

# ITALIAN MODERNISM

## Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde

*Edited by*

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## 13 Gender, Identity, and the Return to Order in the Early Works of Paola Masino

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What happens to literary writing and intellectual reflection in Italy when, in the wake of the modernist epistemological and metaphysical crisis in Europe, the external universe increasingly appears to be a subjective and unstable concept? When the objective reality of time and space and even identity seem to collapse? What happens when philosophy, traditionally dedicated to the examination of ideas like truth, existence, history, and reality, determines these to be nothing other than mythic constructs? Where – in a vacuum not convincingly filled by either science or religion – can one turn for a semblance of truth and order?

These questions, central to the literary and artistic movements of Italy's post-First World War 'return to order,' emerged out of the turbulent historical moments and cultural developments of early twentieth-century Europe – a growing crisis of consciousness stimulated by the writings of such thinkers as Nietzsche, Bergson, and Freud, the rise of Italian Futurism and the French avant-gardes, and the 'Great War' itself. The increasingly subjective nature of modern experience, for example, was a theme of the plays and narratives of Luigi Pirandello and Italo Svevo, who explored with irony the notion of a fixed and knowable self in works such as *Enrico IV* [Henry IV] (1922) and *La coscienza di Zeno* [Zeno's Conscience] (1923). The Futurist avant-garde, which sought to liberate Italy from its past through new and experimental art forms, introduced radical and fluid notions of time and space through its various aesthetics, substituting previously distinct metaphysical categories of subject and object with the destabilizing Bergsonian notions of flux and interpenetration. Finally, the First World War, with its unprecedented horrors and disappointing outcome,

stripped many of their faith in religion, country, technology, and even, as suggested in the wartime poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti, of faith in the ability of language to correspond to and communicate experience. Caught somewhere between the intense subjectivism of the thinkers and movements described above and the post-war search for a new objectivity, modernist women authors like Paola Masino and Anna Maria Ortese countered their contemporaries' efforts to construct a stronger metaphysic with literary innovations designed to draw attention to psychological and spiritual realities. This essay focuses in particular on Paola Masino's early work to demonstrate how it reacts to and critiques the post-war search for epistemological 'certainties' and the very notion of a return to order and tradition.

Slowly taking shape during the war and then gaining momentum in the volatile period that followed it, Italy's 'return to order' was comprised of diverse movements linked by a common desire to correct the metaphysical and epistemological instabilities produced by the historical moments and cultural developments of the previous thirty years. Frequently, this project had less-than-subtle political overtones, as for example in the case of Margherita Sarfatti's *Novecento* movement, which attempted to combine traditional and modern pictorial elements to create an art representative of a new, Fascist Italy. While the desire to recover the artistic patrimony that Futurist painters had once polemically denounced as 'tarlato, sudicio [moth-eaten, dirty]<sup>1</sup> and 'corroso dal tempo [corroded by time]' ('Manifesto dei pittori futuristi' 23) often translated into art that lent itself to the politicized search for *italianità* [Italianicity], in some cases it also evolved into a more philosophical exploration of the metaphysical relationship between subject and object, as in the art of Giorgio de Chirico and others involved with the so-called *scuola metafisica* [Metaphysical School] and the journal *Valori Plastici* [Plastic Values] (1918–22). For these, recourse to the kinds of traditional forms rejected by the avant-garde constituted only one aspect of a sophisticated investigation into the relationship between the modern individual and the external world – the world of objects, materials, and discernible forms.<sup>2</sup>

As Italy's post-war return to order found graphic illustration in the visual arts, important literary figures of the period were also drawn to the idea of recuperating the past. This interest led to the creation of several publications of a collaborative nature in which artists and writers contributed with an equal sense of urgency to debates regarding the relationship between the past and the present. Among these were

journals such as *La Ronda* [The Patrol] (1919–23) and *900* (1926–29). The former, published by a group of intellectuals headed by former *La Voce* [The Voice] contributor Vincenzo Cardarelli, supported a return to the classical forms of the past as a means of expressing modern ideas.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the avant-garde of the pre-war period, which had sought to effect socio-political change through art, *La Ronda's* writers proposed a renewed separation of society and politics on the one hand, and art on the other. But where the *rondisti* advocated hermetic art and literature that reflected Italy's illustrious past, those who contributed to *900* promoted art forms that continued to depart from tradition – forms often of non-Italian origin. Founded by Curzio Malaparte and Massimo Bontempelli, *900* sought to renew Italian culture through the introduction of fresh and innovative writers and movements, and its international contributors included Anglophone writers like James Joyce and members of the Surrealist, Dada, and Expressionist movements.

For Bontempelli, who assumed sole control of *900* after Malaparte's departure in 1927, the notion of a return to order was closely tied to what he considered the profoundly incapacitating 'malattie spirituali [spiritual illnesses]' of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Aestheticism, Impressionism, Idealism, Freudian psychology, and the democratic spirit were, in his opinion, different symptoms of a 'paurosa decadenza [dreadful decadence]' that prized appearance over substance, intuition over perception, the unconscious over the conscious and finally, individual or collective interests over greater laws or truths (*L'avventura novecentista* 26–7). Bontempelli suggested that this frightening decadence, by causing the individual to retreat ever further from the material world into his or her own self, had brought about the destruction of the natural and reassuring boundaries of time and space. 'L'orgia metafisica dell'io,' he wrote in 1928, 'come misura unica del mondo, prima, poi come unica verità, portava fatalmente l'individuo a non credere più nemmeno a se stesso, cioè spingeva l'umanità al suicidio morale [The metaphysical orgy of the self as the only measure of the world, first, and then as the only truth, inevitably led the individual to no longer believe even in himself, that is it pushed humanity to moral suicide]' (27). Thus the return to order proposed by Bontempelli was one that had as its primary task the reconstruction of time and space – a task he theorized would subsequently lead to 'il ritrovamento dell'individuo [the recovery of the individual],' and presumably also to greater cultural stability (9).

At the heart of the *900* project was an artistic practice that Bontempelli identified as *realismo magico* [magic realism], which proposed the magical interpretation of everyday human experience and familiar objects as a means of reaffirming the relationship between the individual and the external world. 'Questo è puro "novecentismo",' he wrote in 1927, 'che rifiuta così la realtà per la realtà come la fantasia per la fantasia, e vive nel senso magico scoperto nella vita quotidiana degli uomini e delle cose [This is pure *novecentismo*, that rejects reality for the sake of reality just as it does fantasy for the sake of fantasy, and lives in the magical sense discovered in the everyday life of men and things]' (22).<sup>4</sup> Bontempelli cited the art of the Quattrocento as an example of *realismo magico*, for its evocation of the tension between the material world (as depicted through precisely rendered everyday objects) and an implied world beyond the merely physical (21). The appeal of such artists as Masaccio, Mantegna, and Piero della Francesca for Bontempelli lay in their ability to create a suggestive atmosphere through the representation of the quotidian. In drawing analogies between his own project and the art of Italy's past, Bontempelli was not suggesting that the return to order be predicated upon a return to any particular tradition (Italian or otherwise), but rather upon a renewed artistic effort to evoke a mysterious reality beyond our own, a reality he felt had been destroyed by the various forms of decadence described above, and which philosophical inquiry, spent with the idealism of the early twentieth century, could no longer address (28).

*900* became an important vehicle for news and illustrations of literary and artistic innovation throughout Europe, many of which developed out of a growing interest in the same inward turn of consciousness described by Bontempelli in the early issues of the journal. In its first volume (published in the autumn of 1926) the journal featured a broad selection of works from authors such as Joyce, the Spanish avant-gardiste Ramón Gomez de la Serna, and the German Expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser – all of whom also served as members of its editorial board. What linked these authors' diverse contributions – an excerpt from a novel, a phantasmagoric series of images evoked through brief tableaux, and a one-act tragedy – was a common interest in exploring the intersection of modern, chaotic life and individual consciousness.

While many of the authors and artists who contributed to *900* over the course of its three-year lifespan had already established reputations, or were rapidly building them, at least one was a newcomer to

the modernist intellectual scene. Paola Masino (1908–1989), whose short story 'Ricostruzione [Reconstruction]' appeared in the journal in 1928, was twenty years old at the time of its publication, making her one of its youngest contributors. Masino's work had never been published before and she was one of only two female writers to have her work included in *900*.<sup>5</sup> Like her fellow *novacentisti*, the Roman writer was interested in exploring the ambiguous relationship between the real and the imaginary. Her work, however, 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.

Creative and intellectually curious, Masino was an ambitious writer who had shown interest at an early age in making original use of the literary medium in order to explore the relationship between gender and society. This appears to be true even of her first work of fiction, a play written in her adolescence entitled *Le tre Marie* [The Three Marias], which reportedly revolved around three women – Maria, Marta, and Maddalena – who were 'variamente innamorate e soggiogate e condizionate' by 'un grand'uomo [variously in love with and subjugated and conditioned by a great man]' (*Io, Massimo e gli altri* 21).<sup>6</sup> Evidence of Masino's early concern with gender, *Le tre Marie* seems to constitute her first investigation of society's enduring attachment to female archetypes and the principal characteristics – love, sacrifice, sexual appeal – that these often embody. With the emblematic names of the play's female protagonists and the description of its single male character as 'un grand'uomo,' Masino linked these archetypes to the Christian, patriarchal society that would become her focus in successive works.

*Le tre Marie* was never produced, but Masino's youthful determination to stage it brought her into contact for the first time, in 1924, with Luigi Pirandello, a figure who would become an important influence on her subsequent development as a writer.<sup>7</sup> A dramatist of international renown by the early 1920s, Pirandello had brought to life, perhaps more effectively than any other Italian of his generation, the early-twentieth-century preoccupation with the 'inaccessibility of truth.'<sup>8</sup> In his plays of the period, which included *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* [Six Characters in Search of an Author] (1921) and the previously mentioned *Enrico IV*, he presented a series of memorable characters caught up in a futile struggle to reconcile reality with appearances. The modern crisis of consciousness that these plays de-

picted would become an important theme in Masino's work as well, particularly the Pirandellian principle – originally outlined in *Umorismo* [On Humour] (1908) and applied in works such as *Così è (se vi pare)* [So It Is (If You Think So)] (1917) and the novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila* [One, No One and One Hundred Thousand] (1925–26) – of the tragic conflict between our own individually created realities and the realities assigned to us by others, or by society at large. In Masino's fiction the tension between the former and the latter was to be interpreted with special regard to the plight of modern woman who, driven by desire, seeks to create her own reality but is confronted at every turn with society's entrenched and inflexible images of woman.

Pirandello's theory of the constructed and fictitious nature of identity provided Masino with a valuable starting point from which to explore the relationship between women and society, but it was undoubtedly Surrealism that provided inspiration for her unique representation of that relationship. Presented to the public in André Breton's 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme* [Manifesto of Surrealism], the movement was largely based upon the aesthetic interpretation of Freudian theories, which led it to embrace the disturbing, the fantastic, and the bizarre in its efforts to depict the workings of the subconscious. Masino's realistic depiction of the chaotic inner world of her characters stems from a similar emphasis on dreams and the uncanny, but in her work the desires of the female subconscious are continuously played out against societal mandates of femininity – a situation that transforms her characters' consciousness into a battleground of gendered impulses and sublimations. The psychological and socio-political implications of this battle were the subject of both 'Ricostruzione' and Masino's first novel, *Monte Ignoso* [Mount Ignoso] (1931).

In 'Ricostruzione,' the short story of 1928 that signalled the beginning of her writing career, Masino examines the interlaced themes of love, society, and female subjugation that she first explored in *Le tre Marie*, but with a new interest in the role of the conscious as mediator between subjective and material worlds. A melodramatic story about a girl who literally appears to die of heartache after her disapproving parents cause her to sever relations with her lover, its title refers to its temporarily reanimated protagonist's efforts to understand her own death by rebuilding her confused memories of the events leading up to it.<sup>9</sup> Though the story's thematic concerns are common to the work of many of Masino's female predecessors and contemporaries, from



Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna* [A Woman] (1906) to Alba de Céspedes *Nessuno torna indietro* [There Is No Turning Back] (1938), an examination of the story itself reveals Masino's early rejection of the conventional narrative forms through which these were often presented in favour of the more radical styles of her modernist contemporaries.

The radical transformation of traditional narrative elements such as structure, setting, and tone in 'Ricostruzione' occurs from the story's outset, which begins, for example, where most other stories end: with the death of its central character. 'La giovane morta,' we are told by an anonymous narrator in the opening line, 'si alzò a sedere nella bara e ... guardò la tomba dove l'avevano chiusa [The dead young woman raised herself up to sit in the coffin and ... looked at the tomb in which they had enclosed her]' (77). This matter-of-fact presentation of an otherwise remarkable event, consistent with *realismo magico's* practice of juxtaposing the real and the fantastic, sets the story in precisely the sort of literary reality-beyond-our-own that Bontempelli promoted in 900 and in his own fiction.<sup>10</sup> The departure from the classic conventions of storytelling – beginning where a story would normally end – is a calculated effort to surprise and confound the story's reader from the start by putting him or her in a position not unlike that of the protagonist, who is equally confused by her abrupt return to life. Masino perpetuates her reader's sense of disorientation through the use of a limited narrative point of view that permits his or her slight understanding of events to grow only apace with the protagonist's, a fact that ultimately causes the reader to share the protagonist's sense of discovery as her memories eventually fall into order to reveal the broader context of her death.

Masino continues to challenge traditional narrative structure with the short story's unusual exposition. By linking the development of its action to its protagonist's fragmented memories of her past, Masino creates a narrative form that mimics the processes of the psyche as it simultaneously moves backwards and forwards in time, progressing towards a denouement only as its protagonist reaches into her past and allows the chaotic flow of her memories to wash over her and rise to the surface of her conscious mind. As the flashes of memory come together and become increasingly intelligible – images likened in the story to 'quadri cinematografici [cinematographic pictures]' (79) – the young woman becomes progressively aware of the circumstances of her death. This literary experimentation with the representation of the processes of the subconscious and conscious calls to mind not just the

work of the modernist authors who were Masino's contemporaries – Woolf, Joyce, and, in Italy, Italo Svevo – but also that of contemporary artists like Giorgio de Chirico (with whom Masino was acquainted), who had made the question of how we perceive the world and our own experiences the subject of numerous paintings and theoretical writings.

De Chirico's 1919 *Valori Plastici* article entitled 'Sull'arte metafisica' is one such work. In it, the painter explores the relationship between memory, experience, and art, metaphorically presenting memory as 'un rosario continuo di ricordi dei rapporti tra le cose e noi e viceversa [a continuous series of memories of relations between things and ourselves and vice-versa]' (16). Describing what he believed would take place if the thread that held memories together – the thread giving them context and making them useful tools for sorting and organizing experience – were to break, de Chirico declared that though the material world would not change, our perception of it would, revealing what he called 'l'aspetto metafisico delle cose [the metaphysical aspect of things].' '[O]gni cosa,' he wrote, '[ha] due aspetti: uno corrente quello che vediamo quasi sempre e che vedono gli uomini in generale, l'altro lo spettrale o metafisico che non possono vedere che rari individui in momenti di chiaroveggenza o di astrazione metafisica [Every thing has two aspects: a common one that we almost always see and that men in general see, the other the spectral or metaphysical one that only rare individuals can see in moments of clairvoyance or of metaphysical abstraction]' (16). Metaphysical art, implied de Chirico, ought to capture or suggest the perceptions of a mind loosened from the moors of memory in order to reveal the previously unknown aspects of things – a goal that allied it to *realismo magico*, which similarly attempted to evoke the 'magical' aspects of everyday things and human experience. De Chirico's effort to escape the ordering influence of memory was also echoed by Breton in the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, where – revealing the influence not just of de Chirico, but also of Freud's work on sleep and dreams – he proposed that 'Man, when he ceases to sleep, is above all at the mercy of his memory [...],' an opinion that led Breton to view 'the waking state' as little more than a 'phenomenon of interference' (12).

Something akin to de Chirico and Breton's rejection of the ordering function in memory operates in Masino's 'Ricostruzione,' the plot of which turns on its protagonist's escalating awareness of the circumstances of her death – an awareness made possible by her increasingly

clear memories, which eventually reveal to her and to the reader the subjugation she suffered in life, particularly in her relationship with her parents. Memory slowly discloses that her mother and father 'le avevano insegnato che è meglio la morte che il disonore [had taught her that death is better than dishonour]' (80) – a not-unfamiliar patriarchal axiom evidently invoked to curtail the young woman's sexuality and independence. The extreme consequence of this lesson, we read, is that 'perchè aveva sempre rispettato gli insegnamenti ricevuti [...] ne moriva [because she had always respected the teachings she received [...] she was dying from them]' (80). The protagonist's horrified reaction to the realization that her own feelings had been sacrificed in the name of family honour is compounded by a revelation that the lover for whom she died had never loved her. Eventually, her rage and disgust lead her to choose death a second time, described in the story's closing line as a form of sleep: 'si riadagiò nella bara morbida e, scacciato l'incubo, entrò nel sonno pesante che precede il risveglio [she sank back down into the soft coffin and, having squashed the nightmare, entered into the heavy sleep that precedes waking up]' (81). Yielding to death (metaphorically sleep) once again, Masino's protagonist rejects not only her own memories, but also symbolically the role of the conscious, the external world, and society altogether.

The second, self-imposed death of the protagonist of 'Ricostruzione' metaphorically suggests her spiritual and psychological death – a self-obliteration resulting from extreme self-denial – and indicates Masino's ongoing concern with society's efforts to define and regulate female sexuality. Condemned to suppress her own needs in order to fulfil those of others, Masino's protagonist is depicted as a victim of a patriarchal society that consigns its female members to the roles historically prescribed for them, checking their desires and limiting their self-determination in the process. Pirandello had alluded to the consequences of this predicament in his play *Così è (se vi pare)*, where the mysterious and elusive Signora Ponza finally identifies herself to her inquisitors as both the daughter of Signora Frola and the second wife of Signor Ponza, adding that for herself, however, she is 'nobody' (138). Here and in other works, such as the short story *Candelora* (1917, republished 1928) and the play *Diana e la Tuda* [Diana and Tuda] (1925), Pirandello's female characters – fabricated as they are according to the desires of others – uniquely embody the Sicilian author's theory of the constructed and fictitious self. And while male charac-

ters such as Henry IV and Mattia Pascal grapple with the implications of this theory, they do so of their own accord, not because forces set in motion by gender-based distinctions have imposed the struggle upon them. Pirandello's acknowledgment of the affinities between his own notion of the fluid self and modern woman's struggle to free herself from static and binding notions of femininity anticipates and, to a certain extent, enables Masino's modernist representation of woman's fight for self-determination.<sup>11</sup>

Even a brief look at 'Ricostruzione' suggests the wide variety of modernist figures and movements that exerted their influence on the young Masino: Pirandello, Bontempelli's *realismo magico*, de Chirico's *arte metafisica* [Metaphysical art], Surrealism, and stream-of-consciousness writing all appear to have affected Masino's early efforts to develop a style capable of representing the inner turmoil of the modern female subject. Yet despite this plurality of influences, and despite the originality of her work, Masino's creative inquiry has been superficially and often solely identified with Bontempelli's – a surprising fact considering that Masino adopted the techniques of *realismo magico* to depict the isolated and alienated psyches of her characters, a use of the fantastic that linked her work to the very 'orgia metafisica dell'Io' that Bontempelli sought to counter. It is for this reason that Masino's innovative approach to writing should be reconsidered, and viewed perhaps as Lucia Re has suggested, as part of a 'different and unusual experimental register, a modernist realism infused with surrealist and expressionist elements' ('Futurism and Fascism' 203). Masino's stylistic innovations would arguably become the most compelling aspect of *Monte Ignoso*, her critically acclaimed novel of 1931, which offered readers a powerful and disturbing portrayal of one woman's struggle against the oppressive patriarchal structures and female archetypes that conspire to construct, interpret, and crystallize female identity.

The most striking technique that Masino developed in *Monte Ignoso* was one that she had already experimented with in 'Ricostruzione,' and involves the deployment of what Freud had termed the 'uncanny' as a means of accessing and depicting the inner reaches of her protagonist's psyche. The uncanny played an important role in the return to order, in both Bontempelli's *realismo magico* and de Chirico's *pittura metafisica* where, in admittedly simplified terms, the presence of the unnatural or the bizarre was intended to suggest the existence of a reality beyond our own. Freud's exploration of the uncanny, how-

ever, focused on its relationship to previously repressed thoughts or traumatic experiences, leading him to argue in 1919 that the uncanny could be generated when 'infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' ('The Uncanny' 150). Linked in this manner to the workings of the subconscious mind (charged in Freudian psychoanalysis with the safe-keeping of repressed thoughts), the uncanny became one of the most important tools of the Surrealist movement – a fact convincingly demonstrated by Hal Foster in *Compulsive Beauty*, where he describes it as 'a concept that comprehends surrealism,' and links it to the political goals of the avant-garde movement, defining it as 'a concern with events in which repressed material returns in ways that disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms, and social order' (xvii).

Many of Freud's works were published (and translated into French, if not into Italian) in the years surrounding the First World War, when Masino was a young girl.<sup>12</sup> However, her close relationship with Bontempelli and *novacentismo* and her interest in Surrealism would have exposed her to at least two (very different) interpretations of Freudian psychology. Though one might be tempted to downplay Masino's receptivity to Freudian theories by invoking her relationship with Bontempelli (who condemned Freudian psychology, claiming that it reduced individuals to what he called 'larve vaganti,' wandering shadows forced to relinquish a stable sense of self), Bontempelli himself, in the pages of *900*, had provided the Surrealists with an Italian forum in which to express their ideas. This fact indicates Bontempelli's willingness to suspend his criticism of Freud in the name of promoting revolutionary forms of literature and art. Thus it is probable that Masino became familiar with the Surrealists and their aestheticized forays into the subconscious as a result of her relationship with Bontempelli, rather than despite it.

This last point is significant, because Masino's recourse to the uncanny in *Monte Ignoso* is best understood in a Surrealist and psychological key; instead of suggesting a reassuring reality beyond our own, the novel's uncanny elements plunge its reader into the psyche of its protagonist – focusing attention once again on the subjective, internal world that Bontempelli had denounced in the pages of *900*. The novel's uncanny effects are owed to a series of seemingly animated paintings of female biblical characters, which Masino uses not only to reveal the

enduring and destructive power of deeply repressed female archetypes, but also to criticize the aesthetics of Italy's return to order and the nascent Fascist regime's increasingly narrow view of women.

The novel, which describes the dissolution of a family in a dramatic tale of adultery, madness, and murder, has as its protagonist a woman named Emma, who is haunted by biblically themed paintings that hang in a room in her family home (whose *unheimlich* nature is immediately apparent). The uncanny role that these will play in the story is prefigured in the opening chapter of the book, which utilizes a disconcerting technique not unlike cinematic slow disclosure to reveal the various stories that the paintings depict. As a small candle flame slowly illuminates the surfaces of the paintings, their biblical subjects come to life and the reader is figuratively (and ironically) 'enlightened' by their stories, which are described not as the bearers of the moral and spiritual values of Judaeo-Christian culture, but as tales marked by perversion, betrayal, lust, violence, and revenge. As the candle illuminates a broader portion of each tableau, its flame frankly reveals, 'senza misericordia [without mercy],' the actions of those traditionally held to be the progenitors of Judaeo-Christian culture, from Jacob and Esau to Joseph and Moses, from Lot and his daughters to Mary and the infant Jesus.

Like 'Ricostruzione,' which also featured a strategically disconcerting opening, *Monte Ignoso* immediately throws its reader into a state of confusion. Perplexed by the mysterious and iconoclastic references to the biblical stories and denied contextual relief by the opening scene's enigmatic presentation of them, our discomfort anticipates Emma's eventual reaction to the paintings. This is described shortly after the first chapter, after the pictures are presented in a more formal manner. 'Tra un armadio e l'altro,' we are told, 'erano appesi quadri immensi di scene bibliche. Pitture primitive e monotone di nessun valore. Le persone erano più grandi del vero. Alcune sbiadite, altre fatte nere dal tempo. Ogni mano sembrava avere sei dita, tutti i piedi erano stortati [Between one armoire and another were hung immense paintings of biblical scenes. Primitive and monotonous paintings of no value. The people were larger than in reality. Some faded, others made black by time. Every hand seemed to have six fingers, all of the feet were twisted]' (16). Grotesque, with their colours mottled by time, the paintings become visual metaphors of the monstrous nature of the archetypes that they represent. Passing through the room where they hang,

Emma keeps her eyes fixed ahead, 'come,' we read, 'uno che cammina su un abisso e ha paura delle vertigine [like somebody who walks over an abyss and is afraid of becoming dizzy]' (16).

Before long, the source of Emma's troubled relationship with the paintings is revealed. After discovering a diary in which her parents recounted their sexual activities in minute detail, Emma had apparently learned that the act leading to her own conception was inspired by the violent biblical stories that were presented obliquely in the novel's opening chapter. Standing in front of one of the pictures, Emma relates in an agitated monologue that every evening her father (under the influence, she believes, of the paintings) required her mother to assume the identity of a female biblical character, after which, she continues, 'si mettevano in terra, qui davanti [they lay down on the ground, here in front]' (22), presumably to re-enact the violent sexual acts hinted at in the paintings. In the pages of her parents' journal Emma discovered 'il modo orribile del suo concepimento al quale ... i personaggi dipinti avrebbero presieduto [the horrible means of her conception over which the painted characters would preside]' (35). The knowledge of the connection between the paintings and her own birth led Emma to consider herself 'una emanazione dei quadri misteriosi, una materia in loro potere, non più una vita libera [an emanation of the mysterious paintings, a material in their power, no longer a free life]' (35) – a conviction so powerful that it causes her to interact, through a series of vivid hallucinations, with the characters in the paintings as though they were alive.

Brought to life in this manner, the paintings become a mechanism that permits Masino to evoke her protagonist's inner world. Emma's surreal interaction with the spectral biblical characters, which alternately mock her and sympathize with her reveals her unconscious desire for release from the violent historical figures and events that she believes presided over her birth, and from the stifling and unyielding female archetypes crystallized in the paintings – archetypes that she has internalized to the extreme point of believing them to be integral parts of her biological and spiritual make-up. Through the uncanny animation of biblical characters like Amnon and Tamar and Lot and his daughters, Masino vividly evokes the hold that the history of Judaeo-Christian culture – and its reliance upon female sacrifice in particular – has on her protagonist. Reiterating ideas first presented in 'Ricostruzione,' this dramatic confrontation between modern woman's desire to be self-determining and the immobilizing power of history

or tradition also critiques articulations of the return to order that relied heavily upon the latter, such as Carlo Carrà's 1919 painting *Le figlie di Lot* [The Daughters of Lot].

Like de Chirico, Carrà was involved in the development of *pittura metafisica* and was a founding member of the journal *Valori Plastici*. Originally an active contributor to the Futurist avant-garde movement, during the First World War the Piedmontese painter developed an interest in the masters of the Trecento and Quattrocento – particularly Giotto, Piero della Francesca, and Paolo Uccello – eventually publishing several articles in which he praised the formal and transcendental qualities of their works (*On Classic Ground* 56). His growing effort to recover and build upon the artistic innovations of the Renaissance arose out of a desire to add a spiritual dimension to modern painting: a dimension he felt had been ignored by Futurist aesthetics. Attracted to de Chirico's metaphysical compositions, Carrà collaborated with the painter for several months in the spring of 1917. However, as the art historian Emily Braun has pointed out, his continuing emphasis on the primacy of Italian artistic traditions 'aligned the style of plastic values with a nationalist agenda' – a view that distanced his painting from de Chirico's, whose ironic incorporation of a similar iconography constituted a 'radical break with traditional representation' ('Renaissance and Resuscitations' 39). The two artists continued to work together on *Valori Plastici*, but by 1919 Carrà had moved away from metaphysical iconography in favour of a distinctly archaic, or primitive style (*On Classic Ground* 52).

An important work from Carrà's *Valori Plastici* period, *Le figlie di Lot* (figure 13.1) demonstrates how post-First World War artists engaged in the aestheticization of a biblical past in the name of a return to tradition and order. As its title indicates, the painting's subjects are the daughters of Lot. Believing themselves the sole survivors of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, they were said to have made their father drunk so that they could lay with him and preserve the human race. While they are typically depicted in the act of inebriating their father, Carrà unusually portrays the two young women engaged in a private colloquy.<sup>13</sup> In a scene that seems suspended in time and space, the artist's treatment of the well-known biblical characters evokes the transcendental qualities that he admired most in works of the past. The fact that this painting was reproduced alongside an article Carrà had written on Giotto for *Valori Plastici* is not insignificant, since the fourteenth-century master's influence is particularly noticeable in its



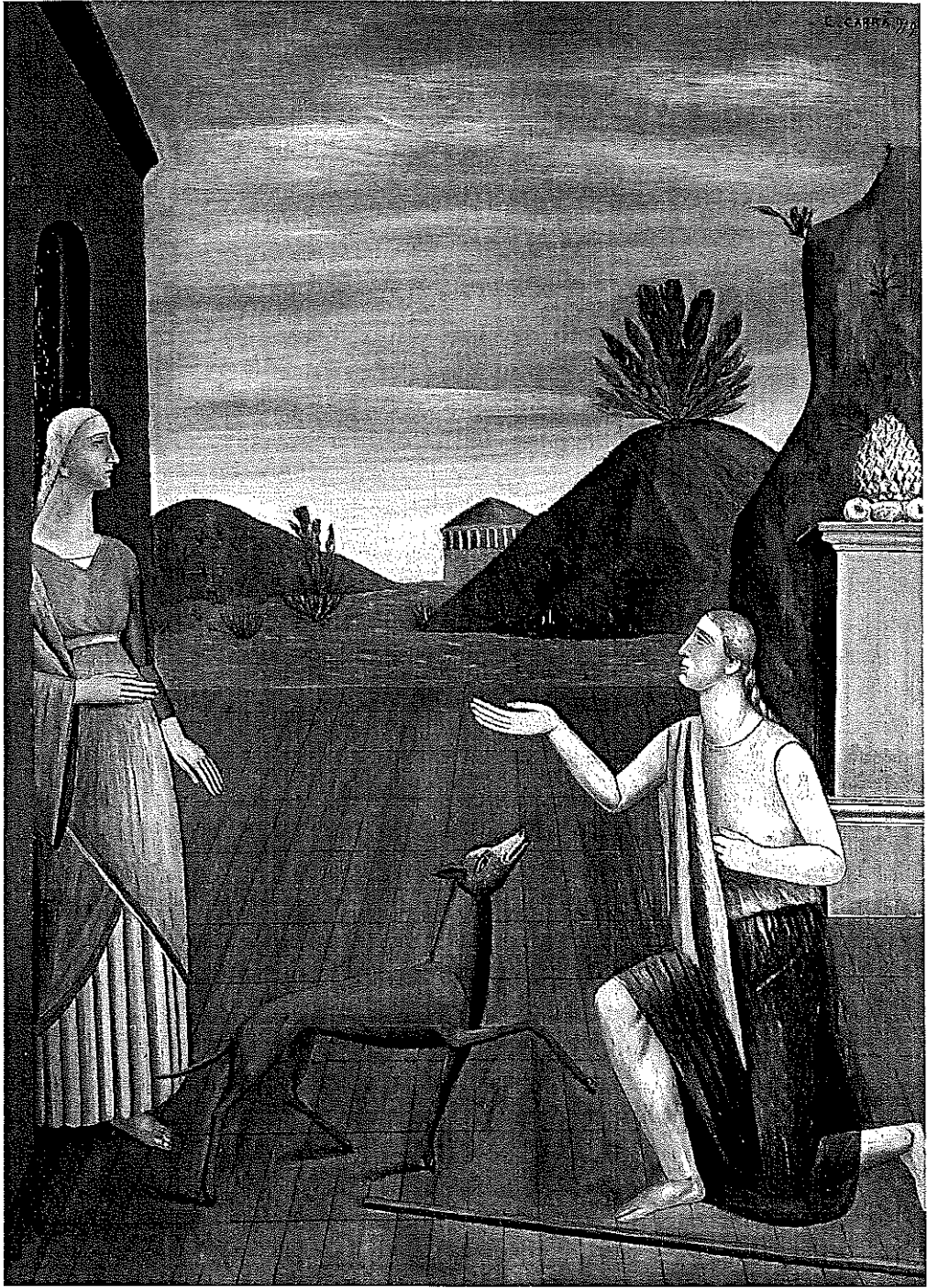


Figure 13.1: Carlo Carrà, *Le figlie di Lot*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 110 x 80. Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

simply defined masses, shallow space, use of light and colour, and stage-like setting. The almost monumental, or heroic quality of Carrà's figures is conveyed by their simple, sculpted forms, the rigidity of their posture and gaze, and even in the ordered folds of their skirts. Their positioning in the extreme foreground of the narrow picture plane intensifies their imposing stature. The unnatural, cerulean blue sky and the suggestion of distant lands just beyond the painting's craggy hills also contribute to its timeless, otherworldly atmosphere. With references to the classical past in the pedestal to the extreme right of the picture plane and in the indistinct rotunda in its background (reminiscent of the one featured in the fifteenth-century *View of an Ideal City*, attributed to Urbino architect Luciano Laurana and painter Piero della Francesca), Carrà also pays homage to his Renaissance predecessors.

The painting's socio-political message, however, is not to be found so much in its formal elements as in its use of symbolism and allegory, which prefigure the charged biblical imagery of *Monte Ignoso* in meaningful ways. Carrà engages his audience at the rhetorical level by means of a serpentine perspective that obliges us to consider several symbols in the work's iconography. Naturally scanning from left to right, the viewer's eye lingers first on the figure of the standing daughter, whose hand rests on her slightly swelling abdomen in a gesture that strongly suggests imminent motherhood. Moving downwards and to the right, the eye falls on the dog, traditionally a symbol of faithfulness, whose presence here serves as a reminder of the responsibility the two women have assumed with their actions (to preserve and continue the species or race), and their devotion to father and family. The posture of the kneeling daughter with her outstretched hand suggests both submission and humility. The pedestal behind her right shoulder bears the pinecone, traditionally a symbol of fertility for people of the Near East, and foretells for her a fate similar to that of her elder sister. These symbols ask the viewer to meditate on the scene, and transform it into an allegory of female obedience, duty, and of sanctified pregnancy.<sup>14</sup> The purity of this allegory is preserved by Carrà's decision to depict the daughters outside of the presence of Lot, seemingly after (or in the case of the younger daughter, possibly just before) the incestuous act has been committed. Unlike customary representations of the story, in which the daughters are depicted as instigators of a forbidden sexual act, Carrà's painting defuses their sexuality by focusing on their maternal roles, visually linking them to the do-

mesticated animal that attends them.

*Le figlie di Lot*, with its aestheticized depiction of a biblical past in which women were obsessively represented as virgins, mothers, or prostitutes, reveals the sort of problem that Masino confronted as a female author writing in the years of Italy's return to order.<sup>15</sup> By 1930, the year in which *Monte Ignoso* was written, the question of female identity was beginning to assume new socio-political dimensions as the Fascist regime formulated social programs and policies that reinforced the mythologizing, essentialist view of womanhood suggested in Carrà's painting.<sup>16</sup> Masino's animated biblical subjects (who bear an eerie resemblance to the primitive and ill-proportioned figures in *Le figlie di Lot*) challenge not only Carrà's image of woman, but also Fascist efforts to define women solely in terms of their maternal and procreative functions. However indirectly and symbolically, *Monte Ignoso* addresses and critiques the patriarchal foundations of Fascist ideology.

The animation of the otherwise two-dimensional biblical women who are the subjects of the novel's paintings allows Masino to explore the ideological and psychological implications of their existence for modern woman – implications that are repressed in Carrà's static treatment. In a process that seems to have been inspired by early-twentieth-century theories of repression, Masino's protagonist internalizes the symbolic value of the figures, and links that internalization to their traumatizing presence at her conception. She then peoples her house with the disturbing figures, again essentially meeting her psychological processes outside herself.<sup>17</sup> This uncanny phenomenon enables Masino to demonstrate the enduring effects of the historical archetypes on Emma (and, by extension, on modern woman), for as Freud had written in 1913: 'distance is of no importance in thinking – since what lies furthest apart both in time and space can without difficulty be comprehended in a single act of consciousness [...] the world of magic has a telepathic disregard for spatial distance and treats past situations as though they were present' (*Totem and Taboo* 106).

Paola Masino was a proponent of *realismo magico*; however, her unique interpretation of the genre ought to be distinguished from Bontempelli's. As this discussion of *Monte Ignoso* has demonstrated, the 'magic' elements of her early works are above all else a reflection of her interest in incorporating emerging theories of the psyche into her exploration of the psychological and socio-political implications of gender. Seen in this light, the uncanny collapse of time and space in

*Monte Ignoso* serves to identify a continuum of Judaeo-Christian gender politics whose relevance to modern female experience could only be demonstrated through the intimate and relentless exploration of its protagonist's inner world.

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to recall an American text – now considered a classic – that preceded Masino's early writings by nearly forty years; a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman entitled 'The Yellow Wallpaper.' Like *Monte Ignoso*, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' explored female suffering, memory, and madness as its protagonist peopled the walls of the room to which she was confined with the figure of a creeping woman seeking to escape imprisonment in a two-dimensional world. Gilman's compelling psychological drama augured the twentieth century's interest in the alienated self, and related this alienation to female oppression by linking its protagonist's condition to the authoritarian and subordinating voice of her husband, who dismissed her anxiety as a 'temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency,' telling her that thinking about her condition would only worsen it (639). Masino's work picks up these threads and interweaves them in a dense literary style that reflects the complicating influences of her time and milieu; Freudian psychoanalysis, *realismo magico*, *arte metafisica*, and Surrealism. In her writing, as in Gilman's, the fantastic is not a means of suggesting the presence of a reassuring external world, it is a means of bringing to light issues of female persecution and oppression, and of relating those issues to the epistemological crisis that played a central role in modern culture.

#### NOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, these and subsequent translations are my own.
- 2 For an overview of Italian culture in the early years of the 'return to order' see Emily Braun's 'Renaissance and Renascences' (21–48).
- 3 For more on Classicism and politics in post-First World War Italy, see Braun's 'Political Rhetoric and Poetic Irony.'
- 4 For more on the relationship between magic realism and *novecentismo* in the visual arts and literature of early-twentieth-century Italy, see Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco's 'Realismo magico' and Paolo Baldacci's 'Il mito del realismo magico (arte e letteratura).'
- 5 The other woman writer whose work appeared in the journal was Amelia Della Pergola (writing under the pen name 'Diotima'), who contributed

two short pieces in the winter of 1926 and spring of 1927. Della Pergola and Bontempelli had been married in 1909 but were subsequently separated.

- 6 Masino discusses *Le tre Marie* in her posthumously published autobiography *Io, Massimo e gli altri*. As noted above, the play was never published, nor does it appear among the letters and works of Masino preserved in the Getty Research Institute's Massimo Bontempelli Papers archive. For this reason I limit my comments on it to that which can be inferred from Masino's mention of it in *Io, Massimo e gli altri*.
- 7 Introduced to Roman theatre by her father, a civil servant with a passion for literature, drama, and music, it is certain that Masino was highly aware of the work of Pirandello, whose radical dismantling of traditional notions of truth and reality had caused a stir both in Italy and abroad. Her initial, brief visit with the playwright in 1924 (described in *Io, Massimo e gli altri* 21–5) was to be the first of many meetings between the two – a fact that was no doubt due in part to Masino's romantic involvement, from 1927 on, with Bontempelli, Pirandello's colleague and partner in the Teatro d'Arte di Roma in 1924 and 1925.
- 8 In his *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, Peter Nicholls presents this notion and its metaphysical consequences as key aspects of modernist writing.
- 9 The tumultuous love story at the heart of 'Ricostruzione' was almost certainly inspired by contemporary events in Masino's own life. The story of Masino's and Bontempelli's relationship, which lasted until Bontempelli's death in 1960, deserves closer attention than I am able to give it here. Briefly, however, Masino's family disapproved of her relationship with the author, who was thirty years her elder and still married to (though separated from) Amelia Della Pergola. Attempting to avoid a scandal, Masino's parents sent their daughter to Paris in the summer of 1929, where she lived for the better part of a year and a half, working at first for the French magazine *La Nouvelle Europe* [The New Europe], and then as a liaison between Italy's Fascist government and French artists and intellectuals. Despite her parents' objections, Masino spent much of her time in Paris with Bontempelli, and in December 1930 was reunited with him permanently in Milan. These events are documented in the correspondence of Masino and Bontempelli, part of the Massimo Bontempelli Papers, 1865–1990, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Accession no. 910147, 910147\*.
- 10 Both Masino and Bontempelli may have been influenced by the work of Edgar Allan Poe; see, for example, Poe's short story, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845).

- 11 Masino's adoption of a plot device that features the unsettling resurrection of a central character may also have originated with Pirandello, who used a similar trope with great success in his one-act play *All'uscita* (1916, republished 1926).
- 12 The dissemination of Freud's works and theories in Italy is the subject of Michel David's study *La psicanalisi nella cultura italiana*. According to David, Freud's introduction to Italian culture was facilitated by a series of articles published by Giovanni Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini in *La Voce* in 1910. Beyond these, Italians interested in learning more about Freudian psychoanalysis had to look to the French for treatments and translations of his ideas, since Italian translations of Freud's texts remained scarce until after 1945 (248).
- 13 The subject of Carrà's painting is likely the moment in which the elder of the two daughters commands her younger sister to sleep with Lot. 'Next day the elder said to the younger, "Last night I lay with my father. Let us ply him with wine again tonight; then you go in and lie with him. So we shall preserve the family through our father." ... In this way both of Lot's daughters came to be pregnant by their father' (Gen. 19:34).
- 14 A different interpretation of *Le figlie di Lot* can be found in Paolo Fossati's *Storie di figure e di immagini*, which offers an extensive formalist reading of the painting, but fails to consider its content and significance from the point of view of ideology or gender.
- 15 For more on the Bible's portrayal of women, see Mieke Bal's *Lethal Love or Anti-covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*.
- 16 Victoria De Grazia has studied extensively the Fascist regime's treatment of women in her *How Fascism Ruled Women*.
- 17 For Freud's early-twentieth-century study of this phenomenon, see *Totem and Taboo*: 'Spirits and demons ... are only projections of man's own emotional impulses. He turns his emotional cathexes into persons, he peoples the world with them and meets his internal mental processes again outside himself ...' (115).

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