingly accepted to wear so far. If, on the one hand, her new, submissive attire points to the "conformità raggiunta [...] all'ideale fascista della donna,"³⁹ on the other, it is also the appropriate accessory for her new (or, better, rediscovered) ascetic and sacrificial attitude and merely the most evident, exterior sign of an even more substantial, interior "lightening".⁴⁰

Her stripping gesture emblematically initiates the last phase of her "starving enterprise", culminating in a death whose real cause remains vague but that, nonetheless, seamlessly fits into the anorexic pattern of the novel. In addition, the *massaia* significantly dies "senza aver più aperto

³⁸The "noise" produced by this kind of food and cuisine is such that it prevents the possibility to think: "Cuoco, di ai tuoi sguatterri di non spezzare le foglie dei carciofi a quest'ora; io voglio pensare. Puliteli a un'altra ora! [...] Tutta la casa ne risuona e io ho l'emicrania!" (*Nascita*, 206)

³⁹Rorandelli, "*Nascita e morte della massaia* di Paola Masino," 83.

bocca", that is, in silence and, allegedly, without having ingested any more food but, perhaps even more revealingly, displaying an "estremo languore" (*Nascita*, 277), that is, the characteristic sign of a real and metaphoric hunger.⁴¹

This progressive pattern of sacrifice and corporeal self-obliteration ends here but, unsurprisingly, this is not the end of the story of the *massaia*. As we have previously mentioned, her eminently anorexic, modernist impulse towards self-consumption is necessary not only to define her identity⁴² and sanction the authority of her discourse, but also a precondition for inspiring new discourses. The "Epilogo" of the novel, with its persistent allusions to the supernatural, despite its continuous ironic and mocking tone, ties together the transcendence of the creativity and the regeneration of the *mes-sia* with the figure of the *massaia* by depicting a parallel resurrection scene and, as such, may reinforce this alternative line of interpretation:

Molti anni sono passati, ma la fama della dama previdente e benefica persiste tuttora [...] quello speciale becchino [...] raccontava di aver spesso veduta la Massaia uscire dalla sua cappella e, preparata con un po' d'acqua e terra e polvere d'ossa una poltiglia fosforescente, spalmarne le borchie, le lettere, le maniglie e quanti finimenti d'ottone si trovano nel mausoleo [...] A volte si mette a parlare con qualche vicina che abbia anche lei finito di rassettare la tomba al marito. (*Nascita*, 281)

Together with the amused denunciation of the professional housewife curse that affects the *massaia* even after her death, funeral and burial, one of the first things we learn from this passage is that her fame survives her death. If it is permissible to momentarily extricate the "Epilogo" from the socio-cultural context and to read beyond the ironic intent, these words would serve to indicate once again that it is only after her finite, physical body has been literally and literarily effaced that her infinite, aesthetic rebirth via a fundamental linguistic operation is possible.⁴³ Her own voice will actually remain present and heard after her death, so that even a hum-

⁴⁰Writing about Richardson's *Clarissa*, Frega appropriately notes that "Saintly vitae commonly stress denuding activities [...]. As Clarissa slowly turns into a pallid, skeletal saint, she sells her clothes, insisting that they not be purchased by her friends" (*Speaking in Hunger*, 106).

⁴¹Re notes that "[Like Pinocchio] La Massaia ha una dieta [...] scarna e limitatissima. Non prende cibo per non diventare, a sua volta, cibo" (Re, "Fame, cibo e antifascismo," 175).

⁴²In fact, sacrifice and abstinence, which basically define the *massaia's* identity, also contribute to "erase" her.

ble undertaker (the “becchino”) may be moved and inspired to produce and tell a gothic tale about her wanderings in the cemetery. In this particular sense, the “death/dissolution” of the *massaia* coincides also with a verbal creation and manages to revitalize precisely those imaginative and artistic powers which were basically declared dead at the moment the protagonist abandoned her original, “intimate” enclosure.

Granted, at the same moment in which the author successfully concludes her book and her narration, we are also reminded by the protagonist’s “sterility” and by the undertaker’s storytelling abilities that creation is “a model that corresponds to the masculine other”⁴⁴ and that “art is only possible through struggle against the body and a world gendered as feminine.”⁴⁵ The imaginary vision of an older Masino, who renounces her creative side and her own work in order to take care of both Bontempelli’s body and literary *corpus*, immediately brings to life and confirms the validity of such critical remarks.

At the same time, however, it seems also legitimate to add that, at the conclusion of the novel, the *massaia*’s “body disappear[ed] into the infinite text” only to be successfully “‘born again’ more purely as text.”⁴⁶ Language is what has “killed” her and language is what actually keeps making her “be born” and live again, in the stories and rumors about her that will continue to be told (including the present one), all pointing, in one way or another, to the resiliency of the (eminently artistic) powers of dreaming and imagination. Beyond the irony, her absurd, anorexic death, together with the tale of her heroic suffering and alleged failure and defeat may thus have also the indirect effect of indefinitely renewing her (and her author’s) reputation, of validating her final choices and affirmatively “ennobling her memory.”⁴⁷

In the last line of the novel, the narrator writes: “I morti non vedono i vivi”. The courteous exchange between the caretaker and the ghost of the *massaia* regarding her forgotten “fazzolettino”, however, may also suggest that a different kind of communication between “morti” and “vivi” is still

⁴³The fundamental linguistic (and thus also creative) operation at the base of the notion of “fame” emerges from its definition in the *OED*: “That which people say or tell; public report, common talk; a particular instance of this, a report, rumor.”

⁴⁴Lukacher, *Maternal Fictions*, 119.

⁴⁵Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 101.

⁴⁶Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 81.

⁴⁷Frega, *Speaking in Hunger*, 101.

possible and that the former are still able to inspire, "be heard", have an influence and, especially, keep feeding the dreams and imagination of us all.

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