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**EXTREME CHILDHOOD:  
CHILDREN, ADULTS, AND COMING-OF-AGE  
IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN NOVEL**

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Extreme Childhood:

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This dissertation examines five contemporary Italian novels that focus on the traumatic and violent coming-of-age of the child protagonists and their dysfunctional relationships with inadequate adults/parents. Deploying a variety of interpretive tools drawn from literary, sociological, psychoanalytical, and philosophical approaches, this study investigates whether—and if so, then in what ways—these narratives may be read collectively as a literary symptom exposing a form of social uneasiness having to do with the concept of coming-of-age. More specifically, it explores the problematic relationship between children and grown-ups, which indirectly touches on the ideas of the future, of legacy, of ethics, indeed of our presence in the world. This hypothesis stems from the fact that these novels are the literary expression of a social context in which the pervasive presence of the media has blurred the line between authenticity and fiction (i.e. between trauma and its mere representation) eradicating the notion of childhood as such. As a result, the traumatic coming-of-age process, traditionally codified by initiation rites organized by elders, is nowadays fragmented into a myriad of apparently unimportant but potentially disturbing event—for instance, finding

specific information online—that do not imply the presence of a grown-up and therefore jeopardize the role and identity of adults as mentors.

Relevant factors and notions, such as the link between fatherhood and the Symbolic Order, the importance of the animal and the role of *cattiveria* in identity formation, the Double, the Other, fairy tales, and the abject, are analyzed and woven together into an essay that aims to provoke a few crucial questions about childhood, adulthood (fatherhood in particular) and coming of age in both novels and in contemporary Italian society.

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And I want to thank my father. Now I know: this dissertation is for you.

Come faceva ad essere così cattivo? Come?  
Chi glielo aveva insegnato?

*Niccolò Ammaniti, Ti prendo e ti porto via*

Quando hai visto, non torni indietro. Sei cresciuto, sai.

*Simona Vinci, Dei bambini non si sa niente*

Perché i figli salvano e tengono vivo il nome dei morti,  
come i sugheri, reggendo la rete,  
preservano il filo di lino dal fondo del mare.

*Eschilo, Coefore*

Ma va là, nebbia!

*Mio padre*



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## Introduction

The idea at the very core of this dissertation came into being a few years ago, when a number of novels focusing on the traumatic and violent coming-of-age of the child protagonists and their dysfunctional relationships with inadequate adults appeared in the literary landscape of contemporary Italian fiction. All the stories were set in suburban or rural areas, all were written in a lowbrow narrative style, and all included explicit descriptions of disturbing and/or violent episodes. Despite these nonspecific similarities, the plots of the novels were obviously very different from one another, and the novels themselves were not explicitly connected in any way. All the same, it was impossible not to notice a common kernel, a sort of dark and disquieting nucleus that defied a clear-cut definition but was nonetheless clearly discernible in all texts. The effect was so uncanny I had the haunting impression that all these books were actually recounting the same story, only in different ways.

This dissertation is borne out of the compelling drive to explore that kernel and revolves around a sustained attempt to grasp its elusive nature through a variety of interpretive tools drawn from literary, sociological, psychoanalytical, and philosophical approaches. At the same time, the very impossibility of pinning it down opens up a series of questions and tentative answers that actually constitute the deeper and truer sense of this research.

The novels examined—which are representative of a wider trend—were all published at the turn of the century, between 1997 and 2006, and were written by three very well-known Italian writers belonging to the same generation. They are, by author: *Ti prendo e ti porto via* (1999), *Io non ho paura* (2001), and *Come Dio comanda* (2006) by Niccolò Ammaniti (b. 1966); *Certi bambini* (2001) by Diego de Silva (b. 1964); and

*Dei bambini non si sa niente* (1997) by Simona Vinci (b. 1970).<sup>1</sup> All these texts have become best sellers in Italy; they have been translated into various languages, and three of them—*Io non ho paura*, *Come Dio comanda*, and *Certi bambini*—have been made into movies.

The common or symbolically comparable elements these novels share can be summarized as follows:

- All the main characters are children or preadolescents: the youngest protagonist (Pietro in *Ti prendo e ti porto via*) is nine, the oldest (Cristiano in *Come Dio comanda*) is thirteen.
- All of the plots are built around a traumatic event, a dysfunctional rite of passage that marks the end of the main characters' childhood and their access to the adult world. Yet unlike traditional rites of passage, organized by elders and centered around a carefully planned traumatic situation specifically aimed at the transmission and acquisition of knowledge and experience, the initiations described in these novels are either led by corrupted adults or completely unsupervised.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alongside the novels examined in this study, other significant texts focusing on a similar topic were published in the same years. Among others, in random order: *Ruggine* (Stefano Massaron, 2005); *Brother and Sister* (Simona Vinci, 2004); *Dio non ama i bambini* (Laura Pariani, 2007); *Come prima delle madri* (Simona Vinci, 2003); *Voglio guardare* (Diego De Silva, 2002); *Il tempo materiale* (Giorgio Vasta, 2008); *Per voce sola* (Susanna Tamaro, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Van Gennep's seminal essay *The Rites of Passage* (in particular the chapter called "Initiation Rites") clearly explains that initiation rites are carefully planned by adults who decide what trials the children must go through in order to become stronger and be accepted in the world of adults. Also Luigi Zoja, while speaking of paternity in his essay *Il gesto di Ettore*, specifically affirms that, in premodern societies, the fathers were responsible for male children's initiation rites: "Fondamentale ruolo paterno, quindi, è quello dell'iniziazione. Era il padre, o il gruppo di padri, che doveva sovrintendere a questo delicatissimo passaggio del figlio maschio nell'età adulta" (262).

- The child protagonist is often the means through which the moral categories of good and evil and, more generally, the standard hierarchy of conventional values are questioned;
- All the novels end either shortly or literally right after the traumatic event; none of them recount what happens to the protagonists after that, with the very partial exception of *Ti prendo e ti porto via*. In particular, in *Certi bambini* and in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (and, to a lesser extent, in *Come Dio comanda*) the story ends leaving the main characters shocked and suspended, as if on the brink of an abyss into which they are about to be swallowed.
- All the novels display a conflictual, dysfunctional relationship between children and adults and/or between children and their social context. In some cases the line separating childhood from adulthood is completely blurred and children behave like adults, with the disastrous consequences described in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* and *Certi bambini*. In other cases the adults are metaphorically blind: they do not take children into consideration and do not show any empathy, or they just cannot see behind the apparently normal surface of everyday routine. At times such blindness is actually literal: in *Io non ho paura*, Michele's father cannot see his son in the dark and mistakenly shoots him. Sometimes the parents do not care about their children or are totally absent. Sometimes the grown-ups are loving and well-meaning, but they are misfits and unbalanced, like Cristiano's father in *Come Dio comanda* (the only novel that investigates the special relationship between father and son). Generally speaking, the adults are inconsistent and contradictory, unable to understand, unable to help, inadequate, or just plain corrupted; they have lost their authority and are no longer able to be proper guides/models in the growing up process. Sometimes the adult world "contaminates" the child; sometimes the child

“saves” the adult(s). In either case there is no room for a gradual, healthy transition between childhood and adulthood. The intermediate phase of adolescence seems to have disappeared. Growing up is not a process; the passage between childhood and adulthood looks more like an abrupt tear that leaves an open wound.

- All the novels are set in degraded, culturally-deprived suburban areas, in a type of social and geographical landscape that is very recognizable to Italian readers. Interestingly enough, as Ellen Nerenberg underlines, the locations of crime and violence are no longer exclusively situated in the south of Italy—as in the best mafia or camorra tradition—but can also be found in the “safe” north (12-13).
- The many socio-cultural references are typical of contemporary Italian pop culture.
- All the novels deploy a peculiar narrative style typical of a new and not easily definable literary trend identified by the Italian scholar Daniele Giglioli as *la scrittura dell'estremo*.

This research investigates if, and in what ways, these narratives may be read as a literary symptom exposing a form of social uneasiness that hinges around the concept of coming-of-age and, more specifically, around the problematic relationships between children and adults—a notion that indirectly touches on the idea of future, of legacy, of ethics, of our presence in the world.

This hypothesis, which has inspired and guided this research from the very start, stems from a host of considerations regarding relevant aspects of the contemporary Italian socio-cultural context, including my personal experience as a secondary school teacher, and is sustained by two main notions: *la scrittura dell'estremo* and the “disappearance of childhood.”

### *La scrittura dell'estremo*

*La scrittura dell'estremo*—hereafter translated as “extreme writing”—is a literary trend/narrative technique identified by the Italian scholar Daniele Giglioli and analyzed in his essay *Senza Trauma* (2011).<sup>3</sup> The notion is crucial to this study not only because it identifies a literary category—however broad, porous, and vaguely defined—in which all of these novels fall but also, and most importantly, because it refers precisely to the obscure kernel at the center of the all narratives examined.

While Giglioli claims that it is not possible to give a clear-cut definition of this writing style, he also indicates its main features on both thematic and formal levels. First of all, he argues that “extreme writing” is the literary attempt to describe events that exceed the limit of representation—that is, traumatic events. As a consequence, this narrative technique is inevitably characterized by a distinct penchant for crude, gruesome descriptions of violent scenes that aim to elicit a sense of disgust in the reader: “Qui si giustifica la sua predilezione per la violenza, per il sangue, per la morte [...] Ovvero per quella modalità di indistinzione tra soggetto ed oggetto che Julia Kristeva ha chiamato ‘abiezione’ [...] Ma qui si comprende anche la ricerca [...] del *disgusto*” (18-19, emphasis in the text). “Extreme writing” is always characterized by a host of specific stylistic features, all of which are easily detectable in the novels discussed in this study: a syncopated narrative rhythm (heavily influenced by the language of TV commercials), frequent new paragraphs, anaphors, repetitions, frequent epanorthosis (the most typical of which are: “anzi,” “cioè,” “voglio dire”), parataxis, nominal sentences, lists, rhetoric questions (such as “Sai qual è il tuo problema?”), and anacolutha. The lexicon is taken primarily from colloquial, oral expressions and is a

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<sup>3</sup> Daniele Giglioli is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Bergamo.



mixture of everyday informal Italian, idiolect, slang, dialect, and dirty words; it is also heavily influenced by contemporary pop culture, especially by music and television (Giglioli 32-35). Another typical feature is the role of the narrator, whose voice is usually preponderant. Even if Giglioli does not insist on this point, it is clear that “extreme writing” is deeply indebted to the “cannibal” literary movement, of which Niccolò Ammaniti is one of the most famous representatives.<sup>4</sup>

Combining literary criticism with a socio/psychoanalytical approach (101), Giglioli argues that the “extreme writing” literary production is a symptom that hides a repressed truth. This truth refers to individuals’ need for authenticity, something which

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<sup>4</sup> “Cannibal” literature appeared in Italy in the nineties, and is a wholly Italian phenomenon that challenges disciplinary borders. Its most significant literary productions were gathered in the collection of horrific short stories *Gioventù Cannibale* (1996), which also included a short story by Ammaniti. According to Daniele Brolli, the editor of the book, the “cannibal” trend is the narrative outcome of a feeling of deep rejection of conventional values on both a social and literary level (viii). In the introduction to the collection of essays *Italian Pulp Fiction*, Stefania Lucamante points out that, while the definition “cannibal writing” comprises an extremely diverse literary landscape, all cannibal tales are characterized by the fact that they recount disturbing stories of unrestrained violence and extreme horror, often set in post-industrial or industrial areas. The cannibal literary production is heavily informed by media on both a thematic and formal level: while the notions of consumerism and commodification of culture are crucial, the language is heavily contaminated by television, cinema, cartoons, music, computer games, and advertisements. In particular, visual media editing techniques (such as quick cutting) are applied to create a new, page-turning narrative rhythm. In one of the essays, Pierpaolo Antonello significantly underlines the influence of TV while speaking of one of the most famous “cannibals,” the Italian writer Aldo Nove: “In his scenario it is the law of commodities and television language that establishes the frame of mind, which, as a devastating virus, makes protagonists recite a monologue made of mass-mediologic garbage [...] People recite a script written by ads and commercials” (52). The lexicon mimetically reproduces the language used by the average Italian in informal conversation and, as such, includes the frequent use of obscenities (Lucamante 20). Marco Berisso underscores “the extreme use of orality in a literary language,” and speaks of a sort of “linguistic neo-verism,” particularly evident in Ammaniti (95). The extremely provocative style, combined with an even more provocative plot, challenge the conventional Italian literary canon in a unique way. In this respect, as Filippo La Porta argues, “cannibal” literature has the “unquestionable merit of [...] contaminating our literary language” (72). It is this contamination that, a few years later, allowed “extreme writing” to appear on the scene of Italian contemporary literature.

seems to be increasingly difficult to experience as it is crushed by the myriad of mediated representations of reality that are part of our everyday lives.<sup>5</sup> The notion of reality—or, rather, its representation—is central to the definition of “extreme writing” and is extensively discussed in Antonio Scurati’s essay *La letteratura dell’inesperienza. Scrivere romanzi al tempo della televisione*, a text extensively quoted by Giglioli. Scurati’s view hinges on the notion of “inexperience,” which is to say, the individual’s perception of mediated events as authentic. This debate about reality and its representation(s) is not new of course—Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, among others, notoriously discussed this concept decades ago—but it is certainly still relevant.<sup>6</sup>

In his study, Scurati explores the relationship between literature and our experience of the world, and, in agreement with the view expressed by Giorgio Agamben in *Infanzia e storia* (and while referring to Walter Benjamin), he reaffirms that only a narrative can give shape—that is, a symbolic form—to our experience: “Il mondo si traduce in esperienza laddove il reale è adeguatamente reso da una narrazione” (41). Scurati argues, however, that this experience-forming process is no longer possible in our contemporary world. The connection has been irreparably severed, and words—narratives—can no longer structure reality:

La letteratura [...] e l’esperienza stanno oggi dinnanzi a noi come le due metà non combacianti di una tessera spezzata e non più ricomponibile. Non si compongono non perché manchi la commensura tra di esse ma perché sono perfettamente identiche. Anzi, la parola esatta è “indifferenziate.” [...] Si elidono, dunque, a vicenda. (9)

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<sup>5</sup> Giglioli quotes Slavoj Žižek to argue that “extreme writing” exposes the flaws of the superficial ideological lie that shapes our perception of reality, both on a personal and a social level: “...la struttura ideologica che struttura la nostra percezione della realtà è minacciata da sintomi che sono ‘il ritorno del rimosso,’ crepe nel tessuto della menzogna ideologica” (Giglioli 103-104).

<sup>6</sup> Debord, Guy. *The Society of Spectacle*, 1967. Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981.

The overlapping of reality (or one's experience of reality) and literature (the narration of reality) is a consequence of what Scurati calls the "absence of the world," that is, the absence of a stable, solid system of reference for our sensorial perceptions, which is the necessary conceptual horizon for any narration that aims to give meaning to things (21). According to Scurati, the "absence of the world," is generated by the "misappropriation of experience" caused by the all-pervasive communication technology that has become an integral part of our daily lives (25-26). This notion is obviously linked to the concept of grand narratives—or rather, their disappearance—introduced by Francoise Lyotard in his landmark essay *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).

Television misappropriates the individuals' experiences in two ways. First, as already mentioned, it mixes personal experiences and their representation in an indistinct, imaginary dimension, making it impossible to structure them. Second, it causes "the disappearance of the world" because the instantaneous, mechanical, spectacular representation of events, shown frantically one after the other on the screen often without any logical connection, has become self-referential.<sup>7</sup> As Baudrillard famously affirms in his landmark essay *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), the mechanism of representation has its own life: one representation refers to the other, and the chain-production of images forms an autonomous constellation that instead of explaining the event becomes the event itself. Rather than explaining reality, therefore, TV *produces* reality in a demonic game of mirrors in which there is no need for an actual reference point—an actual *world*—outside the communication system. This is why literature has lost its power to explain the world, to give it a meaning: there is no way to narrate reality because, in our contemporary society, there is not just *one* reality.

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<sup>7</sup> The speed of television and communication technologies is linked to the Baudelairean concept of shock as discussed in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*.

New communication technologies have put the idea of the world as a stable reference point in question, and what has taken the place of reality is a myriad of *realities* that reflect one in the other in a proliferation of images and news (21).

Other factors, or course, have contributed to the devaluation of the subject's personal experience. The alienating world of modernity, in which an individual's unique identity is belittled, has made people's actual experience seem insignificant, especially when compared to sensational events printed in the newspapers. Monetization has effaced the specific characteristics of objects, to the extent that their "aura," as Benjamin would say, has been lost.<sup>8</sup> Modern science has challenged the reliability of (older) people's personal sensory experience by giving priority to the concept of objective, proven truth. The confinement of violent or disturbing individuals in prisons, asylums, or hospitals has removed these forms of extreme experience from the everyday life of civil communities. And, finally, the persisting myth of the Great War as a "true experience" has made everyday life seem uneventful and flat—despite the fact that this myth has proven flawed, as this traumatic experience could actually not be narrated by those who went through it (43-44).

The notions discussed so far constitute a central aspect of the literary, sociological, and psychoanalytical investigation developed in *Senza Trauma* and give a clear idea of the theoretical and social framework in which "extreme writing" was born.<sup>9</sup> While Giglioli agrees with Scurati in claiming that the problem of our contemporary environment is the misappropriation of experience—that is,

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin affirms that "If we designate as aura the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of a perception, then its analogue in the case of a utilitarian object is the experience which has left traces of the practiced hand (186, emphasis in the text).

<sup>9</sup> In his essay, Giglioli focuses on autofiction and noir as these genres better illustrate the relation between reality and its fictional representation.

“inexperience”—he is very specific in his diagnosis of our society’s malady. In his opinion, the main problem of our culture is that our everyday life is virtually deprived of trauma, as the title of his essay affirms. According to Giglioli, war, pestilence, or similar collective tragedies are absent from our contemporary Western world, in the sense that they do not really affect daily existence. They are merely “inexperienced” through their representation on visual media. More generally, pain and grief are shunned and avoided; our life in our consumeristic society is centered around the constant attempt to exclude anything that might elicit a traumatic experience, while, at the same time, we are subject to the famous, terrible imperative to enjoy: “...le occasioni di trauma sono state respinte ai margini dell’esistenza quotidiana come mai prima nella storia della specie umana [...] La felicità è anzi un dovere” (8).<sup>10</sup> The fact is, this absence of real trauma constitutes a lack that is in itself traumatic. We cannot but feel that something is missing, that the avoidance (or rather, the denial) of pain, suffering and shocking events has left a painful void. This impression is connected to the feeling of “inexperience,” or “unreality,” that both Scurati and Giglioli analyze in their works and with which contemporary Western individuals are so familiar. In Giglioli’s words, the absence of trauma in our everyday life actually exposes a want: “Al vissuto, al centro esatto del vissuto, manca qualcosa di decisivo” (10). In the hopeless attempt to fill this lack, we constantly need to generate the missing phantom trauma through discourse, incessantly creating an imaginary traumatic scenario that hopefully puts us in touch with “reality,” with some form of authenticity: “A un trauma che è tale in quanto non può essere afferrato dal linguaggio, si contrappone un trauma

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<sup>10</sup> Lacan states that “Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego” (Lacan 1975, 3). This imperative is also discussed by Slavoj Žižek in *How to Read Lacan*: “In our allegedly permissive society, this asceticism assumes precisely the form of its opposite, of the generalized injunction ‘Enjoy!’ We are all under the spell of this injunction” (37).

immaginario che necessita di una continua generazione di linguaggio con cui supplire a quell'assenza" (90). As a consequence, language itself *must* be traumatic in order to be perceived as meaningful and true. In other words, as everything seems fake, and the distinction between reality and its representation is blurred, only cruelty can (perhaps) guarantee authenticity, as Giglioli argues: "La crudeltà è garanzia di autenticità" (20). The same concept is also clearly expressed by Slavoj Žižek in his essay *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: "The harshness of the violence as such was perceived and endorsed as a sign of authenticity" (5).

Television is obviously the primary generator of phantom traumas. It shapes our perception of reality according to traumatic parameters and has a deep impact on our language: "La televisione è stata il nostro Vietnam, un bombardamento di immagini che non generano esperienza ma la requisiscono, rendendola impossibile da descrivere senza il ricorso ad immagini che nulla hanno a che fare con l'esperienza quotidiana" (Giglioli 18). And again: "Il punto è che dal trauma immaginario (ovvero dall'immaginario traumatico) attingiamo incessantemente le categorie con cui dar forma ad un'esperienza, la nostra, che in generale di traumatico ha ben poco" (Giglioli 9). Influenced by media representations, our everyday speech deploys the language of trauma to describe everything, as if the only possible way to fill common, everyday reality-deprived events with authentic meaning were through the rhetorical figure of the hyperbola.<sup>11</sup> "Extreme writing" is the literary response to this situation. By using a

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<sup>11</sup> A similar notion is also expressed by Scurati, who argues that death is becoming a taboo subject in mass culture. He states that the imperative to enjoy, typical of capitalism, produces an elated mythology that glorifies youth and beauty and excludes the dimension of the tragic: "La confusione tra reale ed immaginario, la sfocatura tra realtà e finzione, serve, in ultima ipotesi, [...] a liberare l'uomo dall'esperienza della propria mortalità, e ad affrancarlo dalla responsabilità della mortalità altrui" (73). Scurati also underlines the need to create imaginary traumas to counterbalance the fake happiness offered to individuals. This is why our culture is characterized by the proliferation of representations of violence and death that refer to real events but are

language that belongs to the category of trauma and/or by eliciting a feeling of disgust and abjection, it aims at breaking through the “veil of Maya” of representation and reaching a status of authenticity by provoking the same reaction readers would have if they were to actually witness the traumatic scene(s) it represents. In Giglioli’s words, “Il segno aspira allo stesso statuto della cosa;” the language aims at being “real” in reaction to a social context in which nothing is “real” anymore (16, 19). Of course, literature is a form of representation, too, so this goal is a paradox.

These notions are the foundation of “extreme writing,” of which all the novels analyzed are clear examples. And if it is true that the texts examined here reveal the lack of real trauma, then this trauma must in some way refer to the notions of childhood and coming-of-age.

### **The Disappearance of Childhood**

In his study *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982),<sup>12</sup> the American scholar Neil Postman argues that television has eradicated childhood as such. In particular, he claims that childhood is “a social artifact” created by the education system (xi) and defined by literacy (10),<sup>13</sup> and argues that the real divide between childhood and

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“inexperienced” as imaginary: “...il bisogno di fare esperienza della morte, di conoscerla, è sempre soddisfatto dal proliferare di violenze misconosciute, reali ma inesperte come immaginarie” (74).

<sup>12</sup> Postman’s study, first published in 1982, refers to the social context of American towns in those years, but Italy’s technological lag makes it perfectly applicable to the Italian situation in the mid-nineties. In both Europe and the United States, there are many signs that childhood is disappearing: from the precocious onset of puberty in boys and girls in recent years, to the anticipation of the first sexual experiences, to the common practice of presenting twelve- or thirteen-year-old girls as eroticized supermodels, to the adult-look of children’s clothing. The deep crisis in the educational system is a clear symptom that the authority of adults is in doubt. The rate of juvenile delinquency, of course, is another sad and unmistakable indicator. Massimo Recalcati expresses the same concept in *Il complesso di Telemaco* (75).

<sup>13</sup> Childhood was recognized by the Greeks, who despite their ambivalent attitude toward children, invented the idea of school, thereby granting a specific status to very

adulthood is the ability to read: “Thus, in a literate world to be an adult implies having access to cultural secrets codified in unnatural symbols. In a literate world, children must *become* adults. But in a nonliterate world there is no need to distinguish sharply between the child and the adult” (13, emphasis in the text).<sup>14</sup> It was the invention of the printing press that promoted social literacy among the population and created the modern notion of childhood: “The printing press created a new definition of adulthood *based on reading competence*, and correspondingly, a new conception of childhood *based on reading incompetence*. Prior to the coming of that new environment, infancy ended at seven and adulthood began at once” (18, emphasis in the text). By the end of the sixteenth century, the massive use of print had created a new symbolic *milieu* in Europe. Typography was certainly not a neutral vehicle of information: it brought about a new kind of consciousness in which individuality, intellectual rigor, curiosity, and conceptual thinking were key factors. The way of organizing the content of a book influenced the way individuals organized their thoughts; the new practice of silent reading enhanced the idea of individuality; logic and clarity were emphasized, together with a positive attitude toward the authority of information (32). As Postman argues, little by little, as the use of printed materials spread, “Adulthood became a symbolic, not a biological, achievement,” and “European civilization reinvented schools” (36).

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young age. It was also acknowledged by the Romans, who developed a more sophisticated awareness of it and established a connection between childhood and the idea of shame, determining that children needed to be “sheltered from adult secrets, particularly sexual secrets” (6-7). The progression toward the definition of childhood as a specific and delicate phase in an individual’s life ended abruptly in the Middle Ages, when, after the Romans, social literacy disappeared for nearly a thousand years, together with the notions of education and shame (10).

<sup>14</sup> In the Middle Ages, childhood (or infancy) was, as a consequence of illiteracy, more of a concept of age than anything else. It ended at around seven years of age, when children had naturally acquired full command of basic oral language. From that moment on, children shared the same oral culture and speech, the same social sphere, and the same forms of behavior as adults (15).



The first schools were established in Europe's major towns at the end of the fifteenth century. By 1850 childhood was "both a social principle and a social fact" (51), "a description of a level of symbolic achievement" determined by attending school (42).<sup>15</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, literacy had divided childhood and adulthood into two distinct groups. Any group, according to Postman, is largely defined by the exclusivity of information shared by its members, and childhood was based on a specific information hierarchy: "...a particular form of information, exclusively controlled by adults, was made available in stages to children in what was judged to be psychologically assimilable ways" (72). The separation of childhood from adulthood implied the existence of secrets (especially regarding sex and violence) that would be revealed to children in stages (49). Textbooks organized and constructed by adults established what sort of information children could have, at what age. Thus "adults found themselves with unprecedented control over the symbolic environment of the young" (45). A form of control over information was of course also inherent in the actual ability to read, as a certain capacity for decoding and a good knowledge of vocabulary are necessary to understand complex or inappropriate texts.

With the mass diffusion of television, the information hierarchy that created childhood collapses completely. While learning how to read requires self-discipline and

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<sup>15</sup> In 1861 around 75% of the population in Italy was illiterate. By 1900 the percentage had dropped to about 50%. The main steps toward literacy were the Casari Law in 1859, the Coppino Law in 1877, and the Orlando Law in 1904. The Casari Law entrusted local councils with the responsibility of making primary education compulsory for children from six to eight years of age. But few local councils had the money to set up schools, and poor families counted on the labor of their children. The Coppino Law imposed fines for non-compliance with the Casari Law and decreed school compulsory until age nine. This law too, however, was never really enforced.. In 1904, the Orlando Law made education compulsory for children until age twelve and created evening and weekend literacy courses for adults. In the same years, in 1902 to be exact, employing children under twelve in factories was forbidden, allowing childhood to finally be recognized in every field (Marini 18-22).

the capability to decode symbols, watching television—that is, images—does not require any intellectual ability or hermeneutical skills. Television is a quick-paced device: frames come one after the other and require instantaneous pattern recognition, not a delayed analytic decoding of the content. TV is also a present-centered means of communication based on immediate gratification and enjoyment and as such, only elicits esthetic and not rational judgment (113). Above all, television delivers all sorts of information to anybody, regardless of age and condition. It does not keep any secrets. In other words, the new symbolic arena that emerges with the entrance of television in people's daily lives does not need any generational distinction, and it consequently decrees the disappearance of childhood and adulthood as well (78-79). If adulthood is a product of the abilities developed through the acquisition of reading skills (capacity for self-restraint, tolerance for delayed gratification, ability to think conceptually), then the television era has generated the adult-child, “a grown-up whose intellectual and emotional capacities are unrealized and, in particular, not significantly different from those associated with children” (99). In this respect, it is significant that the latest essay by the Italian psychoanalyst Massimo Ammaniti, entitled *La famiglia adolescente* (2015), focuses precisely on the notion that Italian parents tend to behave like adolescents in the attempt to understand their teenage children, an attitude that causes the same generational confusion discussed by Postman: “Ma se i genitori tornano adolescenti, perché i figli dovrebbero diventare adulti?” (Ammaniti 46)<sup>16</sup> One of the main effects of the disappearance of adulthood, of course, is that adults find themselves

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<sup>16</sup> In his essay, Massimo Ammaniti claims that recent studies have discovered that the human brain develops into a new phase at around the age of fifty. As a consequence: “il senso delle possibilità offerte dalla vita, tipico della giovinezza, resta spiccato. Ed ecco che in qualche modo strambo, genitori e figli si trovano a vivere una vita parallela. Diversamente giovani ed adolescenti entrambi” (42). Massimo Ammaniti is Niccolò Ammaniti's father.

“unable to serve as counselor and advisors to the young” (Postman 89), a situation well represented in the novels examined. While television steals individuals’ experience away (as both Scurati and Giglioli argue) rendering them unclear about reality and its interpretation, it also makes their experience seem useless and unimportant, so that children look for information on the media, instead of trusting their elders. In other words, television takes the place of adults as reliable sources of knowledge, dismissing their role as mentors, with the key difference that TV delivers unfiltered information.<sup>17</sup>

According to Postman, the influence of television does not only have an impact on cognitive abilities, it also affects one’s emotional sphere, in particular one’s ability to feel empathy. Constant exposure to the crude scenes of violence and abuse seen on the screen might easily and precociously lead children to develop an attitude of cynicism and indifference, even in dramatic situations (93-95). In other words, the misappropriation of experience discussed above might easily result in the subject’s alienation—or anesthetization—toward pain, grief, and even violence, both inflicted and suffered:

First, it [television] makes it difficult to think about an event, and second, it makes it difficult to *feel* about an event. [...] The point is, of course, that all events on TV come completely devoid of historical continuity or any other context, and in such fragmented and rapid succession that they wash over our minds in an undifferentiated stream. This is television as narcosis, dulling to both sense and sensibility. (104-5, italics mine)

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<sup>17</sup> This is the exact opposite of the psychological mechanism activated by fairy tales, which are structured to give children the information they need in a form that helps them understand and shape their inner and outer world, as Bruno Bettelheim argues in his essay *The Uses of Enchantment*. Fairy tales offer children the basic ethical parameters to guide them in life. Moreover, they are delivered through the mother’s (or father’s) voice, which confirms the child’s sense of safety and enhances the adult’s authority and reliability. Television does not, of course, pay the same attention to what information is given to children and how it is presented.

## **The Socio-cultural Background**

Postman's theory helps analyze specific aspects of Italy's social context. In the nineties there were clear signs that younger generations were perceived as problematic on many levels. While the concern of adults and educators was growing, schools were undergoing a deep crisis that, significantly, is still not over. On the one hand, more and more pupils seemed to have cognitive problems; on the other, children and teenagers seemed to be growing up faster than expected, and most adults involved in education felt that old parameters were no longer valid. Students' behavior became increasingly enigmatic, communication grew more and more difficult, and teachers started to perceive that their authority as mentors was being undermined. The indistinct but palpable feeling of anxiety and insecurity generated by the impression that younger generations appeared to be less and less intelligible and controllable assumed a concrete and official form when, in 1994, the Italian Ministry of Education suddenly required all secondary schools to hire a psychologist to support "difficult" students and, possibly, to help teachers in educating them. Neither specific guidelines nor specific financial resources were given to help schools develop the project, called Progetto C.I.C. (Centro Informazione e Consulenza). In this respect, the Ministry's decision came across as an improvised, superficial response to an emergency situation that could no longer be ignored, rather than a carefully designed strategy. While the C.I.C. Project was a sign that educational authorities had recognized that adolescents had become particularly hard to understand and more fragile, it also sanctioned the fact that the school system needed help regarding communication. An inspired article by the Italian writer and teacher Marco Lodoli, published in the main national newspaper *La Repubblica* in 2002, reveals the teachers' concern and points out the connection between cognitive decline, lack of cultural stimuli, and television culture:

Io sto notando qualcosa di molto più grave, e cioè che gli adolescenti non capiscono più niente. I processi intellettivi più semplici, un' elementare operazione matematica, la comprensione di una favoletta, ma anche il semplice resoconto di un pomeriggio passato con gli amici o della trama di un film, sono diventati compiti sovrumani di fronte ai quali gli adolescenti rimangono a bocca aperta, in silenzio. [...] Gli insegnanti si fanno in quattro, cercano di rendere le lezioni più chiare, più dirette, si disperano e si avviliscono, ma non c' è niente da fare, [...] La cosa più triste è che questo deficit progressivo dell' intelligenza si nota soprattutto nei ragazzi delle classi sociali più povere. [...] non capiscono nemmeno chi sono e cosa stanno facendo, spesso non sanno più incollare una parola all' altra, un pensierino a un altro pensierino. Sono perduti in una demenza progressiva e spaventosa. Crescono rintronati dalla televisione, dalla pubblicità e da miti bugiardi, da una promessa di felicità a buon mercato, da mille sirene che cantano a squarciagola, e accanto a loro non c' è altro che riesca a farsi spazio. E così, poco alla volta, perdono ogni facoltà intellettuale, fino a diventare totalmente ottusi. (Lodoli)

It is only a hypothesis, of course, but it is possible that the behavioral changes that became evident in the nineties were the result of television's evolution into an all-pervasive medium in the eighties, which was then enhanced by the widespread use of personal computers.<sup>18</sup> While this hypothesis requires a more accurate investigation that it is not possible to carry out here, it is a fact that television has become increasingly pervasive since the early eighties<sup>19</sup> and that, in the nineties, younger generations started to have easy access—through internet—to an enormous amount of information that had no need to be filtered and decoded by teachers. While discussing the central role of TV in the disappearance of childhood, Postman puts forward the hypothesis that computers might reestablish the notion of childhood, as individuals must learn a specific language in order to use them (149). In fact, the impact of computers on the relationship between generations in Italy was exactly the opposite: while the majority of adults were still struggling to get familiar with the new communication methods, the younger generations learned more quickly and much better. The effect, of course, was the rise

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<sup>18</sup> According to Paolo Ferri, babies born after 1996 fall into the category of “digital natives” (13).

<sup>19</sup> Umberto Eco defines the years of national television, from 1954 to the 1970s, as the “paleotelevision” era; after that, private networks entered the scene and gave rise to the “neotelevision” era (Nerenberg 36).

of a deep digital divide that is by no means over. The situation was similar to that of many immigrant families in which children learn the new language faster and better than their parents, to the extent of overriding their position as guides, counselors, and mentors. Computers strongly contributed to belittling adults's authority for the simple fact that adults, generally speaking, were not reliable teachers in this field—and they could not relate to the experience of using a computer as children. Moreover, and quite obviously, internet was an apparently much better source of information than any mentor, which gave another blow to the already fragile image of the reliable adult figure. Like print, computers are not neutral ways of transmitting information: their enormous potential was easy to guess right from the beginning, and educators might have feared that the new processors would change our way of obtaining information, the structure of our thought and our human relationships, not to mention, of course, the way we represent and perceive reality. The most sensitive adults probably sensed that childhood as they had known it was disappearing, and felt inadequate in front of a new generation that did not seem to need them and could easily slip out of their control and actually leave them behind.

Outside of the school system, the widespread general crisis that affected the relationship between adults and adolescents (or preadolescents) was acknowledged and analyzed in the impressive number of books written by the pop psychologist Paolo Crepet and published in the same decade in which the novels analyzed came out. Titles like *I figli non crescono più* (2005), *Voi, noi. Sull'indifferenza di giovani e adulti* (2003), *Non siamo capaci di ascoltarli - Riflessioni sull'infanzia e sull'adolescenza* (2001), and *Cuori violenti. Viaggio nella criminalità giovanile* (1995), *I giorni dell'ira – Storie di matricidi* (2002) are quite self-explanatory. Crepet's books, together with the psychologist's frequent interviews on television, are obvious proof that teachers and

parents alike were looking at younger generations with a mixture of preoccupation, impotence, fear, and incomprehension, and reveal a deep feeling of uncertainty on how to deal with this issue. Similar alarm regarding elementary-school children was expressed in popular texts such as Silvia Vegetti Finzi's *I bambini sono cambiati. La psicologia dei bambini dai cinque ai dieci anni* (1998).

In addition to this, a much gloomier sociological aspect contributed to fueling general concern about the younger generations as well as the institution of the family. In the years preceding the publication of the novels examined, a few murders perpetrated by children against parents (or vice versa) had taken place in northern, quiet, well-off Italian villages. The homicides were reported by the media—especially TV—in an extremely detailed and obsessive fashion and had an obvious impact on the public debate and the rise in the level of social anxiety. The most well-known of these crimes happened in Montechia di Crosara (VR), where, in 1991, twenty-year-old Pietro Maso killed his parents to inherit their money, and in Novi Ligure (GE), where, in 2001, two teenagers named Erika and Omar murdered Erika's mother and little brother. At the other end of the spectrum, in 2002, a two-year-old child, Samuel, was killed by his mother in Cogne (AO).<sup>20</sup> The interlaced media representations of these crimes, brilliantly analyzed and discussed by Ellen Nerenberg in her essay *Murder Made in Italy* (2012), turned widespread worry into a form of moral panic that plays a significant role in this study.<sup>21</sup> Nerenberg's analysis also discusses some novels, including *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, *Ti prendo e ti porto via* and *Come Dio comanda*.

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<sup>20</sup> In addition to this, in 1993 and 1995, in Verona and in Crotona respectively, two groups of youngsters threw heavy stones from the overpass onto the highway, randomly killing some people who were riding in their cars below.

<sup>21</sup> Moral panic, as Nerenberg underlines, is a widespread feeling of fear and hostility directed toward a particular social group.

## Extreme Childhood

Starting from the assumption that “extreme writing” is a reaction to the absence of trauma and authenticity characterizing our world (an absence that is in itself traumatic, as Daniele Giglioli affirms), this study focuses on the representation of childhood and adulthood and considers the hypothesis that these novels might be the unconscious literary reaction to the lack of a very specific trauma, the trauma of coming-of-age. In a social environment where childhood as such has disappeared, the traumatic experience of coming-of-age—traditionally codified by initiation rites—is no longer recognized as a crucially significant phase in individuals’ lives. After the “disappearance of childhood,” the traditional initiation is fragmented into a myriad of apparently minor events (finding specific information online, for example) that do not imply the presence of an adult and may instead be very significant and/or traumatic, pushing children into adult territories without guidance or protection. The help or supervision of grown-ups seems to be no longer essential in guiding this crucial transition: in other words, the “disappearance of childhood” makes adulthood disappear, too. This is very destabilizing for adults’ identity and strongly undermines the deepest sense of their very existence. This might be the hidden kernel at the origin of the novels discussed herein.

The project is divided into three chapters.

Chapter one focuses on *Ti prendo e ti porto via* and *Certi bambini*. The two children protagonists are very different from one another (Pietro in *Ti prendo e ti porto via* is shy and kind, while Rosario in *Certi bambini* is violent and aggressive), but, for different reasons, both end up committing a murder. The homicide marks the end of their childhood and a dramatic turning point in their lives. For Pietro, killing the only positive and supportive person in his life (who is also a mother-figure) paradoxically



becomes the only way to escape a dysfunctional world where justice and protection are absent, the way to take care of himself and change his destiny for the better. The murder committed by Rosario, instead, is a perverted initiation rite that allows him to be accepted into the adult world of organized crime and leaves him deeply shattered. What emerges from both novels is the total inadequacy of parental figures and institutions, such as the school system and the police force. Adults are either metaphorically blind or intellectually very limited, unstable, unjust, or just absent. In any case, they are unable to help children in the growing up process: the main characters are left alone in a world where justice is absent, and have to find their own way to survive and enter adulthood, a condition that seems to be characterized by a certain amount of wickedness. As a matter of fact, wickedness and rage are key factors in the development of both Rosario's and Pietro's personalities; in particular, the two novels provide a very provocative insight on conventional moral hierarchies and a thought-provoking perspective on *cattiveria*. This section also analyzes a cruel scene from *Ti prendo e ti porto via* and investigates the symbolic role of the animal in relation to the questions of identity, autobiography, and ethics. From the geographical point of view, the two settings are very different (Rosario lives in the greater Neapolitan area, Pietro in a little village between Lazio and Tuscany), but they are nonetheless equally depressed and degraded, and sadly representative of certain suburban or rural parts of Italy. This is the kind of culturally deprived place in which the real murders and crimes perpetrated by the young have actually happened in recent years. Ellen Nerenberg's informative study *Murder Made in Italy* offers the perfect tools for a brief sociological investigation that focuses on the cultural representation of these tragedies by the media and a brief exploration of the notion of moral panic. Finally, the chapter considers the influence of TV in the representation of Ammaniti's dysfunctional universe.

Through the analysis of Simona Vinci's *Dei Bambini non si sa niente* and Niccolò Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura*, chapter two focuses on the private world of children and on its separation from the universe of adults, to which it is invisible. The notion of seeing, partially discussed in the first chapter, becomes central and is articulated in the opposite concepts of blindness and surveillance, as the key events happen in secret places where the parents' controlling gaze cannot penetrate. The concept of boundaries between childhood and adulthood is absolutely crucial as well: in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* the line is inappropriately trespassed and the consequences are devastating; in *Io non ho paura*, instead, the protagonists' moral integrity and imaginative power protect his childhood purity from adult contamination.

In Vinci's novel, the main characters meet in an abandoned warehouse (*capannone*) in the countryside. This secluded place leaves them free to play and explore their bodies, but these innocent games change when the influence of corrupted adults penetrates into the space through porn magazines that gradually give rise to the wild outpour of violence that kills Greta, the mildest child. Such a dramatic and perverted rite of passage leaves the children broken and traumatized, just like Rosario in *Certi Bambini*. In *Io non ho paura*, instead, the key events take place in the two hiding places where the inhabitants of the tiny village keep Filippo (the child they have kidnapped): the hole and the cave. Michele visits Filippo secretly, when the adults are not around. The hole in the ground is the perfect symbolic place for Michele to meet his double (who is, of course, Filippo) and to face his hidden fears. This is a central step in his identity formation. The hole is the site of ethics and authenticity, the space where true relations are possible, and is paradoxically opposed to Michele's home, the locus of lies, dishonesty and crime. The cave is the location where Michele's actual rite of passage take place: because of the dark, his father does not recognize his son and

mistakenly shoots him in his leg. Michele's initiation is certainly traumatic, but the child manages to preserve his childhood purity (epitomized by the novel's many fairy-tale elements) from the degraded influence of adults, and the story ends with a hint of hope that father and son will reconcile.

Once again, adults are not able to guide and/or protect their children. They are present, but also more ambivalent than in the first chapter, and equally blind. Michele's parents are kidnappers, but loving toward their children; their crime is the result of poverty and of the desire to have a better future, but they obviously choose the wrong strategy to achieve their goal. In Vinci's novel the protagonists' families are not dysfunctional or absent, and there seems to be a fair relationship between family members. Nonetheless, the parents are "blind" and they realize what is happening to their children far too late: in particular, they are powerless in front of the perversity of other adults, who are, alarmingly, much more effective than the parent's love.

The third chapter is different from the others for three main reasons: first, because it only analyzes one novel, *Come Dio comanda*; second, because this novel deals specifically with the father-son relationship, and third, because Rino is the only adult character who really tries hard to help the child protagonist become an adult. The whole chapter focuses on different aspects of fatherhood. Rino is a maladjusted, unemployed skinhead and is quite the opposite of the prototype of the good, traditional father. He is an alcoholic and is obsessed with teaching his son Cristiano to be aggressive and cruel, so that the child can defend himself from abuse. At the same time, though, Rino is honest, has a strong sense of justice, is able to protect his weakest friends, and has been able to build a real relationship with his son. In a dysfunctional social context that closely recalls the degraded environments depicted in the previous novels, the model of fatherhood embodied by Rino seems to be, paradoxically, the only

one possible. Following a Lacanian reading, it can be said that the crisis of paternity is linked to the collapse of the Symbolic Order in favor of a socio-psychological dimension where immediate enjoyment has become a social imperative and has taken the place of desire, and where the authority of the Fathers is no longer recognized. Such a controversial description of fatherhood is perhaps the most obvious representation of the crisis of adulthood.

As already stated, at the turn of the twenty-first century the issue of childhood became a meaningful concern in Italian society. Childhood was gradually identified as problematic and somehow disturbing, and this, in turn, destabilized adults' identity and traditional social roles, values, and standards. While this study explores the literary representation of childhood and adulthood in the selected novels, it may be considered the first step of a broader project, which can be expanded to include other artistic expressions that have symbolically represented childhood in a comparable way. These works belong to the fields of cinema studies—*Io non ho paura*, *Certi bambini*, *Come Dio comanda* are obvious examples—, of visual arts (Maurizio Cattelan, *Charlie don't surf*, 1997 and *Untitled*, 2004), and of contemporary Italian theater (Teatrino Clandestino, *Madre e assassina*, Premio Ubu 2004). On a final note, it is worth noticing that the question of childhood is still at the center of contemporary socio-cultural debate, as the latest novel by Roberto Saviano, about criminal children in Naples, clearly demonstrates (*La paranza dei bambini*, 2016).

## Chapter One

### **Feral Children and Blind Adults. *Ti Prendo e ti porto via* and *Certi bambini***

Niccolò Ammaniti's *Ti prendo e ti porto via* (1999) and Diego De Silva's *Certi bambini* (2001) narrate the story of the disturbing, traumatic coming-of-age of their child protagonists, Pietro (in *Ti prendo e ti porto via*) and Rosario (in *Certi bambini*). The novels have a few obvious similarities: both protagonists' rite of passage from childhood to adulthood requires them to murder an adult; both initiations are preceded by a preliminary test involving the (real or symbolic) killing of a dog; both children live in dysfunctional, abusive, culturally deprived environments in which established moral standards and the categories of good and evil seem to have no value; both Pietro and Rosario have to deal with a huge amount of rage and wickedness coming from the outside world or their inner self (or both); and, finally, both characters are surrounded by corrupted adults who are completely inadequate as mentors and role models. This chapter begins with concise analysis of some meaningful formal aspects of the texts and continues in two parts. The first focuses on the key notion of *cattiveria* and its relation to the coming-of-age process and to adulthood; the second explores the relationship between the novels and their social context, and analyzes specific aspects of the fictional representation of the inadequacy of adults toward children. More specifically, the first part pinpoints and examines distinct psychological and philosophical aspects of the identity formation process: the relation between animals and humans, the dual concept of rage/self-defense versus passivity/suffered abuse (in *Ti prendo e ti porto via*), and the dangers of a too precocious adulthood (in *Certi bambini*). The second part investigates certain forms of contemporary moral panic related to dysfunctional environments, feral children, and corrupt institutions and

explores the fictional depiction of these social fears in the novels; it also analyzes the metaphorical blindness of adults toward children and briefly discusses the concept of reality versus its representation by the media.

Through the analysis of these different aspects, this chapter exposes some of the less obvious reasons contributing to the disturbing impact these novels have on the reader and traces a connection between the stories and their social context. At the same time, it also explores the way in which the texts reflect and simultaneously fabricate the disquieting notions that adults are corrupt and/or totally incapable of guiding children into maturity, and that children are dangerously slipping out of adults' control.

### **Plots and Style**

The main character of *Ti prendo e ti porto via* is Pietro, the younger son of “a brutish, uneducated shepherd and a clinically depressed, overmedicated mother” (Nerenberg 226). Unlike the rest of his family, the twelve-year-old protagonist is shy, intelligent, and sensitive. His mild and gentle disposition verges on passivity and makes him the prime victim of three hooligans from his school class—Pierini, Bacci, and Fiamma—who bully him all the time. The leader of the trio is Pierini, the “bad boy” of the novel who truly hates the protagonist.<sup>22</sup> The pivotal event takes place one winter evening, when the three kids randomly meet Pietro on the street. He is on his way home late for dinner and just wants to be left alone, but the three hooligans insist that he follow them. Pietro knows that they will beat him up if he refuses, so he unwillingly

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<sup>22</sup> Pierini is the antagonist, the villain, and the one who sets the plot in motion. Interestingly enough, Pierini sounds like “Pierino,” the naughty protagonist of many Italian children’s jokes, a sort of “Dennis The Menace.” Ammaniti’s novel, however, is dramatic, and Pierini’s wickedness is no joke. The choice of this very name is a perfect example of one of the many ways Ammaniti manages to play comedy and tragedy against each other.

joins in. As it turns out, they are planning to break into the school and vandalize the gym; Pietro does not want to take part in this raid, but he is not strong enough to stand up to Pierini, so he eventually plays along. Unexpectedly, the janitor notices that something strange is going on and enters the building. Trying to hunt down the intruders, he recognizes Pietro. The next day the child admits that he was not alone and, in the end, the four pupils are suspended for a week.

Pietro does not get any help from his family: his father does not care about him, and his mother is too depressed to look after her son. The only adult who always supports him is Flora, his affectionate Italian teacher. She is the one who understands that Pietro must have been coerced into this delinquent act, so she persuades him to confess and promises to defend him against the other teachers so that the night raid will not have serious consequences. Unfortunately, Flora does not manage to keep her word and at the end of the school year Pietro is the only pupil held back, while all the others are promoted. Pietro's clumsy retribution—perhaps accidentally—causes Flora's death. The murder marks the end of Pietro's childhood and, disturbingly enough, the beginning of his personal development into a healthy adulthood.

The protagonist of De Silva's *Certi bambini* is Rosario. He is slightly younger than Pietro—just eleven—and lives with his elderly grandmother in (or near) Naples. The old woman has Alzheimer's disease, and the child is her primary caregiver. Rosario is enraged, vindictive, and cruel, though he is also capable of generosity and affection, especially toward his grandmother. Instead of going to school he "works" for a sordid local criminal, Casaluce, who hires children to carry out petty crimes. Rosario also helps the young volunteer Santino deliver goods to a Catholic *casa-famiglia*, where he meets Caterina, a seventeen-year old girl with whom he falls in love. When he finds out that Caterina and Santino are lovers, Rosario coldly hires two vicious criminals to

publicly destroy Santino's new bike, deliberately humiliating him in front of Caterina. When Caterina dies in childbirth, Rosario is overwhelmed by pain and rage, and takes revenge on the obstetrician who cared for her by clumsily shooting him in the foot. After doing so, he then tries to ensure his silence by pretending to be part of the Camorra, the infamous Neapolitan criminal organization. This eventually leads him to meet Damiano, the young camorrista who becomes his tutor and hires him to commit his first homicide, after which Rosario will truly be accepted into the adult world of the Camorra.

These different (but equally disturbing) plots are conveyed by means of similar, unconventional, and even challenging narrative devices, such as the deployment of a strongly connoted colloquial language including dialect and vulgar words and graphic descriptions of violent scenes typical of "extreme writing." Both novels also present a non-linear narrative structure, extensive flashbacks, and an unorthodox use of the italic font.

*Ti prendo e ti porto via* is a very good example of the way in which Ammaniti uses the innovative linguistic force and unconventional narrative technique of the "cannibal" movement—of which he was a major exponent—to build a mature, well-rounded narrative work that goes way beyond the typical themes of "cannibal" literature.<sup>23</sup> On a formal level, the novel is particularly complex. The main plot is narrated as a long flashback that starts right after Pietro sees his grades, and is constantly interrupted by a host of satellite episodes and other flashbacks that introduce new characters in a whirling carousel of digressions and side-stories. Moreover,

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<sup>23</sup> It is worthwhile recalling that Ellen Nerenberg has also expressed the idea that Ammaniti's writing cannot be circumscribed into the "cannibal" trend. In her essay *Murder Made in Italy*, she argues that Ammaniti's "short fiction appeared in *Gioventù Cannibale* while his novels sit uncomfortably within the rubric of 'cannibalism'" (137).



Pietro's story runs parallel to that of the aging and pathetic playboy Graziano Biglia, the co-protagonist, so that the reader's attention is constantly shifting from one character to the other.<sup>24</sup> This magmatic structure is rendered through a page-turning narrative rhythm and Ammaniti's typical cinematic style, which seems to mimic an action movie: the author cuts the scene, freeze-frames a character in a crucial moment, unexpectedly moves to another sub-plot, and then suddenly goes back to the previous scene and picks it up where he had truncated it.<sup>25</sup>

Ammaniti deploys all the main characteristics of "extreme writing" discussed in the introduction. His language—consisting of a variety of tones, mixed genres and linguistic registers—is a mixture of standard Italian, slang, idiomatic expressions and obscenities, and often seems to transcribe everyday speech. The syntax is generally simple, while the lexicon is extremely varied and strongly influenced by pop-culture, especially mass media and comics. The novel is studded with references to commercials, to television programs and actors, to popular movie or comic strip heroes, and the author also uses a wide range of specific terms taken from zoology and natural history.<sup>26</sup> The third-person, omniscient narrative technique is characterized by an

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<sup>24</sup> In particular, digressions from the main plot are often graphically encoded: when a chapter is entitled with a word instead of just a number, it usually means it is about a satellite episode.

<sup>25</sup> As Ellen Nerenberg puts it, this sort of cinematic style is not uncommon in contemporary Italian fiction: "Editing techniques proper to visual media clearly inform recent fiction. We can see the relation of the jump cut, quick cutting, and the standard length of a cinematic shot in a mainstream film. We can also relate the more dilettantish notion of zapping, or channel surfing, to the quick pace and brevity of this fiction" (144).

<sup>26</sup> The mixture of these narrative devices creates a texture that is sometimes involving, sometimes estranging, and sometimes puzzling. Take, for example, the italic font. In most cases italics are used to express the characters' inner thoughts, but this is not always so (as will be discussed further on) and the different usage of the same font can be intentionally confusing. The use of flashbacks and the constant disruption of the linear time sequence as well as the unconventional use of italics is also common in *Certi bambini* and more generally in all the novels analyzed in this essay.

extensive use of free indirect speech and an equally frequent—and unconventional—use of italics, together with an almost cyclical use of meta-narrative sentences through which the narrator addresses the reader directly.

While *Ti Prendo e Ti Porto Via* overflows with digressions and satellite episodes, *Certi bambini* only focuses on the life of the main character Rosario, but this does not mean that the plot is uncomplicated. The author plays with the chronological order of the events so that the time sequence is totally disrupted: from a certain moment on, a steady series of flashbacks related to the homicide constantly interrupts the temporal progression of the story, and readers constantly need to reconstruct the fabula in their minds as they move into the plot and acquire new information. From this point of view, both novels require readers to follow the narrative closely to avoid getting lost. In both texts the role of the main narrator is occasionally and unpredictably taken over by another narrating voice, expressed in italics, which has different functions in different contexts and can therefore be quite confusing. In *Ti prendo e ti porto via* the alternative voice usually expresses the characters' inner thoughts, but sometimes it directly addresses the reader instead; in *Certi bambini*, the italic font is generally used to express the "everyman's" point of view, but it can also convey Rosario's memories or thoughts.<sup>27</sup> In both cases, the different usage of the same font can be strategically baffling.

The attitudes of the two main narrating voices in the two novels are very different, but their impact on the reader is similar. De Silva's third person detached, extradiegetic narrator usually describes the events from an external, neutral point of view, relying primarily on an extensive use of indirect free speech. In her article

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<sup>27</sup> Italics are also used in parentheses to report Damiano's words just as they come into Rosario's mind.

“Riflessioni sulle opere di due scrittori italiani contemporanei: Niccolò Ammaniti e Diego De Silva,” Giuliana Adamo affirms that De Silva does not offer many details about his main characters (174). This is certainly true for *Certi bambini*: Rosario’s parents are never mentioned, his family situation is not explored, and the reader is rarely given any insight into the character’s thoughts or information about his past. Even Rosario’s whereabouts are unknown; language is the only matrix of location, and Naples is evoked solely by the dialect used in direct speech and the combination of standard Italian and Italianized dialect (a standard Italian lexicon and a dialect syntactic structure) employed for everything else. The narrator is never ironic or sympathetic; he just stalks Rosario, spying on him with the rigor of a scientist, describing his gestures and thoughts from a removed point of view, as “in a semisoggettiva” (Adamo 176). De Silva’s sheer real-life narrative technique, which is completely different from Ammaniti’s “action-movie” style, emphasizes the narrator’s distance from the characters. This does not imply that the reader is not touched by Rosario’s story: the uninvolved position of the narrating voice has the same sharp, thought-provoking impact as a whistle-blowing documentary, and the events described in *Certi bambini* are actually perceived as extremely disturbing.

On the other end of the spectrum, Ammaniti’s omniscient and involved narrator participates in the characters’ lives exposing their inner thoughts and even making fun of them, like an old friend. This attitude naturally draws in the reader, who feels for the protagonists and is touched by the story. Ammaniti also likes to enhance the impact of the events by playing with irony and contrasts. To achieve his hallmark ironic effect, he typically conveys dramatic contents in a comic style or plays fiction and realism against each other. Sentences such as: “E finalmente eccolo, il nostro eroe, davanti alle porte dello Station Bar” (56) or “il nostro Pietro” (45), obviously elicit the

commonplace Italian expression “i nostri eroi” and bring back memories of cartoon heroes, comics, and adventure novels. This stylistic choice implicitly evokes a sort of heroic imaginary background, but the setting and events depicted in the passage are anything but imaginary or heroic. If anything, Ischiano Scalo is all too verisimilar. The fictional village and the misfit, wondrous inhabitants that Ammaniti describes so well are sadly familiar to the average Italian reader, in the same way that Graziano Biglia is immediately recognizable as the prototype of the pathetic suburban playboy (each *paese* has its own, I guess). Ischiano well represents the desolation and cultural emptiness of certain little Italian suburban or rural *paesi*, where the only meeting place is the main bar, culture is virtually non-existent, and the only thing that really counts is money. As the narrator bluntly argues, in Ischiano there is absolutely nothing to do and nothing ever happens: “La verità era che a Ischiano Scalo non c’era un cazzo da fare” (62). This is the toxic context in which a child like Pietro ends up killing his supportive teacher. Despite the extremely different attitudes of the two narrators toward their characters, then, the involved position of the one can be compared to the aloofness of the other, insofar as both approaches achieve the same thought-provoking result.

The social landscape that De Silva describes in a very realistic, documentary-like style is strongly characterized by the micro and macro criminality that openly permeate everything and, in this respect, it is quite different from Ischiano. Yet Rosario’s whereabouts and Pietro’s social context are equally degraded and culturally deprived, and sadly equally familiar to Italian readers. Unsurprisingly, both places seem to be crowded with unhappy, enraged characters.

## Part One

### Wickedness and Rage. Rosario and Pierini

The notion of *cattiveria* is one of the crucial issues in Ammaniti's novel, and it is a central theme in *Certi bambini*, too. The Italian word comprises a host of notions that cannot really be expressed, in English, through one single word. Therefore, *cattiveria* will be defined, alternatively, as wickedness, aggression, rage, violence, brutality, hate, nastiness, unkindness, viciousness or evil; occasionally, it will be just left in Italian.

The two characters that epitomize *cattiveria* are Rosario and Pierini (one narrator states that “la cattiveria di Pierini sembrava grondare da ogni cosa” [120], while the other affirms that Rosario, after shooting the doctor, “quasi si sorprese di andare così bene in cattiveria” [134]). Both children's personalities are clearly characterized by an overall, persistent, and utterly aggressive attitude and, in both cases, wickedness seems to pay back in terms of social prestige: Rosario's brutality makes him a reliable accomplice for the criminal adults in De Silva's story, while Pierini's cruelty makes him a leader among his peers. On the other side of the spectrum, Pietro does not even understand how to be aggressive. Violence belongs to such an unknown universe that he does not even know how to defend himself and he is bullied by everyone. Needless to say, rage—repressed rage—is a key factor in his personality, too, and the protagonist needs to get in touch with his anger in order to grow up and develop his identity.

*Certi Bambini* begins with the description of a violent scene. Rosario, Vito, and Marcello are trying to steal a Vespa but are caught red-handed by the motorbike's owner and his gang. While Rosario and Marcello manage to escape, Vito is taken and nearly beaten to death. Rosario and Marcello, too scared to go back and help their friend, run away and never mention the episode again, not even to each other. It soon becomes clear to the reader that this initial episode is a flashback, a memory that comes

into Rosario's mind. The passage gives an idea of the degraded environment in which the child lives, while at the same time revealing his familiarity with violence and crime; it also sets the tone of the story and exposes one of the sources of Rosario's anger, which, in this case, does not only stem from a desire to vindicate Vito, but also from a deep, hidden, and unspoken sense of guilt that is poisoning his whole being, a "veleno in corpo" that constantly feeds his thirst for violence (3).

After this brief description, the chapter switches to Rosario's morning routine, only to confirm his enraged disposition.<sup>28</sup> The main character wakes up, opens the window, and looks out onto the old and decaying courtyard. It is the day of his first homicide—the reader will be given this information later—and he is slowly getting ready. While he is casually listening to women yelling at each other from their balconies and to random family fights, he mindlessly fixes his eyes on Assuntina, a fat, middle-aged woman who is sitting at her window shelling peas. After a short while Rosario notices that his gaze is disturbing her and, as soon as he realizes it, he intentionally stares harder with the one clear aim of upsetting her. Rosario does not care about the woman at all, there is no reason for his hostility. What triggers his aggressive reaction is precisely the fact that it is unmotivated: "Rosario tiene con rabbia. Il suo disinteresse verso la signora Assuntina aumenta il suo bisogno di sopraffazione, invece di spingerlo ad abbandonare il desiderio di un male inutile" (6). The duel between Rosario's pugnacious gaze and the woman's timid attitude does not last long. The powerless Assuntina (whose name recalls the Madonna, hence underlining her innocence) is so embarrassed by Rosario's hostile stare that she does not dare to look back at him and finally moves sadly away from the window into the apartment, defeated. Rosario

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<sup>28</sup> The narration seems to switch back to the present, but it does not actually do so. Even the passage describing Rosario's morning routine is a flashback. This will become clear later on.

acknowledges his victory and is nearly overwhelmed by the feeling of empowerment and the perverse pleasure derived from being evil for no reason: “quasi viene meno dalla soddisfazione” (6). The pointless suffering (“un male inutile”) that Rosario inflicts on Assuntina is described without further comment, without questions or explanations, but the episode—together with the initial flashback—is very effective in introducing the character and in revealing the enormous amount of rage that Rosario harbors inside. Rage is a constant trait of Rosario’s personality, as the narrator openly acknowledges (12, 90, 110). In this specific case, however, the protagonist’s cruelty is clearly triggered by the weakness and passivity of his victim, by her inability to defend herself. A similar perverse mechanism is examined in a brief but striking episode in Ammaniti’s novel.

The narrator of *Ti prendo e ti porto via* clearly states that Federico Pierini is the most wicked boy of Ischiano Scalo: “Federico Pierini era il ragazzo più cattivo della zona” (74). Pierini has a crush on Gloria, Pietro’s best friend, but the real reason he hates the protagonist is because he can’t stand his passive attitude. To be more precise, Pietro’s passivity actually triggers Pierini’s desire to be violent and hurt him: “[Pietro] Gli faceva venire delle strane voglie. Voglie violente. Sì, gli veniva voglia di fargli del male” (86). This psychological mechanism recalls the dynamics between Rosario and Assuntina, whose passivity sets off the child’s aggression. In particular, Pierini cannot stand Pietro’s reproachful Jesus-like eyes, “...quegli occhi da cucciolo sfortunato, da Gesù di Nazareth, occhi odiosi che ti rimproverano” (90), and he is madly enraged by Pietro’s silent, passive manner even when he is beaten up. He wants to hit Pietro until he begs for mercy, just like the rest of his victims (91). The wicked boy’s cruel behavior is the focus of a powerful “splatter” episode that deserves a brief investigation. In this case, Pierini’s victim is a turtle whose eyes remind him of Pietro’s.

When he was a child, Pierini found a turtle in the family's vegetable garden. He picked it up, took it to his father's work table in the garage, clamped it into a wood vice, then grabbed a hammer and hit its shell until it broke. A long crack opened up, and reddish organic matter leaked out, but the turtle did not show any visible reaction to the wound: it just kept silently wiggling its head and limbs, exactly as it did before the blow. Pierini searched the turtle's impassible eyes, looking for some sort of reaction to the violence and pain he was inflicting, but he detected nothing:

Pierini si era avvicinato e le aveva cercato qualcosa negli occhi. Ma non ci aveva trovato niente. Niente. Né dolore, né stupore, né odio.

Niente di niente.

Due palline nere e cretine. (91)

Infuriated by the turtle's lack of reaction, he hit the creature again and again, in a frenzy, until he was too exhausted to continue. The poor animal had turned into a "jigsaw puzzle of bones dripping blood" (Ammaniti 2006, 84), but nothing had changed in its eyes: "La tartaruga giaceva con il carapace trasformato in un puzzle di ossa che grondava sangue, ma gli occhi erano gli stessi. Fissi. Idiotti. Senza segreti" (91). At that point Pierini put the animal on the ground, and when the bleeding creature painfully dragged itself away, the kid started screaming out loud: "...quella aveva preso a camminare lasciandosi dietro una striscia di sangue e lui aveva preso ad urlare" (91). Pierini's prolonged scream (the expression "aveva preso a" implies a certain duration of the action) is perhaps even more disturbing than the splatter scene described before. The scene clearly recalls Ammaniti's "cannibal" origin, while the word *cretini*, intentionally lowers and trivializes the symbolic dramatic import of the passage and reveals Pierini's pointless brutality. Needless to say, the passage is another obvious example of "extreme writing."



### **Animals and Human Identity. The Animal That Therefore I Am**

Pierini's creepy scream turns a crude—but still plausible—episode of childish violence into a more opaque event that can be better investigated by analyzing the interconnection between human identity and animality, and the way in which the latter notion reverberates on the former. Jacques Derrida's landmark essay *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006) offers an interesting perspective in this respect.

Derrida's study is inspired by an apparently insignificant daily routine that takes place every morning, when the family cat follows the philosopher into the bathroom and looks at him while he is naked. Derrida realizes that every time this happens, he feels a weird, inexplicable sense of shame about his nudity while simultaneously being ashamed of being ashamed. Puzzled by his own reaction, Derrida explores this “primal scene,” as he reluctantly calls it (11). He examines the intellectual, psychological, and emotional process that is set in motion when he looks at himself while being looked at by the cat—that is, when he sees himself through the cat's eyes—and underscores the fundamental role played by the animal, the “absolute other,” in the construction of human identity (11).

In the first part of his essay, Derrida acknowledges that humans are the only living beings who are conscious of their nakedness and ashamed of their nudity. From this point of view, he argues that “clothing would be proper to man, one of the ‘properties’ of man”—that is, one of the defining qualities that differentiates humans from animals, just like speech, reason, the *logos*, burial and so on (5). On the contrary, animals are never naked, precisely because they are always naked without knowing it; in other words, there is no nudity in nature. Therefore, the awareness of one's nudity—and the shame that accompanies it—is a distinctive human trait; the story of Adam and Eve is an obvious reference point, let alone the connection it traces between awareness

of nudity, guilt, and rational knowledge. But why should one be ashamed of his/her nudity (“ashamed of being as naked as a beast”) when seen by a creature that is supposed to have no awareness of such a concept? (4) How is it possible that an animal—a cat—affects a human being’s perception of self so deeply? Maybe what is at stake, then, is the conceptual border that separates animal and man, as Derrida’s question provocatively suggests: “Before the cat that looks at me naked, would I be ashamed *like* a beast that no longer has the sense of its nudity? Or, on the contrary, *like* a man who retains the sense of his nudity?” (5, emphasis in the text)

This question presupposes a complexity inherent to the traditionally distinct and hierarchically determined positions of humans and animals respectively, which have never really been questioned in philosophical terms, as Derrida states. In this respect, the notion of gaze is crucial in imposing the rational superiority of man toward animals: “Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Levinas and Lacan [...] never evoke the possibility of being looked at by the animal that they, for their part, observe” (90). By regarding the cat as a *subject* that is *looking* at him (instead of an *object* that is *looked at*) and by wondering what the cat *thinks*, Derrida opposes the tradition and implicitly questions the ontological distinction that, from Descartes on, has separated human beings from every other living species on the basis of the human “propers” (reason, language, *logos*, consciousness, or moral awareness), which animals are not supposed to possess. This concept is clearly stated by the Belgian scholar Nathan Van Camp in his article “Between the Species. Negotiating the Anthropological Limit: Derrida, Stiegler, and the Question of the Animal,” in which he affirms that “What for Derrida secretly unites Descartes, Kant, Levinas, Lacan and Heidegger is that these thinkers simply oppose the *Animal* to the *Human* by denying all animals certain qualities that are supposedly only proper to man” (58). Of course, Derrida does not deny the difference between humans

and animals, but he does criticize the idea that such difference is a “unilinear and indivisible line having two edges, Man and Animal in general.” Instead, he claims that “this abyssal rupture has a multiple and heterogeneous border,” let alone the fact that there is no such thing as “The Animal” in general (31). By reevaluating the animal, Derrida condemns the anthropocentrism and the logocentrism at the basis of Western philosophical tradition, according to which human beings occupy a privileged position in comparison to other creatures, and human life is more precious than animal life.<sup>29</sup> Above all, Derrida sharply condemns the relegation of animals outside the ethical circuit that every philosopher—even Levinas—has perpetuated as a logical consequence of this distinction. While he identifies the animal as the “more radically other [...] than the other in whom I recognize my brother,” Derrida also argues that it is precisely this “radical otherness” that specifically calls for the ethical responsibility of men toward animal life (107).

In his essay *About Looking* (1980), the English scholar John Berger affirms that animals are simultaneously very different from, and very similar to, human beings. In his words, they are “both like and unlike” man and therefore occupy an absolutely unique position in relation to us (4). According to Berger, animals are unlike man, but they look at man in the same way as man looks at his surroundings—that is, with incomprehension. Therefore, humans “recognize” animals’ gaze (even if it comes from a different species); at the same time, only humans, among all species, are aware of themselves returning the gaze (5). Because of the peculiar like-and-unlike position of animals, their gaze seems to have the exclusive power to force humans to question their proprieties and their sense of self as human beings: “The parallelism of their

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<sup>29</sup> Logocentrism is clearly defined by Van Camp as “Western philosophy’s assumption that there is a foundational principle of being and that this principle can be grasped through reason and discourse” (60).

similar/dissimilar lives allowed animals to provoke some of the first questions and offers answers.” (7). As a consequence, the presence of animals is imperative to the construction of human identity, to the extent that Derrida wonders: “Who am I therefore? Who is it that I am (following)? Whom should this be asked of if not of the other? And perhaps of the cat itself?” (5-6).<sup>30</sup>

According to Derrida, the position animals occupy in relation to humans is not only unique, it is also a position of priority. Animals appeared in the world before men, who, therefore, *follow* them: “man is in both sense of the word *after* the animal” (17-18). Thus, the speculative concept of “humans alone” (which is to say, without animals around them) is simply nonsense, since there has never been such a thing. As Derrida suggests that Heidegger’s “being-in-the world” is tantamount to “being-with-the animal” (“Is being-with-the-animal an essential structure of *Dasein*?” [80]), he also hints that the preexistence of animals on earth makes the relationship with the animal “other” as crucial to the definition of self and to autobiography as—and possibly even more than—the relationship with the human “other”: “Wherever some autobiographical play is being enacted there has to be a psyche, a mirror that reflects me naked from head to toe [...] But cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror?” (51). Their preexistence also gives animals a privileged point of view on human beings and the power of activating human thinking:

And from the advantage of this being-there-before-me [...] [the animal] can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will ever give me more food for thinking [...] than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat. (11)

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<sup>30</sup> Also: “I often ask myself, just to see, who I am—and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment” (Derrida 3).

Finally, Derrida also suggests that the presence of the animal is also central to the process of philosophical investigation: “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there” (29).

### **Wickedness, the Animal, and Identity. Pierini, or “The Turtle That Therefore He Is”**

This intriguing theoretical framework can help unveil the less obvious meaning of the turtle passage in *Ti prendo e ti porto via*. It also makes it possible to affirm that the turtle’s passivity enrages and scares Pierini because it questions not only his violent behavior but also, and most importantly, his identity.

At this point in the novel, it is clear that Pierini’s mode of relating to others is through violence and abuse. He needs to be recognized as the strongest; he needs to assert his power to feel that his perception of himself is solid and that his position in the world is established. He needs to read the pain in the turtle’s eyes, in the eyes of that “radical other” who, more than anything else, is the crucial mirror through which one’s identity is unconsciously questioned, formed, and perceived. The turtle’s blank eyes enrage Pierini for two reasons: first, because they do not respond to his violence, revealing the uselessness and brutality of his attack; secondly, and most importantly, because without a reaction to his cruelty, there is no acknowledgement of his existence. What Pierini is seeking in the turtle’s eyes is an image of himself that can confirm his identity. But the turtle’s eyes—like Derrida’s cat—are a mirror that *does not* reflect the image he needs to see. That is why Pierini becomes more and more violent, hoping to provoke and to see a reaction in the animal’s eyes. But he sees nothing. Meaningfully enough, the word *niente* is repeated three times, as this unbearable *niente*—a negation

of the child's identity—is the underlying cause of Pierini's paroxysm of violence and his creepy scream (91).

On a fictional level, it is important to remember that the “radical otherness” of the turtle is symbolically matched by the extreme “otherness” of Pietro, who is described by Pierini as “una specie di ET del cazzo” (91). As the eyes of the turtle resemble Pietro's Jesus-like eyes, they actually turn out to be the third component of a metonymical chain that links the turtle to Pietro and to Jesus, so that the animal's gaze, just like Pietro's, symbolizes not only passivity, but also dignity, and inflicted injustice. This implies that Pietro's eyes, too, actually question Pierini's power and circuitously jeopardize his sense of identity. This is why Pierini hates Pietro so much.<sup>31</sup>

A couple of further considerations are needed here. Beyond reevaluating the animal on the ethical level, Derrida also recognizes a mysterious and nearly mystic quality in the gaze of beasts. Being addressed by the bottomless, “uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret” gaze of the cat/animal gives the French philosopher a feeling of vertigo, as if he were being addressed by some kind of god—and it is not by chance that he uses the word “divinanimality” (132). Once again, a crucial aspect of human existence and identity—finitude—is defined through and by the gaze of an animal: “As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human” (12). John Berger is probably referring to a similar concept when he writes:

The animal scrutinizes him [man] across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. [...] The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of cave, mountains, seas, are

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<sup>31</sup> Going back to *Certi bambini*, it is interesting to note that Assuntina does not dare to look into Rosario's eyes and shows her submission through her behavior. This boosts Rosario's ego because with her he is able to achieve what Pierini never does with Pietro: an acknowledgment of his supremacy and, circuitously, of his idea of (him)self.

specifically addressed to man. [...] Animal interceded between man and their origin because they were both like and unlike man. Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged *there* and *here*. Likewise they were mortal and immortal. (5)

Significantly, in the novel, Pierini looks into the turtle's eyes and determines that they have no secrets: "Fissi. Idioti. Senza segreti" (91). Following the line of thought just traced, it can be argued that Pierini's cruelty toward the turtle makes it impossible for him to form a healthy sense of self, as previously mentioned, and to discern the precious secrets that animals keep in custody for men. These two things, of course, are deeply connected: the void that Pierini perceives jeopardizes at once his identity and the symbolic link with his human-divine origins embodied by the animal. The fact that Ammaniti chooses a turtle for this episode is particularly interesting, as reptiles are the animals to which human beings usually feel least connected. Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher who theorizes everybody's ethical responsibility toward "the Other," also chooses a reptile to admit, *de facto*, the exclusion of animals from the ethical circuit, as Derrida polemically points out. When provocatively questioned if animals have a face, Levinas answers: "I don't know if a snake has a face" (Derrida 108). In other words, "the Other," for Levinas, is exclusively a human being, and the face and the gaze that, in his ethical-philosophical view, inevitably and always express the imperative "Thou shall not kill," are solely human. Following this thread, and keeping in mind that Pierini's blind violence is directed against a reptile (the most "radical other" among animals), it seems legitimate to assume that the passage would elicit more pity and compassion from the reader if Pierini had been tormenting a dog or a cat. Being directed toward a turtle, the cruelty of Pierini's action stands out in its total, absurd "purity," and the feeling that is elicited is not so much empathy and compassion as mere disgust.

The passage is also linked to the Kristevan notion of the abject, evoked by blood, the breaking of skin and of borders, the pouring out of the body's insides. The abject is the monstrously fascinating place where borders crash, where inside and outside uncannily mix, and where meaning collapses. It is "the jettisoned object," the revolting matter one has to expel to form his/her identity, but the same matter from which one can never really separate themselves. This is why the abject is haunting, it is contaminating. As Kristeva puts it: "The 'unconscious' contents remain here *excluded* but in strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive *position* to be established" (7, emphasis in the text). If the turtle—in its disgusting representation as a jigsaw of bones and blood—symbolizes the abject, it also represents an obscure side of Pierini's personality, an unconscious "content" that haunts him, and one from which he cannot really escape, even if he tries. Hence the scream. In this respect, the turtle does indeed harbor a secret for the child. But the animal's eyes are impenetrable, and the turtle is mute.<sup>32</sup> There is no access to the unconscious content

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<sup>32</sup> In his essay *Unclaimed Experiences*, Kathy Caruth examines Freud's considerations on Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Tancredi, the hero of Tasso's poem, unknowingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel, as she is wearing the armor of an enemy knight and he does not recognize her. Later on, Tancredi is lost in an enchanted forest and hits a tree with his sword. The tree bleeds, and Clorinda's voice comes out, telling him that he has wounded her once again—and once again unknowingly. Freud uses this literary passage as an example of repetition compulsion, "the unwitting reenactment of a traumatic event that one can not simply leave behind" (Caruth 1996, 2). Caruth draws attention to the voice that comes out of the tree, the "sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound" (2). According to Caruth, the voice borne out of the reenactment—that is, the repetition—of a traumatic experience, as sorrowful and painful as it can be, is the only access to the hidden trauma, to "a truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth 1996, 4). Through the voice, therefore, the individual can bring the trauma to consciousness and become free from its "possession." From this perspective, once again, Ammaniti's choice of the turtle is not incidental. If the turtle symbolizes an unconscious, traumatic content, then the fact that it is mute means that for Pierini—a violent human being—there is no access to the hidden and painful content it represents. Pierini screams because he can't find his image reflected in the turtles'



embodied by the reptile. Pierini's code of violence (which is man's code of violence, as it is specifically male) can certainly break a shell, but it only creates a fracture and does not really produce any opening, any communication channel. Quite the contrary. The code of violence bars any possible communication between man and animal, between conscious mind and unconscious contents, between man and his (sacred) origins.

On a final note, there is an intriguing parallel between the turtle episode in *Ti prendo e ti porto via* and the passage describing Rosario's first homicide in *Certi bambini*. When Rosario shoots the man in the tunnel, the wounded, powerless victim falls onto the floor. Before dying, the man stares at the child with a dignity that the narrator defines "frightening." The man's gaze triggers Rosario's rage: "L'uomo non smette di fissarlo, lo guarda con una spaventosa dignità. Rosario reagisce con rabbia. Vafangulovafangulo, ringhia. Spara ancora, due volte" (35). Rosario, like Pierini, falls into a paroxysm of rage after looking into the eyes of his helpless victims. While Assuntina does not dare look back at Rosario and just retires, confirming the child's power over her, the eyes of the dying man enrage Rosario because they share the same non-judgmental dignity as the turtle's, which reveals the overwhelming absurdity of taking someone's life away and uncovers the meaningless void hidden behind (and by) Rosario's aggression.

Rage is Rosario's way of protecting himself from feeling emotional pain. He is a vulnerable, narcissistic child: he needs love, he needs the full attention of others and is hurt if he does not have it. When he allows himself to have feelings for someone he admires—as he does with Santino and Caterina—he often feels inadequate and hurt

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eyes and because his violence does not allow him to access a mystery that is deeply involved with his human nature. His scream is a scream of solitude and fear.

because he is not reciprocated as he expects (94, 103, 119, 140). In other words, affection exposes him to suffering, whereas anger or aloofness make him more secure and safer in his interaction with the world. Rosario feels weakened every time he feels love for Caterina; his own vulnerability scares him, and he prefers being enraged, or just detached. But repressed suffering does not simply disappear (as *Ti prendo and ti porto via* demonstrates) and Rosario's emotionally distant attitude shows its flimsy nature when Rosario learns that Caterina has died. He initially reacts with cold indifference to the news (– E' morta Caterina, – diceva don Alfonso. [...] Rosario non sentì niente), but after a short while his grief bursts out in the form of a violent and unstoppable epileptic crisis that shakes his whole body: “Si stese a terra e cominciò a sbattere. Le mani, la testa, i piedi. Si ribellavano tutti insieme e ognuno per i fatti suoi” (134). In other words, Rosario has repressed his pain in the unconscious, but his body reveals his trauma and the symbolic fragmentation caused by it. As an aside, both Pierini (*Ti prendo*) and Mirco (*Dei bambini*) feel weakened as well by their respective feelings for Gloria and Martina, and both react by stiffening up and/or becoming aggressive.

### **Wickedness, the Animal, and Coming-of-Age. Killing a Dog**

The symbolic importance of the animal in the construction of specific—and in this case perverse—aspects of human identity is established in both novels through a significant symmetry, since both Pietro and Rosario must prove they are ready to kill a dog before they actually commit the murder that marks their respective coming of age and their passage into adulthood. Neither animal gazes nor symbolic identity-mirrors are involved, but violence remains a central aspect of the identity-formation process.

In the episode narrated in *Certi Bambini*, Rosario's mentor Damiano takes Rosario for a ride in his sports car. When the child gets into the vehicle, he is surprised to see a friendly, fluffy dog in the back seat: he assumes it is Damiano's pet and he likes it straight away. Damiano does not give any explanation and drives into a huge, deserted storehouse; while the young man and the child walk casually around, the dog runs here and there, playing happily with them. Without any warning, Damiano pulls out his gun and shoots the poor animal in the leg. While the stunned dog painfully tries to escape, Damiano hands the weapon to an emotionally paralyzed Rosario so he can "finish the job." Rosario is utterly shocked, but the narrator makes it clear that he does what he has been asked to do (72).

A symbolically equivalent situation is described in *Ti prendo e ti porto via*. Pietro's father wants to shoot Zagor, the family dog that has the bad habit of killing farm animals. Pietro loves the dog and implores his father to spare it. His father agrees on condition that Pietro makes sure the animal is tied up securely every night. He also warns that, should Zagor stray around and kill again, it will be Pietro's responsibility to slay it. Pietro is horrified at the thought that he might actually have to shoot his beloved dog, but nonetheless accepts the pact and seals his promise with what Ammaniti calls *an adult yes*, that is: "[un] sì deciso, da adulto" (139). Unlike Rosario, Pietro has no need to keep the promise. But the symbolic implication of his "yes" is unquestionable: the sign of adulthood is the ability/courage to kill, and killing a friendly animal seems to be an essential part of the initiation rite into adulthood—a condition that does not seem to allow room for kindness. It also seems that evil is contagious, and hurting someone has a sort of domino effect. Graziano hurts the generous and kind Flora, who is pregnant and falls into depression. As a consequence, she does not help

Pietro at school and hurts him, and Pietro, in turn, takes revenge and eventually kills her.

These episodes show the central role played by the animal in the coming-of-age process and the relationship between violence and adulthood. While Rosario's "dog-test" proves to Damiano that he is ready to become a killer and a recognized member of the Camorra, Pietro's promise to kill Zagor foreshadows the unexpected manslaughter of Flora—his personal, perverse rite of passage.

### **Pietro's Coming of (R)age. From Passivity to Aggression**

Pietro could not be more different from Pierini and Rosario. But he is also different from his other peers, too. His isolation is evident from the very beginning of the novel, when the narrator describes him sitting outside the school building, waiting for the finals grades to be posted. He is with his best and only friend, his classmate Gloria Celani, a pretty, upper-class little girl, and he is very worried. In his gut he knows that something has gone wrong. When he finds out that he has been held back, while the others—including Pierini—have been promoted, Pietro is so upset he literally faints. When he reopens his eyes, he feels alone, separated from everybody. The description is a perfect metaphor of Pietro's dejected psychological condition: "si rende conto che [...] lui là in mezzo è il giullare, la pecora nera [...] e che anche Gloria è dall'altra parte, insieme a tutti gli altri" (14). Pietro's emotional and spatial separation is further noted at the beginning of the long flashback that actually constitutes the novel, at the point when the narrator identifies him as the protagonist of the story and introduces him to the reader. The passage—which is actually an entire chapter—starts with an aerial view of Ischiano Scalo and seems like it comes out of an adventure book: "Un viaggiatore armato di binocolo che si trovasse a bordo di una mongolfiera potrebbe

vedere meglio di chiunque altro lo scenario della nostra storia” (40). The focus gradually zooms in on Pietro, who is quietly reading a book in a secluded schoolyard corner while everybody else is playing basketball, and finally closes with a meta-narrative explanatory sentence: “Quello è Pietro Moroni, il vero protagonista di questa storia” (43). The statement works just like a voice-over, enhancing the cinematic quality of the narrative and underlining the presence of the omniscient narrator/director who is presenting a story to the reader/spectator. Above all, though, it underscores Pietro’s distance from all the other boys.

The main reason Pietro is different from the others is, of course, his mild and sensitive personality. Pietro is sweet and quiet, he loves school, books, and animals, especially insects and reptiles (turtles included). He is shy and unable to say no, which is why he is often mistreated and abused and why he participates in the school raid organized by Pierini. He is very aware that, in order to be considered “a man” he has to be aggressive, but he hates the very idea of violence: “Perché, alla fine, amici e nemici lo accusavano di farsela sotto? [...] Perché per essere considerato un *uomo* devi sempre fare l’ultima cosa che ti va di fare al mondo?” (358, emphasis mine) Even if he is aware that the only way to defend himself from people’s cruelty is to be brutal in turn, he cannot push himself to be aggressive toward anyone. He actually looks at people’s wickedness in awe and wonders—with a mixture of fear, admiration, and envy—what sort of courage, what mysterious knowledge enables Pierini to be so wicked, always allowing him to find the cruelest way to scare people and to coerce them into doing things they would never otherwise do: “Pietro si domandò se anche lui un giorno sarebbe stato capace di diventare come Pierini. Di spingere a terra qualcuno con tutta quella cattiveria” (100). And again: “Come poteva essere così cattivo? Come? Chi glielo aveva insegnato? Uno così ti fregherà sempre” (120).

Even though Pietro can daydream about being *cattivo*, he certainly cannot change his nature, and he cannot be aggressive or cruel. Unfortunately, however, abuse is almost the canonic manner of social intercourse in the dysfunctional and amoral universe of Ischiano. The novel makes this very clear. Aggressive and abusive people are respected and left alone, while those who are kind are mistreated and abused by others. Institutions do not protect the weak, and there is no real justice, as Pietro's school experience clearly demonstrates. He, the good child, is held back, while Pierini and his gang are promoted precisely because they are troublemakers. The teachers decide to pass them because they are afraid of the hooligans' revenge and because it is easier to get rid of them than keep them at school. Other characters in the novel are also harmed because of their weakness and/or their generosity. Alima, the Nigerian prostitute without a resident permit, is forcibly repatriated after she calls the police to help Italo, the school caretaker. She is perfectly aware of the huge risk she is taking by making the phone call, but she thinks her long-time client is in a life-threatening situation and decides to help him at all cost. As a result of her good and courageous deed, Alima is deported to Nigeria, while Italo, when questioned by the police, denies even knowing her to avoid trouble with his wife.

Pietro's dysfunctional family dynamics mirror the amoral interactive structure of the village. In his household there is no logical relationship between guilt and punishment. Retribution does not depend on the seriousness of Pietro's transgressions, it rides only on the totally unrelated mood of his father, who can punish him or not, for no logical reason:

La giustizia dovrebbe funzionare che ognuno paga per le colpe che commette. Però a casa sua le cose non andavano esattamente in questo modo. [...]  
 La colpa, a casa sua, piombava giù dal cielo come un meteorite. Alle volte, spesso, ti cadeva addosso, alle volte, per culo, riuscivi a schivarla.  
 Una lotteria, insomma. (194)

In Pietro's home, and in Ischiano, justice simply does not exist and being guilty or innocent makes no difference as far as punishment is concerned. Those who are weak and will not fight for themselves are generally punished harder. This is the way things work in the village.

Pietro is aware that he cannot count on social justice or any form of protection in his toxic social environment, and he is resigned to being tormented. He has actually decided that the only thing he can do is to stay clear of brutal people: "A dodici anni Pietro aveva deciso di non perdere troppo tempo a ricamare sul perché delle cose. Era peggio. [...] I fagiani non si chiedono perché i cacciatori sparano. Scappano e basta" (71). A few lines later, a sentence in italics further expresses Pietro's hopeless disposition: "*Pensa che bello essere invisibile.[...] Oppure, ancora meglio, non esistere nemmeno. Non esserci proprio. Non essere nemmeno nato*" (71, emphasis in the text). The italic font, once again, gives voice to Pietro's most intimate feelings, underlining his misery and showing a tragic and desperate dimension that recalls, among other literary examples, Rosso Malpelo.<sup>33</sup>

Given the main character's passive conduct, his coming-of-age is particularly shocking. Pietro is deeply hurt when he finds out he has not been promoted. His teacher, Flora, has betrayed him, and he has been treated unfairly. As usual, however, he does not react, he just withdraws to his secret place in the marshes and keeps his pain to himself. It is Gloria, his best friend, who pressures him to take revenge on the teacher

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<sup>33</sup> "Rosso Malpelo" is the famous novel by Giovanni Verga published in 1878. Its main character, Rosso Malpelo, is considered evil and is mistreated by everybody just because he has red hair. He accepts abuse as a given, and speaking of an old donkey that died after being beaten so many times, he says: "Ecco come vanno le cose! Anche il *grigio* ha avuto dei colpi di zappa e delle guidalesche; anch'esso quando piegava sotto il peso, o gli mancava il fiato per andare innanzi, aveva di quelle occhiate, mentre lo battevano, che sembrava dicesse: "Non più! non più!" [...] Ma se non fosse mai nato sarebbe stato meglio" (141).

who has broken her promise. She is so insistent that the protagonist finally agrees to bring a harmless water snake into Flora's home, just to scare her. He climbs into her supposedly empty apartment through a half-open window and lands in her bathroom. In the dim light, Pietro unexpectedly sees Flora in the bathtub. She is immersed in cold, dirty water, in a deranged state of depression and dehumanization triggered by her lover's abandonment. The disgusting details deployed to describe the scene are another clear example of "extreme writing." A rotten smell fills the room. Pieces of bread, banana peels, and magazines float in the filthy water where Flora's swollen and pregnant body is immersed. While Pietro is paralyzed by shock, the water snake sneaks into the bathtub and briefly swims between Flora's immobile legs before crawling out of the water again. Flora, unfazed, is cradling a portable tape recorder and is obsessively listening to a famous Italian pop song from the eighties by the popular singer Loredana Bertè, "Sei bellissima." Of course, she is anything but beautiful: deadly pale and skeletal, she actually looks like a crazy, scary red-haired witch to Pietro, who is really horrified. Resisting the impulse to run out of the room, he finds the courage to ask Flora why he was held back. She coldly reveals that the real reason he was punished is because he is weak and can't rebel against abuse. She adds that he is just as weak and worthless as she is, and that, in consequence, he will always be taken advantage of: "Non hai spina dorsale. Ti hanno bocciato perché permetti agli altri di farti fare cose che non vuoi fare. [...] Tu sei come me. Tu non vali niente. [...] A te ti fregheranno perché non reagi..." (370). It is precisely in this instant that Pietro, deeply shaken, does react, for the very first time in his life. In "un maledetto attimo" that will change his life forever, Pietro—harshly hurt by Flora's words—suddenly and reflexively steps on the cord of the cassette recorder, knocking it out of the teacher's hands (370). The electric tape deck tumbles into the bath water, Flora jumps up, slips, falls back, hits the nape of



her neck against the bath tub, and dies shortly afterwards. Flora dies as a result of the wound incurred and, technically speaking, Pietro is only the indirect cause of her death but he feels unquestionably guilty: “il piccolo psicologo che era in lui, si risvegliò e domandò: *“Allora, come ci si sente dopo aver ucciso la propria professoressa di italiano?”* (374) While the disturbing, “extreme” description of the homicide draws attention to the traumatic event, the narrator’s subsequent intervention points to the uncomfortable truth this event reveals. Deep inside, Pietro—or some hidden part of him—really did want to hurt Flora, just as she had hurt him. Somewhere, a huge amount of rage was just waiting to come to the surface.

Flora’s last words are symbolically crucial on more than one level. First of all, her last sentence is truncated on the verb *react* or, to be more precise, *not react*. Literally and metaphorically, Pietro’s re-*action* truncates Flora’s gloomy predictions about his hopeless future and simultaneously breaks his ingrained passive attitude that, from then on, will no longer be part of his personality. Secondly, Flora’s last sentence has wider theoretical implications, since her words imply that Pietro has not been held back because he damaged the gym; he has been punished because he did not rebel against those who bullied him, because he could not stand up to Pierini. In other words, Pietro is guilty of being weak. Flora’s statement opens up a crucial theoretical question about the unclear line/demarcation between passivity and guilt, a question that remains unanswered. It also bitterly reveals the failure of the school and the teachers to protect the weakest students against the violent ones, while at the same time reaffirming the capriciousness of justice and the unreliability of the cause-effect relation between guilt and punishment.

Various passages throughout the book underscore the flaws and obtuseness of the school system, which is characterized by a general lack of empathy for difficult

students who are simply defined “caratteriali” like Pietro and by a widespread unwillingness or inability to look for the deep reasons behind a kid’s hostile behavior (370, 246, 270). In particular, the narrator draws attention to the teachers’ fear of violent students’ retributions—which results in a passive acceptance of their deviant behavior—, and to the general lack of justice in the educational environment, which sometimes triggers episodes of depression or self-destructive attitudes in the weakest pupils (223, 245, 351, 370). The notion that the school environment is unfair, dysfunctional, and unjust is clearly expressed by the only positive and trustworthy character, Flora: “Perché ai mafiosi che si pentono e parlano i giudici offrono una nuova identità [...] e a un bambino indifeso nessuno offre niente, se non terrore e minacce?” (249) Of course, through these episodes the novel bitterly criticizes the actual educational system in Italy.

For Pietro, the murder obviously represents the (perverse) initiation rite to adulthood and the creation of an independent self. By killing his teacher, the protagonist simultaneously kills someone who is as weak as himself (that is, his own weakness), his ideal mother (“Questo bambino doveva essere figlio mio,” says Flora on page 344) and his innocence. As with any proper rite of passage, the murder marks a turning point in Pietro’s life. From that moment on, nothing will ever be the same: “Da quel momento fino all’ultimo dei suoi giorni ci sarebbero stati un prima e un dopo” (374). (In *Certi Bambini*, too, the homicide marks a point of no return, symbolized by the formally disrupted linear time sequence of the narrative.)

In exchange for his lost childhood innocence, Pietro “gains” access to rage, a hitherto unknown feeling that seems to belong specifically to the adult condition and allows him to cross the border between passivity and assertive, even if violent, behavior. After killing Flora, Pietro runs away shocked, traumatized, and deadly scared.

But he is no longer the submissive kid he used to be. When, shortly after the homicide, he runs into Pierini and his gang, he finds the courage to react to their bullying. To everybody's surprise (including his own), he stands up for himself and furiously beats up Bacci, to the point that they have to stop him. All his repressed rage pours out in one go, and Pietro finally gets rid of his tormentors. Rage seems to be the only answer to the question that he had asked earlier, "Pietro si domandò se anche lui un giorno sarebbe stato capace di diventare come Pierini. Di spingere a terra qualcuno con tutta quella cattiveria" (100). His transformation sadly confirms the perverse dichotomy "abused-abusive" of life in Ischiano and simultaneously opens another theoretical question about the line between self-defense and abuse/violence. This question is not answered in an explicit way, yet the plot seems to indicate that, for Pietro, the only way not to be abused is to abuse in turn and the only alternative to passivity and mildness is rage and aggression.

Pietro's rite of passage heralds the beginning of a healthy identity formation process. After the manslaughter, Pietro spontaneously confesses his crime and is sent to a juvenile detention center, where he will remain for eight years. We do not know what happens to the protagonist in that period: his seclusion represents a symbolically charged absence, a sort of metaphorical death that allows him to reintegrate the traumatic experience into his life, as we know from the last chapter, which is comprised by a letter he writes to Gloria before leaving the detention center. The letter is written in italics, which is Ammaniti's code for the inner voice and for authenticity, and it is actually the only part of the novel written in the first person. Pietro is nearly eighteen now and seems to be able to look back at his past, understand his actions, and integrate his experience into a whole, balanced sense of self. After six years, he has finally and painfully realized what made him step on that electrical cord: he admits that committing

such a horrible crime was the only desperate way to disentangle himself from his toxic surroundings, the only way to be taken away from Ischiano. Had he stayed there, he would have had no choice but to become a shepherd, like his father, and adapt to a squalid existence, just like Flora had predicted. In juvenile prison, instead, Pietro has obtained a high school diploma and, once free, he can go to university, which has always been his dream. Moreover, he will eventually be in a position to take Gloria away from Ischiano, as he states in the last words of the letter, which close the novel and give it its title.

Through the rendering of the homicide that represents his “rite of passage,” the novel posits a troubling question about the subtle line between passivity and guilt, and touches on the complex interconnections between passivity and aggression, self-defense and abuse in a justice-deprived social context. Of course, the corrupted environment is deeply implicated in the protagonist’s brutal and totally unexpected initiation rite, as it is because of the social system’s flaws that mildness implies being abused, and self-defense implies aggression. While Pietro’s story openly challenges the notion of justice, along with the role of adults, school, and society as a whole in their capacity to guide and support children, it also establishes a disturbing link between violence and coming-of-age. These notions are reaffirmed in *Certi Bambini*.

### **Between Childhood and Adulthood. Rosario**

While for Pietro the manslaughter is a totally unexpected event, for Rosario homicide is a planned step along a path that has already been traced. For the protagonist of *Certi Bambini*, the line between childhood and (perverse) adulthood had started disintegrating long before the murder, and before the beginning of the novel. Rosario

might have once been an innocent child, but we never really see that condition: when we meet him, the protagonist is already corrupted, just like his surroundings.

Rosario is eleven, one year younger than Pietro, but he acts like an adult from the very beginning of the story. The narrator is intentionally elusive about the protagonist's age until well into the novel. In the first chapter he gives contradictory clues by casually dropping vague hints about Rosario's childhood, while simultaneously describing the protagonist in typical grown-up poses. In particular, in the first pages Rosario is depicted while smoking a cigarette and experiencing a sexual arousal triggered by his sense of empowerment after Assuntina retires into her home, intimidated by his stare: "[Rosario] Immediatamente pensa: mo' vado a casa sua, busso, quella apre e me la fotto. [...] Poi si schiaccia l'erezione con la mano" (6). The narrator also adds that Rosario had previously fantasized about almost every woman in the courtyard, a misleading comment that allows the reader to draw inaccurate assumptions about the protagonist's age.

The link between childhood sexuality and aggressive instinct was famously established by Sigmund Freud in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905):<sup>34</sup>

The cruel component of the sexual instinct develops in childhood even more independently of the sexual activities that are attached to erotogenic zones. [...] Children who distinguish themselves by special cruelty towards animals and playmates usually give rise to a just suspicion of an intense and precocious sexual activity arising from erotogenic zones. (58)

Rosario fits Freud's description well. His precocious erotogenic sexual activity is accompanied by a special cruelty, and Freud's quote establishes a physiological/psychoanalytical reason for the protagonist's aggressive behavior. The novel also indicates, however, that Rosario's brutality seems to stem primarily from his

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<sup>34</sup> The connection between sex and aggressiveness is also acknowledged by Ellen Nerenberg (214).

desire to conform to a prototype of adulthood defined by aggression. This notion clearly emerges in Rosario's imagined conversation with Caterina. When the protagonist fantasizes about conquering the girl's love by showing her his violent side, it becomes obvious that, for him, adulthood is connoted not by age but by the ability to be brutal:

Avrebbe voluto afferrarla per il braccio, farle venire il livido, trascinarla fuori da quella processione di cristi segnati, portarsela in un vicolo e fatterla contro una parete, [...] raccontarle chi era e che andava facendo, e poi fermarsi quando lei tutt'a un tratto avrebbe cambiato espressione e gli avrebbe detto col sorriso sì, questo è l'*uomo* che volevo vedere. (112, emphasis mine)

Rosario's cruelty is linked to a craved-for adult condition shaped by the typical "macho" stereotype. The scene in which Rosario focuses his eyes on Assuntina "con uno sguardo più grande di lui" (6), as the narrator states, also assumes an interesting symbolic connotation, as such a gaze implies a metaphorical connection between adulthood (the word *grande* means both "big" and, figuratively, "adult") and the hostility that Rosario's gaze conveys. In other words, this sentence subtly reinforces the concept that being "bigger"—that is, grown-up—involves being cruel.

Rosario clearly adores being among adults, no matter who they are and what they do. He is totally fascinated by them and feels gratified when they ask for his help and treat him as a peer. He is charmed by the young Catholic volunteer Santino, and he is equally proud that the disgusting criminal Casaluce asks for his help: "In una sola giornata avevano chiesto di lui due volte. A parte il rischio che adesso si trattava di correre, non trovava molta differenza. Santino o Casaluce" (59). In a review in *La Repubblica*, the literary critic Stefano Giovanardi affirms that Rosario is just a child who needs the approval of adults and wants to be praised by them, no matter who they are:

...non è che un bambino teneramente gratificato dall' attenzione degli adulti e ansioso di svolgere al meglio i compiti che essi, da pari a pari, gli affidano: così l' assassinio di cui è incaricato equivale senza alcun distinguo alla collaborazione

prestata a Santino, un giovane attivo nel volontariato, nella gestione di una casafamiglia. (Giovanardi)

What Giovanardi states is undoubtedly true, but Rosario is not just a child who craves the adults' approval like many kids his age: the protagonist actually wants to *be* an adult and usually perceives himself as one. From this point of view, Rosario embodies one possible extreme consequence of the notion of the "disappearance of childhood" discussed in the introduction.

Rosario generally behaves like a grown-up. His sexual fantasies, as mentioned, involve much older women, and when he visits a child prostitute, he has to fantasize about the girl's mother to get sexually aroused (117). He has no clue about the age difference between himself and Caterina, and it never crosses his mind, not even for split second, that he might be too young to be her boyfriend (Caterina is seventeen, he is eleven). He is so unaware that his age actually defines him as a child that he sincerely behaves as a romantic rival to the twenty-year-old Santino. He hires two criminals to take revenge on him, and when, after a few days, he understands that the young volunteer wants to talk, he anticipates a man-to-man confrontation where Santino would apologize for his relationship with Caterina: "[Santino] Aveva capito che Rosario sapeva, e adesso veniva a spiegargli. Logico" (103). Obviously, Santino is totally unaware of Rosario's crush on Caterina and, to Rosario's enraged disappointment, he does not even mention it. Other characters' attitudes also confirm the kid's misperception: Casaluca treats Rosario as a peer to ensure his loyalty, while Don Alfonso, who wants to encourage the child to help at the "Casa Famiglia," says: "—Qui ci stanno sempre tante cose da fare, [...] e di uomini ce ne sono pochi" (53). The priest probably uses the word "uomini" to establish a sense of complicity between himself and Rosario, but the kid takes it literally: "[Rosario] Pensò che sì, in effetti a Casa Letizia c'era proprio bisogno di uomini" (54). Interestingly enough, the narrating

voice never comments on Rosario's distorted perception. The protagonist's real age is actually so well masked that the reader shares the shocked reaction of the brutal policeman who asks for the protagonist's identity card and finds out that Rosario is too young to have one (121).

The lack of a clear demarcation between childhood and adulthood takes its toll both in terms of inner conflicts and of identity formation. Rosario really wants to be a grown-up, but he is also still a child who is dying to get the family of little toy elephants at the local bar (20). Sitting at the counter, he resists the temptation to get the little plastic animals and lights up a cigarette instead, but the inner imbalance caused by entering adulthood prematurely is fully there. Exasperated by fear, coming from the awareness that his rite of passage involves a homicide, Rosario's inner tension becomes evident when he walks toward the bar, thinking that everything will be different after the murder, and he will be finally treated as an adult. His brain thinks these thoughts, but his body rebels against the whole idea: "...il corpo gli fa storie, lo trattiene, lo avverte di una differenza a cui dovrà prepararsi. [...] Non la vuole questa importanza. Non ancora" (14). Rosario's eleven-year-old body becomes, most appropriately (and once again), the place where the conflict between childhood and premature adulthood, definitely and formally conquered through violence, is unconsciously manifested.

Rosario's psychological condition, characterized by lack of awareness and insight, by emotional unbalance, by the need for love, and by rage, does not develop toward the construction of a whole self. On a thematic level, this is made evident by the fact that Rosario, after the murder, formally enters the criminal organization and the adult world, but this very world is interested in him precisely because he is a child and cannot be prosecuted by Italian law. From this perspective, therefore, Rosario's in-between position hardly changes. On the other hand, the novel's structure shows that



after the homicide the protagonist's personality is even more fragmented and fractured than before. This rupture is not explicitly narrated, but it is formally reflected in the text, as the murder marks a turning point in the structure of the narrative itself. While the first five chapters follow Rosario chronologically as he prepares for the homicide, from chapter six on, the time sequence is completely disrupted and the story is told through a steady series of flashbacks.<sup>35</sup> In other words, as soon as Rosario kills the man, the narrative structure breaks down: after the homicide a linear sequence of events is no longer possible, and this metaphorically implies that no harmonious development of Rosario's personality seems to be possible either. On a textual level, it is also worth noting the performative nature of the novel. As Freud affirms, trauma is characterized by the fact that it disrupts the chronological sequence of time as we know it; moreover, it keeps on returning as a "'daemonic' force" that coerces people into unconsciously repeating the same kind of painful experience (Freud 1990a, 41).<sup>36</sup> By continuously going back into the past (through flashbacks), the structure of the narrative actually performs the haunting mechanism typical of traumatic experiences. As a consequence, it figuratively implies that the homicide is now imprinted, as a trauma, in Rosario's unconscious mind, preventing him from becoming a whole and serene human being.

On a formal level, the traumatic key event is described in the most "extreme" realistic way:

L'uomo rantola. Sembra un animale che ha ingoiato del veleno. Strofinava la faccia nel suo sangue come se cercasse di risalire. Ha raccolto le mani sulla pancia. Le gambe hanno già preso la stortura dei moti ammazzati, [...] Una trema appena un poco. L'altra tira a scatti verso l'alto. Poi tutto il corpo sussulta e si blocca. (36)

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<sup>35</sup> The chain of events that lead to the homicide unravels through a series of confusing flashbacks that follows the rhythm of the subway stops along Rosario's way back home; in particular, the chronological order of events collapses even within a single chapter (the first part of a chapter refers to something that is happening on the train at that moment, while the second part is a flashback).

<sup>36</sup> This is Freud's definition of the repetition compulsion caused by repressed painful contents in the unconscious, that is, traumas.

Unlike Pietro, Rosario does not manage to reintegrate the traumatic experience of homicide into his life and is, therefore, sadly ready to become part of the dysfunctional, immature, and cruel adult world that surrounds him. Despite the different outcomes of the respective rites of passage, both novels criticize institutions and the social context, and both represent a disquieting image of children.

## **Part Two**

### **The Social Context. Moral Panic**

Ellen Nerenberg's essay *Murder Made in Italy* (2012) offers a unique investigative tool that helps identify the link between specific dysfunctional aspects of contemporary Italian society and their fictional representation. Nerenberg analyzes some notorious murders committed in Italy in the last thirty years and examines their renderings in contemporary cultural texts such as novels, films, newspapers, court proceedings, memoirs, and television news broadcasts. The cross examination of fictional and non-fictional narratives highlights the ways in which media, the law, and fiction mutually inform each other, and explores how these different modes of representation construct the cultural meaning of murder in contemporary Italian society. Nerenberg also identifies the most significant forms of moral panic spawned by the crimes she examines (6-7).

The concept of moral panic is crucial for Nerenberg's research and highly relevant to this study (2, 118). According to Stanley Cohen, who first introduced the notion in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1973), a moral panic occurs when "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (9). As Nerenberg underlines, media plays a crucial role in this process: the obsessive attention of newspapers and TV to a perceived threat

raises the level of social anxiety and even spurs social and political forces to campaign for reforms. In particular, the notion of moral panic is intrinsically connected to the representation of fear in public debate, and it “would be impossible to achieve without the fuel and vehicle for contagion that the media provides” (7). While listing a whole range of social fears that have produced various types of “panics” in Italian society, among which is juvenile crime (7), Nerenberg highlights the symbols that lay at their core, which include “sexual predators, abusive and incompetent officials, feral children” (2).

The specific form of moral panic spawned by the notion of feral children grew incrementally in Italy during the 1990s and might have inspired the characters of Pietro, Rosario, and Pierini. Other crucial issues identified by Nerenberg—such as dysfunctional families, toxic environments, and corrupt police—are also sources of moral panic and are reflected in the texts analyzed in this essay.

### **Moral Panic. Feral Children between Fiction and Reality**

One of the murders that fueled a moral panic about feral children is referred to as the Novi Ligure case and is investigated by Nerenberg in her book. In 2001, Italy was shocked by the assassination of forty-one-year-old Susy Cassini and twelve-year-old Gianluca De Nardo, respectively the mother and brother of Erika De Nardo, who stabbed them in their home in Novi Ligure with the help of her boyfriend Omar Favaro. At the time, Erika was 16 and Omar was 17. Erika’s motive was that she wanted to have more freedom to be with Omar. The tragic event was widely covered by the national press and thoroughly discussed in television news and panels, in a fictional documentary, in narrative works of *cronaca*, and in semi-fictional works, such as Lidia Ravera’s novel *Il freddo dentro* and Gianfranco Bettin’s social study *Eredi* (Nerenberg

112). Nerenberg underlines that the double murder elicited twin moral panics in Italian society. At first, the homicide hit on the widespread fear of immigrants, as Erika initially alleged that the killers were two Albanians.<sup>37</sup> But when the truth emerged, the “displaced” fear related to immigrants gave way to the much more disturbing moral panic about Italian youth as perpetrators of monstrous violence. The press, the news, and general public debate concentrated on the fact that violence was coming from inside, not outside, the country and its families and that it was perpetrated by sons and daughters. Erika and Omar came to symbolize the menacing “disaffected and delinquent youth at risk of becoming perpetrators or victims—or both—of violence” (Nerenberg 8).

Ten years before the Novi Ligure murders, in Montecchia di Crosara (a small, materially rich but culturally impoverished village near Verona), twenty-year-old Pietro Maso, with the help of two friends, killed his parents in order to inherit their money. Nerenberg does not analyze this double murder in detail, but the tragic event is obviously a symbolic equivalent of the Novi Ligure massacre. The Maso case is worth a brief investigation, as the plot of *Ti prendo e ti porto via* reflects, in some ways, the form of moral panic generated by the Montecchia tragedy—which happened eight years before the novel was published. Incidentally (or not), the name of the young Veronese killer is Pietro.

The double homicide of Montecchia was particularly brutal and shocked the entire country. Television and newspapers covered the event for months, as they would do years later for the Novi Ligure murders. The case was obsessively discussed in public debates. The press highlighted the wave of sympathizers writing letters to Pietro,

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<sup>37</sup> As a consequence, newspapers and politicians demonized the public danger of an immigration policy incapable of protecting Italians from crimes perpetrated by foreigners, and xenophobic anxiety soared (Nerenberg 111-13, Bettin 190-93).

exaggerating the relevance of the phenomenon; the media's morbid attention to this aspect contributed to the increasing level of anxiety among adults, creating the impression that lots of youngsters actually revered the young murderers as heroes (in the same way that, ten years later, newspapers would overemphasize the number of internet sites dedicated to Erika). Local authorities, public institutions, intellectuals, priests, and psychiatrists discussed the reasons behind such a monstrous crime, and were very firm in denying any responsibility on their side. In particular, the bishop of Verona declared that families, schools, and the church were not to blame: "Famiglia, scuola e chiesa pare che in questo caso abbiano le carte in regola" (Bettin 29). This point of view, however, is not shared by the essayist Gianfranco Bettin, who in his essay *Eredi* claims that the social environment is anything but innocent. Bettin analyzes the social and psychological implications of the murder by blending together fiction, cronaca, and news, and underlines that Montecchia di Crosara does not offer any cultural stimuli to young people; the little village does not even have a movie theater, or a decent library, and the only meeting place, apart from the church, is the local bar—from this perspective, Montecchia closely resembles Ischiano Scalo, a village where "non c'era un cazzo da fare" (Ammaniti 62).<sup>38</sup> In Montecchia, money is very important: it is the symbol of deserved success, it is almost sacred, and it must not be wasted. At the same time, however, money also gives access to social acceptance and choice in entertainment. Pietro Maso's parents had worked hard to make their small fortune, and Pietro believed he needed that money to buy the fancy clothes and the nice car that made him the star of the local bar. Money also granted Pietro access into the circle of adults who illegally gambled in the back room of the bar: as Bettin states, Pietro "si

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<sup>38</sup> The anonymous degraded area where Rosario lives also shares the same lack of cultural stimuli or entertainment.

stava conquistando uno spazio tra gli adulti,” just like Rosario in *Certi bambini* (Bettin 73, 93, 96, 125). When the bishop affirms “Pietro deve aver trovato, *non si sa dove, non si sa quando*, il miraggio del denaro facile” (Bettin 147, emphasis in the text), Bettin answers by arguing that it was precisely in the culturally deprived social context of Montecchia, at the bar, in the general attitude toward money, that Pietro saw this “mirage” (148-149, 155). In other words, Bettin openly acknowledged and underlined the adults’ responsibility in the tragedy: “Ma l’amministrazione comunale si è davvero interrogata sulle responsabilità [...]? Che ne è, signor sindaco, della bisca clandestina del bar ‘John’? Ci vanno ancora a giocare con gli adulti i ragazzi più in gamba del paese? [...] una biblioteca decente?” (155)

Montecchia, a village where “cento ragazzi giocano a calcio negli impianti sportivi della chiesa,” is also “un paese perbene e timorato di Dio,” to quote Graziano Biglia’s definition of Ischiano (Bettin 61, Ammaniti 323). It is quite easy to imagine a similarity between the local bar of Montecchia, where Pietro Maso spends his afternoons showing off his fancy clothes, and the bar of Ischiano, where the local star Graziano Biglia meets his old friends. It is not mere coincidence that, in the fictional bar, one of Ammaniti’s characters, the policeman Miele, explicitly boasts about his acts of vandalism that clearly recall real crimes that happened in Italy in the nineties. When Miele recalls the time he threw heavy stones against a tourist van and pushed it down a cliff—“E ti ricordi quando tirammo le pietre contro il pulmino di quei tedeschi e poi lo buttammo giù dal dirupo?” rievocò il Miele estasiato” (Ammaniti 63)—one cannot help but recall the three twenty-year-olds from Verona who, in 1993, reached the middle of an overpass over the A22 national expressway and threw a 14-kilogram stone

down on oncoming traffic, killing a woman.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that the exterior quietness of Ischiano hides a troubling amount of violence, as Graziano Biglia speculates when he sees Pierini's enraged eyes:

Un paese di gente perbene e timorata di Dio. Dove i ragazzini vanno a scuola, giocano a pallone in piazza XXV aprile. Almeno ne era stato convinto fino a quel momento. Vedendo gli occhi cattivi di quel ragazzetto [...] non ne fu più tanto sicuro. (323)

Just like Graziano, people in Italy started to wonder what was really lurking under the reassuring surface of a quiet and rich village like Montecchia and in the inner world of their own children. The lack of affection and remorse shown by Pietro Maso after the double homicide shocked the nation as much as the killing itself, and the case became a symbol of the growing fear that something was awfully wrong in Italian families and society. As Bettin writes, people understood that the tragedy of Montecchia regarded everybody: "[E'] Qualcosa che riguarda tutti. [...] Affiorava una specie di fondo oscuro, sotto la vasta provincia del benessere. Quella storia parlava di noi, dunque" (32). Pietro, the evil child of the bourgeoisie (joined, later, by Erika and Omar), became the symbol of uncontrollable youth, of a lack of moral values, and of the tragic failure of adults in understanding teenagers and preventing such tragedies. The plethora of books published in those years and dedicated to understanding and decoding teenage psychology (the most famous of which were written by the pop psychologist Paolo Crepet), clearly show that adults felt that they could no longer understand, control, or

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<sup>39</sup> Miele's words recall more than one tragic case that happened in Italy in the early nineties. As mentioned in the text, in 1993 three twenty-year-olds from Verona (Marco Moschini, Riccardo Garbin, Davide Lugoboni) reached the middle of an overpass over the A22 national expressway and threw a 14-kilogram stone down on oncoming traffic. It hit a car and killed a twenty-five-year old woman, Monica Zanotti. In 1996, another woman was killed near Tortona in the same way. The killers, who were respectively twenty-four- and thirty-years-old, said that they did it out of boredom.

help their sons and daughters.<sup>40</sup> They felt inadequate, powerless, and scared of their own children. As the father of one of Pietro's accomplices said: "Credi di conoscere tuo figlio, e te lo vedi sfuggire così... [...] *Ti senti addosso un senso di impotenza*" (Bettin 66, emphasis mine). It is perhaps a similar "sense of helplessness" that the tragic story of Pietro and Flora in *Ti prendo e ti porto via* transmits to readers, together with a sense of anxiety and fear.

### **Moral Panic. Feral Children as Zombies**

In chapter 114 of Ammaniti's novel, Graziano is driving his car when he spots Pierini and Fiamma pushing Pietro to the ground and beating him ferociously. Graziano, who is in a glorious mood and feels like a superhero, immediately stops the car and gets out to rescue the victim of the aggression. But Pierini and Fiamma violently assault him, leaving the playboy speechless and bewildered. After a moment of puzzlement, Graziano easily scares the two kids away, but Pierini's wicked eyes shock him and remind him of a frightening experience he had had years before in Rio de Janeiro (323). The story is told as a flashback in the following chapter, which is called, meaningfully enough, "Bambini."

When Graziano was touring Brazil with his band, one night they got lost on their way to a gig. The musicians were driving their van slowly through a favela, trying to figure out their location, when a gang of about twenty street children, apparent ages nine to thirteen, surrounded the van, forcing it to stop. All the kids were holding rusty knives in one hand and an orange half imbued with some cheap drug in the other. While constantly sniffing on the drug, the children surrounded the vehicle, climbed on the

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<sup>40</sup> Among others: *Non siamo capaci di ascoltarli*, 2001; *Cuori violenti*, 1995; *I giorni dell'ira. Storie di matricidi*, 1998 (co-written with Giancarlo De Cataldo).



roof, and started banging on it. One kid broke the car window, countless little arms slipped in, and one snatched the car keys. The engine stopped. Graziano and his friends were now screaming and scared to death. The ghastly kids robbed them of everything, including the van. When Graziano and his friends finally walked up to the police station, the officer told them that they were lucky to be alive. The children are described as zombie-like figures:

Sembravano un branco di zombie.

Gli occhi senza espressione, persi chissà dove, il viso scavato, le guance rinsecchite, le labbra livide e screpolate come se avessero avuto ottant'anni. [...] E tutti, nello stesso modo, chiudevano gli occhi, sembravano sul punto di stramazze a terra, ma poi si ripigliavano e riprendevano ad avanzare lentamente. (321)

The description is very cinematic. Virtually any reader coming across this passage cannot help but visualize the most typical scene of zombie horror movies and the inevitable sequence when the unstoppable monsters are slowly approaching the terrified protagonists. Yet this literary rhetoric is not merely a special effect, since the connection between Pierini, the street kids, and the zombies evokes and combines the archetypal myth of the evil child and the ancestral fear of the return of the dead. In particular, zombies represent one of the main markers of the uncanny: therefore, the conceptual chain Pierini-street kids-zombie disturbingly connects the notion of the uncanny to children in general, as the title of the chapter seems to suggest.

In his seminal essay *Das Unheimliche* published in 1919, Sigmund Freud offers a host of tentative definitions of the uncanny. Among the different explanations offered in the essay, two are particularly relevant for this study. The first is quoted from Ernst Jentsch, who claims that something/someone is perceived as uncanny when we cannot decide if it/he/she is alive or lifeless:

Jentsch has taken as a very good instance “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate;” and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata. (201)

The second definition is given further on in the essay. Still not satisfied with the many explanations he has listed so far, Freud argues that the real, crucial feature of the uncanny is actually the notion of something familiar that should have remained hidden or buried and is instead brought to light:

...for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. [...] the uncanny [is] something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light [...] Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. (217-8)

The notion of zombies conforms to both descriptions. The first quote refers specifically to mechanical dolls, but it can apply to zombies too. Like Jentsch's automata, zombies are animated, but they lack what informs human life: consciousness, emotions, language, and any kind of moral/ethical/religious sense. Most importantly, they are neither dead nor alive (or, alternately, they are both). Their in-between condition necessarily disrupts the theoretical opposition life/death, which is a cardinal conceptual antinomy among the many that constitute the foundation of our ontological, philosophical, ethical, and religious belief systems. This has interesting consequences.

In Western philosophy reality is interpreted through a dualistic system, a series of oppositions in which the first term is considered positive, and the second negative (such as good/bad or content/form). This duality belongs to the Derridean concept of "logocentrism" of metaphysics, that is:

...the orientation of philosophy towards an order of meaning—thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word—conceived as existing in itself, as foundation. [...] In oppositions such as meaning/form, soul/body, [...], positive/negative, [...], the superior term belongs to the logos and is a higher presence; the inferior term marks a fall. Logocentrism thus assumes the priority of the first term and conceives the second in relation to it, as a complication, a negation, a manifestation, or a disruption of the first. [...] Indeed, we generally assume that this is the procedure to follow in any "serious" analysis. (Culler 92-93)

According to Derrida, all philosophies are united in the search for a foundation, an absolute origin, “something beyond which we need not go”; all of them are “metaphysics of presence,” and, as such, all seek a rigorous system of thought that finally identifies the ultimate “determination of the being of the existent as presence” (Culler 92). The attempt to identify that crucial “something” that intrinsically implies presence and origin and is, on its own, essential and adequate to the determination of “being,” is carried out through the adoption of the abovementioned system of oppositions that shapes our idea of the world, both ontologically and epistemologically, by opposing a “positive” (“present”) term to a “negative” (“less present”) one. Hence, our perception, interpretation, and experience of the world are shaped in accordance to a binary system that defines what is positive and what is negative. However, as the notion of the zombie defies the very idea of the basic life/death opposition (that is, the ultimate presence/absence), the logical consequence is that it also jeopardizes any other system of dualities and, ultimately, our whole system of values. In other words, since there is no life/death opposition in the ungraspable conceptual framework that allows the existence of zombies, there cannot be any good/evil duality, according to which a moral hierarchy can be established.<sup>41</sup> Zombies are neither dead nor alive—and, therefore, neither good nor evil. Hence, the concept of zombies implies a collapse of judgment: they are unknowable, they belong to a different dimension. That is the real reason why they are scary: not because they are hostile, but because they disrupt the reassuring boundary between life and death and one contaminates the other, tainting the reassuring notion of presence with the unsettling notion of absence (from this perspective, they are also linked to the notion of abject). As a consequence, the

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<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to underline that, according to Freud, there are no such oppositions in the unconscious either, as opposites coexist there.

symbolic link between the zombies, the street kids, and Pierini connotes children's wickedness and malice as something that disrupts a crucial and reassuring conceptual order, something that defies established moral and ontological categories and is therefore deeply disturbing.

The second definition of the uncanny links the zombies with the return of what is buried, hidden, or repressed and, at the same time, deeply familiar. In other words, to trauma. According to psychoanalytic theory, every feeling that is too painful, unpleasant, evil, or agonizingly overwhelming is repressed by the conscious mind and is hidden in the unconscious. This happens because the conscious mind chooses not to deal with anything that it cannot endure, as a way of defending its wellbeing, and just removes painful feelings from consciousness. Yet these feelings do not disappear: they are preserved, intact, in the unconscious. The pain becomes a hidden wound, a trauma, that lies dormant in the unconscious mind and comes back either in dreams or when a similar situation elicits the same kind of excruciating suffering that was repressed the first time. Trauma acts like a hidden, uncontrollable force that actually pushes the person to recreate the painful situation that caused it in the first place.<sup>42</sup> When this happens, the pain (or fear, or shame, etc.) comes back in full force and is mistakenly associated to the triggering event. This unconscious dynamic is repeated until the conflict is brought to light and dealt with, as it happens in the psychoanalytic process. The connection between zombies, the Rio street children, and Pierini's vicious look

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<sup>42</sup> Freud exposes his theory of trauma and repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principles*. For a concise definition of trauma, see Soshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious. Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (171). The introduction to Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experiences* offers a very clear perspective on trauma theory (1-9). For the concept of the belatedness in experiencing trauma, see Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference* (196-231) and Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (84). See also Freud's "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'" in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*.

implies the unsettling notion that an unknown trauma, pain, or evil “buried” in the collective unconscious, may “return” through evil children.

The zombie episode is conceptually connected not only to Pierini’s cruelty, but also to Pietro’s homicide, as all these symbolic fictional events are centered around—and simultaneously concur to forming—a troubling image of (feral) children, depicted either as the alarming carriers of an inexplicable and frightening cruelty that defies judgment, or as obscure beings who bring to the surface a painful aspect of life that should have remained hidden.<sup>43</sup>

### **Moral Panic. Criminal Children and Abusive Policemen**

A similarly alarming representation of childhood is found in *Certi bambini*, which focuses on the issue of criminal children. As previously mentioned, the Camorra hires Rosario because he is too young to be sent to prison, so he can virtually commit any crime and still not be punished by the law. The question of age immunity reflects a real and unresolved social problem, as criminals under the age of fourteen cannot be prosecuted in Italy. In the years preceding the publication of the book, the topic was widely discussed in the media:

Al di sotto dei 14 anni i ragazzi non sono però punibili: il reato viene solo registrato e vengono raccomandati interventi educativi. Di tale condizione approfitta così la criminalità organizzata, soprattutto nelle zone ove controlla il territorio. Essa recluta minori che vivono in condizioni di grave disagio socio economico e li usa per realizzare i propri traffici. (Pietropolli)

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<sup>43</sup> On the other hand and simultaneously, the zombie image shifts the whole issue, as it were, to the fictional realm, and therefore diminishes the importance of the concept—a game of positing and denying ideas in which Ammaniti engages throughout the book. The effect is the same that the writer obtains through his *vis comica*: he indicates a serious topic but half-hides it behind a light, funny façade. It is the reader, then, that needs to activate their critical sense and to attune their listening to the text to get to the deeper meaning below the surface.

In 1996, the case of Francesco, a ten-year-old thief, opened a public debate on this issue. Just like Rosario, Francesco lived in Naples and did not go to school. When the police caught him, a judge decided that the only way to really help him was to take him out of his home, so he sent him to a juvenile detention house. It soon became obvious that Francesco was too young to stay there, so he was sent back home and became a “sorvegliato speciale,” which is to say, he could not leave home without surveillance, just like real criminals on strict probation. *Il Corriere della Sera* published a series of articles about the case, pointing out that such a measure was ridiculous and that it was necessary to find a solution for cases like Francesco’s. Above all, an editorial clearly stated that Francesco was no exception to the rule and underlined the inefficiency of the institutions unable to help children like him: “Una storia dove il problema della delinquenza minorile si fonde con la mancanza di strutture capaci di recuperare i ragazzini che nascono e crescono sbandati e si avviano verso un futuro da camorristi” (Bufi).

The social fear of criminal children is intertwined with the rooted distrust toward institutions, responsible, among other things, of not offering children any alternative to delinquency. The many news reports, stories, and movies about the Mafia and the Camorra and, more generally, about corruption inside public institutions at every level of government have spread the idea that policemen are often corrupt and/or abusive and raised the level of the population’s anxiety, as Ellen Nerenberg claims: “...the social and cultural terrain in Italy in the last twenty-five years, [is] a period that could be characterized generally as an atmosphere of lawlessness, of which the Tangentopoli corruption scandals of the 1990s offer but one (extended) scenario” (12). De Silva’s novel well reflects this social concern. Even more blatantly than in Ischiano—where policemen are certainly abusive, too—in *Certi bambini* the police are

totally untrustworthy and corrupted. Organized criminals seem to infiltrate everywhere and have control over everything, and no place is really safe: even a nerdy-looking volunteer at Casa Letizia, of all places, turns out to be a camorrista. Corrupted officials cover for local killers, as Damiano explains to Rosario: “Senza scappare. Non c’è bisogno. Pure se sentono, prima di arrivare aspettano” (37).<sup>44</sup> In such an environment, victims of criminal organization are totally alone and cannot expect any help from anybody; certainly not from the institutions and not even from people on the street, as Damiano again claims: “Quando uno scappa la gente si fa i cazzi suoi, si tira indietro, fa spazio, e tu vedi benissimo dove va” (56). The novel reflects a sadly typical camorrista social context that every Italian cannot but recognize and that obviously generates fear and anxiety about people’s safety.

Set in a different part of Italy, Ammaniti’s novel also explores the flaws of the police. It does so through a stylistically complex episode describing the abuse perpetrated by the policeman Miele, one of Graziano Biglia’s old friends. The passage does not go unnoticed, even in such a magmatic book. It is enthralling, self-contained, and graphically enclosed in one single chapter. Only two of the three main characters appear in this episode. It does not contribute to the development of the plot in any way and is so autonomous and independent from the rest of the book that The New York Times Book Review defined it a “seemingly pointless tangent” (Bray).

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<sup>44</sup> The descriptions of the general widespread corruption regarding the police, simple citizens, and even of one of the volunteers also reflect a form of moral panic (De Silva 89, 122, 143). Violence and abuses by the police can also be related to the death of twenty-three-year-old Carlo Giuliani, a no-global activist shot by the police at the 27<sup>th</sup> G-8 Summit in Genoa, in July 2001. A sign of the moral panic regarding immigrants can be found when Brasile, Rosario’s friend who has been savagely beaten by Rosario, tells the police that the culprits are “marocchini.” Erica and Omar as well initially accused some Albanian immigrants of the massacre (De Silva 87).

On a dark, stormy night, Max, a twenty-year-old modern history student, is driving toward his family's summer house in his father's luxury car, together with his new student friend Martina, a pretty, blue-haired punk girl who is smoking dope in the passenger's seat. Max, whose goofiness with girls and lack of determination remind us of Pietro, likes Martina and is secretly hoping to turn the planned study weekend into a romantic adventure. Lost in his thoughts, the boy is not paying attention to the speed limit and, because of the storm, he does not notice the policeman on the side of the road signaling to him to pull over. When, after a few minutes, he and Martina realize that they should have stopped, they decide to drive back to the police patrol and admit their infraction. This ethically correct behavior is paid back with a disproportionate punishment.

It is clear from the start that the two patrolmen, Bacci (the father of one of Pietro's tormentors) and Miele (the janitor's son), are neither emotionally nor psychologically stable. Through his usual sarcastic tone and cinematic style, Ammaniti depicts the two men as frustrated, angry, and dissatisfied with their lives—just like everybody else in Ischiano. At the beginning of the chapter, they are having an unjustifiably furious argument over their shifts. Their reciprocal frustrations feed resentment in an unstoppable escalation of rage, until they both reach seriously altered states. They are actually pointing their guns at each other, when Max and Martina show up, diverting their attention and interrupting the fight. Bacci is willing to let them drive away and goes back into the police car to rest, but Miele, whose shift has just started, insists in dealing with the young couple. He still needs to vent and, in his irate state of mind, notices the luxury vehicle Max is driving. Miele adores that car but can only dream of it, just as he can only dream of the beautiful television starlets he constantly fantasizes about. The fact that Max and Martina are dressed in a punk-anarchist fashion,



that they have been smoking pot in the car, that they are treating so carelessly a vehicle that, for Miele, is the very symbol of the success and happiness for which he longs, drives him insane with rage. His frustrations, fears, and prejudices all come violently to the surface.

Quella A di anarchia disegnata con i pennarelli sui jeans era un affronto a chi si spacca la schiena sotto la pioggia gelida per mantenere l'ordine, quelle canne lasciate nel posacenere erano un oltraggio a chi una volta ha fatto un tiro per sbaglio a una canna ed è stato tutta una settimana con l'angoscia di essere un drogato, quelle lattine di coca-cola buttate sotto i sedili [...] erano un insulto a chi possiede un'Alfa 33 Twin Spark, e la domenica se la lava alla fontana e si cerca i pezzi di ricambio usati. [...] Tutto ciò che quei due rappresentavano, in definitiva, era uno sfottò a lui e all'intero corpo di polizia.

Quei figli di puttana lo stavano prendendo per il culo. (168-69)

Before discussing Miele's twisted attitude any further, it is useful to make a preliminary consideration. The policeman is certainly narrow-minded, angry, and stupid—and this is not the only episode that shows it. Ammaniti depicts him as a caricature and, through him, clearly criticizes the myths of consumer society and the arrogance and unreliability of the police. Yet, as often happens in this novel, there is something slightly disturbing beneath the surface. The description of Miele's stupidity and abusive behavior echoes the general distrust toward the police and judicial authorities sadly common in Italian society. However, it is also true that policemen in Italy risk their lives for a mediocre, inadequate salary and that many are honest officers who truly believe in their mission.<sup>45</sup> So beneath the irony, the episode about Miele reveals still another problematic aspect of Italian society: becoming a policeman was/is still a good prospect for poor, not-well-educated young boys, and the bitterness and sadness that can be sensed beyond

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<sup>45</sup> On the judiciary level, the massacre (*strage*) of Piazza Fontana (1969) is only the most egregious of many crimes without a culprit, in spite of many trials. Italy is progressively becoming the country where nobody is responsible for anything, and where police and judges cannot be trusted.

Ammaniti's sarcasm recall, even if just briefly, Pasolini's provocative declaration: "Io sto con i poliziotti."<sup>46</sup>

As Miele's thwarted logic shifts from bitter reflections on social disparities to the artificial notion of a personal offense, his thirst for revenge gets out of control. He becomes really abusive. He heavily insults and mistreats the young couple, he searches them for drugs, he hits and humiliates them, until, suddenly, he looks at Max. The boy is on the ground, under the rain, his wrists in handcuffs, his trousers fallen down at his ankles. He is crying, and Miele realizes that he has gone too far. Surprisingly, says the omniscient narrator, he starts feeling something that resembles pity. For a moment, it looks as if rage may subside and Miele may come to his senses, but it is precisely at that point that Max says something to which the policeman reacts as if he were facing a poisonous snake "un velenoso cobra che gonfiava il collo" (176). What transforms the helpless boy into a poisonous snake is a simple question: Max just asks the policeman why he behaves this way, why the rage, why the abuse. Just that. Just "Perché?" (176) It is this question that pierces Miele like a knife. This question is probably the real, key question of the whole novel, to the extent that Ammaniti creates a chapter that has nothing to do with the plot, just to have someone—someone who reminds us of Pietro— ask "Perché?"

The importance of this issue is also underlined by a very peculiar use of italics:

"Perché ti comporti così?"

Miele fece due passi indietro.

Come se improvvisamente a terra non ci fosse più [...] [Max] ma un velenoso cobra che gonfiava il collo.

"Alzati. Le domande le faccio io. Alz..."

(*Spiegagli perché ti comporti così*)

...ati" balbettò.

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<sup>46</sup> In his well-known poem, Pasolini publicly and provocatively takes the side of the police after a fight between policemen and students at Villa Giulia in Rome in 1968, arguing that policemen were the real representative of the working class, while students were part of the middle-upper class (Pasolini 1968).

*(Diglielo)*

*Che cosa?*

*(Digli la verità. Spiegaglielo, su. E non cacciargli balle. Così ce lo spieghi pure a noi. Che non abbiamo capito bene. Diglielo, forza, che aspetti?) (176)*

This is a stylistically complex and even confusing exchange, in that it takes the reader a while to figure out who is speaking in italics. First, Ammaniti uses the italic font in parenthesis, to indicate that a different narrator is directly (and provocatively) addressing the character: “*(Spiegagli perché ti comporti così)*.” It actually seems that the old narrator has suddenly disappeared and a new one, internal and external at the same time, has sneaked into the story and taken over the role. As italics often conveys the inner thoughts of characters, the reader automatically perceives these words as more authentic, more sincere. Then, Ammaniti uses the italic font again, this time without parentheses, when the character answers the new narrator’s exhortation: “*Che cosa?*” Here, the reader has the impression of witnessing a sort of private conversation between the new narrator and Miele, a behind-the-curtain exchange that is not heard by the other characters present on the scene. Finally, Ammaniti uses italics in parentheses once again to indicate that the new narrator is addressing both the character and the reader—as implied by the use of “*noi*”—thereby expanding the topic outside the novel: “*Così ce lo spieghi pure a noi.*” In a few lines, therefore, Ammaniti manages to involve the reader and build a climax around the crucial issue of rage, violence, and justice. Miele’s long answer to such a central ethical question is simultaneously trivial (and therefore perfectly plausible), appalling (for the very same reason: it is verisimilar), and parodic (the amount of technical details Miele knows about Max’s father’s car is just ridiculous). Officer Miele is enraged simply because he is frustrated, because he adores luxury cars (that one in particular) and he will never be able to afford one, because he can only dream of the lifestyle and the beautiful women shown on TV (the whole episode is studded with TV references), because his salary does not allow him to live

out any of his TV-induced dreams. In short, he is enraged because he feels he is a victim. And he is: he is the pathetic, foolish victim of a consumer society in which TV defines one's intellectual horizon, of a world that offers happiness wrapped up in a nice car or a tropical getaway or a beautiful starlet, as if the fictional lifestyle advertised on TV could guarantee a happy life. Miele lives in a social system that does not allow him to achieve the goals that the system itself proposes. As he is not capable of critical thinking, he becomes angry, enraged, and abusive.

**As Real as “Seen on TV.” Authenticity and Fiction in *Ti prendo e ti porto via*.**

In his article “L’immagine autentica. Dietro lo specchio catodico di Niccolò Ammaniti,” Alberto Bianchi argues that the collective imagination created by visual media pulls the strings of Ammaniti’s characters, guiding them like a sort of puppeteer:

Animati da pulsioni apparentemente irrazionali, più che agire sembrano essere agiti da immagini televisive o cinematografiche, slogan pubblicitari, scorie di immaginario massmediatico, divinità di un olimpo di serie zeta: Starsky e Hutch, Fausto Coppi e il peschereccio Findus, John Wayne e i Ferrero Rocher, il conte di Montecristo e Raffaella Carrà, l’ispettore Callaghan e le Tenerezze del Mulino Bianco. (343)<sup>47</sup>

Bianchi’s description of how the language and images imposed by the media govern the characters’ lives recalls Slavoj Žižek’s definition of the big Other (aka the Symbolic Order, that is, the system of unwritten laws and codes that controls individuals’ behavior). In his essay *How to read Lacan* (2006), Žižek compares the invisible influence of the Symbolic Order, “society’s unwritten constitution,” to the instructions covertly given to soap opera actors, who “wear tiny receivers in their ears that tell them what to do, and they learn to act out what they hear” (8). The impact of cinema and television on the inhabitants of Ischiano Scalo is certainly related to this notion. It

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<sup>47</sup> Alberto Bianchi is Associate Professor of Italian Studies at Wheaton College.

comes through in the syntax, the lexicon, and the syncopated rhythm of the text and blatantly permeates the socio-cultural landscape depicted by Ammaniti: while the story is studded with references to popular programs and actors, television defines the one and only cultural horizon that all the characters—and many readers—have in common.<sup>48</sup> The influence of media is so pervasive, that in Ischiano reality seems to be authentic only if it conforms to a model seen on screen. A few episodes are particularly significant in this regard; the most revealing involves the policeman Miele.

Miele's behavior often seems to be guided by an invisible media-generated script. Miele's brutal and cruel behavior imitates fictional stereotypes such as Clint Eastwood, inspector Callaghan, and Steve McQueen, "uomini tutti d'un pezzo. Uomini di ghiaccio che ti sparavano in bocca senza fare una piega" (Ammaniti 166). The virtual screenplay that pilots the policeman is so deeply ingrained that nothing seems to shake it, not even truly dramatic situations. When he breaks into the school raided by Pierini and his gang, thinking that thieves might have shot his dad, he comes to the rescue of his father as if he were interpreting a dramatic role in a movie: "mentre correva non riusciva a non pensare a quel grande film dove il poliziotto Kevin Kostner trova il cadavere di Sean Connery [...] "Ti hanno ucciso papà? Rispondi!" [...] Si era inginocchiato accanto al cadavere del padre come se da qualche parte ci fosse una cinepresa" (219).

This "script" has two consequences. On the one hand, it works as a defense mechanism that shields the characters from their painful emotions by shifting their feelings from the plane of reality to that of fiction. The abovementioned episode is an obvious example. While running toward his wounded dad, Miele feels like an actor in

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<sup>48</sup> From this point of view, Ammaniti's novel is once again a typical example of "extreme writing."

a movie and is more concerned about adhering to an acknowledged stereotype than about the fact that his father might be dead. In other words, by perceiving his life as if it were a representation on an imaginary screen, he avoids the full emotional impact of the pain and grief he would feel if he experienced the event as real.

On the other hand, and paradoxically, it is precisely by conforming to a media stereotype that Ammaniti's characters become "real," as if the faithful reproduction of the fictional standards were the ultimate sign of authenticity. As Alberto Bianchi argues: "E la realtà che vivono acquista verità nella misura in cui è riconducibile a quelle stesse immagini" (Bianchi 343). The incongruous endorsement of reality by fiction is especially evident in two passages. The first regards Max, the student mistreated by Miele. While he is being brutalized by the policeman, Max suddenly estranges himself from the situation and sees himself from the outside. He considers that if that moment of his life were a scene of a movie, he would truly appreciate its realism:

Era perfetta. Da copione.

E la cosa più assurda è che stava accadendo a lui, a lui che era un appassionato di cinema d'azione, a lui che [...] avrebbe apprezzato molto una scena così tosta. Avrebbe applaudito per il suo realismo. Per la violenza inusitata che il regista era riuscito a metterci dentro. Che strano, ora c'era in mezzo, proprio lui, proprio lui che avrebbe applaudito... (174)

The intrusion of a fictional perspective into reality has the unexpected effect of throwing off Max's passivity: after seeing himself as if he were acting in a movie, the boy actually finds the strength to face the "real" situation and react to Miele's abuse—probably because, at this point, he unconsciously decides to behave like a movie hero. The second episode regards Graziano Biglia, the novel's co-protagonist. After his frivolous and self-centered girlfriend Erica has mistreated him for the thousandth time, the playboy decides that he must finally find the strength to leave her. When he brings the subject up, she barely listens to him, thinking that he will eventually decide to give

her another chance, as usual. This time, however, Graziano is truly determined to end the relationship. To convince Erika that he is sure of his decision, he speaks to her in a calm, detached, firm way, just like Robert De Niro in *Love Letters* (35). And it works. Erica realizes that Graziano is serious about leaving her precisely because, this time, he looks like an actor: “Sembra un attore americano. [...] Ad un tratto le viene da pensare [...] che questa volta faccia sul serio” (36). Therefore, it is only when Graziano’s demeanor conforms to a fictional and shared code that his intention is perceived as authentic. Another example of the influence of television models, albeit much more marginal, is found in *Certi Bambini*, when Rosario casually witnesses a lovers’ fight. After a quarrel with her lover, the woman walks away assuming a typical attitude codified by television: “imitando, senza accorgersene, centinaia di separazioni televisive” (16).

The fact that reality is perceived as such only when it is seen as if through an imaginary screen that “elevates” it to the status of fiction is a consequence, of course, of the post-modern obsession with representation(s), which has been widely analyzed in the last decades, from Guy Debord’s *The society of the Spectacle* (1967) to Baudrillard’s famous essay *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), just to cite two seminal theoretical works on the subject. As discussed in the introduction, the incessant exposure to mediated events shown on TV misappropriates individuals’ personal experience and undermines their ability to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic, with the consequent dissolution of reality into “l’inconsistenza dell’immaginario” and the confusion between the two spheres (Scurati 32). In his essay *La letteratura dell’inesperienza* Antonio Scurati claims that television, from the moment it became an integral part of our everyday life, has been “stealing” experience away from individuals at an unprecedented rate. Through the accuracy and high quality

of the images and their supposed “real life” tenor, often combined with a “real time” effect, television actually claims to give access to a real experience through its representation:

L’immagine [...] finge di non essere una finzione, la sua presenza pseudo-naturale nega il proprio statuto di rappresentazione infinitamente manipolabile. Mente sulla propria possibilità di mentire. [...] Siamo al colmo dell’illusione mediatica, che consiste nel far credere di poter avere accesso direttamente ad un’esperienza vissuta senza illusione alcuna. (53-54)

In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek expresses the same notion when he affirms: “Virtual reality is experienced as reality without being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience ‘real reality’ itself as a virtual entity” (12).<sup>49</sup>

Ammaniti’s characters perfectly illustrate the destabilizing effects of the uncontrolled merging of reality and representation typical of mass culture. Trapped in a diabolic game of mirrors in which actuality and fiction turn into one another other until the the original source of their endless reflections is lost, they can only look at their experience and their emotions through an image reflected on a screen. As a consequence, Ammaniti’s characters are simultaneously fake—in the sense that they are estranged from themselves and from their real life, as if they were anesthetized—and paradoxically authentic, as representation is their only access to reality. In other words, they are as real “as seen on TV.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, television also produces a fake actuality/world that has no need of an objective, factual, external reference point: in the mediatic universe one representation refers to the other, so that the chain-production of images becomes an autonomous constellation that instead of explaining the event actually *becomes* the event itself. As Baudrillard argues: “The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational” (2).

<sup>50</sup> Readers are aware of this game, but they are also part of it, as Ammaniti’s style often puts them in the position of spectators: the “Perchè?” passage previously



This “fictional authenticity,” however, lacks something: it lacks precisely that essential, traumatic nucleus that Daniele Giglioli investigates in his essay *Senza Trauma* (as seen in the introduction), it lacks the painful feeling that Miele avoids by identifying with Sean Connery, it lacks the deep inner contact with oneself—and the other—that constitutes the core of true communication, as Graziano finds out. In other words, it lacks the authenticity of emotions and the profound, substantial truth of traumatic experiences. The result, not surprisingly, is an abyssal emotional and spiritual emptiness.<sup>51</sup> More than from a dynamic of repression—which often takes place when facing an excruciating event, and which is the cause of the formation of traumas—the widespread and all-encompassing sense of unreality typical of television culture depicted in the novel stems from a lack of recognition, a denial of truth that leaves precisely the unbearable void that, according to Giglioli, needs to be filled through a continuous evocation of trauma through language, as discussed in the introduction.

Significantly, the denial of trauma—that is, of suffering and pain—does not only affect the characters’ perception of their own feelings, it also determines their perception of others’ emotions: as other people’s lives are also seen as if they were shown on a screen. Miele does not feel/realize the import of the suffering he is inflicting on Max and cannot be empathic toward him. In other words, the fake reality in which the characters are immersed seems to be (one of) the reason(s) for their dysfunctional behavior *and* their cruelty. Through the episode of the policeman Miele, therefore, the

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analyzed is just one example of the way the author plays with the cinematic dimension of the text. In other words, while Ammaniti unveils the dangers of mixing reality and its representations, he simultaneously deploys a technique that imitates visual media and involves the readers in the fictional work he is creating, triggering a thought-provoking short-circuit in the readers, a *myse en abime*.

<sup>51</sup> The characters are surrounded by an emotional and spiritual void: “I personaggi di Ammaniti, traballanti fantocci inconsapevoli, sono veri, sono autentici, e lo sono proprio in virtù della loro inconsapevolezza, della mancanza di ‘movente’ per le loro azioni, del loro nulla e del vuoto che li circonda” (Bianchi 343).

novel touches on a form of moral panic linked to the unreliability and brutality of the police. At the same time, it suggests a generalized state of widespread ethical indifference and lack of empathy that has become a common trait in our consumer society, for which a certain television culture is deeply responsible.<sup>52</sup>

### **Nobody is Safe. Indifference and Violence in *Certi Bambini***

Indifference and lack of empathy, together with violence, brutality, or simply lack of respect permeate the environment in which Rosario lives. The whole story is punctuated by episodes of ordinary wickedness, everyday unkindness, and unnecessary cruelty. The narrator depicts these events as matter of fact and does not express any disapproval or criticism. In this perspective, the man at the supermarket who refuses to give his unused coupons to the old woman who timidly asks for them or the man who sneaks the shy girl's seat away on the subway and does not give it back are just two examples of standard petty abuse, of a common behavioral code in a social context where the concept of kindness toward a fellow human being is simply absent. Like hostility, physical violence is depicted as an ordinary, arbitrary everyday occurrence. Normal people are random victims of violent assaults: an accidental passer-by is brutally beaten up by the criminals who are destroying Santino's bike, and a young innocent clerk is killed because he is "colpevole di parentela," he is guilty of being related to someone. In Rosario's world, nobody is safe. The fact that violence hits so randomly obviously recalls the dysfunctional dynamics of Pietro's home and of

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<sup>52</sup> "Ti prendo e ti porto via è il grande affresco di un'Italia burina, *parvenue* e un po' beccera, del Mulino Bianco e dell'abito firmato, un'Italia ossessionata dall'immagine, abbagliata dalla parvenza, ammaliata dalla sirena televisiva, un paese che è laboratorio privilegiato della civiltà della tecnica perché arricchito troppo in fretta, passando da un semi-analfabetismo diffuso alla cultura mass-mediatica avanzata" (Bianchi 342).

Ischiano Scalo, and it is clear that the settings of both novels—as different as they may be—portray and criticize the same amoral and corrupted attitude that permeates everything. On another plane, and on a referential level, the lack of any moral sense, the degraded environment, and the use of dialect in *Certi Bambini* brings to mind Pasolini's *Ragazzi di Vita*.

A true product of his environment, Rosario does not even contemplate the existence of categories such as good and evil. His response to external situations depends only and solely on his feelings at a given moment. He can be equally cruel or generous, according to his mood; he doesn't even contemplate the possibility that certain things are morally unacceptable, or that other people have different feelings, wishes, and points of view. As De Silva states in an interview, "Per Rosario l'agire non ha nessuna etica che lo sovrasti e gli consenta di elaborare le istruzioni ricevute, per lui le categorie del male e del bene non esistono" (Cervasio).

Rosario's detachment from feelings and emotions—his defensive strategy, as seen before—is reflected in his impassible facial expression: "Rosario di espressioni non ne ha quasi. Per la sua faccia è sempre tutto normale. Come se la meraviglia o lo smarrimento o l'allegria o la pena o la ripugnanza non hanno presa su di lui" (18). Interestingly enough, the three beastly criminals the protagonist hires to destroy's Santino's bike show equal indifference toward good and evil, together with a generalized hostility toward the world, which is perceived as a faceless tyrant:

Per loro non c'era categoria. [...] facevano lavori legali e lavori sporchi, per loro non c'era molta differenza. Gli orari di apertura e di chiusura dei bar, il traffico, il divieto di sosta, l'affitto, le bollette, le tasche vuote quando finivano i soldi, il mondo che continuamente chiedeva di venire a patti con la regola, erano un tiranno senza faccia. (100)

The characters' alienation from their own feelings and actions—and from the impact of their deeds on other people—partially recalls policeman Miele's disaffected attitude.

The policeman's unmotivated cruelty, the abyssal absence of respect and empathy for another human being are echoed in De Silva's novel by the lack of a moral sense guiding people's actions, by the general unkindness, by random aggression, by the fact that everybody seems to think that it is normal to savagely beat a friend in order to establish one's position as the boss, and by the notion that the Camorra is the recognized local authority. It does not come as a surprise that Rosario commits his first murder without thinking about what he is doing. His emotional distance and indifference make him metaphorically blind toward the human life that he is about to take. He doesn't see the implications of his criminal action, he is just carrying out a task:

Rosario va a uccidere con la testa piena di ordini e una specie di ignoranza. [...] Si è addestrato all'obbedienza fino a sviluppare come un disinteresse per quello che dovrà succedere, fino a pensare all'uomo che ammazzerà come a una conseguenza meccanica delle istruzioni, a un fatto, una cosa che lo riguarda solo in quanto prova morente dell'esecuzione. (28)

### **The Blindness of Adults. *Certi bambini***

In *Certi bambini*, the narrator's detached voice is much of what gives the story its whistle-blowing quality: in particular, the removed narrative point of view puts the reader in the position of a detached observer, just like the narrator. As a consequence, readers do not really get to know Rosario: they have no information about his past, they catch only quick glimpses of his intimate thoughts, they do not really know his inner world or the deep reason why he is so hostile. Just like most of the adults in the novel, they are blind to many significant aspects of Rosario's existence, and, metaphorically, they do not really *see* the child protagonist. If anything, they just watch him from a distance.

The theme of adults' blindness toward children recurs, in different variations, throughout the story. From this point of view, the text once again performs the content it conveys. The novel explicitly refers to adult's blindness in a passage where Rosario

fantasizes about beating a man who is sitting in front of him on the train. While the protagonist is envisioning the most violent scenarios, he is aware that he is invisible to the eyes of grown-ups: “Nessuno pensa che da lui possa venire qualcosa di male. Può mettere gli occhi dove vuole, passare dove grandi non possono, a volte restare dove a loro non è permesso. Guardano sempre tutti da un'altra parte” (30). The quotation underlines the lack of attention of adults toward children, as well as Rosario’s invisibility to the adult and institutional world—which is precisely the reason why he is hired by the camorra. The description of the homicide is another obvious example. In this passage, the adult victim walks into a tunnel, sees Rosario in front of him, notices that he is rummaging in his gym bag, and pays him no mind: “Ha visto il bambino con la tuta che apriva la borsa degli allenamenti come se avesse dimenticato qualcosa, ma lo ha trascurato nello stesso momento in cui se n’è accorto” (34). When Rosario takes out his gun and aims at him, the man is so surprised that he does not believe his own eyes; even if he actually sees the weapon, he still does not *see* it, in the sense that he does not register the visual information, he refuses to believe it is real: “Non ha reagito per niente alla vista della pistola. [...] Eppure la pistola l’ha vista. Ce l’ha davanti agli occhi. Semplicemente non ci crede” (34, 35). It is clear that the adult metaphorically refuses to see the (armed) child. The man finally becomes aware of Rosario—of what he is really doing and of who he really is—only after the kid has shot him: “Rosario incontra i suoi occhi *finalmente consapevoli*. L’uomo [...] non leva gli occhi da Rosario, quasi lo ritenesse più importante della ferita che gli ha aperto” (35, emphasis mine). When the man finally *sees* the criminal child and really becomes aware of him, he finally gives him his whole attention, but it is too late.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> As discussed in a previous section, the man can now only fix his eyes on the baby-killer—an attitude that infuriates Rosario.

On a symbolic level, it is obvious that the metaphor of seeing refers to the ability to recognize a person's existence in its complexity. Seeing implies the ability to consider, to listen to, to care for, to help the child who is in front of the adult's eyes, and the blindness of adults toward children once again evokes and denounces the general inability, on the side of grown-ups, to relate to younger generations and guide them.<sup>54</sup> This perspective is confirmed in an interview in which Diego De Silva links *Certi bambini* to the case of Erika and Omar and, more generally, to a crisis of the role of adults in contemporary Italian society:

Ma d'improvviso ci accorgiamo che le cose peggiori ci accadono addirittura sul pianerottolo, in famiglie come quella di Erika. [...] c'è una crisi fortissima dell'adulthood, gli adulti non sono all'altezza dei minori, e quando una società non è in grado di capire i suoi figli, bisogna ripensare tutto. (Cervasio)

In a figurative sense, perhaps the adult character needs to be shaken out of his torpor, of his blindness, he needs to be shot to really see Rosario and all that he represents, to finally take in the tragic reality that has always been in front of him.

This critical outlook on adult society is disclosed in three brief sections without any titles or numbers. They are written almost entirely in italics, and express the voice of common people. The first of these sections, placed between chapter eight and nine, is the most significant and deserves a brief analysis. The narrating voice belongs to a male commuter, and illustrates the typical, repetitive, conventional life of someone

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<sup>54</sup> A similar viewpoint is expressed by Nerenberg, who, speaking of Erika and Omar, also underlines the "failure of a cohort of parents, educators, spiritual leaders, and politicians to comprehend the genesis of the crime and the way it spoke to young Italians throughout the peninsula" (106), revealing the alarming perception of a generation gap between parents and children, and, more generally, between adults and new generations. On a more general level, *Non siamo capaci di ascoltarli: riflessioni sull'infanzia e adolescenza* (2001), by the psychologist Paolo Crepet, specifically deals with the incapacity of parents and educators to listen to and understand the needs of children and adolescents. As mentioned earlier in the text, the involuntary blindness of a parent toward his son is revealed by the desperate words of the father of one of Maso's accomplices, who painfully realizes he does not know his child.

whose horizon is limited to the route that goes from the bus stop to the office and who doesn't want to know, or see, anything else. The passage lists his repetitive daily actions and closes with a meta-narrative sentence followed by a few lines in the standard font.

*La gente vive in pochissimo spazio, e sempre fra le stesse cose. Di tutto quello che pure c'è, si sente solo parlare.*

*Insomma, dicevo, la vita è questa. E tutto sommato non dura neanche molto. [...]*

*Forse è poco tutto questo. Sì, è proprio poco.*

*Ebbe', io sono così interessante, ma così interessante che non mi troverete in nessun libro. [...]*

Rosario ha undici anni. Rosario, Venturino, [...] sono manovalanza impunita. Rosario guarda succedere le cose fino alla fine.

Rosario si prende quello che può finché qualcuno non glielo toglie.

Rosario non vi riguarda.

Rosario vi piace. (77 and 78, emphasis in the text)

Clearly, De Silva deploys two distinct narrative voices to contrast the uneventful existence of the anonymous commuter—"everyman"—to the protagonist's action-packed, violent life. The commuter-narrator is representative of the majority of people who lead a conventional existence and do not want to get involved with children like Rosario—they might actually sit in front of him in the subway without seeing him (Adamo 177). After the description of a boring routine and an uneventful life, the provoking sentence: "*Ebbe', io sono così interessante, ma così interessante che non mi troverete in nessun libro*" introduces a paradox, as it actually appears in the text. This forces the readers to draw an unpleasant parallel between themselves and "everyman," as they, too, are not to be found in a book: they are clearly outside the novel, on the other side of the tracks from Rosario, and are looking at him from a distance. The effect is unsettling, especially after the text switches back to the usual narrating voice that now speaks directly to the reader with hostility. The narrator abruptly assumes a tone of social criticism by affirming that the children are "manovalanza impunita," and addresses the readers accusing them of keeping their distance from Rosario, while at the same time enjoying watching him from afar, like selfish voyeurs: "Rosario non vi

riguarda. Rosario vi piace” (78).<sup>55</sup> Perhaps, just like Rosario’s victim, the readers need to be symbolically “shot” by a brutal accusation to become aware of the existence of children like the baby-killer, in order to *see* them.

The negative connotation of “everyman” is confirmed in the second and third section written in italics. In the first, the “everyman”-narrator refuses to do a little, innocent favor for a woman in a supermarket, for no reason. It is just a little, common, tiny wickedness. The third section, which closes the book, describes average people who buy pastries on Sundays and eat them after lunch, safely locked in their homes, not even remotely concerned about the child they might have bumped into on the street, a child who might just have committed a homicide, a child they have not really seen.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The sentences: “Rosario guarda succedere le cose fino alla fine. Rosario si prende quello che può finchè qualcuno non glielo toglie” were already used at the beginning of the novel (18–19).

<sup>56</sup> Structurally, each of these sections can be considered a supplement in the Derridian sense. As Derrida argues in “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” a supplement is not necessary, but at the same time it adds something that cannot be left out and sheds a new light on the whole, which is nonetheless complete as it is: “The supplement, which seems to be added as a plenitude to a plenitude, is equally that which compensates for a lack” (Derrida 1978, 211–12). Typical examples of supplements, in a literary context, are footnotes, appendixes, codicils, post-scripts. It is only after reading the footnote or the post-script (which means, *belatedly*), that the “text we call present may be deciphered” (212). As far as these sections are concerned, I consider them a supplement not only because they are not part of the plot but, and above all, because they are graphically distinct from the rest of the novel: in particular, they are not numbered and are written in a font otherwise not encoded for narration. Just like footnotes, or post-scripta, these sections offer information that sheds new light on the rest of the novel, and the different voice offers a point of view that forces the reader to reconsider not only Rosario’s story, but also his position within the social parable the novel embodies. Through these provocative passages—these supplements—the narrator has now alerted readers, so that they can reconsider their position and open their eyes to the existence of children like Rosario.



## Chapter Two

### On Seeing. Children and Ogres in *Dei Bambini non si sa niente* and *Io non ho paura*

This section analyzes *Io non ho paura* (2001), by Niccolò Ammaniti, and the controversial novel *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (1997) by Simona Vinci. The main character in *Io non ho paura* is Michele, a sensitive and courageous nine-year-old child, while *Dei bambini non si sa niente* tells the story of a group of children/teenagers: Martina, Matteo, Luca, Greta, and Mirko. Both texts focus on the traumatic events that mark the protagonists' coming-of-age and both explore the failure of parents in guiding and/or protecting their children in their growing up process.

Unlike Pietro and Rosario, whose parents are literally or metaphorically absent, the main characters of these novels live in standard family households, in which adults seem to love and take care of their kids. But the parents' reassuring presence does not have the protective effect one would expect. Despite their love, the mothers and fathers described by Ammaniti and Vinci do not manage to guide and support their children, nor can they shield them from external danger. In *Io non ho paura*, Pino (Michele's dad) wants to earn enough money to give his family a better future, so he takes part in the abduction of a child who is actually Michele's symbolic double. On a figurative level, therefore, Pino simultaneously represents the loving father and the evil ogre that menaces the child-hero; his metaphorically ambivalent position is well depicted in the final scene, when he mistakenly shoots his own son in the leg and then, in shock, desperately calls for help to save him. The protagonists of *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, instead, meet secretly in an abandoned warehouse (the *capannone*) on hot summer afternoons. Far from the unsuspecting adults, the children experiment with their

sexuality and, under the indirect influence of a group of pedophiles, eventually murder Greta, the shyest girl of the group. This horrific event is the consequence of the improper trespassing of the boundary between childhood and adulthood, and leaves the characters as shocked and traumatized as Rosario, the baby-killer of *Certi Bambini*. While the novel denounces the devastating influences of peer groups and of perverted adults, it also disturbingly describes the parents' powerlessness when facing the impenetrability of their children's private world and the potential (or real) hazards menacing their kids. In *Io non ho paura*, instead, the negative influence of grown-ups hurts Michele, but ultimately does not manage to contaminate his childhood, his innocence, and his magic fairy-tale world. It is precisely inside the preserved boundaries of the imaginative dimension of childhood that Michele finds the best cognitive tools to decode reality and gradually develops a whole, mature sense of self.

Both texts are narrated from a child's point of view. This narrative perspective gives the notion of sight/gaze a prominent position: it is through sight that the line between childhood and adulthood is crossed and the main characters are contaminated by the adult world; it is through an ethically conscious gaze that Michele manages to get in touch with Filippo, the kidnapped child; and finally it is because of their literal or metaphorical blindness that parents damage or fail to protect their sons and daughters.

After a brief examination of some of the formal aspects of "extreme-writing," this chapter analyzes these two thought-provoking texts through specific theoretical approaches. In particular, it refers to the interlaced concepts of sight/gaze, surveillance, peer groups, the double, the Other, trauma, the abject, and fairy tales as discussed in selected critical works by Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Bruno Bettelheim.

### Plot, Structure, Style

The main character of *Io non ho paura* is Michele Armitrano, a nine-year-old who lives with his parents and his five-year-old sister in Acqua Traversa, a remote, tiny place located in an undisclosed part of southern Italy.<sup>57</sup> Four houses, their inhabitants, and the surrounding wheat fields are all there is in Michele's life; the village does not offer any form of entertainment or cultural stimuli and, during school breaks, the children get so bored they can't wait to go back to class (10). During the summer of 1978, Michele spends his days playing idly with the other children of the village: Teschio (literally "skull" in Italian), the twelve-year-old obtuse and nasty leader of the gang, the bad boy of the story; Remo, his henchman; Salvatore, a smart nine-year-old who is Michele's best friend; and Barbara, a fat little girl who is constantly bullied and humiliated by Teschio. Though everybody is afraid of the group leader and of his unpredictable temper and cruelty, Barbara is his favorite victim and scapegoat: "In quei giorni era Barbara Mura, la cicciona, era lei l'agnello che toglieva i peccati del mondo"<sup>58</sup> (23). As the only girl (with the exclusion of Michele's sister, who is in another age group), Barbara is an easy target for Teschio's gender-connoted male aggressiveness.

Narrated in the first-person by Michele, the story starts on a hot sunny day, when the kids are running a race to the top of a gigantic, unexplored hill covered in wheat. Midway up, right in the middle of the field, Michele's sister Maria hurts her

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<sup>57</sup> Michele, the first-person narrator, describes his dwelling place as follows: "C'era la villa di Salvatore, [...] un casone costruito nell'Ottocento. E c'erano altre quattro case. Non per modo di dire. Quattro case in tutto. [...] Due case da una parte, due dall'altra. E una strada sterrata e piena di buche al centro. [...] Tutto intorno i campi di grano" (36).

<sup>58</sup> From this perspective, Barbara has something in common with Pietro, but she lacks Pietro's passiveness and good disposition, and is always trying to take revenge, as Michele affirms: "...appena poteva cercava di fregarti" (14).

ankle and calls her brother for help. Michele, who is coming in third, goes back to assist her and loses the race. As a consequence, he has to pay a perilous penance, during which he unexpectedly discovers a deep hole in the ground, hidden by a sheet of corrugated iron and a mattress. As he peers into the hole, Michele gradually discerns a child about his age, emaciated, gaunt, chained, and kept in captivity. Shocked by such an unpredictable and ghastly discovery, he doesn't say a word to the other children; later on, he tries to tell his father, but he won't listen. So Filippo, the kidnapped child, becomes Michele's secret, and Michele starts biking to his hiding place ("the hole"), bringing him food and water. Little by little, the two children become friends. Michele does not understand why Filippo is there, and it is only after a number of bizarre conjectures that he finally realizes the child has been kidnapped and that the kidnappers are the adults of Acqua Traverse, his father and his mother included. The young protagonist is aghast, but he loves his parents and tries his best to come to terms with this shocking reality. Meanwhile, it doesn't take long for the impromptu kidnappers to realize that Michele has seen Filippo—and vice versa. As this might be very dangerous for all of them, Pino makes his son promise that he will stop visiting the captive boy; Michele agrees but he is heartbroken, as he had just assured Filippo that he would not abandon him. A few days later, when Michele understands that the adults have decided to kill their hostage, he decides to break his word and, in the dark, he gets on his bike and secretly dashes to the hill. Arriving there before the adults, he finds Filippo in a cave (his new hiding place) and helps him escape, but in doing so Michele hurts his ankle and remains stuck in the cave. When his father arrives he mistakes his son for Filippo and shoots him in the leg. Before losing consciousness, Michele hears the helicopters of the police and his desperate father calling for help. The novel closes with

Michele's words, while his desperate father is holding him in his arms: "E c'era papà. E c'ero io" (219).

Simona Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* is a truly horrific, hypnotic coming-of-age tale. It tells the story of a murder committed by a group of kids who live in a big apartment complex just outside Granarolo, a little village on the outskirts of Bologna.<sup>59</sup> The group is composed of three ten-year-old children—Martina, Greta, and Matteo—and by two teenagers, the fourteen-year-old Luca and the fifteen-year-old Mirco. The building compound in which the kids live is much more populated than Acqua Traverse (it actually seems to be crowded with families, children, old people) but the cultural horizon appears to be the same, at least for children, who can only choose between hanging out in the cemented courtyard or venturing out to the ice-cream stand around the corner. There is nothing else to do. Shortly before summer vacation, the five protagonists take to meeting daily in an abandoned *capannone*, located in a deserted area about a ten-minute scooter ride from home. There, under Mirco's directions, the children discover their sexuality and experiment with their bodies. Their sexual activities are inspired by the porn magazines provided by Mirco, who obtains them from two shadowy men clearly involved with drugs and pedophilia. Significantly similar to Pierini in *Ti prendo e ti porto via*, Mirco is the villain who actually advances the plot. A victim of sexual harassment as a child and possibly a drug addict himself (this information is intentionally left unclear), he is the unquestioned leader of the group, the one who chooses the members and sets the rules. He is the only member who is past puberty, the perfect metaphorical—and actual—channel through which adult influence can reach the other children. As the content of the printed material

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<sup>59</sup> The building is "uno di quei palazzi che ci sono in tutte le periferie: il parcheggio grande, lo spiazzo davanti, [...] i quadri di controllo elettrico rosso fiammante ai due lati estremi, verso la strada" (6).

that Mirco supplies gradually becomes more perverted and violent, the two men suggest that he take pictures of the children in exchange for money. Under Mirco's pressure, the magazine-based games become more and more brutal and out-of-control until, without even realizing how, the children rape and kill the sweet and passive Greta.

In addition to their common coming-of-age theme, the novels share a similar setting. Granarolo and Acqua Traverse are both located in the proximity of boundless, sun-drenched fields stretching out to the horizon, where, during the summer, children spend their days far from the adults' controlling gaze. Vinci's book opens with Martina standing in front of "il campo di granoturco, altissimo" (5), while the first page of *Io non ho paura* reads: "Quell'anno il grano era alto. [...] le piante erano più rigogliose che mai. [...] Ogni cosa era coperta di grano" (5-6). The bucolic images evoke the idea of a countryside where children can play freely and innocently, but it is precisely in the middle of these open fields that the novels' tragic events take place.<sup>60</sup> In both texts, the contaminating (real or virtual) presence of corrupted adults turns the idyllic environment into a scene of trauma.

There are a few significant correspondences on a formal level, too: both stories are narrated from a child's point of view, both texts deploy a colloquial style and simple vocabulary and syntax, and both narrative structures unfold via a sequence of numbered, untitled chapters consisting of a host of brief sections graphically separated by a blank space. Not encoded in any specific way, these sections come one after the other like the scenes of a movie, and the peculiar blank spaces function as a sort of cinematic cut introducing the next scene. In both texts these stylistic choices enhance

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<sup>60</sup> The adults of Acqua Traverse simply believe there are no dangers in the fields and in the streets: "Macchine non ne passavano. Pericoli non ce n'erano" (10).

the vividly graphic narrative style and meaningfully contribute to the cinematic effect of the narrative works.

The structures of the two novels show meaningful differences as well. The plot of *Io non ho paura* closely follows the *fabula*: the chain of events develops smoothly and consequentially, and the occasional flashbacks or prolepses are only used to make the narrative more intriguing. In this case, the novel's linear gait contributes to conveying the impression that Michele's traumatic coming-of-age will eventually be integrated into a balanced development of his personality. On the contrary, the story in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* is told as a lengthy flashback that starts in chapters four and five; the first three chapters depict the dramatic aftermath of the tragic key event and serve to slowly but effectively build up the readers' expectation and interest. In a similar way as in *Certi bambini*, the disrupted time sequence reflects the characters' troubled state and, above all, echoes the deep rupture that trauma causes in the protagonists' psychic life (an aspect that will be discussed in length further on).

Vinci's uncanny novel certainly communicates a much more disturbing feeling than Ammaniti's. In *Io non ho paura* the reader identifies with Michele, who is the victim of Pino's criminal behavior: it is clear that Pino is the one to blame, and nothing bad would have happened if he had not become a criminal. In other words, the story—just like a fairy tale—conveys a reassuring lesson for adult readers: “Behave honestly, and things will be fine.” In *Dei bambini*, instead, the positions of persecutors and victims are not so clear. The story is told by a third-person narrating voice that alternates between the point of view of one of the children and an omniscient position. Vinci's extensive use of free indirect speech—interspersed by free direct speech—makes the children's voices and points of view blend together, so that no character ever stands out as a separate entity. Martina is undoubtedly the focus figure (her perspective opens and

closes the novel), but Vinci spotlights the group as an autonomous, self-ruling, homogeneous entity. The impersonal effect of this narrative technique enhances the unsettling quality of the novel because neither the children nor the “ogres” are clearly identified. Martina and her friends represent virtually any group of (pre-) teenagers and, in the same way, evil people have no identity. Unknown corrupted adults can elude the surveillance of mothers and fathers and hurt the children, unseen, without the parents even noticing. If there is a lesson in this novel, it is definitely not reassuring: danger can come from anywhere, at any time, and it can hit anyone.

### **Good Children and Evil Adults. The Reconciling Narrative Perspective of *Io non ho paura***

In both novels analyzed in this chapter the world of children is separated from the universe of adults by an obvious, symbolic line of demarcation. In *Dei bambini* this boundary is firmly established and must not be inappropriately trespassed, as the plot demonstrates; in *Io non ho paura* the question is more nuanced.

In Ammaniti's novel, the contrast between generations is made explicit as early as the second page, when the first-person narrator proudly declares that only children dare going out in the blazing light of the afternoon heat, while adults lock themselves inside their dark homes: “Ad Acqua Traverso gli adulti non uscivano di casa prima delle sei di sera. Si tappavano dentro, con le persiane chiuse. Solo noi ci avventuravamo nella campagna rovente e abbandonata” (6). While the use of “solo noi” emphasizes the distinction between the two age groups, the whole sentence hints at the symbolic contrast between children/light and adults/darkness, an anticipation of the figurative link between grown-ups and evil that is made more and more explicit in the course of the story. This antithesis, however, is not absolute. Teschio is a kid, but he is vicious;



Salvatore is a good child and Michele's best friend, but he betrays the protagonist's secret in exchange for a driving lesson; Michele's parents are criminals, but they are also loving toward their son and daughter. The notion that the boundary between (good) children and (evil) adults is not so impermeable is confirmed on a formal level by the presence of two different narrating voices that belong, respectively, to the nine-year-old Michele (the internal, intradiegetic narrator) and to the grown-up protagonist, who comments on the events of his childhood by unexpectedly dropping in a sentence here and there (the extradiegetic narrator). The sudden shift of perspective has a disconcerting effect. The blunt change contradicts the author-reader pact established at the very beginning of the book, when the narrator is clearly a child, and inserts a slightly discomforting streak of literary ambiguity in the novel. The reader is actually given a clue of this as early as page six in a sentence clearly not uttered by a nine-year-old ("Quella maledetta estate del 1978 è rimasta famosa come una delle più calde del secolo"). But the adult narrator does not come into the open until twenty pages later when, on page twenty-two, a thirty-something Michele makes a remark regarding Barbara, the scapegoat of the group: "A distanza di ventidue anni non ho ancora capito come facesse a sopportarci" (22). One of the possible effects of this revelation is that the reader might feel confused, if not betrayed, as Anthony Cristiano argues in his article "I'm Not Scared...I'm Marketable": "What makes it ambiguous is that both voices speak as participant in the events of the story. What is more confusing is that the narrator is an unreliable and intrusive one at the same time, and even omniscient at times" (3). Cristiano is right, but only partially, as the effect of the two voices is actually more surprising than baffling. The incursions of the adult Michele in the narration are limited and extremely concise, and his remarks are so rare and circumscribed that they do not really interfere with the rendering of the child, whose innocent,

uncompromising, and courageous perspective preserves his purity. In *Murder Made in Italy*, Ellen Nerenberg underlines that the marginal adult presence actually reinforces the child's vision: "Consequently, what emerges from *Io non ho paura* is a nostalgia for the emphatic child guided by a sense of moral justice" (231).

In truth, Michele is morally untouched by adults' criminal behavior (unlike Petro and Rosario, who are contaminated by corrupted and/or inadequate adults and institutions). Violence and evil have no grip on him: he is certainly hurt—and physically wounded—by his father, but his nature does not change and he does not become abusive. In this respect, the narrative shows that the contact between good children and evil adults can be dangerous, but it is not necessarily destructive: the novel's open ending leaves the impression that Pino might become a better father (and individual) because of Michele. This concept is echoed on a formal level by the episodic presence of the grown-up narrator, who embodies the conceptual bridge between an ethically sound childhood and an adult condition that still can relate to childhood's innocence and moral soundness. Significantly, thirty-year-old Michele looks back with nostalgia and recognizes a magical power in childhood, a familiarity with the realm of imagination that he regrets having lost: "Da piccolo sognavo sempre i mostri. E anche ora, da adulto, ogni tanto, mi capita, ma non riesco più a fregarli" (118). Since, in the course of the novel, the "monsters" are identified as adult delinquents, the sentence assumes a symbolic value that implicitly confers childhood an ethical power that adulthood has lost.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, however, the presence of the adult narrator indicates the possibility of integrating this childhood quality into an adult personality. Thus the trespassing of the line between children and grown-ups is kept under control

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<sup>61</sup> Michele's father says: "I mostri non esistono. [...] Devi aver paura degli uomini, non dei mostri" (54, 188).

in both form and content: the flaws of criminal adults affect the main character, but not to the extent that he loses his righteousness. The potential damage is avoided by maintaining the reassuring perimeter of a solid moral order.

### **Seeing and Trespassing the Line in *Dei bambini non si sa niente***

Vinci's novel contrasts the world of children and that of adults in a much more extreme, tragic, and hopeless way. In *Dei bambini*, the line that separates the private world of children from that of adults coincides with the perimeter of the *capannone*, the private space where no grown-ups are admitted. However, the walls do not protect the kids from all intrusions: while they block out parental control, they let in the perverted gaze of Mirco's adult friends in the form of pornographic material (55). By imitating adult (perverted) sexuality, Martina and her friends cross the line between childhood and adulthood way too early and in an inappropriate, unsupervised manner, so that there is no way back. As Nerenberg affirms, this topic is the focus of the story: "the collapse of distinction between child and adult lies at the heart of Vinci's novel" (213). Martina, the most reliable character, initially believes that it is possible to be, simultaneously, an adult and a child: "Non ci ho mai pensato, che i nostri corpi potessero farsi male. Non ho mai pensato se erano cose giuste o sbagliate, erano cose, erano i nostri giochi, era come essere fratelli e sorelle, come essere grandi, ma piccoli" (147). But when, at a certain point, children make their appearance in the porn pictures, Martina and her friends become aware that the two categories cannot really mix: "Quei corpi lì non erano come quelli delle altre riviste. Erano come i loro. [...] Però, cosa c'entravano con gli adulti? [...] Ma i bambini e gli adulti, possono mescolarsi tra loro?" (132) The answer is not given, but the unraveling of events is explicit enough. Significantly, the menacing presence of adults is felt even if they do not really appear

in the photos: “Non c’erano adulti, nelle foto, ma la loro presenza si sentiva, erano lì, tutt’intorno, animali in agguato, con gli artigli già piantati nella carne delle vittime” (120). The pictures are therefore already a metaphor for the *capannone*: corrupted adults are not physically there, but their influence is real, dangerous, and detrimental.

As a stylistic counterpart to the disturbing plot, the narrator occasionally shifts the point of view, provoking an unsettling effect on the reader. For example, in a passage describing the children’s sexual explorations, the narrating voice suddenly moves from an omniscient position to an intradiegetic perspective, and the pronouns “noi” and “tu” pop up unexpectedly:

Guardavano riviste sempre diverse e provavano le posizioni.  
La lingua tra le cosce di Greta, tutti insieme, oppure Martina e Greta in piedi l’una contro l’altra e noi intorno, oppure tu, ecco, mettilo tu, appoggialo al buco e fallo entrare con la mano.  
Alle volte scoppiavano a ridere o discutevano di un dettaglio fino allo sfinimento.  
(91-92)<sup>62</sup>

Such an abrupt change of perspective puts the adult reader momentarily in the same position as the children. The effect of this sudden displacement is that we feel as if we had trespassed the boundaries, sneaked into the *capannone* and intruded into the highly private world of the characters, like devious voyeurs. For a moment we, too, are contaminated through sight, just like the children.

### **“Quando hai visto non torni indietro.” Seeing as Moral Contamination**

The visual perspective of nine-year-old Michele in *Io non ho paura* is maintained in the well-known film by Gabriele Salvatores. In his cinematographic adaptation, the Italian director simply ignored the brief incursions of the adult narrator and shot the whole movie keeping the camera a few feet from the ground, so that

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<sup>62</sup> There is a similar example on page 147.

spectators literally see things from a child's point of view. Salvatore's stylistic choice draws attention to the fact that *Io non ho paura* is, in many ways, a novel about seeing and about children's gaze.

The symbolic importance of sight is anticipated at the very beginning of Ammaniti's story, when Maria falls and breaks her glasses, setting the plot in motion.<sup>63</sup> More importantly, seeing is a key factor in the crucial passage in which Michele offers to perform the penance in Barbara's place after the race, openly showing his deep sense of moral justice for the first time. Michele was actually the last kid to reach the hilltop, but only because he stopped to help his sister, so Teschio wants Barbara—who arrived just before Michele—to show her genitals as a punishment for losing the race. It is not the first time that the little girl has been forced to expose the intimate parts of her prepubescent body after losing game: a few days earlier, she had been obliged to show her breasts to the other children. Michele does not particularly like Barbara, but on that occasion he felt sorry for her: “Io ero stato male, non era giusta quella penitenza” (14). Michele's absolute moral standard shows clearly through the adjective he chooses—unjust, unfair—and becomes even more adamant in the episode on the hilltop. When Teschio reveals that the punishment involves exposing Barbara's sexual organs, Michele thinks: “C'era qualcosa di sporco, di... Non lo so. Di brutto, ecco” (24). Michele's words reveal that the child instinctively recognizes what can be defined as a form of sexual abuse: he does not think that the forfeit is cruel, he defines it as *dirty*, an adjective often used to describe pornographic material or explicit sexual content, something that children are not supposed to see. That is why Michele, who feels responsible for his little sister, does not want her to witness Barbara performing the

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<sup>63</sup> In the novel there are also different modes of seeing: with the naked eye, with glasses, and through the eyes of imagination. It is also interesting to note that Maria is scared if she wakes up at night without her glasses.

penance. The adjective *dirty* connotes Teschio's imposition as inappropriate because, by transforming the childish punishment into a form of sexual abuse, it simultaneously and circuitously transforms a children's game into an adult form of prevarication. As if responding to Martina and her friends' question "Can adults and children mix?" Michele spontaneously takes action to keep the two categories separate: his offer to be punished in place of Barbara actually brings the race-game back to the realm of childhood, thereby reestablishing the appropriate, healthy border between adults and children. The main character seems to instinctively know that the act of seeing is not neutral, that it can be an irreversible experience with devastating consequences, as the events narrated in Vinci's novel dramatically attest.

The abovementioned scene in Ammaniti's novel evokes a meaningful episode in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*. After her first sexual experiences at the *capannone*, Martina remembers a game that the children used to play in the girls' restroom at school, when the teachers were not around. The game was called "guardare le mutande" (underwear watching): the children would make a circle, and the girls, especially the less attractive ones, would take turns stepping inside the ring and showing their underwear in exchange for a snack or for help with the homework. Martina's description of a bulky child and her gross underpants—"Aveva delle mutande ascellari, bianco gesso, incollate a quella che vista così sembrava una pagnotta cruda. Tonda e molliccia"—closely recalls Michele's account of Barbara's still undeveloped breasts—"Sembravano scamorze, delle pieghe di pelle, non molto differenti dai rotoli di ciccio che aveva sulla pancia" (Vinci 54, Ammaniti 15). The actual contents of the two passages, the narrative styles, the language, and the childish similes emphasize the correspondence between the two episodes. However, while the episode involving Barbara is *dirty*, as Michele would say, "guardare le mutande" is just a children's game,

where curiosity is still innocent, children are just children, and the influence of adults is absent. As Martina admits, the game she played at school is completely different from the group's games in the *capannone*, even if some obscure connection links the two experiences: "Non c'entrava niente. Era una cosa del tutto diversa, eppure qualcosa di misterioso legava le due cose" (5). The perceived discrepancy between the two situations anticipates the loss of innocence—and the loss of an innocent gaze—for Martina and her friends. Most significantly, it anticipates the notion that sight can be a dangerous channel of contamination. As Nerenberg argues, Vinci's novel actually "illustrates the problem of children's witness of violence, its consequences, and the way it is absorbed and comprehended," and suggests that the simple act of looking at pictures representing violent scenes is enough to elicit brutal behavior in the onlookers (213). Martina fully understands the crucial import, the symbolic implication of seeing, and states it very clearly: "Lo sguardo è già esperienza. Quando hai visto, non torni indietro. Sei cresciuto, sai" (71). Her words really seem to have been heard by Michele and to have inspired his protective attitude toward Barbara at the top of the hill.

Inside the no-man's-land of the *capannone*, there is no Michele to draw a line between good and evil, no hero to stop the group from murdering Greta. The brutal photos enter the symbolic perimeter of the *capannone*, and—by seeing them—the children trespass the line between childhood and perverted adulthood. The poison of violence creeps into the protagonists' emotional beings and drains out their vitality, leaving a sense of emptiness and dullness: "Stava cambiando qualcosa, per colpa delle foto. Non riuscivano più a ridere. [...] Vita falsa, cose che non sentivano da nessuna parte, dentro" (133). It is like a contagion spreading through sight, and there is no way out, as the narrator plainly declares: "Non erano più uguali a prima" (122).

### Seeing the Face of the Other. Michele's Ethical Gaze.

While in *Certi Bambini* sight is a channel of contamination, in *Io non ho paura* it is the means to establish an ethical relationship with another human being. In this perspective, the notion of seeing is the exact opposite of the concept of metaphorical blindness discussed in the previous chapter. After Michele sees Filippo, he also wants to know, understand, and help him. The ethical nature of the main character's gaze and the symbolic meaning of the relationship between the two children are better explored through a theoretical approach that briefly examines the notions of sight and knowledge and their relation to the Levinian concept of the Other.<sup>64</sup>

In *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, David Michael Levin collects a host of philosophical essays that analyze (and question) the predominance of an ocularcentric perspective in Western philosophical thought. Starting from the assumption that the culture and philosophies of ancient Greece marked the beginning of a theoretical thinking that is “drawn to the authority of sight as the noblest sense,” Levin argues that “our western culture has been dominated by an ocularcentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centered interpretation of knowledge, truth and reality” (2), and examines the different ways in which ocularcentrism has assumed a distinctively modern historical form after the rationalization of sight in the Italian Renaissance and the rationalization of thought that took place with Descartes. The essays explore the connections between “vision and knowledge, vision and ontology, vision and power, vision and ethics” (2, 3) and investigate whether our contemporary culture is still ocularcentric or if it is in the process of transitioning to a different paradigm. It seems, in fact, that the historical and epistemological privilege of sight is

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<sup>64</sup> The Other is written with capital O in accordance with Levinas' formalization of the notion.



still pertinent, but that traditional ocularcentrism—which “endistances and estranges subject and object” in the framework of a spectatorial vision that sees the world as exterior to the subjective self—is subsiding in favor of a dialectical intersubjectivity of gazes, constitutive of social relations based on mutual acknowledgment (12). The essays and contemporary theoretical positions of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Foucault show how the scrutinizing and detached gaze typical of traditional ocularcentrism is being replaced by a different kind of gaze that is affected by the looked-at object and becomes deeply implicated by it.<sup>65</sup>

Emmanuel Levinas’ vision of the Other is particularly relevant to this study. According to Levinas, seeing the face of another human being (the ultimately unknowable Other) is not just an act of objective cognition in which the detached observer examines the observed from a distinct, separated position: the simple fact of seeing the face of the Other implies accepting their invitation to initiate a discourse, it involves entering into a relationship, as Levinas affirms in *Totality and Infinity*: “the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation” (198). In Levinas’ view, the face is the primordial expression, “the source from which all meaning appears” (Levinas 1969, 297). By signifying the prohibition to kill, its mere existence implies the initiation of a relationship that is at the core of any possible discourse:

Exteriority defines the existent as existent, and the signification of the face is due to an essential coinciding of the existent and the signifier. Signification is not added to the existent. To signify is not equivalent to presenting oneself as a sign, but to expressing oneself, that is, presenting oneself in person. [...] The existent qua existent is produced only in morality. [...] The principle “you shall not commit murder” [is] the very signifyingness of the face. (Levinas 1969, 262)

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<sup>65</sup> In addition to this, Levin also affirms that “there certainly is some evidence for a shift in our cultural paradigms: a shift, that is, from the normativity of seeing to the normativity of listening” (3). In this respect, Levin also quotes Arendt, who in *The Life of The Mind* observes that “from the very outset, in formal philosophy, thinking has been thought in terms of seeing [...] Since Bergson [...] emphasis and interest have shifted entirely from contemplation to speech, from *nous* to *logos*” (2).

Yet while the face forbids killing, the extreme vulnerability of its skin invites us to an act of violence:

Access to the face is straightaway ethical [...] There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute [...] The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill. (Levinas 1985, 85-86)

The ethical relationship to the Other is borne out of this tension, out of a gaze that is able to discern that the prohibition to kill is inherent to the invitation to violence. This notion cannot but recall Pierini's and Rosario's brutal reactions triggered by the vulnerable eyes and faces of Pietro and Assuntina. In this perspective, the literary characters represent a form of metaphorical blindness that prevents them from honoring the ethical command expressed by the face of the Other and is at the very source of violence.<sup>66</sup>

The face is not just an object to be known or scrutinized from afar, it cannot be incorporated into a preexistent, abstract notion or image of the Other or be understood and converted into a specific concept.<sup>67</sup> It is uncontainable, and it is therefore the object

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<sup>66</sup> This command apparently interferes with one's freedom: "To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this freedom of a 'moving force,' this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder. The 'You shall not commit murder' which delineates the face in which the Other is produced submits my freedom to judgment" (Levinas 1969, 303).

<sup>67</sup> The face-to-face ethical moment is not derived from an a priori, preexistent theoretical system of morality and is not related to traditional ontological assumptions. In this respect, Levinas moves away from Heideggerian ontology, which "subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, [and] remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to [...] tyranny" (Levinas 1969, 46-47). Levinas' concept of relation to the Other is also different from Heidegger's notion of coexistence: "Heidegger's coexistence is, to be sure, taken as a relationship with the Other irreducible to objective cognition; but in the final analysis it also rests on the relationship with *being in general*, on comprehension, on ontology. Heidegger posits in advance this ground of being as the horizon on which every existent arises, as though the horizon, and the idea of limit it includes and which is proper to vision, were the ultimate structure of relationship. Moreover, for Heidegger intersubjectivity is a coexistence, a *we* prior to the I and the

of a continuous process of knowledge (regarding both the other and oneself) that can never come to a definite conclusion:

The face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not “seen.” It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond. It is in this that the signification of the face makes it escape from being, as a correlate of a knowing. (Levinas 1985, 86-87)

The face defies definition, and its infinite nature lies in that: “Expression, or the face, overflows images” (Levinas 1969, 275). Naturally, the infinite “otherness” of the Other cannot be assimilated to one’s identity, either, to one’s “sameness.” The Other is beyond one’s comprehension. Yet, an authentic relation is possible, provided that the viewer sees the Other in an ethical way:

Vision [...] is a search for adequation; it is what par excellence absorbs being. But the relation to the face is straightaway ethical. [...] I have just refused the notion of vision to describe the authentic relationship with the Other; it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship. (Levinas 1985, 87-88)

The ethical relation to the Other is the only possible mode of relation between two human beings, and it implies assuming responsibility for him/her. It is a moral imperative, and there is no other way: “The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation” (201). Meeting this obligation also implies entering into an all-round relationship, where ethical responsibility involves our entire being: “In this maintaining, looking is akin to touching, which is understood as caressing rather than grasping” (Davies 270-71). In other words, as Norma Bouchard argues, the moment of seeing the face of the Other “becomes a primordial experience [...] [that] does not take place at the level of consciousness, but at the level of sensibility” (Bouchard 125).

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other, a neutral intersubjectivity” (Levinas 1969, 67-68). For Levinas, instead, the dimension of intersubjectivity is not only immediately ethical, but it is also irreducible to a preexisting system of thought.

This fascinating view helps explore the symbolic evolution of Michele's gaze. The main character's attitude toward Filippo seems to follow a trajectory that goes from the notion of a spectatorial distance between the viewing subject and viewed object—proper of the Cartesian epistemological tradition—to the more nuanced concept of the mutual involvement of observer and observed, and finally implies Michele's acceptance of his responsibility for the Other.

When he first looks into the hole, Michele wonders if the shape he sees in the dark is a heap of rags, or perhaps an animal. Only gradually does he discern parts of Filippo's body—a leg, an arm, a head—and understands that what he is looking at is a human being (33). The syncopated rhythm of the passage describing the scene, which consists of a series of short nominal sentences arranged into a sequence of new paragraphs, graphically conveys both Michele's fragmented apprehension of Filippo's body and the representation of the captive child as a heap of disconnected limbs:

No, c'era qualcosa  
 Un mucchio di stracci appallotolati?  
 No...  
 Un animale? Un cane? No...  
 Cos'era?  
 Era senza peli...  
 Bianco...  
 Una gamba...  
 Una gamba! (32)

When he realizes that the heap of rags is indeed a human being, Michele runs away, deadly scared. He doesn't say anything to the other kids, but he cannot stop thinking about it. While biking back home, he remembers that Teschio had claimed ownership of the valley simply because he had seen it first (“Questo posto è mio. [...] Io l'ho visto per primo. Le cose sono di chi le trova per primo”) and, on the same grounds, decides that he now owns the child: “Era mio. Era la mia scoperta segreta” (22, 34). The equation between seeing and owning is certainly not uncommon among children, and

Michele's consideration sounds perfectly verisimilar for a nine-year-old. From this perspective, his attitude has thus far excluded any ethical relationship as described by Levinas and is representative of the detached spectatorial mode of relating to the observed object and, possibly, of the wish to incorporate the Other into one's sameness. On the other hand, Michele's initial effort to discern Filippo already conveys an intention and a determination to "see" that symbolically anticipate his willingness to really meet the Other. It does not come as a surprise, then, that Michele is not satisfied with the abstract idea of owning Filippo and soon wants to know more about the captive child.

The second time the protagonist goes to the hole, he calls to the motionless kid. As he gets no answer, he throws little stones at him to check if he is alive, to no avail. The little pale, unmoving body is not only dead-like, it is also, once again, dehumanized, as the narrator argues: "Non aveva più niente di umano" (50). Meaningfully enough, Michele now decides that he wants to see the child's face in order to understand, to know: "Dovevo vedergli la faccia. La faccia è la cosa più importante. Dalla faccia si capisce tutto" (50). By deciding that he needs to see the child's face, Michele does not simply express the desire to see more. What is at stake here is not a question of "quantity," it is not the desire to acquire more information in order to possess the looked-at object more thoroughly. The mode of vision that matters to Michele is defined by the quality of his gaze; he wants to *see* in such a way that he gets to know, as much as possible, the unknowable entity embodied by Filippo, the Other. At this crucial point in the novel, Michele senses, unconsciously, that he needs to see in a different way, to adopt a different kind of vision through which he can finally see Filippo as a human being. As a consequence, his gaze actually shifts from the field of childish curiosity—and uninvolved observation—to that of ethics. This ethical gaze not

only reintegrates the dehumanized kid into the human realm, it also bestows Michele with a moral depth that defines him as an ethically sound human being and simultaneously gives him the strength to face his most obscure fears.

Strongly determined to see Filippo's face, Michele overcomes his fear and descends into the hole, only to find that the kid's head is completely covered by a filthy blanket. He tries to pull the blanket away, but at that point the kidnapped child suddenly rises up, his eyes closed, his arms stretched toward Michele, in a typical zombie posture. The terrified protagonist frantically makes his way out of the hole, but he cannot forget Filippo's face: "Quella faccia scavata, quegli occhi chiusi, quella bocca spalancata continuavano a balenarmi davanti" (53).<sup>68</sup> The face of the Other/Filippo is scary and haunting but it also—or rather *and therefore*—demands ethical action. The next day, when the image of the kid with stretched arms comes back to Michele's mind and scares him again, the protagonist comes to a deeper insight and understanding. Through his own fear, he identifies with Filippo and suddenly realizes that the kid was scared too, and that he was simply asking for help. This insight makes he decide to help the unlucky child. He starts bringing him food and water, and above all starts building a relationship with him. In short, seeing Filippo's face has elicited an ethical response, a response that will take an even more defined form when, further on in the novel, Michele sees Filippo's eyes.

### **On Seeing and Falling. Greta's Empty Eyes**

The theme of the scary, mysterious hole in the ground is echoed in *Dei bambini*

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<sup>68</sup> Michele does not see Filippo's eyes as the kidnapped child keeps them shut, but this does not diminish the symbolic import of the Other's face. Actually, Levinas even affirms that: "The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes" (*Levinas 1985, 85*). At the same time, the demanding gaze of the Other is the epiphany of the face, as stated further on in this chapter (*Levinas 1969, 75*).

*non si sa niente*: “La notte è piena di buchi. A volte, sembra che si aprano delle strade là in fondo al campo, fosse impreviste nelle quali si può precipitare e non tornare mai più, anche soltanto a caderci con lo sguardo” (26). The sentence cannot but recall the hole where Filippo is held hostage, while at the same time it foreshadows the hole in which Greta will be buried.<sup>69</sup> Most importantly, it links the notion of death (evoked by “mai più”) to the notion of seeing (“anche solo a caderci con lo sguardo”). The poetic image of one’s gaze falling into a hole in the middle of wheat fields is not just a powerful synecdoche or an abstract metaphor of the dangers of straying from the right path. It actually establishes, once again, a connection between seeing and experiencing, and confirms that the act of seeing can have concrete consequences. It is through seeing that one falls into the hole and never comes back, just like Greta and, metaphorically, like all the children in the *capannone*.

The crucial importance of gaze is tragically underlined in Vinci’s novel by the children’s reaction to the only photo where the eyes of the abused child are not covered by a black strip. The picture has a shocking effect on Martina, who suddenly realizes that those children are real, just like herself: “Era l’unica foto senza il rettangolino nero sugli occhi. Questo la rendeva diversa da tutte le altre: era qualcuno. [...] La paura e il dolore sono belli solo se restano senza nome” (130-31). It is the child’s gaze—a gaze that reflects the protagonists’—that gives the portrayed subject an actual, perceived

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<sup>69</sup> Moreover, while Filippo’s obsession with the idea of being dead is mirrored by the actual death of Greta, the lexicon the two authors use in speaking about death and the hole is also similar. The rendering of Martina’s and Michele’s respective considerations about Greta and Filippo are meaningfully akin. Martina thinks: “Forse anche Greta sta così, sospesa in un luogo che non è da nessuna parte, con la terra morbida sulla pelle, dentro gli occhi, le orecchie, la bocca. Terra morbida e fresca e il movimento sotterraneo di grilli, cicale, vermi. Una popolazione muta che fa del suo corpo un luogo di passaggio e nutrimento” (Vinci 164), while Michele conveys an analogous image referred to Filippo: “Me lo immaginavo morto nella terra. Scarafaggi, cimici e millepiedi che gli camminavano addosso, sulla pelle esangue, e vermi che gli uscivano dalle labbra livide” (Ammaniti 44).

identity, while, on the contrary, an eyeless face is as impersonal and inexpressive as a mannequin's, as Martina states (130). In other words, it is only by seeing the victim's scared eyes that the main character becomes aware of the Other, that she can establish an emotional contact with them and feels a compassionate reaction that recalls Michele's. The gaze actually plays an important role in the Levinasian theory:

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one "puts the things in question in giving")—this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. (Levinas 1969, 75)

On that tragic afternoon, Greta's face and eyes are covered in tape, and the children cannot really see her features: "I lineamenti si erano schiacciati sotto la plastica deformandole il viso" (143). Greta has literally become just like one of the children with the black strip on their faces, and the tape that deforms and hides her features prevents the others from feeling a connection to her, from taking responsibility for the (Other) girl. Greta is eyeless (or gazeless) on a narrative level, too: the reader very seldom, if at all, sees through her eyes/perspective. The omniscient narrator offers information about her, but we rarely have the feeling that the narration renders her point of view, as is often the case with Martina, Matteo, and Mirco. At a certain point she is even depicted trying *not* to see what is happening next to her, looking at the table with "gli occhi vuoti" (45). The lack of Greta's perspective, of her gaze/eyes, is mirrored by her passive attitude throughout the novel: Greta is shy and mild and just goes along, reluctantly at times, always following Martina; she never really takes any initiative, she does not seem to really like the games in the *capannone*, she just imitates the others. In a way, therefore, Greta is the perfect victim: since her gaze remains hidden, she is like a mannequin, she is nobody, a no-name. Or, rather, she is anybody and what happens to her is nothing personal. It could have happened to any other member of the gang or to any other shy child: "Nessuno di loro sapeva esattamente perché lei e non Martina,



o Luca o Matteo. Era accaduto così e adesso bisognava andare avanti in questo gioco cattivo” (142). As in a dark game of mirrors, Greta’s blindness reflects both the blindness of the kids’ parents, whose gaze cannot penetrate the *capannone* and, figuratively, the blind destiny that has randomly made her the group’s victim.

### **The Other Side of Blindness: Surveillance in *Io non ho paura***

In the closing scene of *Io non ho paura* Pino shoots his son because he cannot see him in the dark. Pino’s literal blindness figuratively indicates his refusal to recognize and accept his son’s (the Other’s) ethical behavior and personality. Interestingly enough, the shot momentarily blinds Michele too, as if the initiation rite to adulthood would necessarily have to include a temporary inability to see (218-19). All adult inhabitants of the tiny village are accomplices in the kidnapping and, from this perspective, they are metaphorically blind toward the Other. At the same time, they obsessively keep an eye on everything: on the police helicopters, on the news, on the hole, on Filippo, and especially on Michele.<sup>70</sup> For them, seeing means keeping everything under surveillance.

This specific aspect of the novel can be better examined through the theoretical framework traced by Michel Foucault in his seminal essay *Discipline and Punish* (1975). According to Foucault, modern society is based on control, which is the real source of power. The practices of surveillance and discipline, formerly confined to places dedicated to the exercise of restraint and regulation (prisons, armies, schools, hospitals) have progressively and silently invaded all fields of civil society. Modern

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<sup>70</sup> It is obvious that parents keep an eye on their children, but from a certain point in the novel on the reason for the adults’ controlling gaze is clearly linked to their fear that Michele can help Filippo escape, or that Filippo will be able to recognize him after he is set free.

forms of constraint no longer come into being through the imposition of physical pain or coercion; they become effective through the impalpable and extensive exertion of surveillance instead. As in modern societies “the codified power to punish turns into a disciplinary power to observe,” and nobody can really escape the (unconscious) feeling of being exposed to a controlling gaze that imposes and demands discipline and obedience (225). Individuals are actually fabricated by this power, embodied by a number of different methods of supervision that subtly influence or command the subjects’ behavior.

The Panopticon, the ring-shaped model prison famously described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, perfectly depicts the effect of surveillance on individuals. The inmates are isolated in single, contiguous cells whose only window look onto the courtyard, and are under the constant gaze of the watchman who resides in the tower at the center of the round open space. From inside the tower, the officer can see the prisoners but they cannot see him, so they never know if they are being watched or not. The result is that they constantly behave as if someone were watching them, as that the system is effective even in the absence of a controller. In other words, while the inmates are subjected to the (virtual) gaze of the watchman and objectified by it, they are caught up in a power relation in which they interiorize the constraints and make them play upon themselves:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power [...] he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and knows it, [...] inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles: he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (202-203)<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The Panopticon is a type of institutional building designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. The connection between power, discipline, observation, and knowledge is such that the Panopticon, in Foucault’s words, is also a privileged place for examination and experimentation “and for analyzing with *complete certainty* the transformations that may be obtained from men” (205, emphasis mine). Like investigation techniques in

According to Foucault, discipline systems in modern societies work in the same exact way. The controlling gaze of the anonymous watchman has morphed into society's virtual surveillance on individuals: a powerful and impersonal force that demands discipline and obedience on a physical and a psychological plane. This impersonal gaze constitutes the social system, and its enormous power produces a system of knowledge that, in turn, reinforces the power by which it is produced in a self-perpetuating circle. The combination of power/knowledge and discipline/gaze is central in the production of discourse, and any discourse—shaped by the choice of vocabulary and the production of images, texts, and performances—is the result of power relationships that fabricate the individual. Needless to say, the role of mass media is absolutely central in this process.

Acqua Traverse, as tiny as it is, is no exception to the modern “society of surveillance,” as Foucault would say. Michele cannot but feel he is under constant control, even when he is alone:

Quando stavo in strada avevo l'impressione che tutti osservavano quello che facevo. Mi pareva di scorgere dietro le finestre la madre di Barbara che mi spiava [...] Ma anche quando stavo solo [...] quell'impressione non mi lasciava. [...] mi pareva che mille occhi mi guardavano. (172)

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the constitution of empirical science, this examination method, too, produces knowledge. The Panopticon is also an ideal form that can be applied to any institution; it is a way of defining power relations in everyday life, a figure of political technology. It can be identified as the formula for the basic functioning of a society penetrated by disciplinary mechanisms, in which discipline is not identified with a single institution: “it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology” (216). As such, it is a modality that, little by little, has infiltrated any other modality of power and has made it possible to bring its effects to the most minute elements by an infinitesimal distribution of power relations: all non-disciplinary spaces become disciplined. The system also defines itself in positive terms: control, rationalization, and discipline actually increase productivity and welfare in many fields.

Significantly, this thought crosses Michele's mind right after he has unwillingly promised his dad that he will not visit Filippo again, that is, when his inner conflict is at its peak. Torn between his innate ethical drive on one side, and the obedience to his father and to the social imperatives of Acqua Traverse on the other, Michele eventually decides to obey his dad and stop visiting Filippo, even if this means betraying his deepest sense of justice and friendship. As immoral as it is, the social imperative actually wins over Michele's true feelings because the boy has introjected the controlling gaze of the social order and, in Foucault's words, has "become the principle of his own subjection" (202-203). In this perspective, Michele's subsequent decision to break his promise and to follow his own sense of justice severs the tie between surveillance and power and inscribes the protagonist's action in a wider form of civic responsibility that goes well beyond the rebellion of a child against his father and symbolically engages a broader level of political awareness and social activism. From a personal point of view, Michele's decision to disobey his father and follow his true inner calling is a first step toward his future identity as a mature, whole, and autonomous human being.

### **Parents and Children, or the Impossibility of Seeing**

In Vinci's novel, parents' surveillance is a function of their love. The mothers keep a constant eye on the kids playing in the courtyard in order to protect them:

Nello spiazzo: una marea di ragazzini che le madri guardano e controllano dalle finestre. [...] Non hanno paura: sono in tanti, ci sono tutti, si fidano del gruppo, le madri. Si fidano dell'attenzione di tutte le altre, se una si distrae, se una non c'è, qualcuna c'è sempre e li guarda tutti i bambini, non solo i suoi. (16)

The secluded space of the *capannone*, however, blocks out both the parents' affection and their gaze: "Questo era un posto a parte, diverso, con leggi proprie. Un posto dove

lo sguardo dei padri e delle madri, la loro autorità e anche il loro amore, non entravano” (55).

In other words, when it comes to the *capannone*, mothers and fathers are just blind. The metaphorical blindness of the main characters’ parents is involved in both Michele’s injury and in Greta’s death, but in Vinci’s novel this aspect is particularly unsettling since the adults’ symbolic sightlessness does not depend on lack of love or on their wrongdoing. Nothing indicates that the children live in particularly dysfunctional environments or that their parents do not care about them, nor that they are criminals. The descriptions of household scenes, referred primarily to Martina and Matteo, portray typical family dinners or intergenerational discussions about curfews or other ordinary routines. In other words, the mothers and fathers described by Vinci don’t seem to be doing anything particularly wrong, but when it comes to their children’s secret world, they are as blind as the anonymous adults described in *Certi Bambini*. Their blindness is just a consequence of ordinary preoccupations and everyday duties, as evinced by Martina’s statement: “...i suoi, sembrano stanchi. A dir la verità sembrano sempre stanchi, e sembra che non abbiano mai tempo” (19). This unintentional but probably inevitable lack of attention does certainly not imply a lack of love. Yet, its repercussion is devastating.

This aspect of the novel can be better explored by briefly examining Freud’s reading of the dream of the burning child discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (330-31). In his study, Freud reports that a father, whose son had died a few days before, dreamt that his child was standing beside his bed reproachfully asking: “Father, don’t you see I am burning?” The man woke up and realized that his child’s corpse in the adjacent room was indeed burning: the old man who was supposed to have watched over it had dropped off to sleep and a candle had fallen on his son’s arm, burning his

sleeve. Freud's interpretation of this haunting dream has been subsequently discussed by both Jacques Lacan (Lacan 1998a, 53-64) and Cathy Caruth (Caruth 1996, 74-91). Though the details of this theoretical debate are too articulated to be reported here, it is worthwhile recalling some focal concepts relevant to this research.

In his analysis, Freud first argues that the dream simply fulfills the father's wish to see the child alive. He then recognizes that it also realizes the basic function of any dream: to satisfy the individual's desire to prolong sleep and suspend consciousness (373). Paradoxically, though, while the dream allows the father to see his child alive again, it also delays his actual protection of his dead body. According to Freud, this seems to imply that consciousness is simultaneously tied and blinded to a reality that it tries to avoid and that can be faced only in dream. Freud's interpretation is further elaborated by Lacan, who sees the dream as a function of awakening rather than sleeping; in other words, Lacan claims that the dream does not have the function of prolonging the father's sleep, but, rather, of waking him up. In fact, the dream offers access to another, truer reality. The words pronounced by the son are more real than the noises and the glare coming from the next room, which clearly contribute to the production of the dream and to the father's awakening: "Is there not more reality in this message than in the noise by which the father also identifies the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door?" (Lacan 1998a, 58) According to Lacan, then, the dream actually awakens the father to the child's death. In Caruth's words:

Indeed, to the extent that the father is awakened by the dream itself, his awakening to death is not a simple movement of knowledge or perception but rather, Lacan seems to suggest, a paradoxical attempt *to respond, in awakening, to a call that can only be heard within sleep.* (99, emphasis in the text)

Caruth's contribution to the discussion involves the notion of trauma as an event that excludes the possibility of a proper response, as trauma is not experienced fully when it takes place and can only be addressed belatedly (when the feeling associated with it

returns in dreams, or as a reaction to other triggering episodes). The death of a child is, indeed, an event that cannot possibly be met with a proper response, it can only be “seen” too late, it cannot be prevented:

As a response to the child’s request, the plea to be seen, the father’s awakening represents not only a responding, that is, but a missing, a bond to the child that is built upon the impossibility of a proper response. Waking up in order to see, the father discovers that he has once again *seen too late* to prevent the burning. [...] Awakening, in Lacan’s reading of the dream, is itself the site of a trauma, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another’s death. (99-100, emphasis in the text)

The conscious encounter with a child’s—or another’s—death is an inherent impossibility and is necessarily marked by a failure to see: “In his awakening, the father’s response repeats in one act a double failure of seeing: a failure to see adequately inside and a failure to see adequately outside” (Caruth 103). It is precisely this impossibility of seeing that constitutes the very essence of parents’ bond to their child: “The bond to the child, the sense of responsibility, *is in its essence tied to the impossibility of recognizing the child in its potential death*” (Caruth 103, emphasis mine). Caruth’s words, therefore, disturbingly explain the parents’ blindness in Vinci’s novel as a condition inherent to the parent-child relationship: the potential death—and, symbolically, any condition of peril—regarding one’s child can be addressed only belatedly, when it is too late. This notion, along with the impersonal tone of the novel, contributes to giving the hopeless impression that the parents were indeed powerless in preventing Greta’s murder.

### **Monstrous Peer Groups. *Dei Bambini non si sa niente* and *The Lord of the Flies***

In Vinci’s novel, the notions of blindness and surveillance are interlaced with the themes of child sexuality and uncontrolled peer groups. The physical location that brings together all these aspects is the *capannone*, the place where the protagonists

elude parental supervision, experiment with their bodies, and eventually turn into murderers.<sup>72</sup> The children's mutual physical explorations create a unique and profound connection among them; the group that is born out of this dynamic is, literally, another main character in the novel—and a very uncanny one. A self-standing entity, an autonomous organism generated by a mysterious chemical process, the group only exists insofar it is not seen by adults: “Questa è stata la prima volta. La prima volta dentro il capannone. La prima volta che ha cominciato ad esistere questa cosa diversa, questa cosa che erano loro insieme, senza sguardi esterni” (47). The new entity includes everyone and annuls any form of individualism, as Mirco underlines: “...tutti insieme o zero...così non ci fregiamo, così non cambierà mai niente” (83). While it requires its members' total devotion, the group is also protective and nurturing toward all its members, until the appearance of the pedophilic photos sets off a perverse dynamic that turns it into a monster dictating crueler and crueler rules. The mechanism is unstoppable. Each step toward the abyss necessarily leads to the next, until it is too late to go back. In the truly horrific passage describing the escalation of violence that leads to the murder of Greta, the children seem to be completely possessed by an unrelenting force that has transformed their games into an outburst of savage fury directed toward the little girl, a ferocity that none of them can control: “All'improvviso era successo qualcosa. [...] come un virus contagioso, o piuttosto come una febbre comune [...] come se il gruppo fosse un organismo indipendente, che li accoglieva dentro di sé annullando le differenze. [...] Un ritmo violento ed inarrestabile” (117). After the collective violent assault, it is Mirco who actually kills the little girl, while everybody

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<sup>72</sup> Of course, the concept of moral panic (related to both pedophilia and feral children) fully applies to this novel, too, but this is not the focus of this section.



else is literally paralyzed and cannot do anything but watch: “stavano lì pietrificati ad osservare questa scena incredibile” (143-44).

The story narrated by Vinci obviously recalls *The Lord of the Flies* (1954), probably the most famous contemporary representation of the cruel nature of children and the dangers of uncontrolled peer groups. The plot is well known: a number of kids are stranded on a desert island after a shipwreck; soon enough, they form two groups that become, respectively, symbols of civilization and savagery. The “savages,” who are gradually joined by many members of the other party, slaughter a sow and put its head on a stick as an offering to the Beast, the imaginary evil entity that inhabits the island. They kill almost every “civilized” child, until a ship rescues everybody.<sup>73</sup> Golding’s text shows the influence of group dynamics on children and underscores their active participation in such mechanisms. The Beast is not really imposed by anybody: it is created and adored because it evokes the most obscure parts of the protagonists’ selves and allows them to vent their rage and cruel instincts. This notion is made crystal clear in a famous passage in chapter eight, when the Beast tells Simon, one of the “civilized” kids: “You knew, didn’t you? I’m part of you?” In other words, while the Beast is a monster that swallows the children’s individualities in one big gulp, its existence is only possible because each single child feels the allure of evil, even if in a conflicted manner.

The group in Vinci’s story emanates the same obscure, captivating force as the Beast in Golding’s novel. Just like many children on the island, the kids in the *capannone* are hypnotized, fascinated, and want to be part of that obscure entity. Noone

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<sup>73</sup> The hen that Teschio and his group killed and put on a stick after they reached the top of the hill closely recalls the sow’s head of Jack and his gang. Ammaniti’s description is another example of “extreme writing”: “La testa le pendeva da un lato, come un orripilante pendaglio intriso di sangue. Dal becco socchiuso colavano pesanti gocce rosse. E dal petto le usciva la punta della canna” (20).

wants to be left out: every child is ready to obey its rules and take whatever step is required, as if its increasingly evil demands are resonating with some hidden part of themselves. Mirco leads the gang and makes the decisions, but the others never disagree or rebel. They perceive that whatever happens, no matter how horrible it is, is just inevitable: “Non si trattava di passività, semplicemente i suggerimenti di Mirco erano le cose che si sarebbero dovute fare comunque, l’evoluzione necessaria” (117). Mirco is as caught up in the group’s dynamic as the others. When, at a certain point, he believes he wants to leave the *capannone*, he realizes that he just can’t, as the group has become his life: “Non poteva, non poteva andarsene, semplicemente, non ci riusciva. Due mesi, e la sua vita era tutta qua dentro” (135). Even Martina, the most mature of the children, cannot reject the group’s laws, she cannot protect her little friend Greta, nor explain what happened in that tragic afternoon.

In her review of *The Lord of the Flies*, Kathleen Woodward addresses the issues of adults’ control and peer group violence, and establishes a link between the disquieting representation of children in Golding’s novel and specific sociological aspects of western society. She argues that the power of the story ultimately rests on the ancestral fear of the child as a violent other, and this is why readers feel relieved when the naval officer—an obvious symbol of discipline—rescues the children at the end of the story: “We [adults] welcome with uncomplicated relief the figure of authority. We conclude that children require strict supervision and constant discipline” (58). Significantly, Woodward argues that “supervision and constant discipline” are much more effective if applied to single children than to groups.<sup>74</sup> She also identifies a

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<sup>74</sup> In order to make this point, Woodward quotes a character in Doris Lessing’s novel *Memoirs of a Survivor*, who affirms that the only way to cope with troublesome kids is “to separate them and put them into households in ones and twos” and concludes: “This is how to deal with the enemy—divide and conquer” (58).

connection between the novel and the increasingly frequent cases of violence perpetrated by youth in real life:

In newspapers we read of children not yet ten who beat up the elderly, [...] children who try to kill their parents [...] the generations come to regard each other as alien—the elderly are strangers to the middle aged, children perceive their parents as belonging to another species, parents are threatened by their children. (59-60)<sup>75</sup>

While Woodward's article exposes a form of intergenerational conflict and distress that may recall the Italian social situation of the nineties discussed in the introduction, it also focuses on the notion of group as an amplifying factor in the development of violent behavior. Vinci's novel draws on a similar social fear of (groups of) feral children and reflects a form of concern regarding violent baby gangs, of which Rosario and his friends are an obvious literary example (while at the same time touching on the social anxiety related to pedophilia.)<sup>76</sup> Significantly, Ellen Nerenberg overtly links *Dei bambini non si sa niente* to the Novi Ligure case, underlining the empowering effect of the group on deviant behavior: "In the way of the Novi Ligure case, in which the court-appointed psychiatric experts determined that the two teens committed the murders only when emboldened through their identity as a couple, Vinci's novel demonstrates the strength—and peril—of group identification" (219). In addition to this, the novel also insists on the alarming exclusion of adults from the mysterious world of children, furtherly exposing the parents' powerlessness. No matter how much they love their children, grown-ups will never be able to understand what happens in the *capannone*: "E poi, quello che è successo qua dentro è nostro. Non si può spiegare a nessuno, non

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<sup>75</sup> It is worthwhile underlying that regarding another generation as alien is tantamount to not seeing the other for what he/she is. In other words, the estranged attitude denounced by Woodward is actually a specific type of figurative blindness that creates a distance and a mutual non-understanding, which is the foundation of hate and violence.

<sup>76</sup> In Vinci's novel the form of moral panic related to unrestrained peer groups combines with the social anxiety linked to the phenomenon of pedophilia.

possono capire, i genitori, poi” (146).

### ***Io non ho paura: The Double...***

While Martina and her friends secretly meet in the *capannone*, Michele covertly meets Filippo in the pit on the hill. The symbolic function of “the child in the hole,” as Filippo is called throughout the novel, is multifaceted. As already stated, he represents the Other, but he also epitomizes something obscure and concealed from sight that wants to stay hidden: when Michele takes him out of the hole for a short while, he actually asks to go back inside: “Posso tornare giù davvero?” (147) Moreover, Filippo belongs specifically to the protagonist, and that is why Michele states that the child is “his” (34, 186).<sup>77</sup> The possessive adjective conveys an urgency: the child is in Michele’s destiny, he is his double, and as such, he embodies the hidden side of the main character’s personality.

The novel gives a few clues indicating the role of Filippo as Michele’s alter ego. The first obvious hint is Michele’s initial assumption that Filippo is his crazy twin brother secretly confined in the hole soon after birth.<sup>78</sup> This fantastic version of the real story becomes fixated in Michele’s head and is not shaken even when he sees another kidnapper—instead of his father, as expected—near the pit: “Anche se avevo visto Felice arrivare dalla collina non riuscivo a togliermi dalla testa che quel bambino poteva

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<sup>77</sup> In a way, the captive child embodies the protagonist’s personal abyss and the door to his inner self. From this point of view, for Michele, the hole is the equivalent of the gate described by Franz Kafka in the famous parable “Before the Law” in *The Trial*.

<sup>78</sup> As Michele does not possess the frame of mind to understand the adult world of kidnappings and ransoms, he turns to the realm of imagination to come to terms with reality. As a consequence, his explanation regarding Filippo is that the kidnapped child is his crazy twin brother who, after he was born, bit his mum’s breast instead of suckling her milk and she ordered her husband to kill him. The man set off to the mountains with the baby but could not murder his own son, so he decided to hide him in the hole instead.

essere mio fratello” (76). Felice, of course, does not fit at all into Michele’s twin-brother narrative, but this is not relevant. The protagonist’s perception has less to do with reality than with his unconscious capacity of vision and, in this perspective, Michele is right, insofar Filippo is indeed his symbolic twin. It can also be affirmed that both kids are imprisoned by adults, even if in different ways: while Filippo is literally kept in a hole, Michele is confined in a metaphorical one (“un buco di paese,” as an Italian would say) and is trapped in its tiny toxic environment. The really decisive clue, however, is the dialogue that takes place after Michele goes down into the hole and cautiously joins Filippo under his filthy cover. A quick-paced verbal exchange, typeset in a sequence of new paragraphs (a literary device that Ammaniti often uses to underline the importance of what is being said), reveals the similarities between the two children by actually mirroring one child’s question in the other’s answer:

-Quanti anni hai? [...]  
 Ero paralizzato. -Nove, e tu?  
 -Nove.  
 [...]  
 -Tu che classe fai?  
 -La quarta, e tu?  
 -La quarta.  
 -Uguale.  
 -Uguale. (116)

After this conversation, Michele cleans Filippo’s face with his shirt. It is at this point that the main character sees the child’s eyes (and clean face) for the first time, even if just for a split second. Soon afterwards, Michele formally promises Filippo that he will take care of him. Therefore, the passage simultaneously confirms Filippo’s role as Michele’s double and his position as the Other in the Levinasian sense.

### **... and the Uncanny**

The notion of double is linked to repetition compulsion, to trauma, to the return

of the repressed, and to the uncanny. While some aspects of these interconnected concepts have already been discussed in the first chapter, others deserve further investigation.

Among the many forms of the uncanny Freud describes in his famous essay, he also mentions the double. According to the father of psychoanalysis, the concept of the double (or alter ego) derives from unbounded self-love and primary narcissism, typical of children and primitive men. The first double of man, argues Freud, was probably the immortal soul, whose aim was originally to ensure the survival of the self. With the evolution of humanity, however, “this stage has been surmounted” and the function of the double has undergone a drastic change, reversing “its aspect. From having been a guarantee of immortality, it becomes the uncanny bearer of death” (210-11). The double has thus come to symbolize the splitting of the self, and instead of ensuring eternal life, it confirms its mortality and non-identity and, in particular, in famous literary examples, has been depicted as a demonic force, driving the subject to suicide.

In trying to pin down the concept of the uncanny, Freud gives one tentative definition after the other. One definition often corrects and adjusts prior ones, echoing but not exactly repeating them. In one of his explanations, the psychoanalyst refers to the uncanny feeling he had experienced when he got lost in a foreign town and kept returning to the same place. His essay seems to follow suit, going disturbingly around in circles (213). This in fact is precisely the point: since the uncanny is intrinsically askew, it cannot be explained, it can only be “performed,” so that the notion is ultimately better conveyed by the eerie game of reflections that *constitutes* Freud’s text than by his tentative descriptions. This singular off-side nature of the uncanny is commented by Samuel Weber in his essay *The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment*: “It is not merely the Uncanny which is off-beat, off-side and far-out, *abseits*;

for Freud himself has been led astray. The reasons for this pertain surely no less to the nature of the uncanny, to its position *abseits*, than to any peculiarity of Freud, or weakness in his argument” (1109, emphasis in the text).<sup>79</sup> In *Fiction and his Phantoms: A reading of Freud's 'Das Unheimliche,'* Hélène Cixous also argues that what makes Freud's text a literary example of the uncanny is the pattern of repetitions (either on a stylistic, psychological, or symbolic plane), in which Freud's essay is caught and that it simultaneously produces: “Freud's adventure in this text is consecrated to the very paradox of the writing which stretches its signs in order to ‘manifest’ the secret that it ‘contains’” (547).<sup>80</sup> Eventually, about two-thirds into the text, Freud announces that he

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<sup>79</sup> Weber focuses on the castration complex, which is connected to the notion of vision, and identifies it as the main nucleus of Freud's theory. When the child sees the absence of the maternal phallus, he discovers a difference that: “*refers to itself indefinitely*. To use a language made popular by Lacan: castration inscribes the phallus in a chain of signifiers, signifying sexual difference, but also the difference (and prohibition) which necessarily separates desire—in the Freudian theory at least—from its ‘object.’ Castration thus structures the future identity and experience of the subject, by confronting it with its unconscious desire as a violent and yet constitutive difference, preventing the subject from ever being fully present to itself, or fully conscious” (Weber 1973, 1112). As the “difference” discovered by the child in its mother's body is neither simply visible nor fully invisible, castration is directly linked to sight. According to Weber, in fact, as the child cannot believe what it sees/does not see, it will not be able to trust its eyes again. But also, and most importantly, as the perception of the “lack” of the maternal body is perceived as enormously threatening to the child's notion of the totality of its own body, it implies a restructuring of experience, in which the narcissistic categories of identity and presence are deeply shaken (Weber 1973, 1113).

<sup>80</sup> Cixous also adds that “Freud has hardly anything to envy in Hoffman for his ‘art or craftiness’ in provoking the *Unheimliche* effect. If we experience uneasiness in reading Freud's essay, it is because the author is his double in a game that cannot be dissociated from his own text: it is such that he manages to escape at every turn of phrase. It is also and especially because the *Unheimliche* refers to no more profound secret than itself: every pursuit produces its own cancellation and every text dealing with death is a text which returns. The repression of death or castration betrays death (or castration) everywhere. To speak of death is to die. [...] Freud's adventure in this text is consecrated to the very paradox of the writing which stretches its signs in order to ‘manifest’ the secret that it ‘contains.’ [...] So, of the *Unheimliche* (and its double, fiction) we can only say that it never disappears... ‘fiction’ is a hybrid body composed of language and silence that [...] invents double, and death” (Cixous 547-48).

is “ready to put forward two considerations which [...] contain the gist of this study” (217). In the first, Freud finally states that the nucleus of the uncanny is repetition itself and argues that the disturbing feeling is not elicited by a particular type of emotion but by its mere recurrence: “If every affect, belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*” (217). After this, he makes a second consideration that connects the uncanny to the *return* of repressed emotions or feelings. In agreement with Schelling’s analysis of the opposed meanings of *Heimlich*—which can mean both “familiar” and “unfamiliar”—, Freud affirms that: “It might be true that the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimish*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it” (222).<sup>81</sup> Of course, this notion recalls the concept of trauma.

The interlacing of repetition, the uncanny, and the return of the repressed is given a specific shape when Freud refers to the return of the dead as a typical marker of the uncanny, as already mentioned in the first chapter: “most people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts.”<sup>82</sup> In addition to this, Freud also states that a particular case of this class of the uncanny is the idea of being buried alive, which

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<sup>81</sup> Also: “...this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (217).

<sup>82</sup> Freud underlines that human beings’ strong emotional reaction to death is so deep-seated in human psyche that it has not changed since the earliest times. As our subconscious has no use for the idea of its own mortality, death remains ungraspable and cannot be known rationally, so that human beings’ ambiguous and ambivalent emotional attitude toward death is repressed (and, in addition to this, he mentions “the old belief that the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivors.”) Freud claims that we no longer believe in the animistic notion of the return of the dead, “but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us” (224).



“to some people [...] is the most uncanny idea of all” (220).<sup>83</sup>

According to Freud’s theory, Filippo is connoted as uncanny in multiple ways: he is Michele’s double, he is literally buried alive, and, in Michele’s perception, he is also dead and coming back to life, as the protagonist’s nightmare about Lazarus indicates. Soon after discovering the hole, Michele dreams about Lazarus, the dead man resuscitated by Jesus. In the nightmare, narrated in a typical “cannibal” style that underlines its frightening effect, Lazzaro does not obey Jesus’s command to get up and, infuriated by His insistence, goes for His throat: “Gesù incominciava a scuoterlo come una bambola e Lazzaro alla fine si alzava e gli azzannava la gola. Lascia stare i morti, diceva con le labbra imbrattate di sangue” (43). Since dreams are supposed to reveal unconscious contents, it is clear that the uncanny feeling triggered by Filippo and linked to the return of the dead already resonates in Michele’s psychic system. Moreover, as the return of the dead epitomizes the return of the repressed, the passage confirms that Filippo, Michele’s double, embodies the obscure, hidden part of the main character’s personality buried in the unconscious.<sup>84</sup> The passage is paralleled, both formally and thematically, by another episode in which Michele asks Salvatore’s opinion about resurrection: Salvatore responds by telling Michele a splatter story about a father whose son was killed in a street accident. The desperate man, says Salvatore, goes to see a

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<sup>83</sup> Freud links this to the phantasy of extrauterine existence, which is not scary in itself but has a certain lasciviousness in it.

<sup>84</sup> Filippo is also compared to another symbol of the repressed, Nunzio Scardaccione, Salvatore’s mentally ill elder brother, who has been taken away from home and confined to a hospital (circuitously recalling, in this respect, Michele’s imaginary crazy twin Filippo). The description of Nunzio’s madness is deeply disturbing: he pulls out his own hair and eats it, he drools, he bites his own arms until they bleed. If, according to Freud, we consider the “uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity” (201), the parallel between Salvatore’s brother and Filippo reinforces the uncanny quality of Filippo’s character. Significantly, the uncanny is not only disturbing, it is also contagious through sight: “Io non lo potevo guardare. Avevo paura che mi mischiava la sua follia” (71).

magician and asks to see his son once again. But when the son, one night, actually comes back, he is monstrously maimed, covered in blood and enraged: “...era tutto maciullato e non aveva un braccio e aveva la testa spaccata, con il cervello che gli colava e diceva [al padre] che lo odiava perchè [...] era colpa sua se era morto. –E allora? – E allora il padre ha preso la benzina e gli ha dato fuoco” (85-86). This story, too, obviously means “leave the dead alone” and symbolizes Michele’s anxiety and fear of the return of the repressed.

It is no surprise, then, that Michele is obsessed by Filippo and is literally seized by terror when Filippo rises and stretches his arms toward him: “I capelli mi si sono rizzati in testa, ho cacciato un urlo, ho fatto un salto indietro e sono inciampato nel secchio e la merda si è versata ovunque. Sono finito schiena a terra urlando. Anche il morto ha cominciato ad urlare” (52). Nonetheless, Michele eventually chooses to face his dark side, to embrace it, to be touched by it. By making this decision, he takes a decisive step on a path toward wholeness that comprises two symbolic gestures: embracing his Double and building an ethical relationship with the Other. These two movements actually follow the same trajectory, as both converge in defining Michele’s identity: on the one hand, and from a psychoanalytic perspective, the protagonist’s promise heralds the conscious recognition and integration of his obscure side, a necessary phase in the construction of a whole sense of self; on the other hand, his commitment toward the other child is an essential factor in the development of his personality, as, according to Levinas, one’s identity is actually informed by its relation of responsibility toward the Other:

In this book I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by

me as face. [...] Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another. (Levinas 1985, 95-96)<sup>85</sup>

In the same years in which he was working on “The Uncanny,” Freud was also writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). It is in this essay that, for the first time, he explicitly connects the repetition compulsion—which he defines as a “demonic force”—to the return of a repressed traumatic event and to the death drive, “the instinct to return to the inanimate state” (41, 46). In other words, according to Freud, trauma, the uncanny, *and* the death drive are all connected through the notion of repetition. Significantly, repetition is also formally staged in the novel by the obsessive way in which Ammaniti returns to the concept of death: the profusion of reiterations of the word “morto” and its variations is impressive, especially in the first part of the book. Just to give a few examples, when Michele’s father is mad at him and the tension is so high that nobody speaks, the kid says: “Sembrava che ci stava il morto in casa” (58); on the other hand, his mother, when tired, “Si buttava sul letto e moriva” (59). In particular, Michele continuously obsesses over Filippo, wondering if he is dead or alive or, alternatively, if he was dead and he has come back to life: “Era morto” (33); “Me lo immaginavo morto nella terra” (44); “Era morto” (50); “La pelle del morto era sudicia” (51); “Il morto ha piegato la gamba” (52); “Un lupo mannaro” (53); “Se era morto veramente? Se lo avevano resuscitato?” (81). Filippo, too, is obsessed with the idea of

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<sup>85</sup> By physically embracing Filippo, Michele embraces both the Levinasian Other and the Freudian Double. In doing so, he integrates his repressed fears and traumas into his personality, and he sets off on a journey into himself, into awareness, and into maturity. The embrace between Michele and Filippo can also be read as an encounter with the Other that implies the acknowledgment of a shared trauma, as Cathy Caruth observes: “We can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (Caruth 1996, 8).

being dead, along with his family and dear ones: “–Cosa hai detto? Sono morto! –Ha risposto. –Cosa? –Cosa? Sono morto? Sono morto? Sono morto. Cosa? [...] Ma lui continuava a strillare. –Sono morto? Sono morto. Sono morto?” (80); “La mia mamma è morta” (113); “Liliana. È morta anche lei. Anche Peppino è morto. E papà è morto. E nonna Arianna è morta. E mio fratello è morto. Sono tutti morti. Sono tutti morti e vivono in buchi come questo. [...] Il mondo è pieno di buchi dove dentro ci sono i morti” (114). And so on. Just as in Freud’s essay, it looks like the “uncanny” is never present in the content alone, it has to be performed—at least partially—by some formal features of the text as well.<sup>86</sup>

### **Children, Interrupted. Trauma in *Dei bambini non si sa niente***

While Michele gradually achieves a clearer perspective and builds a well-structured sense of self, the children in the *capannone* seem to be lost in a sort of cognitive confusion. Confronted with sexual explorations, Martina and her friends find themselves either immersed in a disjointed numbness or caught in a paralyzing, feverish incomprehension of events. As the New York Times Book Review underscores, the children’s complex and radical emotional shifts are often reported through vague and simple sentences, such as “Something was changing” or “It was strange” (Mobilio). While such statements are clearly inadequate in articulating the main characters’ emotional turmoil, they also reflect their inability to understand and elaborate what is happening and make sense of it. This incapacity to develop a rational interpretation of events may well be a common aspect of adolescence or preadolescence, but it is also a typical effect of trauma.

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<sup>86</sup> This performative characteristic of the text exists only at the linguistic level. But the uncanny also has a temporal aspect that does not appear as strongly here.

In her essay *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* Cathy Caruth explains that, in 1980, what was previously known as “shell shock” was given the name of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and was recognized by the American Psychiatry Association as a phenomenon that was caused not only by natural catastrophes but also by “rape, child abuse, and a number of other violent recurrences” (3). The APA’s revised definition is not just a matter of terminology: what is at stake is a crucial rethinking of what trauma is: “the impact of trauma as a concept and a category, if it has helped diagnosis, has done so only at the cost of a fundamental disruption in our received modes of understanding and of cure, and a challenge to our very comprehension of what constitutes pathology” (3). Trauma does not really depend on a specific type of event “outside the range of human experience,” to use the APA’s clarification, as the same event—however tragic it may be—may not be considered exceptional by all individuals in the same way and may not be equally disturbing to everybody. As Caruth argues, what makes an experience traumatic is not the event in itself, but one’s own perception of it: “the pathology consists *solely* in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). This definition confirms the two fundamental qualities of the traumatic experience—belatedness and possession—already established by Freud.

Caruth also quotes Henry Kristal, who states that trauma is caused by the impact of an event in which “no trace of registration of any kind is left in the psyche, instead, a void, a hole is found” (6). This void is perfectly described by Vinci in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*. After the uncontrollable, savage outburst of violence culminating in Greta’s murder (the description of which is a typical example of “extreme writing” and

is truly traumatic for the reader, too), the children do not seem to be able to retrieve any conscious registration of the atrocious event. When they notice the scratches and wounds on her dead body, it is as if they were noticing them for the first time: “Nessuno di loro si ricordava come glieli avessero fatti [...] Anche qui, non riuscivano a ricordare, forse un morso [...] Non riuscivano a capire cosa fosse successo” (145).<sup>87</sup> In the first three chapters, which describe the days after the murder, the protagonists actually behave like “textbook trauma-cases” (Mobilio). As soulless puppets (or disturbing automata, to use an expression that evokes the uncanny), the children carry on with their daily activities, but their actions are robotic, they are alienated from their everyday life. They are simultaneously sucked in by the black hole in their psychic system and obsessed by the thought of Greta, so that nothing makes sense to them any longer. Matteo mechanically eats the food his loving and totally unaware mother puts on his plate, then goes to the bathroom and secretly forces himself to throw up. He believes that vomiting and remembering what he had eaten will allow things to make sense again, but his mind just goes blank: “il mondo tornerebbe ad avere senso. Tornerebbero a esserci degli appigli. E invece no, niente” (18). Martina, in turn, often stops midway through an action, feeling suddenly lost, and can’t think of anything but Greta: “...cerca di ricordarsi cosa deve fare, ma i pensieri si incastrano, vanno via. Tornano là” (29). Even Luca, who has always been less sensitive than Martina and Matteo, is in shock. He sleeps all day, gets up only to eat, and then goes back to bed.

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<sup>87</sup> The children have obviously seen the violence perpetrated on Greta, but have not really known it at the moment when it happened. Trauma disrupts the connection between seeing and knowing: “Traumatic experience [...] suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth 1996, 92). From this perspective, trauma is yet another form of blindness.

The novel's formal structure reflects this thematic aspect. The first three chapters show an insistent recurrence of the temporal adverb "before," as opposed to "now," to signify that something has severed the lives of the children in two. While Martina is the one who conveys this notion by saying: "Quando ero piccola, però era solo due mesi fa," in the second chapter it is the omniscient narrator who drops the absolute statement: "Prima giocavano tutti insieme. Prima." In these chapters, clauses like "Martina pensa a com'era, prima" or "Fino all'anno scorso" or "Prima era un'altra cosa" are counterbalanced by "Non viene più nessuno" or "Adesso vanno via tutti" or "Adesso è diverso" (repeated twice) or "È un'estate diversa, questa" (7, 13, 16, 23, 134, 6, 17, 24, 28, 25). As the devastating event separating "before" from "now" is never mentioned, this effective, climax-building narrative strategy can be read as a structural rendition of the void left by a trauma that has not been registered in the conscious mind and is inaccessible through words.

While there is still no unanimous definition of PTSD, "most descriptions generally agree that there is a response to an overwhelming event or events which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behavior stemming from the event" (Caruth 1996, 4). The novel does not say in what form the trauma of Greta's murder will haunt the children in their future lives, but it certainly gives us a clear example of "repeated, intrusive hallucinations" in terms of both content and structure. In particular, it is clear that Martina will make a habit of walking out into the wheat fields to Greta's burial place, alone, and of singing a tune for her. Significantly, the tune has the form of a repeated song, like a mantra: "canta come se cantasse a qualcuno [...] un mantra che se lo ripeti e lo ripeti e lo ripeti, perfetto e limpido, fa andare via tutto il male e i brutti pensieri" (5). The novel clearly suggests that Martina will perform her memorial tribute for Greta as a sort of obsessive ritual that finds its

correlative in the organization of the text, in the hypnotic and slightly creepy refrains that, graphically positioned in the middle of the white page at the end of the first three chapters, suddenly disappear for a while, then return after the disclosure of Greta's death, and finally double in the conclusion of the novel. Each of these refrains, repeated exactly like mantras, is slightly different from the others, but all of them give vague directions to the same mysterious place in the middle of the wheat fields: "Dritto dentro i campi per cinque minuti, poi ancora dritto, lungo il fosso, fino alla fine, poi dentro, nel fango e tra le ortiche" (on the last page of the novel, no number). The suspended mode of the prose and the poetic, fable-like tone of the texts are at the same time disquieting and fascinating, and, in this regard, it is particularly significant, that Vinci admits that when she wrote the book she was obsessed by the image of a child singing: "Non si è padroni di ciò che si scrive, si scrive a partire da un'ossessione e io ero ossessionata da questa bambina che canta, sola, nella piazza del paese" ("Simona Vinci Duras italiana"). As in *Certi bambini*, the formal disruption of linear time in the narrative is the stylistic counterpoint to the trauma that shatters the children's psychic system.

### **The Abject**

The notion of the abject, partly discussed in the first chapter, further contributes to exploring a particular aspect of Vinci's story. One of the main characteristics of the abject, as Kristeva affirms in *Powers of Horror*, is the blurring of borders between inside and outside: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Needless to say, Vinci's novel is full of markers of the abject, the most obvious of which is Greta's violated body. In this



perspective, the corpse is not just the main symbol of waste, of what one rejects in order to define identity and meaning, it is something that disturbs an essential order, it is death infecting life:

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (4)

Besides the corpse, vomit and fecal matter are two typical markers of the abject: “What goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to the abjection” (108). Significantly enough, Matteo, Martina, and Greta vomit at certain points in the novel. Greta’s skin and bowels break, letting outside and inside inappropriately mingle.

Besides these obvious examples, the whole novel depicts a number of situations in which boundaries crumble. Ellen Nerenberg claims that the book “negotiates a series of inside-outside binaries, transactions that convey the alternations between a recognition of the law and its transgression, of the allowable and the impossible, the knowable and the inscrutable” (212). Of course, the familiar/unfamiliar feeling elicited in the children by their sexual explorations can be added to Nerenberg’s inside-outside list: as stated before, the children’s instinctive and intimate sexual drive is “activated” by an external stimulus resonating so intensely with it that the separation line between what is intimate/inside and what is unknown/outside becomes blurred. Martina thinks that sex is “una cosa sconosciuta e allo stesso tempo familiare,” while Matteo “aveva pensato che era strano e poi che assomigliava a qualcosa che sapeva già” (64-65).<sup>88</sup> As

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<sup>88</sup> After the first meeting in the *capannone*, Martina remembers when she used to masturbate in kindergarten. The teacher would reproach her, while she would innocently and genuinely wonder why she was not allowed to do such a pleasant thing (52). Then, in the *capannone*, Martina realizes that the pictures in the magazines awake in her a familiar shiver she has been feeling for some time when lying in bed at night (43), even if the link between the shiver and the magazine is still unclear to her.

the commixture of familiar and unfamiliar is also one of the main markers of the uncanny, it is obvious that Ellen Nerenberg mentions the children's "*uncanny* recognition of the sensation of sexual pleasure that preexists any of the summer afternoon explorations" (221, emphasis mine).<sup>89</sup>

Each trespassed boundary leaves a feeling of disorientation and a deep scar. In particular, the first actual intercourse leaves a major, painful mark on all the members of the group: Matteo feels an evil cold in his heart, Martina thinks that love is like: "Pesci morti, ed uno strappo doloroso" (86), while the clumsy intercourse between Luca and Greta is described as both painful and necessary: "Il corpo di Luca era scivolato su quello della bambina pietrificata. [...] le stava facendo male, si capiva [...] Poi era andata, era successo quello che doveva succedere" (89). The group itself is born out of the disruption of the confine separating self and others. Being part of the group means letting go of the exclusive ownership of one's own body, as Martina lucidly states: "Martina pensava al suo corpo, a questa cosa che aveva abitato da sola per un sacco di tempo e che adesso spartiva con gli altri" (92). Such a radical disarticulation of the children's perception of their physical boundaries must necessarily have a correspondingly confusing impact on the perception of their identity. Martina, Matteo, and Greta's bodies are not sexually mature; the children are not emotionally equipped for a sexual relationship with another human being, and the premature experience leaves them confused, dismayed, and helpless in front of something they can neither understand nor escape. Significantly, Matteo's inner turmoil is connoted as a reaction

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<sup>89</sup> The notion of something buried coming to light might also apply here. Martina's sexuality has been brought to the surface by the children's games, but she is still too young and it should have stayed buried longer. When she holds Mirco's penis in her hands, she thinks: "Era strano. Una cosa che veniva da dentro. Ce n'erano tante di cose così, venivano da un posto molto profondo e buio, cose che uno non lo sa, di avercele dentro, però all'improvviso, quando servono, vengono fuori" (64).

to the violation of his private space: he feels upset “come quando si sta da soli nella propria stanza dopo che qualcuno è venuto a trovarti e ha toccato tutte le tue cose” (65). Martina, for her part, feels she has lost something and cannot do anything about it (47), a consideration that stresses the notion that what is happening is inevitable, inexorable. In this conceptual framework, where physical, emotional, and psychological boundaries are crumbling moral distinctions lose their meaning. Evil and good are just there, as the narrator affirms through the filter of Martina’s perspective: “Il male che sentiva alle volte, lo schifo, c’erano, semplicemente. Buono e cattivo come a scuola, come a casa, come dappertutto” (92). In such an ethically fragile context, the disintegration of the line separating adults and children activated by the porn magazines happens in no-man’s-land, and the result is devastating.

Significantly, trauma is impossible to locate either in time or in space and, from this perspective, is related to the notion of abject. As Caruth states, “the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9). In the novel, the abject that pollutes the children’s life causes a trauma they cannot handle, leaving them shattered and lost.

### **The Power of Enchantment. Magic and Fairy Tales in *Io non ho paura***

In *Io non ho paura*, the symbolic boundaries that contain childhood and moral righteousness are preserved through the power of imagination and fairy tales, which permeate the pages of the novel and give it the “universal, timeless quality of a fable” (Bruni). In particular, fairy tales offer an interesting perspective and help investigate the symbolic roles of Michele and his father.

In his essay *The Use of Enchantment: The meaning and Importance of Fairy*

*Tales* (1976), Bruno Bettelheim gives a Freudian reading of the most popular western fairy tales (those by the Grimm brothers, in particular) and compares their structure and imagery to dream symbolism, arguing that fables play a crucial role in children's psychological development and are essential in helping children come to terms with their deepest fears and with the most obscure aspects of their personality. Each archetypal character (the ogre, the wolf, the lost child, the good fairy, and so on) embodies a different aspect of the child's inner world, and young readers can project their own conflicts on these fantasy figures without feeling isolated or guilty. This is why characters are often split between the good side and the bad side, as in, for example, the good mother and the evil stepmother. Since children naturally relate to their own experience, they identify both figures as symbolizing their own mom, who can be perceived as loving or hostile, depending on the situation. The device of the evil stepmother enables young readers to maintain love for their parent, while at the same time allowing them to express and deal with their rage, which is felt by the hero of the story as well. The wolf, just to give another example, can be a projection of the child's evil feelings, and a good fairy tale is supposed to show how this evil side can be faced in a positive and constructive way. Fables are therefore a critical tool for children, not only because they help them understand and integrate aspects of their developing personality at an unconscious level, but also because they promote cognitive development and help kids find meaning in life:

[The child] needs ideas on how to bring his inner house into order, and on that basis be able to create order in his life. [...] [Fairy tales] speak about his severe inner pressure in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and—without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails—offer examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties. (5-6)

As children's utmost psychological need is to be reassured that they will eventually be able to solve their frightening inner conflicts and live happily, good fairy

tales must show a number of elements that are symbolically significant in this respect. In particular, the hero must be a child or symbolically represent one; he must overcome a number of difficult and terrifying situations before he manages to win over the evil character. The antagonist (be it a giant, an ogre, or a witch) must be bigger than the child; the evil characters must be harshly punished, and, eventually, there must be a happy ending. The punishment of evil characters is particularly important. Children feel safe by hearing that the villains are penalized; if there is no retribution, they feel that nobody is really going to protect them (Arthur 457). Moreover, metaphors in fairy tales must not be explained, as their effectiveness consists precisely in their power to access children's unconscious and reassure them. Explanations, instead, would make the children aware of the uncomfortable and disturbing feelings that they are harboring in their psyche (Arthur 456).

The dimension of fairy tales infiltrates Ammaniti's novel in many ways. While monsters and fantasy characters are frequently evoked by Michele, both Michele and Filippo use their imagination to decode and give meaning to dramatic events: for example, Filippo sees his helper Michele as an angel, while Michele identifies with a comic hero—Tiger Jack—to find the courage to deal with scary situations. The role of animals in the novel is also typical of the fantastic world of imagination. In the same way that fairy-tale heroes are sometimes opposed or assisted in their quest by hostile or friendly animals, Michele's universe is populated by little wild beings that either scare or help him—virtually or factually. When the protagonist must cross the whole length of an unsteady wooden beam suspended four meters off the ground in the abandoned farmhouse, he thinks of lizards for inspiration and manages to go all the way by imitating the way they crawl. Michele is also assisted by an animal when he helps Filippo escape from the cave. That night, a number of nocturnal creatures, both real and

unreal, appear and disappear around the protagonist while he is desperately looking for Filippo's new hiding place. At a certain point, the child asks some goats for help, precisely as a fairy-tale character would do. The goat does not answer, but another animal, a night owl, actually helps him by flying obsessively around Filippo's newly built prison, as its door has blocked the access to its nest.

The presence of these fantastic elements makes Ammaniti's story a sort of fairy tale in itself, in which the child hero fights against the malicious ogres or giants. Yet, while in Bettelheim's view the child's gigantic enemies symbolize adults, the monsters of the novel are real adults, and Michele must sadly understand this notion in order to grow up. Ironically enough, it is the child's father, Pino, who tells his son the awful truth: "È degli uomini che devi aver paura, Michele, non dei mostri" (54).

According to Bettelheim's paradigm, Pino is undoubtedly the ogre, even if he is not depicted as an evil man: he truly loves Michele, he misses his wife and children when he is away for work, and he is happy when he can be with them. The reason he participates in the kidnapping is because he wants to have enough money to make his family happier, but his moral integrity is not solid, and his weakness and his criminal behavior make him an unreliable model for Michele.<sup>90</sup> This has two consequences: the first is that Michele must find another mentor—Tiger Jack, the comix hero—; the second is that the child ends up playing the role that his father cannot fulfill. From this point of view, Michele is not just the child who wins over the ogres/adults: he is also

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<sup>90</sup> Pino's basic—however unsteady—good nature might be the factor that saves Michele at the end of the novel, when the man is obliged by his accomplices to go to the cave and kill Filippo. As explained before, Pino does not recognize Michele and shoots him in the leg. We do not know if Pino is just a poor shooter, or if he has seen his son at the last second and has shifted his aim; however, the fact that Pino shoots at his target's leg might mean that he is simply not able to kill a human being and that he just cannot murder anyone. In any case, the last lines make crystal clear that Pino's only concern is that his son is saved: he does not mind being arrested, as long as the policemen take Michele to the hospital.

the only real adult of the story, in the sense that he is the only character whose moral integrity can guide the others. He is also the one who protects the weakest kids: he takes care of Filippo, and he plays a paternal role toward his sister, taking full responsibility for her on a practical, symbolical, and psychological plane. Michele's paternal role toward Maria is actually much more effective than his father's toward him: when Maria hurts her ankle at the beginning of the story, Michele takes off her shoe "come avrebbe fatto un dottore" (9), while when he hurts his ankle at the very end, his father mistakenly shoots him.<sup>91</sup> Michele also plays the husband's role when he wants to protect his mother from the explicit gazes of men at the street market, and when he runs to defend her after intercepting Felice's concupiscent stare in the family kitchen (157).

It is Michele who tells fairy tales to Maria before she falls asleep at night. This is especially significant in that the role of storyteller, according to Bettelheim, is specifically reserved to adults, as the presence of a parental figure reinforces the metaphorical value of the happy ending and reassures children that their most obscure feelings are legitimate and approved:

Fairy stories provide assurance to children that they can eventually get the better of the giant—i.e., they can grow up to be like the giant and acquire the same powers. [...] When his parents tell him the story, a child can be sure that they approve of his retaliating in fantasy for the threat while adult dominance entails. (27-28)

Fairy tales underline the "adult" role of Michele and mark one of the key episodes in his coming-of-age process. According to Bettelheim, children sometimes change well-known details of familiar fables according to their emotional state: "[Children] have their own ways of dealing with story elements which run counter to their emotional needs. They do this by changing the story around and remembering it differently from

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<sup>91</sup> Michele also protects Maria from the painful truth when he discovers that their father has kidnapped Filippo (93). He is the one who takes Maria home when all the adults are congregating at Salvatore's house (191), and he protects her when the adults fight (198-99).

its original version, or by adding details to it” (148). For quite a while Michele does not want to acknowledge his father’s misdeed, but at certain point he can no longer deny to himself that his parent is the “ogre” who has chained Filippo in the hole. On the same night, while reading the usual bedtime story to Maria, he abruptly changes the happy ending in such a way that, in his impromptu version, the witch manages to eat the child-hero (96). The chapter closes as follows:

- Prendilo e chiudilo in cantina che domani ce lo mangiamo ... -  
Mi sono fermato.  
Maria dormiva e quella era una brutta storia. (96)

The fairy tale has clearly lost its power to reassure Maria (and Michele himself) that the hero will eventually be able to win over the giants. And, as Bettelheim states, if the happy ending is missing and evil continues to exist, the child feels permanently in danger (138-44). The transformation of the happy ending in a tragic outcome is an obvious sign that Michele’s worry-free childhood has come to an end. Yet despite the awareness that his father is a metaphorical ogre, Michele is not totally carried away by his new gloomy version of the story.<sup>92</sup>

While in *Io non ho paura* imagination represent a powerful tool that allows Michele to gradually come to terms with a gloomy reality, in Vinci’s novel the healing power of fairy tales is totally lost. Martina remembers with nostalgia her best friend from early childhood Cristina, a sweet girl who used to narrate stories to the younger kids of the building complex. When Cristina moved to Genoa, nobody took over her role as the courtyard storyteller. None of the older children know any fairy tales to pass

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<sup>92</sup> In a similar way, Sergio’s intrusion into Michele’s room prevents the child from completing the fantastic ritual through which he gets rid of the monsters before he falls asleep. Once again, an actual ogre—an adult—changes the happy ending of an imaginary tale (119). Significantly, it is in the same pages that the adult narrator suddenly appears and admits that he cannot win over monsters as he used to do as a child.



on to the younger kids, and it was as if Cristina had been the last to possess that kind of magic knowledge and had taken it with her: "...[i più grandi] ogni tanto raccontano qualche fumetto [...] I piccoli vorrebbero delle storie più storie, ma i grandi non le sanno" (28). Even Martina and Matteo, who are only ten, do not have access to the magical world of fables. The loss of the fairy-tale world confirms once again that Vinci's children have no reference points to help them interpret reality.

Michele manages to keep and develop his positive ethical attitude because he does not really outgrow fables, their language and their magic symbolism, and he continues to be inspired by them. In other words, Michele does not blindly embrace the adults' world: instead of letting himself being engulfed in it, he brings his own childhood purity into his coming-of-age process. His childhood spirit is epitomized by a mysterious inner voice that guides Michele throughout the novel. Midway between a magic inner oracle and an unconscious expression of a solid connection to his inner self; the strange voice is actually unknown to Michele himself, but it is so firm and clear that the child cannot but follow its instructions. It is this inexplicable force that pushes Michele to rescue Barbara: "-Aspetta! Io sono arrivato ultimo, - ho sentito che diceva la mia voce" (25). The same strength helps Michele embrace Filippo and his own most obscure fears, and makes him break his promise and confront his own father. In other words, the world of fairy tales gives Michele key tools to face his crude reality, and it is a decisive factor in relation to his identity formation.

The extensive presence of fantastic elements makes *Io non ho paura* a sort of fairy tale too, so that the adult reader is involved in Michele's childhood world just by reading the book. This aspect of the narrative, together with the fact that Michele is both a child and an adult (both symbolically and as the narrating voice), makes readers

identify with the protagonist and, as it were, invites them to experience some aspects of their own childhood again.

### Chapter Three

#### Teaching Violence through Love. *Come Dio comanda*.

Ammaniti's dark novel *Come Dio comanda* (2006) tells the story of a group of underclass misfits who live in the imaginary village of Varrano, a remote place in northern Italy surrounded by woods and desolate industrial zones. The main characters are the shy thirteen-year-old Cristiano and his loving and brutal father Rino, a thirty-six-year-old, muscular, alcoholic skinhead constantly out of work.

The book starts with a prologue that, from a formal point of view, is definitely at odds with the main architecture of the narrative. Not counterbalanced by an epilogue or a conclusion, the brief initial section actually breaks the symmetry of the text's structure, consisting of a self-contained set of three long chapters called "Prima," "La Notte," and "Dopo." While these titles eloquently indicate that the focal event takes place in the central part of the novel, the eccentric position of the preamble captures the readers and reinforcing the impact of its content. It comes as no surprise, then, that the prologue introduces the main themes of the novel: Rino's brutality, the importance of an ethically sound father figure—represented by his first employer—, and the unjust mechanisms of a society where the poor and outsiders are always guilty.<sup>93</sup> Above all, the initial section reveals Rino's obsession with teaching Cristiano to be aggressive and the strict relationship the older protagonist perceives between adulthood, virility, self-defense, and aggression. This is the abrupt beginning:

"Svegliati! Svegliati, cazzo!"

Cristiano Zena aprì la bocca e si aggrappò al materasso come se sotto ai piedi gli si fosse spalancata una voragine.

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<sup>93</sup> In one of the episodes narrated in the prologue, the councilor's wife finally manages to seduce Rino. Her husband finds out, and Rino is fired. The episode is hilarious and is recounted in Ammaniti's typical comic manner, but it nonetheless introduces the serious issue of social injustice.

Una mano gli strinse la gola. “Svegliati! Lo sai che devi dormire con un occhio solo. È nel sonno che t’inculano.” (7)

Both the voice uttering these words and the hand grabbing Cristiano’s throat belong to his father. Rino is completely drunk—as usual—and in the throes of one of his frequent, splitting headaches. The incessant barking of a nearby watchdog is keeping him from sleeping and driving him crazy, and he is in a horrible mood. While trying to catch his breath after this harsh wake-up, Cristiano ranks his dad’s fury as five-star, the highest level in his personal classification system. When his father is this mad, Cristiano’s only option is to be quiet and let him vent his rage. But this time Rino has a plan: he takes his handgun out of a drawer, hands it to the boy, and orders him to go out in the snow and shoot the barking dog. It is three thirty in the morning and it is snowing, but the kid has no choice: he takes the weapon and ventures out in his pajamas to carry out the task.

In this section, Rino is described as the typical strong, muscular, macho figure: “La nuca rasata [...], il naso a becco, i baffi e il pizzico, il collo e la spalla muscolosa. Al posto degli occhi aveva due buchi neri. Era a petto nudo. Sotto, i pantaloni militari e gli anfibi sporchi di vernice” (7). A few days earlier, when the bathroom door had jammed, Rino shot at the lock, and when the door still would not yield, he savagely kicked it, shouting and tearing it to pieces with his bare hands. The episode is seen through the astonished and admiring eyes of Cristiano: “Alla fine suo padre l’aveva presa a calci. L’aveva sfondata urlando e strappando pezzi di legno con le mani” (10). The initial description introduces Rino perfectly. A heavy drinker and very quick-tempered, the main character is also maladjusted, unreliable, and angry with the world. He is chronically unemployed, constantly struggling to make ends meet, has a cobra tattooed on his shoulder and a Nazi flag on his bedroom wall, and beats up anyone who gets in his way. He does not care about physical pain, and people are afraid of him: nightclub

bouncers let him in whenever he shows up, and women flock to him, even though he treats them badly. In short, he is the prototype of the macho, aggressive, politically-incorrect hooligan. At the same time, though, Rino is also courageous and straightforward, takes responsibility for his actions, protects weaker people, has a strong sense of justice, and truly loves his son. With his peculiar mixture of rage and love, racist clichés and ethical principles, respect and rebellion against rules, Rino is actually the character that most obviously embodies the psychological complexity that Ammaniti investigates so deeply in this novel, and the one who most openly challenges the reader's parameters of judgment.

Cristiano, instead, is a sweet and delicate boy: "Cristiano era un ragazzino esile, alto per i suoi tredici anni, con i polsi e le caviglie sottili, le mani lunghe e scheletriche e il 44 di piede. [...] nasino piccolo e all'insù, e una bocca troppo larga per quel viso smilzo" (11). Rino's son is sensitive, reliable, mature, rational, shy, and socially awkward. He adores his father, takes care of him, and bears with his aggressive manners and his lunacy. He can be blindly enraged, but this only happens once and leaves him shocked and wondering about the legitimacy of his behavior. For the most part, the young protagonist strongly recalls some the traits of Pietro, the main character of *Ti prendo e ti porto via*: even if Cristiano is actually older and not so passive (he is occasionally bossy at school) he shows the same sensitivity, the same insightfulness, the same responsible attitude.<sup>94</sup> Rino and Cristiano live in a shabby two-floor house that Rino built with his hands before Cristiano was born, in extremely precarious conditions. Rino sleeps on a dirty mattress on the floor, Cristiano keeps his clothes in cardboard boxes, they sit on plastic chairs and have no washing machine or iron.

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<sup>94</sup> Both characters are connoted as children: sexual drives are not mentioned in either novel.

Everything is dirty; father and son only perfunctorily clean up the ground floor on Saturdays, when a social worker officer checks in on them. On those occasions, Rino awkwardly dresses up and forces himself to behave, in order to prove that he is perfectly able to look after his beloved son, whom he fears will be taken away from him.

When Rino hands him the gun, Cristiano would much rather stay in bed, but he eventually goes out and kills the dog. The crucial difference between father and son is played out around the association of virility with aggression, and is metaphorically hinted at through an apparently irrelevant detail related to Rino's gun. While the weapon perfectly fits Rino's macho character and is an appropriate symbol of his brute masculinity and strength, it is too heavy and cold for Cristiano, and instead of boosting the child's aggressiveness it makes his scrotum shrivel when he slips it into his underwear: "...il freddo dell'acciaio gli raggrinzì lo scroto" (11). Eventually, Cristiano does kill the dog and feels exhilarated at the thought of telling his dad, but when he goes back home Rino is asleep, and the episode is soon forgotten.

The novel features two co-protagonists, Quattro Formaggi and Danilo, Rino and Cristiano's only friends—incidentally, the fact that Cristiano has the same friends as his father's is one of the factors that signal the blurring of border between childhood and adulthood. The plot unfolds through a breathtaking sequence of stories within stories, in an overwhelming progression of violent and increasingly improbable events, and can be briefly outlined as follows. Quattro Formaggi, whose nickname comes from his favorite pizza, is a thirty-eight-year-old, feeble-minded fellow who is obsessed with a porn star named Ramona and with a gigantic and aberrant nativity scene he has set up in his living room. He is the typical village idiot, unable to say no, to react, or to defend himself, and everybody bullies him. He and Rino were brought up in the same orphanage and, one day, Rino decided to take him under his wing and has protected

him from other people's abuse ever since. As for Danilo, he is a forty-five-year-old alcoholic. He started drinking after his two-year-old daughter choked to death on a bottle cap while in her car seat. Danilo, who was driving, stopped the car and desperately tried to save her, but her seat belt would not open, and the baby girl died in his arms. One year later, his wife left him to start a new family with another man. He still hopes to win her back, but she has no intention of rebuilding a relationship with him.

The narrative's many plotlines dramatically and frantically converge in the second, central chapter, when an epically stormy night changes the lives of all the characters. Danilo had planned to ram-raid the local bank with his two friends, but Rino bails out at the last minute. Quattro Formaggi sets off on his moped under the pouring rain to meet Danilo as planned, but on his way he crosses path with Fabiana Ponticelli, one of Cristiano's schoolmates, a pretty girl who has always reminded him of his favorite porn star. Fabiana is on her own moped, driving home. She is slightly alarmed when she recognizes the young man and realizes that there is nobody else around. Unfortunately, she has a good reason to be worried: when the slow-witted Quattro Formaggi spots Fabiana, of all people, out in the terrifying tempest, he is so surprised and upset that something in him snaps. He believes he hears the voice of God telling him that bumping into the girl on such a night is a sign, and that she wants him to follow her. Therefore, he goes after the girl as she takes a shortcut through the woods—another sign, according to the voice. Quattro Formaggi overtakes Fabiana, pretends to crash, and, when the girl stops to help him, lunges for her. She manages to escape into the woods, but the man chases her down, pushes her to the ground, tries to rape her without succeeding, and finally cracks her head open with a stone. The description of the murder is one of the many examples of "extreme writing" found in the novel. When he realizes what he has done, Quattro Formaggi calls Rino. He is so shocked and tearful that he

cannot speak. Rino thinks that his friend has been beaten up and runs out in the storm to help; when he finds out what happened, he begins furiously pummeling Quattro Formaggi, but suddenly a dormant aneurysm in his brain explodes. After a series of violent fits, Rino falls to the ground, motionless. Quattro Formaggi, whose mind is by now completely deranged, thinks that his friend is dead and decides that God is definitely on his side: when the two corpses are found, it will be certainly assumed that Rino has killed Fabiana. Relieved by this thought, the murderer goes back home. But Rino is not dead. Despite his nearly total paralysis, he manages to call Cristiano at home and to sputter enough words for his son to understand where he is. Cristiano arrives to find Rino lying on the ground near Fabiana's corpse. The storm is still raging in full force. Even though he is deeply shocked, Cristiano is sure his dad has not killed the girl. He takes his father home and throws Fabiana's body into the river. Then he calls an ambulance for Rino. In the last pages of the novel, Cristiano proclaims his dad's innocence in church, during Fabiana's funeral, but nobody can hear him.

Rino's vision of the world, introduced in the preamble, becomes clearer and clearer in the course of the novel: in his opinion, violence and aggressiveness are necessary in order to defend oneself, overcome obstacles and get problems solved. He sends Cristiano out with a gun because he wants to teach him how to be a grown-up. This notion is confirmed by Rino's words, as the protagonist is afraid that his son might not have the guts to carry out his task because he is *still a child*: "Cristiano era troppo bambino, faceva le cose solo per paura di papà. E quando uno fa le cose per paura e non per rabbia non ha i coglioni per tirare il grilletto" (17). Of course, the explicit reference to rage—and the opposition rage/fear—implies that being an adult is tantamount to being able to be enraged, a notion that is central in the novels analyzed in the first chapter.



The same novels also describe two preliminary rites of passages obviously recalled by the dog episode discussed here. In *Certi bambini*, Rosario is forced to shoot a dog to demonstrate that he is ready to commit his first homicide, while Pietro, the protagonist of *Ti prendo e ti porto via*, must promise his father—with an “adult ‘yes’,” as the narrator states—that he is ready to kill his beloved Zagor. Neither of these two rites is created to support the children’s psychic development and their identity formation process, and neither stems from the intention to guide the children into the next stage of their life: Rosario’s mentor just needs to check if the kid is good enough to serve in the Camorra, and Pietro’s father wants to make sure that the family dog will not give him any more trouble. In *Come Dio comanda* the situation is very different; Rino loves Cristiano, he is concerned about him and really wants to be a good guide for him. Of course, he teaches what he knows, which is aggression. But he does so with love.<sup>95</sup>

### **The Unreliable Father. Aggression and God’s Injustice**

The ability to defend oneself through violence is a fundamental obsession of Rino, whose everyday attitude is that of a soldier at war, constantly on guard, as the beginning of the book testifies. Among the many episodes that demonstrate his fixation—and, consequently, his preoccupation with teaching Cristiano to be aggressive—one is particularly significant.

A while into the story, Cristiano damages the motorbike of an older schoolboy, who then proceeds to beat him up. Cristiano does not want to tell his father that he has

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<sup>95</sup> During the press conference held after the showing of Gabriele Salvatores’ *Come Dio comanda* in Rome at Cinema Quattro Fontane on December 2, 2008, Ammaniti says precisely that “Rino insegna l’odio con tanto amore” (RB Casting).

been beaten up, but Rino sees his son's bruises and immediately guesses what has happened.

At that point, he also realizes that Cristiano is not able to fight. He is totally dismayed:

“Gli hai fatto male?” Gli bastò guardare suo figlio negli occhi per capire. “Non gli hai fatto un cazzo!” Scosse la testa disperato. “Tu...tu non sai fare a botte.” Fu una rivelazione. [...]

“È colpa mia. È colpa mia.” Ora girava afferrandosi la testa con le mani come un penitente a Lourdes. “Non sa difendersi. È colpa mia. Ma che imbecille...” (152)

Rino does not only think he has neglected to teach his son an essential skill. He believes he has actually harmed him: “Come se non gli avesse insegnato a parlare, a camminare. Come se avesse avuto un figlio con un'allergia mortale ai farinacei e lo avesse obbligato ad abboffarsi di pane” (152). As often happens in Ammaniti's narrative, a comically hyperbolic tone (“come un penitente a Lourdes”) is used to convey a dramatic concept, while the pejorative lexical choice (“abboffarsi”) trivializes the tenor of a sentence that actually discloses a crucial and poignant notion (a typical “extreme writing” technique). The result is that Rino's concern is presented as exaggerated and even ridiculous; however, the content of the passage is not comic at all, as the main character feels that not teaching Cristiano to be aggressive makes him a failure as a father.

Prior to exploring the ambivalent, complex relationship between fatherhood and aggression and how this relates to the representation of paternity in Ammaniti's text, it is important to analyze some specific passages of the novel that actually establish unexpected and unorthodox connections between suffering, self-defense, wickedness/aggressiveness, and (God's) punishment. The troubling perspective that emerges from this investigation sheds some light on Rino's attitude and his obsession with self-defense and aggression.

The first, obvious consideration regards the novel's insistence on the devastating effects of suffering, especially when it is caused by protracted abuse. Nearly every character in the text is the victim of mistreatment or a cruel fate; while Danilo's story illustrates the destructive impact of his daughter's death, Quattro Formaggi is the glaring example of how abused people can become abusive in turn and inflict extreme pain on themselves and/or others.<sup>96</sup> In this respect, the feeble-minded killer of Fabiana is definitely a key character: the favorite victim of local bullies, he has never been able to react and has always accepted offence with a half-smile, so that everybody in town has always considered him a kind soul, a harmless human being. Only Rino has always known that this was not the case. He knew all along that nobody can absorb all that evil and not be contaminated by it, and that Quattro Formaggi was like a bomb waiting to explode. He also knew very well that the pain would pile up, lie dormant in a dark place in his friend's brain, and that, one day, it would suddenly awaken:

Quel sorriso a mezza bocca che gli usciva dopo che qualcuno gli aveva fatto il verso e lo aveva chiamato spastico non era il segno che Quattro Formaggi era un santo, ma che l'insulto aveva fatto centro, aveva bucato una parte sensibile e il dolore andava a ingrossare una parte del suo cervello dove pulsava qualcosa di infetto, di storto. E un giorno o l'altro, presto o tardi, quella roba cattiva si sarebbe risvegliata. (252)

While the passage clearly identifies Rino as the only character who is sensitive enough to read beyond the surface of things and understand Quattro Formaggi's agony, it also offers a provocative insight on the matter by suggesting that inflicting pain can be tantamount to setting a time bomb. Cristiano, too, confirms this notion when he recalls a gory scene he saw in a pet shop. While looking at a tank in which a water turtle and a piranha fish were swimming together, Cristiano noticed that the turtle kept on biting

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<sup>96</sup> Danilo becomes an alcoholic after his daughter's death and dies while desperately and drunkenly driving his car against the ATM machine in the attempt to steal the money.

on the fins and tail of the fish. He asked the owner of the shop to separate the two animals, but to no avail, so he went back to the tank, and observed the scene for a while. The piranha seemed to passively accept the slow and steady torture, until the turtle bit on its gill, and suddenly blood came out of the wound. When the piranha smelled its own blood, something snapped in its brain, and in one single, flash-light movement, it went for the turtles' throat and cut it open. After his father's stroke, Cristiano feels he might react to the hardships of his life in a similar way: "Ecco, Cristiano Zena, in quel momento, si sentiva proprio come il piranha del centro commerciale, attaccato da tutte le parti. E quando finalmente avrebbe sentito l'odore del sangue, del suo stesso sangue, sarebbe scattato e avrebbe fatto una strage" (434).

The novel also offers a further, disquieting insight on the topic of aggression through the words of Dr. Brolli, the doctor who treats Rino after his seizure. Dr. Brolli is a capable, sensitive physician who really likes Cristiano. He understands the introverted kid's grief and rage, and empathizes with him because Cristiano reminds him of his own childhood and his own father, who was a doctor too, and whom he loved and admired deeply. While thinking about his old dad, the physician remembers his formidable words, warning him that God's wrath hits the weakest people: "Dio si accanisce sui più deboli. Tu sei medico e questo lo devi sapere. [...] Il male è attratto dai più poveri e dai più deboli. Quando Dio colpisce, colpisce il più debole" (360). The perspective offered by Dr. Brolli's senior—who seems to be a reliable, insightful, and therefore credible character—adds another disturbing element to the novel's take on the issue of aggression. To grasp the story's full provocative view on the subject, however, it is necessary to examine another crucial, related episode.

After the fight with the older schoolboy, Cristiano tries to explain to his father that he lost because his adversary was older, stronger, and a martial arts expert, but

Rino would not accept this as an excuse. In his opinion, the crucial factor in winning a fight has nothing to do with the antagonist's physical strength or his mastery of fighting techniques. The key factor, according to Rino, is *cattiveria*:

“Sei un coglione completo. Ancora credi alla stronzata che chi sa fare le arti marziali sa fare a botte. [...] Non hai veramente capito un cazzo. Sai cosa ci vuole per menare? Lo sai o no?”

Cristiano scosse la testa.

“È tanto semplice! La cattiveria! La cattiveria, Cristiano!” (153)

And again:

“Io vorrei, non sai quanto vorrei aiutarti, ma non posso. Sei tu che devi sbrigarti i tuoi casini. E per fare questo esiste un solo modo: devi diventare cattivo.” Gli prese un braccio. “Tu sei troppo buono. Sei molliccio. Non sei abbastanza incazzato. Sei fatto di roba morbida. Dove stanno i coglioni?” (154)

Rino's brutal advice is obviously perceived as inappropriate as it contradicts the basic, conventional rules that regulate civil communities, according to which aggressive instincts must be kept under control, people should be respectful of others and of society's rules, and conflicts should be solved through the legal system.<sup>97</sup> While his instruction also clashes with the idea of ethical behavior, Rino's words also bring to mind Pietro's central question about Pierini's cruelty in *Ti Prendo e ti porto via*: “Come faceva ad essere così cattivo? Come? Chi glielo aveva insegnato?” (120) From the pages of *Come Dio comanda*, and from a comparable amoral environment, Rino seems to answer Pietro's question: it is the father who should teach the son to be aggressive. This is actually a crucial paternal task. According to the novels' painfully dysfunctional logic, the son needs to learn aggression and malice in order to defend himself, so that

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<sup>97</sup> The notion that human societies are based on the repression of both aggressive and sexual instincts is notoriously expressed in Freud's seminal essay *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929). In this essay (which Lacan considers a rigorous investigation of the question of evil, as quoted in Massimo Recalcati's essay *Sull'Odio*, p. 234), Freud famously argues that while the rules imposed by civilization make human communities possible, they also force human beings to control and repress their instincts, a condition that is at the basis of people's discontent and aggressiveness.

he will not be abused, will not accumulate rage, and will not end up murdering someone—as Pietro and Quattro Formaggi did.<sup>98</sup>

The examined passages take place in different moments of the story but, when connected, form a very disquieting vision of the world: if God's wrath hits the weak, and one needs to be *cattivo* to defend oneself, it means that one escapes God's rage by being wicked. Or even, that God protects wicked people. This provocative perspective is in obvious contrast with the Catholic viewpoint, according to which the Holy Shepard helps the weak and the desperate, rewards the good, and condemns wicked sinners. In particular, the Catholic religion preaches that suffering should be joyfully accepted, that hardships are part of the inscrutable divine plan, and that pain should be welcomed as an opportunity to make up for one's sins, to obtain God's grace, or simply to get closer to Him: "Beati quelli che sono nel pianto, perché saranno consolati. Beati i miti, perché avranno in eredità la terra" (Matthew 5, 1-12). In order to get closer to God, therefore, the faithful should not fight back against offender(s). Instead, good Christians are expected to offer the other cheek to the one who slaps them, *as God commands* in the gospel according to Matthew: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38-39).<sup>99</sup>

St. Matthew's teaching does not seem to work in the dysfunctional social context of Varrano. While the topics of social injustice and amorality are already

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<sup>98</sup> Secondly, on a theoretical plane, Rino's words establish a direct correlation between the ability to solve problems—that is, to be autonomous—and the ability to be aggressive.

<sup>99</sup> In Varrano—or in Ischiano, for that matter—, turning the other cheek does not seem to drive the characters any closer to God or to trigger any form of spiritual evolvement: if anything, it pushes them to be evil. Having said that, it is clear that there is a profound and decisive difference between accepting pain and giving it a spiritual meaning, or experiencing it with a feeling of impotence that fuels resentment.

present—and crucially so—in the novels analyzed so far, *Come Dio comanda* widens the perspective by introducing the problematic dimension of divine justice. This issue is explicitly evoked by the epigraph that introduces the first chapter. It is taken from the Bible and reports the prophet Jeremiah's passionate and provocative question to God:

Tu sei troppo giusto, Signore,  
Perché io possa discutere con te;  
ma vorrei solo rivolgerti una parola sulla giustizia.  
Perché le cose degli empi prosperano?  
Perché tutti i traditori sono tranquilli? (Jeremiah 12, 1-2)

Jeremiah's questions obviously echo the famous biblical lamentations that Job addresses to God asking Him for the reason of evil and injustice, and set a polemic tone that identifies the topic of (divine) justice as one of the central themes of the novel.<sup>100</sup> It should not come as a surprise, then, that the representation of the Lord in the story is quite the opposite of the traditional one. Obviously evoked by the novel's title and by the name of the young protagonist—significantly named after His son—the God of *Come Dio comanda* is actually a constant presence in the plot, but not in the way one would expect: elusive, unpredictable, even mean, He is a very unreliable Father (just like Rino). He can listen to Cristiano's prayer and help him find his beloved dad in the woods, but He can also assume Quattro Formaggi's favorite porn actor's voice and convince him to follow Fabiana, insinuating that the girl is secretly hoping to have an

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<sup>100</sup> Ammaniti's God recalls certain aspects of the Biblical God from *The Book of Job*. God lets Satan inflict a number of tremendous and arbitrary punishments on his righteous and loyal servant Job only to test his unyielding faith in Him. Despite the atrocious and constant torments, Job never curses God; instead, he confronts Him and desperately asks why he has been punished so hard. The Lord does not answer. Instead, he reminds Job of all the wonderful things He has created, so that the pious man recognizes His almightiness and greatness and just accepts His inscrutable decisions, at which point he regains his health and his wealth. But his complaints and his desperate questioning touch on a crucial issue that remains unsolved, and are considered the biblical highpoint on the problem of the suffering of innocent people, of God's justice, and of the existence of evil.

intimate encounter with him, so that the deranged murderer says: “È stato Dio a farmi fare quelle cose” (418).<sup>101</sup>

Like Job and Jeremiah’s questions, the novel’s concerns remain unanswered; if anything, the story demonstrates that there is no justice, that even God is unreliable, and that in the unfair and unjust world of Varrano mild people are abused, innocent girls are killed, and fate is just cruel.<sup>102</sup> In other words, the novel depicts a world where traditional reference points are not to be trusted anymore, and where the individual is not granted any kind of social or divine protection, or justice. It is in such an environment that Rino deems it imperative to teach Cristiano to defend himself through aggression and violence.

### **The Contemporary Paradox of the Father**

The intriguing essay *Il gesto di Ettore. Preistoria, storia, attualità e scomparsa del padre* (2000), by the Italian Jungian psychoanalyst Luigi Zoja, explores the interconnection between fatherhood and aggressive instincts and offers an interesting perspective on the representation of paternity in the novel.

Zoja traces the origins and the evolution of paternity through the centuries, and claims that fatherhood is a fabricated psychological principle and a socio-cultural construction.<sup>103</sup> According to his view, fatherhood is the result of a shift in consciousness, of a deliberate resolution originated in prehistoric times, when, at a

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<sup>101</sup> To complicate things even further, no character is ever really sure that the voice they hear is really God’s.

<sup>102</sup> It is interesting to note that if we follow this train of thought to the extreme, we may also wonder if the “father” of the story (the narrator) is truly reliable.

<sup>103</sup> Unlike motherhood, which is firmly founded in nature, fatherhood has been subject to cultural changes through the centuries, and its manmade predicament needs to be transmitted from one generation to the next by means of specific ceremonies or rituals.



certain point, male individuals made the decision to take care of their children and thereby *chose* to be fathers.

At the dawn of human origins, aggressive prehistoric males would compete to satisfy their sexual needs and perpetuate the species: the strongest individuals would win the fight and impregnate the females, but they would not take care of their offspring. Things started to change over two million years ago, in the Paleolithic period: around that time, which is considered the cultural horizon of human history, the *Australopithecus* hominid rose to a standing position, walking on two feet for the first time. Together with this drastic physical transformation, an equally revolutionary change took place in hominids' psyches: they developed the ability to conceive abstract thought, to make plans for the future. While women cultivated the land, male hunters would chase their preys into the wild, and little by little, *agueres* *Zoja*, began to form, in their minds, memory images disconnected from what was actually in their field of vision. The memory image of their prey would enable them to prepare an ambush, while the recollection of the place they left allowed them to return. Evolution favored those individuals who were able to plan and develop a project as opposed to those who blindly followed their innate aggressive instinct. Males began to bring back their quarries/preys to the women and children and to take responsibility for them. This way, they gradually turned into fathers, starting both the first form of family and the first form of civilization: "Provocatively stretching the argument, I tried to say that culture was born with the birth of fatherhood. Because the father is born out of awareness. [...] The father, therefore, is a sort of missing link between nature and culture" (Zigiotti 1).<sup>104</sup> In accordance with its genesis, *Zoja* defines fatherhood as a psychologically responsible

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<sup>104</sup> Moreover, as fatherhood is the result of a conscious intention, it also signals the birth of the human psychic system.

attitude that chooses rationality and planning over the unrestrained expression of aggressive instincts. The two contradictory aspects—the competitive, aggressive, brutal, prepaternal male, versus the responsible, planning, caring, paternal male—have always been simultaneously present in men and are at the origin of what Zoja calls *the paradox of the father*. This paradox consists of the fact that the father must follow a double standard: he must be an example of rationality, of moral and loving behavior inside the family, while simultaneously he must use all his strength and means—both legit and non-legit, including wickedness, cruelty and violence—to defend his family from the outside world and guarantee its survival.<sup>105</sup> It is specifically the son who expects his father to follow this double standard:

“Con me, chiede [il figlio], sii buono, sii giusto. Amami. Ma con gli altri, sii prima di tutto forte: anche a costo di essere violento, anche a costo di essere ingiusto.” [...] In famiglia il padre deve osservare una legge morale; nella società, invece, deve rispettare per prima cosa la legge della forza, o per essere più precisi, una sorta di legge dell’evoluzione darwiniana, dove il ‘bene’ coincide con la maggior capacità di assicurare la sopravvivenza a sé e ai discendenti. (Zoja 12-13)

In other words, the paternal condition still harbors, as it were, the prepaternal aggressive attitude, which must nonetheless be kept under control. To be able to defend his family and fight against external dangers, the father needs to wear a metaphorical armor, argues Zoja. The archetype of the armored father is Hector, the hero of Homer’s *Iliad*.

During the terrible Trojan siege, three female characters (his wife Andromache, his sister-in-law Helen, and his mother Hecuba) try to convince Hector to rest and stay inside the town walls, to no avail: the hero goes out to fight in defense of Troy and is eventually killed by Achilles. Zoja underlines that Hector’s decision to fight is not dictated by an impulse: he is not driven by rage or by the thirst for revenge. On the contrary, his resolution is the result of a rational, conscious assumption of responsibility

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<sup>105</sup> In addition to this conflicting behavior code, the father must also be guarded *inside* the family, as family love must not distract him from his responsible, firm role.

that actually makes him the symbol of the father: “His task is socio-cultural. [...] he fights to defend the future of the children of Troy” (Zigiotti 2). Hector is the symbol of the father because he can control his aggressive instincts and consciously use them to defend his family and, as such, he stands in opposition to Achilles, the archetype of the competitive and aggressive male who is carried away by his uncontrollable fury. Zoja highlights a particularly charged scene that takes place when Hector says goodbye to his wife Andromache and his baby son Astyanax, right before going to the battlefield. The hero wants to take the child in his arms, but he forgets to take off his elm, so that Astyanax is scared of him. Only when Hector realizes his mistake and takes off the armor can he finally embrace his child. This scene, claims Zoja, is a perfect metaphor for the notion of fatherhood: Hector needs the armor to defend his family from external enemies, but the same protective covering also prevents him from showing affection to his son. The meaning is clear: the father must wear the armor, but he must not forget that he is wearing it. If he keeps his helmet on—that is, his aggressive side—inside the family, the flow of communication and love between father and son will be interrupted. The armed and unarmed versions of the father are both necessary and inherent to fatherhood, there is no solution to the paradox: “Forse alla contraddizione del padre non c’è soluzione: il padre deve togliersi l’armatura per farsi riconoscere dal figlio. Ma, per far questo, deve prima indossarla” (259). The armor is necessary since the son needs to recognize that the father is strong enough to both protect him and to teach him to defend himself: “Tutti gli esseri umani devono poter disporre di aggressività. Tutti devono essere in grado di difendersi. La società prevede che il figlio apprenda questa qualità combattiva soprattutto identificandosi nel padre” (259-60).<sup>106</sup> If the son has the

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<sup>106</sup> Eventually, Hector is killed by Achilles, the prepaternal, competitive, and aggressive male. As Zoja underlines, the victory of the Greek hero’s wild impetus over Hector retains its metaphorical value, insofar the aggressive instinct is something

impression that his father cannot offer him the protection he needs, he will look for another powerful father figure who can protect him and teach him to fight—like Rosario in *Certi bambini*, for example, or even Michele in *Io non ho paura*.

Hector is finally killed by Achilles, the aggressive prepaternal male whose barbaric force is actually honored by another father, Priamus, who implores Achilles to have his son's corpse back. In Zoja's view, Priamus' attitude epitomizes the impossibility of suppressing aggression, and the necessity of coming to terms with it:

Priamo rende omaggio all'invincibile forza barbarica rinchiusa in Achille. Niente, infatti, può avanzare stabilmente lungo il cosiddetto sviluppo civile, se non prende atto dell'inespugnabilità di fondo dell'istinto, della necessità naturale che lo ripropone, e di quella civile che impone un compromesso con esso. (102)

According to Zoja's analyses, Rino is oftentimes more comparable to the enraged Achilles than to the responsible, paternal Hector. His prepaternal side is very forceful, and it is significant that he is often drunk, a condition that, according to Zoja, is the main enemy of fatherhood, "nemico costante della figura paterna" (109). On the other hand, Rino is also deeply committed to his paternal role. Not only he has raised Cristiano on his own and does his best to take care of him, he actually and strongly chose to be a father. Had it not been for Rino, who was absolutely determined to keep the child, Cristiano's mother would have had an abortion (113). Rino's paternity is a consequence of his free and conscious choice, which, as Zoja argues, is an essential trait of fatherhood. Both aspects of the paradox of the father—responsible paternal love and uncurbed aggressive instinct—influence Rino's attitude toward his son: while he loves Cristiano deeply, he is also menacing and aggressive toward him, as the initial

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that cannot be eliminated from men's life: "Niente, infatti, può avanzare stabilmente lungo il cosiddetto sviluppo civile, se non prende atto dell'inespugnabilità di fondo dell'istinto, della necessità naturale che lo ripropone, e di quella civile che impone un compromesso con esso" (102). In this respect, Zoja recalls Freud's position in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

scene testifies (55). As a consequence of this oxymoron, Rino is violent and loving at the same time, and that is why his behavior is totally unpredictable. He can switch from playing with Cristiano to pointing a gun at him in a split second and vice versa (40). Despite this, or *because* of this, Cristiano thoroughly admires his father, considers him a model, and wants to be like him:

Cristiano, come sempre, si perse ad osservarlo.  
 Trovava che se suo padre fosse nato in America sarebbe diventato di sicuro un attore. [...]  
 Aveva la faccia da duro. [...]  
*Perché non sono uguale a lui?* (38-39)

Rino's version of fatherhood certainly reflects the contradiction between (prepaternal) aggressive attitude and (paternal) assumption of responsibility, but it does not really fall into the paternity model proposed by Zoja. While in Hector the two contradictory aspects of fatherhood are clearly separated from one another and seem to be mutually exclusive, in the character of Rino they are totally intermingled. Hector needs the helmet to fight his family's enemies, and he needs to take it off to embrace his son, one psychological condition excluding the other. Rino, instead, manages to have a true and loving communication with Cristiano *through* his aggressiveness, that is, while "wearing the helmet." This is why Rino's behavior is so upsetting.

Rino's attitude toward Cristiano is disturbing on two different conceptual levels. On a psychological level, Rino's paternal model is unsettling because it openly reveals the deep interconnections between aggression and love, and does not give any reassuring answers to the paradox. Rino's model of fatherhood certainly does not fall into the category of "good"—despite the narrator's sympathetic attitude, it is really hard to define Rino as a good father—, but at the same time it is clear that it cannot just be labeled as "bad," either. On a narrative level, this disruption of conventional categories is represented through the destabilizing effect that the relationship between Rino and

Cristiano has on the social worker Trecchia, the character that represents institutions. Trecchia judges the situation according to conventional parameters and cannot make a decision regarding the child's custody: he obviously sees Rino's many faults, but at the same time he cannot fail to recognize that the loving bond that ties him to his son is true, authentic, and genuinely beneficial to both of them. He cannot find a rational explanation for his feelings, but deep inside he knows that the standard procedure in such a case—separating father and son—, would have disastrous consequences:

Quel ragazzino non poteva più vivere in quel degrado. [...] Avrebbe trovato una famiglia normale a cui darlo in affido fino alla maggiore età.  
Eppure... Eppure non era così sicuro che quella fosse la cosa giusta da fare. Quei due vivevano l'uno per l'altro e qualcosa gli diceva che se li avesse separati avrebbe fatto peggio. Il dolore li avrebbe uccisi o trasformati in due mostri feroci. (383)

In other words, conventional criteria do not seem to be of any use when it comes to judging the protagonist's model of fatherhood, which falls in a sort of moral grey zone.

On a socio-psychological level, then, the fact that Rino's paternal posture does not seem to distinguish between an "armed" attitude toward the outside and a loving attitude toward the inside of the family, circuitously denounces an alarming lack of separation between a safe inside and a menacing outside. In other words, the symbolic implication of Rino's version of fatherhood is the disappearance of a clear boundary between the protective family nucleus and the potentially dangerous social context. This notion was already present in Ammaniti's previously discussed novels: *Io non ho paura* reveals the flawed core nestled inside the family circle, while in *Ti prendo e ti porto via* the youth detention system, which is supposed to protect families from criminals, actually saves the child protagonist from his obtuse father and his toxic environment. In *Come Dio comanda*, the line that divides the inside from the outside and safety from danger collapses, and the one who confusedly mixes violence and love is the same person who is supposed to keep them separated in order to pour love into

the family nucleus and aggressiveness toward the outside. From this perspective, Rino seems to be a provocative, contemporary answer to what Zoja calls “the paradox of the father.” The paradox, in this case, no longer refers to the tension between the “armed” attitude toward external menaces and the loving, “unarmed” approach toward the son. In Verrano’s dysfunctional world, violence is just part of everyday reality, inside as well as outside the family shell, and the much more alarming paradox is that in such an environment perhaps a loving father really does have to teach aggression. Actually, it is precisely by recognizing and revealing the brutal aspect of his personality in front of Cristiano that Rino teaches his son how to deal with violence and how to protect himself from a toxic environment. Of course, Rino’s teaching is not risk-free, nor is it ethically safe. Yet, the novel suggests that it is perhaps the only possibility.<sup>107</sup>

### **A Contemporary Chain of Fathers. Rino versus Mr. Ponticelli**

In addition to Hector, Zoja examines two other mythical characters that have informed the representation of fatherhood in western society. One is Ulysses, the king of Ithaca who returns home to his wife and son after twenty years of absence in Homer’s *Odyssey*. The other is Aeneas, the hero of Virgil’s epic poem *The Aeneid*.

The night the Greeks sneak inside Troy, Aeneas dreams of Hector, who, wounded and bleeding, reveals to him that his town is lost and that he, Aeneas, must escape and bring with him the sacred wreaths and the family gods (the Penates).<sup>108</sup> When Aeneas wakes up and realizes that the Greeks are really putting Troy to fire and sword, he is torn between the desire to fight against the enemies and the obligation to

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<sup>107</sup> A certain degree of brutality can perhaps have an overall positive effect if it is meant and perceived as a punishment. However, this is clearly not the way Rino uses it.

<sup>108</sup> “The venerable statues of the gods, With ancient Vesta from the sacred choir, The wreaths and relics of th’ immortal fire” (Virgil 369).

follow Hector's command and ensure the survival of his lineage. After a sign from Zeus, Aeneas resolves to escape. Besides the family gods, he carries his old father Anchises on his shoulders and holds his son Ascanius by the hand. Using a very effective metaphorical expression, Zoja describe the triad Anchises-Aeneas-Ascanius and their connection with the Penates as a *chain of fathers*: "Catena dei padri, in cui Enea prende il suo posto. Anchise sopra, Ascanio sotto. La catena dei padri è l'espressione terrena della divina eternità" (157).

There is no female version of such a close connection between humans and gods. It is only the male lineage that Aeneas is taking care of. His wife Creusa, who was following him, mysteriously disappears in the streets of Troy and is never found again.<sup>109</sup> Creusa and the goddess Cybele are the only positive female characters in the Aeneid, and they are both quite marginal; for the rest, Virgil's poem is a gallery of negative female figures: Aphrodite, Aeneas' cold mother, abandons her baby son, who is raised by his father; Juno doesn't like Aeneas and conspires against him; and even Dido's feelings represents the negative side of love, the uncontrollable, passionate drive that interferes with the hero's sacred mission. Aeneas' male lineage, on the contrary, is solid. Not only do the Penates connect fathers and sons, they also link the dying town of Troy to the still-to-be-founded town of Rome, thereby safeguarding and infusing the identity of male generations through history: "I sacri arredi e i Penati [...] collegano i padri ai figli, il mondo Greco a quello romano, la città distrutta a quella che sarà fondata [...] tutelano il rapporto tra le generazioni, sono la parte più vera della loro identità" (146). The character of Aeneas perfectly symbolizes the vertical line that connects fathers, sons, and gods, as opposed to the horizontal perspective of the prepaternal

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<sup>109</sup> She disappears, and then briefly reappears as a ghost only to tell Aeneas that the gods will protect him, and to assure her husband that her spirit is hosted by the goddess Cybele.



warrior figure: “La forza adolescente, orizzontale del guerriero è maturata in forza verticale dei padri. Orizzontale è la combattività dei pari, [...] verticale è la pressione del padre sulle spalle di Enea” (153).

The notion of *chain of fathers* is a further hermeneutical tool that can shed light on some specific aspects of *Come Dio comanda*. Each father figure in the novel—Rino, Danilo, Fabiana’s dad, Dr. Brolli Senior, and Max Marchetta’s father—play a symbolically important role, even if they only appear for a few pages. On the contrary, the mothers are inessential, and most of them are depicted as negative characters: Cristiano’s mother abandons him in his crib and disappears, Fabiana’s mom is totally apathetic and unable to take care of her daughter (the night the girl is murdered, she stuffs herself with sleeping pills and goes to bed, oblivious of the fact that Fabiana is not home), and Teresa, Danilo’s wife, is just a voice on the phone.<sup>110</sup> The only positive mother in the novel is Esmeralda’s (Fabiana’s friend), but she remains in the background and does not really have any agency in the story, let alone the fact that her daughter hates her. The representation of mothers in Ammaniti’s novel might recall the depictions of the female figures in the Aeneid: those who are of any consequence affect the characters’ lives in a negative way, the others are even more marginal and irrelevant.

By contrast, each of the fathers described in the story is a meaningful figure in his own way. In particular, the character of Mr. Ponticelli (Fabiana’s father) deserves a closer look. He is portrayed as the prototype of the successful, wealthy, good-looking, middle-age man, and the embodiment of the conventional father figure:

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<sup>110</sup> Moreover, Teresa is ubiquitously presented as an insensitive mother. In his delirious monologue, Danilo accuses her, as she is now starting a new family, of having forgotten their deceased baby daughter, while he, the father, is still mourning the child. Of course his wife’s behavior is healthy, while Danilo’s is destructive, but in the context of the novel Danilo’s twisted argument somehow underlines the strength of paternal attachment to children.

Il padre di Fabiana era un perfetto rappresentante della comunità di Giardino Fiorito. Imprenditore di bell'aspetto. Un metro e ottanta d'altezza. Quarantadue anni. Capelli brizzolati e dentatura candida. Sposato con Paoletta Nardelli, ex Miss Eleganza Trentino '87. Buon padre di famiglia. (367)

The name “Giardino Fiorito” (“Blossoming Garden”) evokes the image of an exclusive, residential area for well-off families and conveys the notions of richness, formality, imposed artificial order, and control. Ammaniti’s definition of Mr. Ponticelli as the perfect representative of such a place also seems to indicate lack of spontaneity and a rigid personality. We do not know much about the character, but we do know that he cares enough about Fabiana to oblige her to come back before nine at night, and that Fabiana hates him as only a teenager can hate a parent: “Ma quanto lo detestava? [...] Lo odiava quanto tutti i granelli di sabbia di tutte le spiagge del mondo. No, di più” (194). There is not much communication between father and daughter. Going back to Hector and to Zoja’s paradox of the father, it really looks as if Alessio Ponticelli wears an armor that allows him to be successful in society and to protect his family and his house, but he forgets to take it off with Fabiana, so that his love does not reach her (and/or he might identify so deeply with the inflexible moral and formal code that he is not able to step out of his rigid role).

The character of Mr. Ponticelli is crucial because, from the perspective of fatherhood, he represents Rino’s alter ego. While their children are about the same age, go to the same school, and are attracted to each other, Mr. Ponticelli and Rino could not be more different. One is the typical, traditional, authoritative father, a wealthy, hard-working man who fits into society’s schemes, with a family and a nice house; the other is single, unemployed, poor, an outcast so maladjusted that he is constantly at risk of losing Cristiano’s custody. Despite the obvious differences, though, both characters take their paternal role very seriously, both love their children, and both have the same deep and obscure bond with them. This special, mysterious emotional connection is

only revealed when the father-child pairs are touched by death. Needless to say, only in the male pair both parties survive.

To investigate this topic, it is necessary to go back to the wood where Rino is laying in the mud. The exploded aneurysm in his brain has damaged his nervous system, and he cannot move a single muscle. He wants to call Cristiano with his cell phone, but his brain won't transmit the impulse to move to his limbs. In that moment, Rino imagines a huge army of ants running in his veins:

Le gambe. Le braccia. Lo stomaco. La bocca.  
*Come un sacco di pelle ripieno di formiche. [...]*  
 E anche se non soffriva tanto, avvertiva un fuoco lontano, un dolore distante e le formiche che gli correivano nelle vene, [...]. (260, 273)

In a fascinatingly visionary passage, desperately trying to get in touch with Cristiano, Rino orders the ants that have taken possession of his body to march toward his fingers:

*Ascoltatemi!*  
 Le formiche, sotto il cielo viola, si misero sull'attenti e miliardi di occhi neri lo guardarono.  
*Voglio che andiate tutte nel mio braccio destro. (282)*

The ant army is obedient, and the duteous insects carry out the order at the cost of their lives: after a tremendous, strenuous effort Rino can actually move his fingers and make a phone call. At the other end of the line, the ringing phone wakes up Cristiano, but the kid thinks that his father is home, so he does not bother to pick up. As the phone stops ringing, unanswered, Cristiano goes back to sleep. After a short while, Rino manages to make a second phone call; this time Cristiano gets the phone and runs out to help his father. In between the two phone calls, though, Cristiano has a dream: he dreams that he wants to commit suicide, but ants, not blood, are coming out of his veins. Only after this vision does he answer the phone and get in touch with his dad.

The shared image of the ants seems to indicate the emergence of a new level of communication between Cristiano and Rino, which materializes in a dreamlike, unreal

dimension, and situates their bond on a sort of mysterious and powerful plane that reaches beyond any rational explanation. On such a plane no words are needed, a notion that is graphically sustained by the fact that the chapter following this episode consists solely of the drawing of an ant. This way, Ammaniti underscores the evocative power that images and symbols have over words—even in a novel—and simultaneously expresses the visceral connection between father and son. On a metanarrative level, the author involves the reader in the same type of mysterious, wordless communication that is taking place between the two protagonists: through the drawing, the novel powerfully “speaks” to the reader without words, just like Rino “speaks” to Cristiano through the dream.

Like Rino, Mr. Ponticelli is a loving father, too. Despite his armor, he has a special connection with his daughter. On the morning after Fabiana’s death, he comes back home from a business trip, and realizes that the girl is not in her bed. Distraught, he goes to the police to report her missing and starts looking for her everywhere. He is driving around randomly, hoping to spot her somewhere, when a mysterious and powerful impulse urges him to stop near the place where Fabiana was actually killed. When he sees Fabiana’s moped, half hidden in the bushes, he suddenly knows that his daughter is dead:

Per il resto dei suoi giorni Alessio Ponticelli si chiese cosa l’avesse spinto a fermarsi proprio lì, senza riuscire a darsi una risposta. Secondo alcune ricerche americane certi animali sono in grado di avvertire l’odore del dolore. Il dolore ha un odore proprio, forte e pungente, come i feromoni degli insetti. [...] E forse lui, in qualche modo, aveva sentito la sofferenza che la figlia aveva provato prima di andarsene. Fatto sta che quando Alessio Ponticelli vide il motorino di sua figlia buttato dietro la cabina dell’Enel qualcosa dentro di lui si seccò e morì. Ed ebbe la certezza che Fabiana non facesse più parte di questo mondo. (373-74)

The obscure urge that pushes Mr. Ponticelli to stop precisely where her daughter was killed reveals a mysterious connection between father and daughter that reaches beyond the border between life and death, and shares the same special, unfathomable nature as

Rino's newly formed bond with Cristiano. In particular, the reference to insects' behavior evokes the ants that symbolize the link between the two protagonists and suggests a parallel between the two episodes. In both cases, it is the closeness to death—or actual death—that activates the connection, a condition that bestows the events with the connotation of absolute truth.

The doubling (or splitting) of the paternal figure into the characters of Rino and Alessio Ponticelli has a few interesting implications. As already stated, Rino's version of fatherhood is definitely unorthodox, while Mr. Ponticelli embodies the prototype of the traditional, authoritative father. As such, he recalls the typical father figure from early twentieth-century family portraits. In these pictures, claims Zoja, fathers are usually positioned at the center of the family group, to signify their position as head of the family. The clothes, the furniture, and the room, instead, reveal the family's status, so that these pictures actually portray both the family and the social context. Such a codified iconographic convention epitomizes one of the main functions of the traditional father, who, metaphorically speaking, is the intermediary between the family and the external world, the channel that introduces children, especially sons, into society at large. Mr. Ponticelli seems to be utterly equipped for this role: his successful life testifies to his ability to master society's rules, so that he looks like the perfect intermediary between his offspring and the external world, and a much more trustworthy and appropriate father than Rino. However, something does not quite work out as expected, as the plot shows that Mr. Ponticelli's teachings indirectly and paradoxically contribute to causing his daughter's death. On the night of the storm, after Fabiana sees Quattro Formaggi's simulated accident, the girl hears her father's words resonating in her head. Those words convince her to go back and help Rino's friend, despite her fear that he might harm her: "*La qualità di una persona si riconosce se*

*aiuta la gente in difficoltà*). Così avrebbe detto papà” (220). It is because she is obeying her father that Fabiana stops to help Quattro Formaggi, who subsequently kills her. Of course, the episode does not imply that Mr. Ponticelli is a bad father; on the contrary, it shows that he passed on to his daughter a sound ethical principle. But by also showing the devastating consequences of following this paternal instructions, the passage subtly and simultaneously undermines the traditional notions of both ethics and paternity.

The death of Fabiana not only hints to the inadequacy of the traditional model of fatherhood represented by Mr. Ponticelli, it also establishes that, in this novel as in the *Aeneid*, only the male lineage survives: two out of the three daughters who appear in the plot die (Fabiana and Laura), while the father of the third (Esmeralda) is not even in the picture. On the other hand, in the course of the novel two more links are added to the *chain of fathers* represented by Rino and Cristiano: Mr. Marchetta, Rino’s previous employer and father figure, and God, invoked by Cristiano after Rino’s ant-operated and unintelligible phone call. The fact that God answers Cristiano’s direct prayer to Him and helps him find his father symbolically validates the chain and confirms its connection with the divine (304). Of course, the novel’s version of the *chain of father* is rocky and unorthodox, just like the model of fatherhood embodied by Rino: Mr. Marchetta is not his real father, the connection to God is shaky, to say the least, and God Himself is not as reliable as it should be.

### **Rino’s Aphasia. The Evaporation of the Father and the Disintegration of the Symbolic Order**

The problematic, unsteady notion of fatherhood is examined in three recent essays by Massimo Recalcati, the famous Italian psychoanalyst whose studies on paternity (*Cosa resta del padre* [2011], *Il complesso di Telemaco* [2013], *Patria senza*

*padri* [2013]) have had an extensive impact on the national public debate in the recent years.<sup>111</sup> Using a Lacanian perspective, Recalcati investigates the role of the father figure in contemporary society and its implication with the concepts of *castration*, Law, and the Symbolic Order; he claims that Italy is witnessing a crucial crisis of fatherhood and argues that this phenomenon—the “evaporation of the father,” as Lacan calls it—manifests itself in the progressive disappearance of “the orientating function of the ideal in collective and individual life” (20).<sup>112</sup> Recalcati’s essay does not exclusively refer to the relation father-son, but the male line is particularly emphasized as sons will potentially become fathers and need to learn fatherhood.

In his famous essay *Il Complesso di Telemaco* Recalcati briefly analyzes the metaphorical implication of the Pope’s sudden and temporary aphasia in Nanni Moretti’s film *Habemus Papam* (2011). In the scene examined, the newly elected Pontiff falls in the throes of a panic attack and, instead of going out on the famous balcony of St. Peter’s Square to meet the faithful and speak to them, he cries out loud in despair and runs away. As a consequence, the balcony remains empty, and no words are addressed by the Holy Father to his adoring sons. In Recalcati’s opinion, the scene indicates that words have lost their power to give a meaning to life: “Quello che Moretti ci mostra è l’evaporazione del padre come impossibilità di sostenere il peso simbolico di una parola che vorrebbe poter dire ancora il senso ultimo del mondo, del bene e del male, della vita e della morte” (21). In this perspective, the Pontiff’s silence

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<sup>111</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all quotes and references to Recalcati are taken from *Il complesso di Telemaco*, 2013.

<sup>112</sup> Lacan first spoke about the “evaporation of the Father” in a note to a presentation by Michel De Certeau, at the congress “Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis” held in Strasbourg by the École freudienne de Paris on the 11, 12 and 13 of October 1968.

symbolically denounces the failure of the guiding role of the Father (both human and celestial), and indicates the collapse of ideals and values on both the individual and the collective level (20).<sup>113</sup>

Recalcati's analysis can also be applied to the character of Rino, who after the stroke falls into a state of apparent death—in this sense, the father figure he embodies “evaporates”—and consequently loses the faculty of speech. Like the Pope's, his aphasic condition seems to symbolize his failure to guide his son into adulthood through words.

The crucial connection between paternal function and language can be better investigated through Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, which is at the basis of Recalcati's essay. According to Lacan, language plays an absolutely pivotal role in the subject's psychological development and in the construction of their identity. The individual's acquisition of language is strictly connected to two interlaced concepts related to the paternal function (and to the father figure): the Symbolic Order and the Name-of-the-Father. Some aspects of the complex relationship between language and these two symbolic fields are particularly relevant to this study and are briefly examined here.

Lacan, like Freud, starts from the assumption that in the first, prelinguistic phase of its life the child perceives itself in a one-to-one, exclusive relation with its mother.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> This notion is reinforced when, in another scene, the fugitive Pope, clad in ordinary clothes, is sitting on a crowded bus and talking aloud to himself admits that the Church no longer manages to understand the world. Significantly, the people around him do not understand what he is saying. Recalcati also underlines that the Pope is just like a scared child who needs to be consoled and protected. Besides further undermining the authority of the father figure, this aspect also puts into question the legitimacy of the roles: who is the father and who is the son, if the father needs his son(s) to console and protect him? This question, of course, can also be referred to Rino and Cristiano (22).

<sup>114</sup> In psychoanalytic discourse, it is customary to refer to the child as “it.” This study follows this convention.



In this phase, its whole world consists in its dyadic relation with her.<sup>115</sup> This is the Imaginary Stage, the phase in which the child wants to be the one and only object of its mother's desire and wants to satisfy it completely: in psychoanalytic terms, this means that it wants to be the (imaginary) phallus for her.<sup>116</sup> On her side, the mother, too, is very tempted to yield to the fantasy that her child can satisfy all her needs and fulfil the inescapable lack that, according to Lacan, is at the core of subjectivity.<sup>117</sup> This unhealthy, imaginary bond between mother and child is extremely strong, and it takes a third party to break it: in other words, there needs to be another person, or object, that captures the mother's desire, deviates it from the child, disrupts the imaginary couple, and sets the child free from the Oedipal deadlock. This third party may be, but is not necessarily, embodied by the father and has the crucial function of imposing the

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<sup>115</sup> It is in this phase that the child goes through the Mirror Stage. Looking at its image in the mirror, the child jubilantly (and delusionally) perceives itself as a wholly functioning, complete human being—a notion that contrasts with the fact that it is, instead, still unable to command its body. This non-correspondence between the child's idealized reflection (the *imago*) and the actual (physical) reality jeopardizes the construction of the subject's Ego. In other words, according to Lacan, the Ego is constituted on the basis of an external ideal image and is therefore split—and lacking—right from the start.

<sup>116</sup> In this stage, Lacan refers to the phallus as the imaginary object of the mother's desire. Darian Leader and Judy Grove argue that: "It is important to distinguish at least two different conceptions of the phallus in Lacan's work of the 1950s. Firstly, as an imaginary object, an imaginary lack. [...] And, secondly, as a signifier, a symbol of desire, which is different from having or not having a penis. It is literally a symbol, representing the enjoyment that has been lost in getting through the Oedipus complex." (Leader and Grove 96). This loss is an effect of language and the entrance in the Symbolic Order.

<sup>117</sup> The notion that an inherent lack is at the core of subjectivity is crucial in both Freud and Lacan (Lacan expresses this notion clearly in Book X of his *Seminar*); quoting Lacan, Massimo Recalcati underscored that "il soggetto si produce come mancanza ad essere" in his Seminar at the University of Verona on April 10, 2016. In one of his articles Recalcati also argues that the imaginary bond between mother and child is a primary perversion. In this perspective, the notion of perversion is not linked to the presence of pregenital sexuality in children, as Freud affirms in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*; it refers instead to the dyadic, reciprocal, absolute, imaginary bond between mother and child: "La perversione strutturale dell'essere umano non risiede tanto nella sessualità ma nel rapporto madre-bambino. [...] È la follia fallica che regola il rapporto tra madre e bambino" (Recalcati, "Pregenitalità")

interdiction of incest, that is, the Law, in Lacanian terms.<sup>118</sup> This basic prohibition is notoriously called *castration*. Because of *castration*, the child understands that the mother's desire is directed toward another object, that it cannot be the phallus for her, and is therefore forced out of the imaginary, suffocating one-to-one relationship. *Castration* marks a crucial step in the subject's development, because it introduces the fundamental experience of limitation and lack in one's life. It is around this lack, around the constant attempt to fill it, that individuals can healthily structure their desire and their identity. Only after the child has undergone this process of loss, can it step out of the Imaginary and into the Symbolic. Through this crucial passage, the subject eventually becomes a member of the society of human beings, a part of a wide network of relationships regulated by that constellation of conventions, rules, and norms that Lacan calls the Symbolic Order.

The entrance into the realm of the Symbolic is aligned with the child's acquisition of language, which, in turn, is strictly connected to the notion of the Name-of-the-Father. As hinted before, the key interdiction of incest—*castration*—is not always or necessarily imposed by the actual father; as a matter of fact, it can also be imposed by a third party (another person, or a job, or a passion of the mother's). In order to be able to impose the crucial prohibition, however, this third party must have one key characteristic: it must exist on a symbolic level, that is, it must function as a metaphor for the prohibition.<sup>119</sup> Lacan calls this paternal metaphor (or paternal function) the Name-of-the-Father:

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<sup>118</sup> As Massimo Recalcati repeatedly argued during his seminar at the University of Verona, the third party—i.e. whoever/whatever embodies the paternal function—must deviate the mother's desire away from the child and make clear that it cannot go back to where it came from (that is, the child cannot have the *Thing* of the mother) and that the mother cannot incorporate the child back into her body.

<sup>119</sup> In Lacan's famous example of the crocodile mother, the symbolic father represents the roller that prevents the mum-crocodile from closing her jaws and swallowing her

Lacan calls this third term the Name-of-the-Father or the Father's name, but by formalizing its action in the form of the paternal metaphor or function, he makes it clear that is not inescapably tied to either biological or de facto fathers, or, for that matter, to their proper names. (Fink 56)

The Name-of-the-Father is therefore not a human being, but a signifier. Through the interdiction of incest and the entrance into the Symbolic, the Name-of-the-Father introduces the notion of phallus as the symbol of what is lacking. In the Symbolic Realm, the phallus is not the male organ, nor (just) the imaginary object the child identifies with in the imaginary phase. It is actually a signifier that indicates precisely the loss of the imaginary fantasy of being the mother's imaginary phallus. It also represents the child's perceived absence of the maternal penis and, as a consequence, is the signifier of what the child desires but cannot have, of prohibition, and of lack. The phallus is actually the *primary signifier*, as it does not correspond to any signified; as Weber says, it is a pure *representation of an absence*, insofar it represents precisely the absence of the object to which the signifier refers (Weber 1991, 146). It is only when the child loses the *imaginary* phallus, (that is, when it accepts letting go of the imaginary fantasy of *being* the phallus and of owning the *Thing* of the mother), can it can have the *symbolic* phallus, the signifier of that lack. This point is crucial because of the connection between this notion and the concepts of language and desire.

The complex concept of phallus actually marks the passage between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As Weber affirms,

The phallus is situated, decisively and indecisively, on the border that separates the imaginary from the symbolic. [...] The phallus must be understood as that which marks the passage from the imaginary to the symbolic, from demand to desire, as a

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child: "The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth. [...] There is a roller, made of stone, of course, which is potentially there at the level of the trap and which holds and jams it open. That is what we call the phallus. It is a roller which protects you, should the jaws suddenly close." (Lacan, *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII*, p. 129, quoted in Fink 56-57) The phallus that Lacan mentions here is the symbolic phallus, the signifier of prohibition and limitation imposed by the Name-of-the-Father.

discontinuous and conflictual one. The favorite name for this conflict is ‘castration.’ (Weber 1991, 145)

By signifying the loss on a symbolic level, the phallus makes it possible to face the lack, to give it a meaning and, what is most important, to structure one’s desire around it. Because of its peculiar nature of simulacrum, of pure signifier, the phallus represents the impossibility of ever getting from the signifier to the signified object of desire (which, in this particular instance, has never existed). So, the phallus is not only the symbol of lack and prohibition, but also the symbol of the abyss that always separates signifier and signified, desire and object of desire, enunciation and enunciated. This separation is always present in language (Weber 1991, 148).

From this point of view, the paternal function is totally similar to the function of language, as both have the role of imposing a limitation on the child’s biologic impulses and enjoyment (the *Thing*), as Recalcati clearly argues:

La funzione paterna è dunque omologa a quella del linguaggio perché introduce una mancanza nel soggetto limitando il godimento immediato della pulsione (decretando, secondo Lacan, la morte della Cosa) e generando come effetto di questa limitazione (castrazione simbolica) il movimento del desiderio. (Recalcati 2010, 40)

According to Lacan, language introduces limitation in the child’s existence. It is like a scissor that humanizes the purely biological, animal life by cutting off specific objects of enjoyment, which will be lost forever because of the effect of the signifier; the child learns to speak and simultaneously learns that it has to let go of its mum’s breast, control its sphincter, discipline its appetite, and so forth. In other words, through the action of the signifier the child loses its animal instincts (which will subsequently turn into human drives, while the lost objects of enjoyment—for example, the mum’s breast—will leave a residue through which the involved body parts—the child’s mouth—will become erogenous zones). Moreover, language has another crucial effect that impacts the subject’s enjoyment: it actually makes the object(s) it refers to unreachable, as every

word acquires a meaning only because it refers to other words, in a never-ending chain, and no word actually coincides with any object. In Lacan's view, signifiers—words—only make sense because of their relation to other signifiers, and they never really represent a self-identical object, they never “reach” any signified. Meaning is the result of a constant movement: it emerges from the combination of the metonymical chain of signifiers that never coincide with any object (displacement) and the metaphors (condensation) that give the feeling of unity and meaning to sentences. In other words, meaning is given by the *position* of a signifier in the signifying chain, by its relation to the other linguistic elements (Weber 1991, 112-115). For example, the word “cat” does not make sense because it refers to a particular cat, but because it differentiates itself from similar words, like “mat” or “cap.” Through the differential relation of similar words, I understand the meaning of “cat,” but it remains on a linguistic, abstract, symbolic level. The word “cat” does not actually “bring me” to any actual cat.

The Name-of-the-Father is so intertwined with the function of language, that the fact that the mother mentions the father in her discourse may be enough to institute the paternal function, even in the father's absence or, rather, precisely in his absence: “What matters is how she manages to indicate implicitly to the child the existence of a Symbolic network to which they are both linked, a network which is beyond the Imaginary relation of the two of them” (Leader 105). It is clear, at this point, that a child needs a paternal function in order to enter the Symbolic Realm and develop his own identity in relation to other human beings. As this function is a metaphor, it might seem that the real father is losing his importance but, despite the deep crisis that has hit paternity, it is not really so. In fact, the actual father, when present, still has the key symbolic tasks of recognizing his son, as Zoja affirms in *Il gesto di Ettore*, and, above all, he has the crucial responsibility of being a symbolic father and transmitting the law

of *castration* (or the Law-of-the-word, as Recalcati says) to his children.<sup>120</sup> Significantly, Recalcati identifies the notion of legacy as the one essential trait of paternity. He argues that the contemporary father must pass down to his children the Law-of-the-Word because only the awareness of one's limitations makes the subject realize that they are not autonomous, nor self-complete entities. Only this awareness makes the subject realize that they must accept society's rules and allows them to open a space for others, to coexist with them, and become a member of the human community:

La legge della parola, castrando il godimento incestuoso, impedisce [...] che "tutti possano avere tutto." Essa ci introduce alla dimensione finita, dipendente, lesa della vita. [...] La legge della parola [...] introduce uno scambio che è all'origine di ogni possibile patto sociale: la rinuncia al godimento del tutto [...] rende possibile avere un Nome, l'essere un uomo, l'iscrizione nel corpo della comunità a cui appartengo." (32)<sup>121</sup>

It is important that the actual father obeys the Law, as it is only because of his own subjection to the Law that he can incarnate the symbolic figure of the Name-of-the-Father: "While the father may be the locus of a prohibition, this prohibition also applies to the 'law-giver' himself, turning him into a symbolic father, or into what Lacan calls the name-of-the-father" (Weber 147). Without this subjection, the father will not be able to embody the paternal function and pass on to his child the interdiction of incest

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<sup>120</sup> In this respect, it must be remembered that despite the many recent, deep social changes, in Italy, the father is still the figure traditionally identified with the law-giver, with the head of the family—and it is often still so. Even if he makes it very clear that the father and the paternal function are not the same thing, Lacan recognizes that there is a strong connection between the two: "It is in the Name-of-the-Father that we must recognize the support of the Symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of law" (Lacan 1977, 67). A similar concept is expressed by Samuel Weber: "...the Other of desire is personified in the father, for it is he who introduces the law of desire through the incest prohibition and the threat of castration [...] What is important is not the person of the father, but his role as guardian of the law" (Weber 1991, 137).

<sup>121</sup> "La Legge della Parola ha come suo tratto fondamentale quello di sostenere la vita umana come marcata da una mancanza, da un senso del limite, da una impossibilità di autosufficienza" (Recalcati 60).

that heralds the child's more general apprehension of the system of rules that regulates society—that is, the Symbolic Order.

Just like the Name-of-the-Father, the Symbolic Order—also called the big Other—is strictly connected to language, and is structured according to a similar system of multiple and interrelated relations between its components.<sup>122</sup>As Slavoj Žižek explains:

The big Other operates on a symbolic level. What, then, is this symbolic order composed of? When we speak (or listen, for that matter), we never merely interact with others; our speech activity is grounded on our accepting and relying on a complex network of rules and other kinds of presuppositions. First there are the grammatical rules that I have to master blindly and spontaneously. [...] Then there is the background of participating in the same life-world that enables me and my partner in conversation to understand each other. The rules that I follow are marked by a deep divide: there are rules (and meanings) that I follow blindly, out of habit, but of which, if I reflect, I can become at least partially aware (such as common grammatical rules); and there are rules that I follow, meanings that haunt me, in ignorance (such as unconscious prohibitions). Then there are the rules and meanings I know of, but must not be seen to know of—dirty or obscene innuendos that one passes over in silence in order to keep up the proper appearances. (Žižek 2007, 9)

The quoted passage gives an idea of the extent to which language informs human beings in Lacan's view, and of the deep connection between language and the apprehension of society's rules.<sup>123</sup> Language is crucial on both the individual and the collective levels: on the one hand, the French psychoanalyst famously affirms that "The unconscious is

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<sup>122</sup> In the same way as the meaning of a word is inferred only on the basis of its difference from other similar words and its position inside the sentence, individuals does not have a fixed identity, but are defined by and through their relation to other individuals. As a consequence, their actions are determined by their position in the Symbolic Order, that is, in the social system, as Lacan demonstrates in his seminar on E. A. Poe's *The Purloined Letter*.

<sup>123</sup> The Symbolic Order, therefore, does not only consist of obvious, visible, written rules. It permeates all aspects of culture and society, it is an impalpable, anonymous mechanism commanding the actions and thoughts of individuals. In Žižek's words: "The symbolic order, society's unwritten constitution, is the second nature of every speaking being: it is here, directing and controlling my acts: it is the sea I swim in, yet it remains ultimately impenetrable—I can never put it in front of me and grasp it. It is as if we, subjects of language, talk and interact like puppets, our speech and gestures dictated by some nameless all-pervasive agency" (Žižek 2007, 8).

structured like a language,” thereby focusing on the incidence of verbal expressions and structures on the individual psychic system; on the other hand—in a definitely more obscure formula—he claims that “The unconscious is the discourse of the Other,” thereby reaffirming the influence and impact the Symbolic Order (the Other) on the individual’s identity formation. The subject’s individual speech—the Saussurian *parole*—is precisely the way in which one’s subjectivity symbolically connects and fits into the larger scene of the world and into the Symbolic Order that regulates it—which, on a linguistic level, correspond to the Saussurian *langue*. In other words, individual speech is the subjects’ way of blending into the social environment while at the same time maintaining their uniqueness as subjects.<sup>124</sup>

Considering this theoretical framework, Rino’s aphasia is particularly meaningful. If the (symbolic) father has the function of introducing the child into the field of language and into the Symbolic Order, then it is clear that the protagonist’s loss of speech metaphorically indicates his inadequacy to affirm and endorse the conventions and rules regulating the social context in which he lives, and, as a consequence, his inability to help Cristiano understand and accept them. Taking into account Rino’s troubled relation to his social environment, this might not come as a surprise. However, the main character’s dumbness can lead to further, more interesting implications.

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<sup>124</sup> In the Lacanian perspective language defines individuals as both unique beings and as part of a larger community of speaking subjects. This perspective is indebted to Saussure’s structural linguistic approach, which famously distinguishes between the concrete use of language—the original sentences that individuals produce when they actually speak (the *parole*)—and the abstract, preexisting code shared by the speaking community, the grammatical and syntactic structures on which any concrete use of language is necessarily based (the *langue*).



In his reading of Lacan, Slavoj Žižek affirms that the symbolic order “only exists insofar as the subject acts as if it exists”: in other words, he argues that the anonymous mechanism of the symbolic order only exists because it is perpetuated by the subjects’ words and behavior, which are influenced by the mechanism in turn, in a sort of vicious circle (10). In this perspective, Rino’s silence and apparent death seem to symbolize an act of passive rebellion toward social conventions, the hopeless way in which the protagonist expresses his refusal to participate in perpetuating such a corrupted social system. This view is confirmed by the fact that the protagonists’ words do not just disappear completely: instead of leaving a total void—like the Pope in Moretti’s movie—they are replaced, as it were, by the image of the ant discussed above, which infuses Rino’s silence with a specific significance. While inevitably evoking Aesop’s famous fable *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, the ant actually brings to mind the myth of honest labor and the related notions of maturity, responsibility, and deferral of immediate pleasure in favor of future well-being. In addition to this, it conjures up the concepts of industriousness, obedience, social organization, and cooperation, and it conveys the idea of a society in which individuals operate as a unified identity to create a social structure that takes care of children and of the survival of the species. In short, the image of the ant epitomizes precisely those values that a father, according to Zoja, is supposed to honor, incarnate, and transmit to his son, the same values represented by Hector. The metaphoric import of the image seems therefore to suggest that Rino, despite his aphasia, still honors, somehow, the paternal role of the lawgiver. Yet the fact that the message is conveyed by a picture indicates the loss of faith in the power of words and, implicitly, a rejection of the degraded rules of contemporary society, that is, of the contemporary, corrupted Symbolic Order.

The nonverbal manner in which the “ant values” are affirmed underlines the uncertainty that characterize the role of contemporary fathers. At the same time, the traditional authoritative father figure—which might perhaps be considered a possible solution to the crisis of paternity—is excluded from the picture by a further destabilizing aspect: the ant is a female insect. In ant colonies all individuals are female; males are born only in certain periods of the year, and their only function is to fecundate the queen, the only individual that can give birth. After the coupling, male ants die. No *chain of fathers* is to be found in ant colonies. The metaphorical reverberation of the ant image, therefore, impregnates Rino’s silence with conflicting, multilayered signification, and while it hints at the flaws of the contemporary social system, it further identifies the condition of fatherhood as extremely complex and fragile.

### **The Legacy of Desire. The Ant versus the Grasshopper**

Through the image of the ant and its implication Rino indirectly transmits to his child the Law, the limitation that will allow him to structure his desire. This is extremely important because, according to Recalcati, desire is the only real gift that a father can—and must—pass on to his children, the only meaningful legacy. In other words, a father should transmit to his child the notion that the acceptance of prohibitions and limitations is not a punishment: on the contrary, it is the only condition through which the individual can find freedom and self-realization: “Il padre agisce come portatore della legge che proibisce il godimento incestuoso, e, al tempo stesso, colui che offre in eredità il senso della legge non come castigo ma possibilità della libertà, come fondamento del desiderio” (37). And again: “C’è un dono che viene trasmesso nel movimento dell’ereditare, è il dono del desiderio e la sua legge, che può umanizzare la vita” (17).

Desire is completely distinct from impulses or from drives. It is not an appetite, and it has nothing to do with the immediate satisfaction of a need or with hedonistic pleasure. In our contemporary social context, however, restraint, interdiction, and discipline are often considered a limitation to one's free will, while the immediate obtainment of enjoyment—which is, consumer pleasure—is seen as the key to a fulfilling life. The blind pursuit of pleasure is continuously encouraged by the media in myriad forms; it is presented as the only means of obtaining happiness, it is virtually not curbed by any ethical interdiction, and it has paradoxically become an injunction of our super ego, as Žižek underlines: “Today, however, we are bombarded from all sides by the different versions of the injunction ‘Enjoy!’” (Žižek 2007, 104) Therefore, the search for enjoyment takes place in a sort of symbolic desert, becomes absolutely urgent, and turns into the pressing need to fill in a gap that cannot really be filled in that way. This frantic quest generates anxiety and eventually shows its coercing, enslaving nature, as Recalcati argues. The so-called total freedom proposed by the media is actually not freedom at all. If freedom is separated from any sense of responsibility and from the symbolic restraints around which desire is actually constituted, the individual's uncontrolled impulses eventually mingle with the death drive, become traumatic, and ultimately destructive: “dove la pulsione si sgancia dal desiderio diviene solo pulsione di morte” (50). The connection between unrestrained enjoyment and the death drive, of course, refers to the Lacanian notion of *jouissance*, which Recalcati translates with “godimento mortale” (50).

While real freedom and a healthy structuring of desire and identity are built around the notion of prohibition and of acknowledged impossibility, contemporary society seems to go in the opposite direction, insofar as it invests the subject with the delusional notion of total freedom and the false myth of a happiness that can be reached

through hedonistic enjoyment. This concept is also linked to the notion of the “misappropriation of experience” operated by television and discussed in the introduction.

From this perspective, too, Rino’s loss of speech reflects the disorientation and powerlessness of a father figure immersed in a social context that does not endorse the Law he is supposed to transmit. While his paternal role requires him to pass the notion of limitation and lack on to his son, contemporary consumer society does not really seem to sanction any restriction on the individuals’ so-called freedom. The invisible puppeteer, as Žižek would say, seems to advocate the “grasshopper model” as the way to a fulfilling existence as opposed to the ant’s responsible attitude, which, according to this model, only frustrates the subject’s freedom. No wonder the character of Rino can only try to fulfill his role in a non-traditional, nonverbal, even controversial manner, that is, by means of an image. If language is the main—though obviously not the only—vehicle through which the mainstream consumer ideology is divulged, then Rino has to find a different, less contaminated—albeit tentative—form of expression.

### **What is Left of Fatherhood**

Massimo Recalcati links the phenomenon of the “evaporation of the father” to the alarming disappearance of traditional values such as a sense of responsibility, an ethical attitude, and respect for the others and for society’s rules. While he claims that the reinstatement of the traditional, authoritative father figure (the *pater-familias*) is not a realistic solution, he tries to understand what new form of fatherhood is possible in

contemporary society. To do so, he investigates the notion of paternity through the mythological character of Telemachus, Ulysses' son in the *Odyssey*.<sup>125</sup>

During Ulysses' absence, the Satyrs usurp his reign and lead a dissipated life in Ithaca. Telemachus is too young to stop the devastation of his home and his town, and hopes that his father will come back from sea to restore the legitimate order: "Telemaco domanda giustizia: nella sua terra non c'è più Legge, non c'è più rispetto, non c'è più ordine simbolico" (116). Both Zoja and Recalcati agree in defining the Satyrs as a metaphor for unrestrained enjoyment: in particular, Recalcati argues that the wild princes' attitude gives us a perfect example of what Lacan calls *jouissance mortelle* (that is, wild enjoyment that turns into a destructive force), while Zoja defines them as a perfect example of prepaternal behavior. Obviously, both notions imply that without a father there is no Law, no Symbolic Order, only compulsive, destructive *jouissance* (Recalcati 50, Zoja 115-16). Ulysses returns after more than twenty years of absence, disguised as a beggar, and initially Telemachus does not even recognize him. Soon, however, the king of Ithaca reveals his true identity to his son and with his help he finally kills the Satyrs and restores the subverted order.

Recalcati argues that the relationship between Ulysses and Telemachus is the perfect metaphor for the contemporary relationship between father and son—a son who has to learn fatherhood in turn. On the one hand, modern children are just like Telemachus: they need a father who brings back the Law in a world where the Symbolic

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<sup>125</sup> Telemachus is still a baby when his father Ulysses leaves his reign, Ithaca, to go to the Trojan War. After the end of the ten-year conflict, a series of events keeps Ulysses away from his reign for ten more years. While nobody in Ithaca knows if the king is still alive, the social order is disrupted by the Satyrs, the unruly young princes who aim to usurp Ulysses' reign and marry his wife, Penelope. The Satyrs do not recognize any ethical rule, have no respect, no compassion, and observe no Law. Like a gang of hooligans, they just take possession of Ulysses' house, eat his food, use up his wealth, and wildly follow their impulses and their appetite.

Order has been substituted by the devastating imperative to enjoy. On the other hand, Ulysses' disguise as a homeless beggar epitomizes the condition of contemporary fathers, who are indeed fragile, flawed, insecure. Yet, claims Recalcati, it is precisely through their fragility that they can and must fulfill their paternal role. The meeting between Telemachus and Ulysses/beggar demonstrates that the king-like father, who incarnates discipline and dictatorial power, is no longer a realistic model. Contemporary fathers are vulnerable and flawed—and this is precisely what makes them human and credible. In particular, in a world where words have lost their deciphering and illuminating power, as Moretti's Pope realizes, fathers are naturally incapable of *explaining* the meaning of life, but they can do something else, they can *show* that life has a meaning: "...un padre radicalmente umanizzato, vulnerabile, incapace di dire qual è il senso della vita ma capace di mostrare, *attraverso la testimonianza della propria vita, che la vita può avere un senso*" (Recalcati 14, emphasis in the text).

It goes without saying that Rino is an obvious example of an unstable, flawed father figure. Despite his defects, however, he also has a strong, sincere ethical sense that is wonderfully described in an intense scene where he curbs his aggressive instinct—that is, his prepaternal side—out of respect for another human being who incarnates the values of respect and honesty and who, meaningfully enough, is his father figure. By renouncing aggressiveness, the main character shows his subjection to the Law and the Symbolic Order, honors the moral and ethical rules that the social context is neglecting, and thereby fulfils his paternal role.

In the examined episode, the narrator explains that Rino, Danilo, and Quattro Formaggi once worked at a construction company called Euroedil. Unfortunately, at a certain point when business slowed down, the owner and manager Mr. Marchetta had

no choice but to lay Rino and his friend off and only hire them occasionally when he needed help. At the time of the narrated events, Mr. Marchetta has become old and sick, and his son Max has taken his place as the company manager. When Rino learns that Euroedil is about to start a new, massive project, he expects to be offered the usual temporary job; he goes to the company premises with his two friends, but they find out that Max has already hired a team of immigrant workers. As opposed to his righteous father, Max is a pathetic, mean individual. His only concerns are his physical appearance and money; he does not care about old workers and prefers hiring an illegal workforce that he can underpay. When Rino finds out that he is not going to get the job, he becomes furious and violently breaks into Max Marchetta's office. He is so angry that he is about to punch Max in the face, but he suddenly notices a picture taken twenty years before, pinned on the wall. The photo portrays a group of workers, including Rino and Mr. Marchetta Senior. Rino's fist stops in midair as he remembers those days: Mr. Marchetta was a demanding boss, but also a man of principles; he respected his workers, he appreciated their work and always paid them on time, and he made sure they had their wages no matter what. He was strict, but also compassionate and generous: when he discovered that Rino was going to have a baby, he offered him the left over bricks from a previous construction job so that Rino could build a proper house for his family. Rino and Cristiano still live in that house.

Still holding Max against the wall, Rino looks at the photo, thinks of his old boss, and lets go of Max, out of respect for his father:

Tuo padre ci teneva, ai suoi operai. Non voglio dire che era un padre per noi o stronzate del genere. Se non facevi il tuo lavoro eri fuori. Poche chiacchiere. Ma se non ti lamentavi e lavoravi duro ti rispettava. Se c'era lavoro, ci potevi scommettere che ti chiamava. [...]

Il mondo è fatto su misura per i mediocri. Tu sei bravo. Prendi gli schiavi negri e i bastardi dell'est e non li paghi una lira. E quelli ci stanno. La fame è una brutta bestia. E gli operai che si sono rotti la schiena per questa ditta? In culo. Non si spreca nemmeno una telefonata. La verità è che non hai rispetto nè per quei figli di

cane che vengono a rubarci il pane di bocca nè per noi e neanche per te stesso. Guardati, sei un pagliaccio...Un pagliaccio travestito da padrone. Io non ti spezzo le ossa solo per rispetto a tuo padre. Alla fine, vedi, è solo questione di rispetto. (77-78)

This is a very powerful passage, where Rino's moral stature is revealed in full. And there is no doubt that, in comparison, Max is, metaphorically speaking, a dwarf.<sup>126</sup> Besides offering a piece of cutting, sincere, and blunt criticism on the tragic issue of immigrant exploitation, the passage also makes clear that the violent, aggressive, dysfunctional Rino is, indeed, a much more ethically worth individual than the self-centered handsome guy who now owns the construction company, leaves his sick old father with a care-giver, and, as soon as Rino leaves, fires the secretary whose only fault is that she did not keep "that hooligan" out of the office (79).

When Rino comes out of the building, he wonders why he did not punch Max in the face. The passage is so intense that the reader might wonder along.

"...Perché non l'ho ammazzato? Che cazzo mi prende in questo periodo?"  
 "...per Cristiano" gli suggerì Quattro Formaggi. [...]  
 "Bravo. L'ho fatto per Cristiano." (84)

The manifest, obvious meaning of this verbal exchange confirms what the reader already knows: Rino fears that the social services will take Cristiano away from his custody if he gets into trouble. His explanation makes perfect sense. But his words also have a latent meaning. Keeping in mind Recalcati's vision, it can be said that the protagonist does, indeed, keep his rage under control for Cristiano's sake, but not only because of the social services: he does so because this is the only way he can honor the Law and symbolically pass it on to Cristiano. Not through words: through facts. Once

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<sup>126</sup> Unlike his father, Max Machetta is a clown who follows the standards promoted by TV and speaks in the language of advertising: "Un imprenditore deve essere sempre elegante, perchè eleganza è sinonimo di sicurezza e affidabilità" (71). From this point of view, he recalls Policeman Miele.



again, a consideration that Recalcati refers to a movie can also be applied to the examined passage. In *Il Complesso di Telemaco*, the psychoanalyst briefly speaks about *The Son*, a film by the Dardenne brothers (2002). In the movie, a father whose son was killed finds out that his young apprentice, who is working with him through a prison rehabilitating program, is actually his son's murderer. He is so shocked that he is about to kill the boy, but at the last minute he renounces his payback, does not harm him, and keeps on mentoring him. By doing so, claims Recalcati, he symbolically adopts the boy and actually transmits to him the gift of the Law:

La legge del taglione è sospesa dall'irruzione della legge della parola. Da qui, da questa sottomissione del padre alla Legge, dalla sua rinuncia al godimento della vendetta, sorge la possibilità di una nuova e più autentica adozione simbolica del ragazzo e, da parte del ragazzo stesso, una comprensione più soggettivata della legge. Come se l'interdizione simbolica ad uccidere che anima la Legge della Parola potesse essere effettivamente introiettata dal soggetto quale legge propria solo a partire dalla trasmissione, resa possibile dall'atto paterno di rinunciare al godimento della vendetta, cioè dalla sua sottomissione liberatoria alla legge della castrazione. (37)

Rino, too, renounces his retribution. Cristiano is not present, but this does not affect the import of Rino's behavior: through this gesture, he figuratively obeys the Law and becomes a symbolic father. This consideration, of course, gives an additional, less obvious meaning to the sentence: "L'ho fatto per Cristiano."

By renouncing his revenge out of respect for a worthy father figure, Ammaniti's contemporary, dysfunctional Aeneas also reconstructs and honors a symbolic *chain of fathers* that had been missing a component and is now complete (it is not by chance that Rino uses the word "father" while speaking of Mr. Marchetta). It is Rino's position in the chain, then, that gives his speech and his endeavor the dignity and power that the reader feels so strongly. From this position, Rino not only passes on to Cristiano the Law, he also gives his son a legitimate place in the sequence. In short, he is helping him to become a self-realized individual, and he is teaching him fatherhood.

Meaningfully enough, the *chain of fathers* created by Rino is not based on biological bonds, but on ethical principles. Max, Mr. Marchetta's biological son, is unworthy of being part of this chain, and this is proven by the fact that he does not seem to value his father's teachings, let alone take care of him.

### **Becoming an Heir. Cristiano's Rite of Passage**

On his side, Cristiano cannot just passively receive this legacy: he must actually earn it. Being a biological son does automatically involve being an heir, in the same way as having a child does not imply being a symbolic father.<sup>127</sup> The notion of legacy, according to Recalcati, implies a double movement: on the one hand, the man must choose to be a father, he must recognize his child as his son and accept responsibility for him, as Zoja argues, too; on the other hand, the child must consciously elect the adult as his father, he must actively choose to be his son and heir and accept the Law that the father symbolically represents.<sup>128</sup> As Recalcati puts it: "Per essere davvero un

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<sup>127</sup> As Recalcati affirms, paternity involves a symbolic adoption of the child. For this reason, the absence of the father becomes traumatic only if it is a symbolic absence, if it reflects the father's rejection of the son as such. In both Ulysses' and Rino's case, their absence is certainly actual, but not symbolic. Neither of them has refused to take responsibility for their sons, neither of them has rejected fatherhood.

<sup>128</sup> This notion recalls Zoja's concept of the blessing of the child, a double movement that gives both father and son their identity as such. Zoja recounts that after Hector has taken Astyanax into his arms, he blesses the child and lifts him to the sky. This gesture has become the symbol of fatherhood: "*Questo gesto sarà per tutti i tempi il marchio del padre*" (91, emphasis in the text). Through this ritual, not only the father recognizes the child as his son, he also recognizes himself as a father, thereby fulfilling an archetypal need on both sides: "Il rito della benedizione ha vita in sé [...] essendo assoluto, incondizionato, potente, questo rito è necessario alla vita psichica del figlio quanto del padre" (266). In Roman society, where fathers were considered the link between sons and gods, the same gesture became particularly symbolic. Not all children were formally recognized as sons by their biological fathers: only the elevation of the newborn to the sky formally ratified the father's assumption of responsibility for his son, and his willingness to become a parent. While this blessing ritual also functioned as a proper rite of passage, it also maintained the original "double direction": on a psychological level, it elevated the child to the status of son, while, simultaneously, it also elevated the man to the revered status of father: "Mentre

erede non è sufficiente ricevere passivamente un'eredità già costituita, ma è necessario un movimento soggettivo di ripresa, di soggettivazione del debito" (113, 121).<sup>129</sup> The

The movement signifying the transformation of a son into an heir is well represented by Telemachus' journey in the *Odyssey*. Telemachus undertakes a perilous expedition in search of his dad, whom he does not even remember and who might already be dead. He does not find him, but during his journey he meets many people who loved and admired Ulysses deeply. Through their words, Telemachus actually gets to know his father, becomes proud of him, chooses him symbolically, and can finally become his heir. Only after the journey (and the process) is completed, does the young heir meet Ulysses in the flesh; at that point father and son, together, can restore the Law. For Telemachus—and for every son—the symbolic journey toward the assumption of the paternal legacy is an essential step in the identity formation process; it is also a specific form of rite of passage in which the individual is completely alone and, in this loneliness, without any help, he symbolically finds his father and the values he represents (Zoja 262).<sup>130</sup> Recalcati specifically underlines that the transmission of

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iniziava il bambino alla condizione di figlio, [...] anche l'uomo veniva iniziato a quella di padre, vertice della sua vita privata ed asse della società" (171).

<sup>129</sup> The debt Recalcati mentions here is once again linked to the transmission of the Law and to language (that is, the Other). Only the awareness of one's limitations makes the subject realize that no one can exist as an autonomous, self-sufficient entity, that everybody is deeply indebted to the speaking community that preexists them, and that everybody can only exist in relation to others (and to the Other). It is because of this awareness that the subject accepts society's rules, opens a space for others, and becomes a member of the human community: "La legge della parola, castrando il godimento incestuoso, impedisce [...] che 'tutti possano avere tutto.' Essa ci introduce alla dimensione finita, dipendente, lesa della vita. [...] La Legge della parola—la Legge simbolica della castrazione—introduce uno scambio che è all'origine di ogni possibile patto sociale: la rinuncia al godimento del tutto, [...] rende possibile avere un Nome, l'essere un uomo, l'iscrizione nel corpo della comunità a cui appartengo" (32).

<sup>130</sup> As Recalcati points out, becoming an heir is like being born again: "La seconda nascita, quella che investe il problema dell'ereditare, è una conquista della soggettività" (122). And also: "L'ereditare non è la ricerca di una assicurazione

legacy implies *first* the severing of the chord that ties father and son, and *then* the son's decision to become an heir. Only orphans can really inherit something: "Ogni movimento autentico dell'ereditare suppone il taglio, la separazione, il trauma dell'abbandono del padre, l'esperienza della perdita, dell'essere, appunto, orfano" (47). The condition of loneliness is crucial because it is precisely by invoking the father when the father is absent, that the son truly brings the father's symbolic presence into (his) life.<sup>131</sup>

This notion sheds an interesting light on the novel. Rino takes his paternal role seriously, and consequently he wants to teach Cristiano aggression, which he deems essential in life. He organizes two rites of passage for his son: the first requires Cristiano to kill a dog (as narrated in the prologue); the second demands him to fight and win. Cristiano passes both tests: he shoots the animal and hits Trekken so hard that he remains on the floor. However, these potential initiation rites soon reveal their ineffectiveness, since neither of them really marks a turning point in Cristiano's existence. As it turns out, the event that truly changes the young protagonist's life does not involve his ability to be aggressive; on the contrary, Cristiano's real rite of passage requires him to prove his ability to protect, to help, to trust, and, above all, to save another person, who, meaningfully enough, is his father. As the narrator states, the crucial turning point in Cristiano's existence is his separation from Rino: "In seguito Cristiano Zena ricordò il momento in cui portarono via suo padre su una lettiga come quello che cambiò la sua esistenza" (342).<sup>132</sup>

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identitaria. Implica piuttosto un salto in avanti, uno strappo, una riconquista pericolosa" (47).

<sup>131</sup> This notion, too, was expressed by Massimo Recalcati in his Seminar at the University of Verona on April 13, 2016.

<sup>132</sup> The "disappearance" of Rino is the event that changes Cristiano's life forever. The narrator refers to the time before the storm as "Cristiano's previous life": "Spesso

As opposed to the previous two “tests” and to the pre-modern rites of passage traditionally organized by the community of fathers (Zoja 260), Cristiano’s true initiation is neither fabricated nor supervised by any father figure. It is quite the opposite: after the storm, Danilo and Quattro Formaggi also disappear from the scene and the young protagonist is left completely on his own. It is precisely this solitude, together with the crucial fact that Rino—just like Ulysses—is nevertheless symbolically present as a father, that enables Cristiano to choose him as his parent. In this perspective, the main character’s position differs profoundly from Pietro’s and Rosario’s, whose fathers are non-existent on both a practical and a symbolic level.

Cristiano’s coming-of-age process is very demanding, and not only because—on a purely practical level—the boy must find a way to carry his unconscious father home, make sure he is taken to the hospital the next day, and even dispose of Fabiana’s corpse. The real core of his rite of passage is indeed much more challenging and pivots around the key notion of trust: Cristiano must decide, in complete solitude and despite all odds, whether or not to believe in his father’s innocence. And he decides that his father is not a murderer:

No. Ci doveva essere un’altra spiegazione. Certo che ci doveva essere. Quando suo padre si sarebbe svegliato dal coma gliel’avrebbe detta e lui avrebbe capito tutto. Perché suo padre era violento, era un ubriacone, ma non era un assassino. *Però l’altra notte ha picchiato quella bionda che è entrata in camera mia. Ma l’ha presa solo a calci in culo. È diverso. Mio padre è buono.* (404)

Cristiano resolves to trust his father despite the circumstances that seem to indicate that Rino has killed Fabiana and assumes full responsibility for his choice. By protecting Rino, who is really innocent, from the judgement of a society that would certainly declare him a murderer and a rapist, Cristiano actually reaffirms law, justice, and,

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Cristiano, nella sua esistenza precedente, si era trovato a ragionare, davanti al telegiornale, sugli errori commessi dagli assassini italiani” (402).

indirectly, all the values connected to the notion of fatherhood—which Rino still represents, even if in a dysfunctional way. In other words, he truly becomes an heir. This is his true rite of passage and his legacy.

### **The (S)son and the (S)savior**

Cristiano's role as the savior of Rino becomes particularly interesting if compared to the salvific function of another Son, indirectly evoked by the novel's title and directly recalled by the young protagonist's name: Jesus Christ. Speaking of Jesus, Massimo Recalcati argues that His sacrifice was crucial in establishing the faith in God and symbolically saving His divine image: "La fede di Dio si cementa, infatti, solo attorno al sacrificio del figlio. [...] È la testimonianza del figlio [...] che fonda l'esistenza del padre e dà corpo a quella di Dio" (117).<sup>133</sup> To clarify this point, Recalcati refers to Lacan, who in his *Seminar XX* claims: "It is true that the storyette of Christ is presented, not as the enterprise of saving men, but as that of saving God. We must recognize that he who took on this enterprise, namely Christ, paid the price—that's the least we can say about it." (108).<sup>134</sup>

Cristiano's initiation rite definitely confirms his role as Rino's savior. This does not really come unexpectedly, since Cristiano actually takes care of his father throughout the novel: he wakes Rino up from his drunken sleep so that he can get to work on time, he drives the van when Rino and his friends are too drunk to do it, he

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<sup>133</sup> See also the famous line: "Chi crede nel Figlio, ha la vita eterna" (Gv3,15 ss.; 3,36; 5,24).

<sup>134</sup> The line of thought according to which the Father is symbolically saved by the Son leads to a couple of interesting parallels: first, while Cristiano feels abandoned by Rino, Jesus Christ on the cross feels abandoned by His Father, even if just for a minute; secondly, both Christ and Cristiano's words are not heard in the corrupted social context in which they live: the people of ancient Rome did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, while nobody, in the crowded church, hears Cristiano when he declares that his father is innocent.

insists that they clean the room before the social worker comes to check on them. Moreover, it is for Cristiano's sake that Rino refrains from committing petty crimes (35, 58, 99, 102). From this point of view Cristiano is the certainly the more responsible of the two, he is the one who behaves as the father. It is therefore significant that, after Rino's stroke, his position recalls that of God, insofar as the sentence that he writes to Rino—"Io non ti ho abbandonato. Ti sto solo aspettando" (452)—echoes and answers the invocation of the Son to the Holy Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) <sup>135</sup>

Thus Cristiano's symbolic function expands beyond the role of the salvific son to include that of a protective father. From this perspective, the disintegration of the line separating childhood from adulthood—or rather, son from father— does not have any specific negative impact on Cristiano; it signals, instead, the inadequacy of Rino, a notion that recalls the concept of the adult-child discussed in the introduction. As for Cristiano, his hybrid symbolic dimension strongly emphasizes his sincere, loving, overall positive nature, which is the result of both his fragility and his maturity. This connotation makes the young protagonist the ideal spokesman for a crucial consideration about the complex topic of *cattiveria*.

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<sup>135</sup> According to Zoja, when the Roman emperor Costantine imposed Catholicism as the official religion in Rome, fatherhood started its inexorable, albeit slow, decline, due to the fact that Christ occupies a position as relevant as God's in the Catholic iconography. In other words, argues Zoja, the Son stole away some power from the figure of the Father. This overlapping of roles, as it were, is probably an inevitable phase of the process of heritage. After the son becomes an heir, the distance from the father is drastically reduced, so that the son can position himself next to him (or, to use a typical Catholic expression, *to the right of the father*) and help him impose the Law. After his journey, Telemachus can help Ulysses defeat the Satyrs; after his death on the cross, Jesus Christ can effectively spread God's teaching among humanity (he needed to die and resurrect for peoples to believe Him).

### The Question of *Cattiveria*

*Cattiveria* is a pivotal theme in both *Ti Prendo e ti porto via* and in *Come Dio comanda*, and resonates from one novel to the other.<sup>136</sup> As mentioned before, Pietro's question "Chi glielo aveva insegnato?" (referred to Pierini's wickedness in *Ti prendo*) is indirectly answered in *Come Dio comanda* by Rino who teaches Cristiano how to fight and explains to him: "Devi diventare cattivo." While the passage seems to settle the matter, however, it simultaneously reveals the flaw of a blindly aggressive approach. Significantly, the character that notices the inadequacy of Rino's teaching is Cristiano.

To explore this issue in detail, it is necessary to go back to the episode in which Rino realizes that his son does not know how to fight and decides to give him a fighting lesson, assuming that he has been the victim of Trekken's abuse. However unwillingly, Cristiano follows his father's fighting instructions so accurately that he actually breaks Rino's nose, which makes his father very proud of him. At this point, Rino gives Cristiano a wooden club and orders him to jump in the van: according to his plan they will drive around, find Trekken, Cristiano will beat him up and will not be bothered by the schoolboy again.

Rino's reaction, however excessive, might be understandable in the novel's dysfunctional perspective, except for the fact that Cristiano, in this particular occasion,

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<sup>136</sup> Freud's seminal essay *Civilization and Its Discontents* makes crystal-clear that aggression is inherent to human nature: Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved [...]; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo hominis lupus* (58). From this point of view, the social environments described in *Ischiano* and *Varrano* are just the logical narrative outcome Freud's perspective.



has not been abused at all. In fact, he was the abuser. That same afternoon, the mild and shy young protagonist was in a shopping mall, when he saw Trekken, the handsome and popular schoolboy, hanging out with Fabiana and Esmeralda, the two most beautiful girls in school. Cristiano felt a painful pang of envy, and when he saw Trekken's beautiful motorcycle parked nearby, he lost it. He stole a big knife from one of the mall shops and used it to savagely damage the bike: "Doveva essere impazzito di colpo. Aveva rubato il coltello e si era accanito sulla moto come se fosse stato ipnotizzato. Come se nel suo cervello ci fosse stato una specie di blackout" (143). But Trekken saw him, and that is why he beat him up.

The focal point of this episode is that Trekken has done nothing against Cristiano: his only faults are being popular among girls, having a really nice motorbike, being successful in sports and at school. Cristiano, as we know, is the opposite: he is shy, socially awkward, and poor. At school, girls make fun of him and teachers have given up on him so completely that they do not even notice if he is in class. The main character feels as if life has given him nothing and has given Trekken everything that he painfully misses.<sup>137</sup> The beautiful motorbike, which is so much better looking than Cristiano's old bicycle, is just the target of the sudden, wild, blind outpour of rage that comes out of Cristiano's pain and frustration. In this respect, Cristiano acts just like Quattro Formaggi or Policeman Miele in *Ti Prendo e ti porto via*. Unlike these other characters, however, the protagonist of *Come Dio comanda* is aware that his attack on Trekken is unmotivated and unjust, and he is also very lucid in his considerations. Most

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<sup>137</sup> According to Lacan, aggression is not the result of frustration, as Freud claims in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Instead, it is the result of the fascination for an unreachable ideal, for a mirror image that is too perfect to be met. This notion can be applied to Cristiano's relationship to Trekken, but also, for a different reason, to Pietro's relation to Pierini. The Lacanian connection between narcissism and aggression is analyzed by Massimo Recalcati in *Sull'odio* (pp. 52-56 in particular).

importantly, Cristiano notices straight away that Rino is so obsessed with teaching him how to fight that he does not even ask him what happened. He is very aware of his father's blindness:

Ma la cosa che lo stupiva di più era che suo padre non gli aveva neanche chiesto la ragione per cui aveva fatto a botte. Non gli era nemmeno passato per la testa. *A lui frega solo che suo figlio non si faccia menare da nessuno.* (155)

Cristiano knows that his father's plan to take revenge on Trekken is unfair, but he is too scared to tell Rino that he was the one to blame, so he jumps in the van and tries to talk his dad out of his pugnacious scheme. All the same, he gradually gets caught into the spiral of menaces and violence verbally conjured up by Rino. The excitement mounts and when they finally do find the schoolboy, Cristiano is really ready to fight: he jumps out of the vehicle and hits Trekken really hard on the jaw, as Rino has taught him to. His attack is successful, but Cristiano is terrified by the overwhelming, scary, blinding force of his rage. He realizes that he was so intoxicated by the power to hurt someone, that he could easily have killed his opponent. Significantly, his rage dissolves immediately after the fight: when he looks into Trekken's eyes, he feels empty, dismayed, and anguished: "Ora sentiva solo la nausea e una terribile stanchezza" (160-61).

While Cristiano's awareness shows the power of rage and the disastrous domino effects of random, uncontrolled violence (Cristiano's initial vandalistic attack leads to Trekken's violent reaction, to Rino's fighting lesson, and finally to Cristiano's brutal aggression against Trekken), it also underlines the importance of distinguishing between violence and self-defense. Most importantly, though, the passage underlines the abyss of injustice generated by unmotivated violence through another crucial question that resonates—again—from one novel to the other: "Perché?" Just like Max with the abusive Policeman Miele in *Ti Prendo e ti porto via*, Trekken asks Cristiano:

“Perchè? Io non ti ho fatto niente...” Needless to say, it is the same hopeless, desperate, unanswered “Perché?” that enquires about the reason of wickedness and cruelty, with the difference that the main character is now in the position of the abuser (*Ti prendo* 176; *Come Dio*, 144, 161). While this “Perché” actually makes Cristiano feel bad, it also reveals the risk of using aggression as a way to relate to the others and to life in general: from this perspective, this is the real, final, (in)complete answer to Pietro’s question.

All in all, the dysfunctional social environment depicted in *Come Dio comanda* is as disquieting as the corrupted scenarios depicted in the other novels. The text’s specific contradictions and paradoxes (God is unreliable and even mean; the dysfunctional father is truly affectionate and loving; violence and hate are taught out of love) openly challenge conventional moral standards and traditional social perspectives, and even certain apparently “politically correct” judging parameters are put into question. One clear example is the negative, spontaneous reaction of the paramedic who puts Rino into the ambulance and promptly judges him on the basis of his look: “Non era il primo e non sarebbe stato l’ultimo maledetto naziskin che gli capitasse di soccorrere facendo quel lavoro. *Quanto odio questi bastardi...*” (340). The cultivated, progressive, middle-class reader may certainly understand (and perhaps relate to) this comment, but the novel demonstrates that this judgment is superficial, and actually unfair. Needless to say, the thought-provoking contradictions exposed by the text remain unsolved. Even Cristiano is not exempt: he saves his father and reaffirms justice, but to do so he commits a crime (he throws Fabiana’s corpse in the river instead of calling the police).

And yet, in the corrupted landscapes described by all the texts analyzed in this study, Rino stands out as the only father and adult who takes his role seriously and really cares for his child. Paradoxically, he manages to transmit his love because he does not even try to cover his many flaws. In this perspective, he is completely sincere, always. His honesty, together with his love, dedication, and attunement toward his child—which is precisely what was missing in the other texts, with the partial exception of *Io non ho paura*—activate the deep trust that transform the child into an heir and makes his identity-formation process possible. (And I like to think that on a general level this concept is valid also when speaking of daughters, as the theoretical works by Recalcati imply.) Moreover, the father's love activates the child's salvific potential, a factor which was absent in the other narratives—with the partial exception, once again, of *Io non ho paura*. These aspects offer a positive hint that adults and children might perhaps find new roles and new ways to help and love each other even in such a dysfunctional world.

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