BOYS ON THE PROWL: COMING-OF-AGE NARRATIVES IN POSTWAR ITALY

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My study counters the scholarly commonplace that the end of the Second World War brought about the demise of the Italian Bildungsroman. I argue that instead of a decline, authors Moravia, Saba, Soldati, and Morante reshaped the narrative premise. In contrast to the classical Bildungsroman (in Italian Romanzo di formazione), which narrates a protagonist’s successful integration into society, the postwar variations on the genre focus instead upon a protagonist’s altered state (encapsulated by the Italian term de-formazione). What I call Romanzo di deformazione is a sub-genre in which peer pressure, societal expectations, and family obligations distort the young protagonists’ perception of masculinity and sexuality.
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T. C.
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PREFACE

We do not grow absolutely, chronologically. We grow sometimes in one dimension, and not in another, unevenly. We grow partially. We are relative. We are mature in one realm, childish in another. The past, present, and future mingle and pull us backward, forward, or fix us in the present. We are made up of layers, cells, constellations. We never discard our childhood. We never escape it completely.

*Anais Nin, Diary 1944-1947*

It wasn’t difficult to select the authors I set out to investigate in my dissertation on coming-of-age narratives in post-war Italy: Moravia, Saba, Soldati, and Morante. Their works have resonated with me and have resurfaced in my research, especially in the last five years.

My college experience in Italy fostered my interest in the European *Bildungsroman*. By the time I received my bachelor’s degree, I was familiar with many canonical texts including Dickens’s *Great Expectations* and Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale*. However, there was still much about the genre I did not know. As a young student I had read, of course, Collodi’s *Pinocchio* and De Amicis’s *Cuore*, but I was not familiar with modern *Bildungsromane*. The two years I spent at the University of Virginia working on my master’s degree were extremely influential in this regard. I had the opportunity to study Calvino and above all Morante, whose novel *L’isola di Arturo* intensified my interest in coming-of-age narratives.

In *The Way of the World* Franco Moretti writes, “maturity and youth are inversely proportional: the culture that emphasizes the first devalues the second, and vice versa” (8). What, then, constitutes maturity? And, equally important, what makes a man a man?
I take these questions as a starting point taking into account the concepts of identity, masculinity, and sexuality, which recur repeatedly in the narratives of the four selected authors.

My study counters the scholarly commonplace that the end of the Second World War brought about the demise of the Italian Bildungsroman. I argue that instead of a decline, these authors reshaped the narrative premise. In contrast to the classical Bildungsroman (in Italian Romanzo di formazione), which narrates a protagonist’s successful integration into society, the postwar variations on the genre focus instead upon a protagonist’s altered state (encapsulated by the Italian term de-formazione). What I call Romanzo di deformazione is a sub-genre in which peer pressure, societal expectations, and family obligations distort the young protagonists’ perception of masculinity and sexuality.

Chapters one and two of my study focus on sexual initiation in adolescence. I refer to the concept of sexual experimentation and sexual inadequacies in an interdisciplinary, comparative and multi-discursive fashion. I use archival materials to investigate the institution of the Case di tolleranza (Houses of Prostitution) from the 1940s to the Legge Merlin (Merlin Law, 1958). Furthermore, I illustrate how the modern notion of Italian masculinity evolves in relation to the sociocultural context. I then ask two fundamental questions: How do these authors portray manhood? How do class and sexuality affect the perception of masculinity? Chapters three and four examine the concept of masculine gender identity within cultural and social contexts. The discourse on gender identity and sexuality serves as the basis for a closer analysis of texts by Mario Soldati (La confessione, 1955) and Elsa Morante (L’isola di Arturo, 1957). In both
novels, I analyze how adolescent sexuality was viewed and expressed in the mid-1950s within a Catholic and patriarchal environment.

Primarily informed by masculinity studies, my dissertation is as much an analysis of the novels as it is an investigation of the complex historical, social and cultural context that produced them. The topics discussed are relevant and timely, especially in light of current debates around bullying, misogyny, and homophobia. To this day, numerous men are profoundly impacted by adolescent experiences, peer pressure, and expectations based on “male gender roles.” For this reason, I believe that further research is necessary to expand and elucidate the complex relationship between hegemonic masculinities (the idea of a “real man”) and subordinate masculinities (masculinities that do not live up to this ideal).

Works Cited


CHAPTER 1

Boys Interrupted: Saint Augustine and Alberto Moravia

Once we have an experience, we are thereafter unable to see the world as we did before. Our innocence is lost and we cannot go home again.

Daniel Gilbert, Stumbling on Happiness

There is an episode in the Confessions where Saint Augustine recalls his first quest for love and sex at the age of sixteen in the multicultural and wicked city of Carthage:

I came to Carthage, where a cauldron of illicit loves leapt and boiled around me. I was not yet in love, but I was in love with love, and from the very depth of my need, I hated myself for not more keenly feeling the need. I sought some object to love, since I was thus in love with loving. My longing then was to love and to be loved, but most when I obtained the enjoyment of the body of the person who loved me. (Confessions, 3.1)

Provocatively, Augustine characterizes the Carthage he came to as a young adult as a hissing cauldron of unholy loves and he candidly admits that this love would be illicit and entail sexual contact. Pursuit of sex, he consistently writes, is a slavery that by definition cannot give pleasure. Another important passage describes the famous bath episode:

In the sixteenth year of my age the brambles of lust grew right up over my head, and there was no hand to tear them up by the roots. In fact, when my father saw me at the baths and noticed that I was growing toward manhood he told my mother of it. She was seized with a holy fear and trembling. For it was her wish, and I remember how privately and with what great anxiety she warned me not to
commit fornication and especially not to commit adultery with another man’s wife. (2.3)

Monica, his mother, was a domineering and controlling woman who played a significant role in ending her son’s sexual relationships and lived with him as his spiritual companion in Italy. The honesty with which Augustine describes his experiences and the consequent feeling of shame toward his mother resonates throughout the text reminding us of the eternal quest for sexual pleasure, necessary even if it may lead to a sense of guilt.

I chose to begin this first chapter quoting from Augustine’s *Confessions* because I believe it is a text that may have influenced Alberto Moravia not only in naming his novel’s protagonist, but also in the depiction of adolescent desires and the obsessive love for the mother. As Carlo Emilio Gadda put it, *Agostino* is about a “thirteen-year-old boy getting acquainted with facts and matters of sex” (227). Although the quest for sex is undoubtedly one of the predominant aspects of the novel, there is much more to Moravia’s narrative: dealing with the absence of a father, the painful search for independence, the yearning to fit in and to be accepted by one’s peers.

During a series of interviews with Alain Elkann, Moravia discusses the large number of adolescent protagonists in literature:

The reason is simple and clear: the young person marries the maximum of passionate vitality with the maximum of ideals. Then there was a kind of revolution beginning with the 19th century, for which the narrator attributed a particular importance to what I would call the initiation of adolescence, and the age of the protagonists was lowered. In this sense my four novels of adolescence are four novels of initiation” (Elkann, *Vita di Moravia* 277; translation mine)
With the exception of *Gli indifferenti* (Indifference, 1929), these novels of initiation were written during the early 1940s: *Agostino, La romana* (The Woman of Rome), and *La disubbidienza* (Disobedience).\(^1\) Each work portrays the trials and tribulations of a youthful protagonist trying to break free from the societal norms and the bourgeois mentality of the time. There are striking analogies between *Agostino* and *Disobedience*: both texts deal with the psychological problems of two adolescent boys (Agostino is thirteen, Luca is fifteen); both characters belong to middle-class and experience an existential crisis. Lastly, both texts are biographical, so far as portraying important events in the author’s life: the troubled relationship with the mother and the illness experience.

In the self-reflective *Breve autobiografia letteraria* Moravia states that *Agostino* was written while vacationing on the island of Capri during the month of August 1942. The title, which according to the author is a reference to the month the novel was conceived, is also a clear sign of the novel’s belonging to the *Bildungsroman* genre. Many coming-of-age narratives bear, in fact, the name of their protagonist in the title. The novel is indeed, despite its brevity, the story of a young boy’s journey from innocence to experience, a detachment from what is known and familiar in order to embark on a quest for the secrets of life. In Moravia’s own words:

*Agostino* is about the relationship of a child and his mother while vacationing at a seaside resort. During the summer days, Agostino discovers two important things: sex and social differences. Sex is what determines the relationship with his mother, who is at first seen as a sacred and inaccessible parent, then as a woman

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\(^1\) It is important to note that in the United States *Agostino* and *Disobedience* were published in one single volume titled *Two Adolescents* (New York: Farrar & Straus, 1950).
like the others. Social difference is what separates the boy from his working-class playmates. (Elkann, *Vita di Moravia* 135; translation mine)

In many ways, one could argue that the book is also the story of a painful initiation to life, the ordeal of a boy who strives to become a man and who fails to measure up to his concept of masculinity. But where does the difficulty of maturation reside? I would argue that for Agostino the issue lies in the absence of a father and in the lack of positive male role models. This absence is also the reason for his inadequacies dealing with gender issues and an emerging sexuality. While the absence of a male role model causes a void in the boy’s life, the presence of a strong mother figure will not allow him to mature.

Agostino’s widowed mother, a central character in the narrative, is delineated through the relationship with her son. In this respect, it is important to note that although their bond is rife with oedipal tension, in a 1946 essay titled *La psicanalisi* Moravia writes that he has only a superficial acquaintance with Freud’s theories, and yet he is in some ways indebted to the father of psychoanalysis. For him, one of the greatest achievements of psychoanalytic theory lies in releasing the literary work from all conformism, thus allowing writers to discuss sexual themes (Moravia 85). It goes without saying that any approach to Moravia’s works cannot disregard the psychological factors. Despite what he states in the aforementioned essay, the author is a connoisseur of Freud’s work. The troubled sensuality that binds Agostino to his mother is a clear indication of such knowledge. The initial idyllic condition of the mother-child symbiosis finds its “objective correlative” in the calm early-morning sea:

In the early days of summer, Agostino and his mother used to go out to sea every morning on a small rowboat typical of Mediterranean beaches known as a *pattino*. At first she brought a boatman along with them, but Agostino gave such clear
signs of annoyance at the man’s presence that the oars were then turned over to him. He rowed with deep pleasure on the smooth, diaphanous, early-morning sea, and his mother, sitting in front of him, would speak to him softly, as joyful and serene as the sea and the sky, as if he were a man rather than a thirteen-year-old boy. (3)

As previously mentioned, the story unfolds in the span of three months, during a crucial moment in Agostino’s existence. At the same time, it is safe to assume that there will be more trials and tribulations for him to overcome before reaching adulthood. As it happens, the closing line of the novel reads: “But he wasn’t a man, and many unhappy days would pass before he became one” (102).

The relationship between the boy and his mother appears to be structured around gender roles. The woman assigns her son a level of maturity that he still doesn’t possess, at the same time acknowledging his male superiority and treating him as a grown man. It is Agostino who operates the pattino and who lights a cigarette for her, as if the son were a substitute for her late husband. Simultaneously, the woman’s body is perceived by the son as a beacon of safety and comfort. As Gadda rightfully pointed out, the oedipal bond between the two develops in the narrative: in the beginning Agostino is childishly jealous of his mother, then he begins to consciously see her as an ordinary woman, like many others.

After the idyllic opening, in which the boy becomes more and more aware of his admiration toward his mother – the first object of affection as Freud would say – the narrative gives way to disillusionment, as is often the case in traditional Bildungsromane, where the hero confronts the harsh realities of life. The disenchantment is embodied by the introduction of a disturbing element represented by Renzo, the woman’s admirer, who
contributes greatly to a change in her behavior. She welcomes the young man’s attention with the same spontaneity that characterizes her relation with her son. Agostino scrutinizes the woman’s behavior following the “double gaze” narrative technique privileged by Moravia, which can be explained as the depiction, through the filial gaze, of the parents’ double nature (known/unknown). According to Valentina Mascaretti, Renzo embodies the antagonist, the father that has to be murdered, representing only one of the two oedipal extremes (212). Freud argues that the father represents at the same time the son’s envied object and a necessary model of masculinity. In Renzo’s case, there is only the element of disturbance within the mother-son nucleus as the man never evolves into a positive male example for the boy. Using Debenedetti’s terminology, Renzo is the “propulsive” character, in the sense that he disrupts the symbiotic relationship between mother and child, ultimately replacing the latter. As Agostino looks at his mother and her suitor he cannot help but think: “What offended him most wasn’t so much the mother’s preference for the young man as the quick almost premeditated joy with which she accepted his invitation. […] It was as if all those days on the sea with him she had been bored and had only come along for lack of better company” (7).

The boy’s sense of inadequacy and exclusion is what permeates from his thoughts as he is taken to past memories by way of association:

One memory confirmed his ill humor. He had gone to a ball at a friend’s house with his mother. During the first dance, a female cousin who was upset at being ignored by the men consented to dance a couple of rounds with him, *the boy in short pants*. But she had danced gracelessly, with a long sullen face. And although he was absorbed in minding his dance steps, Agostino quickly picked up on her unkind and contemptuous attitude. All the same he invited her for a third round and was surprised to see her smile and stand up quickly, smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt with both hands. But rather than run into his arms, she
walked past him toward a young man who, looming behind Agostino, had beckoned to her to dance. The scene lasted no longer than five seconds, and no one noticed except Agostino. But he was mortified beyond measure and had the impression that everyone had witnessed his humiliation. Now, after his mother’s departure with the young man in the pattino, he compared the two events and found them identical. (9; emphasis added)

It is interesting to note the reference to the culture of the short pants, a visible element of difference and exclusion. In much of the Western World during the 19th and early 20th centuries short trousers were worn only by young boys until they reached a certain height and level of maturity. When boys got older, usually around puberty, they would be allowed to wear their first pair of long trousers. Consequently, this produced the perception that shorts were only for young boys. For this reason, grown men would not wear shorts to avoid looking immature. The detail of the short pants will resurface, as we shall see, at the end of the narrative during the crucial episode of the trip to the brothel.

The rupture with the mother is symbolized by the slap in the boy’s face, an episode reminiscent of a famous passage in Svevo’s novel La coscienza di Zeno (Zeno’s Conscience, 1923): “She raised a hand and gave his cheek a sudden backhand slap, a blow that felt soft, almost accidental and regretful. Agostino didn’t say a word. He did a somersault on the sand and walked off, making his way down the beach, head lowered, in the direction of the cabins” (14). The humiliation felt by the boy is associated again with something else, as it happened before with the memory of the dance: “With the same sharp sense of discovery as a man who has found a treasure and sneaks away to hide it and gaze upon it at his leisure, he ran to be alone with her slap, so new to him as to seem unbelievable” (15). The physical pain triggers an emotional discomfort, as “the burning
sense of humiliation it provoked rekindled and even amplified a thousand unpleasant sensations that he felt over the past few days” (15).

Agostino’s formation is complex as he depends completely on his mother. He doesn’t belong to the realm of the adults yet, nor is he welcomed – at least initially – among his peers. Once the symbiotic knot has loosened by means of the mother’s slap, he begins venturing out into the world guided by Berto, a boy about his age, who introduces him to the gang of the Bagno Amerigo Vespucci.2 Agostino experiences the encounter with Berto as “an opportunity” (17) that he shouldn’t let slip away.

In *The Way of the World*, an analysis of the novel of formation in European culture, Franco Moretti posits that opportunities are events created by the hero, a sort of narrative moving force:

What is important is to be able to dispose of one’s energies *at every moment* and to employ them for the countless occasions or opportunities that life, little by little, takes upon itself to offer. ‘Seize the opportunities.’ If we project this notion on to the diachronic axis of plot we get the contours of the novelistic ‘episode’. […] The novelistic episode is almost never meaningful *in itself*. It becomes so because someone – in the *Bildungsroman* usually the protagonist – *gives it meaning*. (45, emphasis in original)

In this respect, Moravia is attuned to the classical *Bildungsroman*, in which the growth of the individual happens through opportunities of contact with society. For Moretti, opportunity equals trial and Agostino’s journey to Vespucci beach can in fact be read as the beginning of an adventure, an initiation rich with puberty rites.

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2 The idea of exploration and discovery (Amerigo Vespucci) may have influenced Moravia’s naming of the beach.
In *Morphology of the Folktale* (1929) Propp argues that the neophyte experiences an illumination through a series of rites and physical experiences; the hero is tested, interrogated and/or attacked. The same sequence of functions analyzed by Propp can be found in the episode of the encounter with the Vespucci gang; after being forced to smoke a cigarette, Berto tricks Agostino by suddenly stubbing out the lit cigarette on the back of his hand: “The pain was blinding, and Agostino’s first impulse was to throw himself at Berto and start punching him. But the other boy, seeing him run toward him, stood still, placed his fists against Agostino’s chest, and with two hard blows to his stomach, almost knocked him out and left him gasping for air” (21). The cruelty of the scene is counterbalanced by Agostino’s bizarre fascination with the violence of this new experience, “a new behavior so monstrous it was almost attractive” (22).

The remote beach where the gang hangs out can be envisioned as a ghetto, a microcosm dominated by primal instincts and the survival of the fittest. The boys are like untamed animals, and in fact they like to conglomerate near a shack that they call “the Den”. Thus, pure and innocent Agostino becomes their prey and object of derision to the point where he is by them renamed “Pisa”, the city where he’s from. The desolate part of the beach where the gang gathers resembles a dantean *bolgia* where the vulgar and quarrelsome boys incarnate the angry devils. The episode where they are fighting over a pack of cigarettes – which Berto stole from Agostino’s mother – is indeed reminiscent of the Malebranche episode in Canto 22 of the *Commedia*:

Give ’em back,” Berto shouted, throwing himself at him furiously. “They’re mine, Pisa gave them to me, give ’em back or I’ll – ” The other boy took a step back and waited till Berto was within range. Then he stuck the cigarette pack between his teeth and started methodically pounding Berto’s stomach with his
fists. Then, tripping him, he sent him sprawling to the ground. “Give ’em back,” Berto shouted again as he squirmed in the sand. But the other boy shouted with a dumb laugh, “He’s got more. Get busy, guys…” and with a unity that shocked Agostino, the boys piled up on top of Berto. For a moment there was a tangle of bodies in a cloud of sand. […] Finally the blond, who appeared to be the most agile, disentangled himself from the pile, stood up, and waved the second cigarette pack in the air triumphantly. One by one the rest of them stood up. Berto was last. His ugly freckled face was twisted with rage. “You dogs…you thieves,” he shouted, shaking his fist and sobbing. He was crying angry tears, and it had a strange effect on Agostino to see the tables turned on his tormentor and Berto treated just as ruthlessly as Berto had treated him. (25)

The brawl comes to an end and Agostino realizes that tricksters too sometimes get tricked. And if Malacoda is the leader of the dantean Malebranche, Saro – the boatman and only adult of the group – is the head of the gang. The first thing that Agostino notices about him is his unpleasant appearance, with “small squinting eyes, a red aquiline nose, and flared nostrils covered with purple veins that were disgusting to see” (26). But perhaps his most devilish trait is his hand deformity: the presence of a sixth finger on each hand ³, described by Agostino as a stumpy tentacle (26). The detail of Saro’s deformed hands should not be overlooked as it is rife with symbolic significance and his twelve fingers are clearly a disturbing and anxiety-provoking element for the boy. The uncanny (unheimlich) coincides with something that is at the same time fearful and familiar, repulsive and homely. Freud ties the uncanny to the old animistic conception of the universe, which was characterized by the idea that the world was inhabited by the spirits of human beings. For children, this strangely familiar feeling stems from “repressed infantile complexes revived by some impression” (157). By means of the uncanny a boy’s anxiety may be translated into the fear of losing one’s eyes and the attraction-repulsion to the maternal womb, elements that are both present in the novel.

³ It is mentioned in the Bible that the giants who roamed the earth had six fingers.
Saro’s six-digit hands cause fear and repulsion in Agostino as they represent the “unknown”, something that should have been kept a secret but is instead revealed:

A final detail added to Agostino’s initial disgust. He realized that Saro, as the lifeguard was called, did not have five fingers on each enormous hand but rather six, making them look more like stumpy tentacles than fingers. Agostino studied his hands at length but could not tell whether Saro had two index fingers, two middle fingers, or two ring fingers. They all seemed to be the same length, except the little finger, which protruded from his hand like a thin branch at the base of a knotty tree trunk.” (26-27)

Saro’s uncanny nature is intensified by his pedophilic tendencies toward Agostino as exemplified in the episode of the boat ride to Rio, a nearby beach. This time, the boatman’s hand suddenly grabbing the boy feels like a “snare” (53), an animal trap which is an obvious castration symbol. Another character representing the otherness in the Vespucci gang is Homs, Saro’s young lover, a black boy who embodies a traditional role in the novel of formation. To illustrate my point, if in the classical Bildungsroman the element of alterity that takes part in the hero’s journey into adulthood is represented by the hermaphrodite, in the modern version of the genre the same role is sometimes assigned to the character of the homosexual.

Agostino’s journey from innocence to experience leads him to a world previously unknown to him. It is only when he gets acquainted with the group of local young hooligans, all children of boatmen and lifeguards, that he learns about his upper-middle class status. Social class differences emerge as conversation continues among them:

One of them asked Agostino, point-blank, “Are you rich?” By now Agostino was so intimidated he didn’t know what to say, but he answered anyway.

“I think so.”
“How much? One million? Two million? Three million?

“I don’t know,” said Agostino, at a loss for words. “Do you have a big house?”

“Yes,” said Agostino. Reassured by the more polite tone the dialogue was assuming, he couldn’t resist boasting, “We have twenty rooms.”

“Twenty rooms,” an admiring voice repeated. (33)

Agostino discovers his bourgeois identity when comparing himself to the lower classes represented by the banda Vespucci. Unlike them, he is educated, polite and nicely dressed. However, he decides to put aside the bourgeois world he has known so far in order to fit in and be accepted by the gang. The encounter with the lost boys is a disturbing and unsettling experience for him, and yet this is exactly what helps him forge a new identity and look at the bourgeoisie with a critical eye. Along with the discovery of deceit, the realization of social class differences is an essential component in the boy’s formation, as in the episode in which Agostino is mistaken for a boatman by a bather and his son, who will eventually ask him to take them for a boat ride. He plays along and when the man inquires about his life, he makes up a sad story about not being able to go to school as he has to work in order to survive. The episode is essential in understanding Agostino’s desire to be accepted by his “friends.” He is continually drawn to their bawdiness and at the same time repulsed by it:

The boys, getting ready to dive in, acted out hundreds of obscene gestures, tripping, pushing, and touching each other with brashness and an unrestrained promiscuity. […] Agostino’s repulsion was weaker than the murky attraction that drew him to the gang. So thoroughly intermingled were the two that he couldn’t tell how much pleasure was actually concealed by his loathing. (61)

The boy’s perverse attraction to the gang is part of his formative journey and, as in the classical Bildungsroman, the longing for acceptance and integration into society is one of the hero’s main goals. To illustrate this complexity, let us look at Agostino’s reaction:
“He didn’t realize it, but what attracted him to Vespucci, besides the company of the boys, was their brutal mocking of his mother and her alleged lovers. He could sense that his former affection was turning into an entirely different sentiment, both objective and cruel, and he felt he should seek out and cultivate the boys’ heavy-handed irony for the simple fact that it had hastened this change” (46). Clearly, since Agostino’s mother is virtually the only reference point for him thus far, his fascination with the gang lies in the fact that they represent a model of masculinity that has been missing in his life. In other words, in order to develop a sense of self apart from the mother, the boy hopes to establish his individuality through mingling with the gang. Ironically, the latter’s favorite conversation topic appears to be his mother’s sexuality:

“His mother is pretty,” an admiring voice said, “the best-looking woman on the beach. Homs and me, we snuck under the cabin to see her getting undressed, but she lowered her dress right on top of where we were looking and you couldn’t see a thing…she’s got nice legs…and those tits…”

“Her husband’s never around,” a third voice remarked.

“Don’t worry. She knows how to console herself. You know who she’s doing it with? That guy from Villa Sorriso…the dark-haired one. He comes to pick her up every day with his boat.”

“You think he’s the only one? She does it with anyone that asks,” another boy said maliciously. (28-29)

The same attraction-repulsion toward the gang is experienced again when they gossip about his mother, and this constitutes a kind of initiation to the secrets of life. In a way, Agostino plays the part of the novice, whereas the other boys and their leader Saro represent the tribe. As Mircea Eliade suggests in his essay “Initiation and the Modern World,” in many cases puberty rites imply the revelation of sexuality, and this is
precisely what happens to Agostino. Once the gang senses the boy’s innocence and ignorance, they begin provoking him in order to demonstrate their knowledge to Saro:

“What do Renzo and your mamma do?” Berto suddenly asked, emboldened. “They” – and he made an expressive gesture with his hands – “and you sit there watching them, right? […] “He knows nothing,” Saro replied plainly. Then he turned to Agostino, lowering his voice. “Say, Pisa…a man and a woman…what do they do together? Do you know? (30)

The scene bears resemblance to an episode in Augustine’s *Confessions* dealing with his “adolescent stirrings.” In this passage he describes his vice (sex) and his need to compete with his friends:

What is more worthy of censure than vice? Yet I went deeper into vice to avoid being despised, and when there was no act by admitting to which I could rival my depraved companions, I used to pretend I had done things that I had not done at all, so that my innocence should not lead my companions to scorn my lack of courage, and lest my chastity be taken as a mark of inferiority. (2,7)

Sandro will be the one chosen to explain to Agostino “something he seemed to have always known and, as if in a deep sleep, forgotten. […] It was as if he had always known but never felt it in his bones the way he did now” (32). As a result, the unveiling of the secrets of sex causes the boy’s awakening as if all thoughts of sexuality had been repressed and left to the unconscious. The new knowledge is like a “bright shiny object whose splendor makes it hard to look at it directly and whose shape can thus barely be detected” (32). Light might reveal what is hidden, but it can also be blinding, as knowledge often leads to discomfort and pain.

Sight and blindness are recurring motifs in Moravia and in the case of *Agostino* these are deeply intertwined with the oedipal subtext of the novel. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, blindness is both the king’s physical and intellectual inability to “see.” Throughout
the tragedy the idea of sight is used as a metaphor for insight and knowledge. When Oedipus discovers the terrible truth of what he has done (killed his own father and married his own mother), he gouges out his own eyes, physically blinding himself to the reality around him. Upon his return to Speranza beach, Agostino is assailed by darkness:

After that day a dark and tormented period began for Agostino. On that day his eyes had been forced open, but what he learned was far more that he could bear. […] While before he had struggled in the dark to free that affection from an unjustified repulsion, now he felt almost obliged to separate his rational new knowledge from the promiscuous, visceral sense that he was born of a person he wanted to see only as a woman. He felt as if all his unhappiness would vanish on the day he could see in his mother the same beautiful creature perceived by Saro and the boys. (68)

However, his hopes to see his mother as an ordinary woman eventually fail as he realizes that she remains more a mother that ever. The motif of darkness/blindness returns as Agostino is left with a murky sense of impurity: “What was the use of seeing things clearly if the only thing clarity brought was a new and deeper darkness? Sometimes he wondered how older boys, knowing what he knew, could still love their mothers” (70-71). Curiosity and thirst for knowledge suddenly turns upon itself: once something is known, it cannot be unknown. The mother’s realm, once so dependable, now abounds with an unsettling sensuality. Thus, embedded in the Moravian depiction of adolescence we may discern a dual force: on the one hand is a constant desire for knowledge, on the other a fear of uncovering the secrets of sexual intimacy.

Deeply intertwined with the motif of desire/fear of knowledge is the theme of voyeurism, dear to Moravia. His oeuvre is saturated with objects that function as filters: mirrors, windows, screens and his novels abound with scenes where characters peep at other characters, not to mention the novel entitled *L’uomo che guarda* (The Voyeur),
published in 1985. The fundamental element of voyeurism is evident in the language used by the author and in the obsessive repetition of words that denote the act of watching and observing: “peered,” “saw,” “got a glimpse,” “observed,” to name a few. In the moment of Agostino’s loss of innocence through the revelation of his mother’s sexuality there is an important shift in the focus, a change in the way the boy sees persons and objects present in his life. Not only does he realize that his mother is a “woman like any other,” he now perceives her as a sexual creature. He begins watching her every move as her womanhood reveals itself to him. The boy’s voyeurism pushes him to look for signs of kisses or caresses on the woman’s body or to furtively watch the partly undressed woman unclasp her jewelry before her bedroom mirror: “When he was close to her, he felt as if he was monitoring her, when he approached her door it was as if he were spying on her” (72). Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault and others have argued that voyeurism tends to be associated with guilt. Freud, in particular, argues that if “the pleasure in looking” replaces sexual activity, it becomes a perversion. For Agostino however, there seems to be no sense of shame. It is as if the image of the mother, seen through the gaze of Saro’s boys, has been replaced by that of any woman. Consequently, the boy’s visual path becomes increasingly vivid as the trespassing look leads to touch and as voyeurism and sexual fetishism become one: “And when he touched her clothes he felt as if he was touching the woman who had worn them against her skin.” (72, emphasis added)
The Boys and the Ladies of the Night

Lust will always walk into your life wearing love’s dress.
And you will fall for her every damn time.
— Erin Van Vuren

Historical representations of prostitution often associate the topic with shame or secrecy. Ironically, the term “prostitute” comes from Latin *prostituere*, to expose publicly (*pro*: in front, *statuere*: to place). In her informative study, Mary Gibson writes that, following the 1860 *Regolamento Cavour* (Cavour Regulation), “the state preferred that prostitutes congregate in the tolerated houses since concentration facilitated control by police and doctors. Integrated into the “family” of the brothel supervised by a madam, prostitutes would lose their threatening status as independent women.” She then continues: “To seal off these brothels, the law stipulated that their windows remain shut, covered with smoked glass in winter and Persian blinds in the summer. To prevent communication between outside and inside, prostitutes were forbidden to stand in the windows or doorways of their houses.” *(Gibson 33)* This law of enclosures, I argue, may be regarded as a metaphor for Agostino’s arrested initiation. His journey comes to an abrupt end at the exact moment when entering the whorehouse would have constituted a resolution of his oedipal obsession and consequently a successful transition from boyhood to manhood. From this standpoint, the brothel visit becomes the primal rite of passage and at the same time a confirmation of the boy’s inadequacy in matters of sex.
It is important to note that the investigation of adolescent boys’ sexual initiation in brothels has remained quite unexplored, at least in Italian culture, despite its centrality to conceptions and self-conceptions of masculinity. This omission is surprising considering how frequently the brothel visit constituted an important stage in the development of the individual, not only in the bourgeois context, but also among the lower classes. One might argue that such reticence was less about conceptions of masculinity and more about a reluctance to acknowledge such undignified practice. There are only a few twentieth-century Italian novelists who have dedicated parts of their oeuvre to this topic, among them Pasolini, Vittorini, Pratolini, and Bassani.

Franco Moretti briefly discusses the literary trope of the encounter with a prostitute in his study of the Bildungsroman. He argues that in the first half of the Twentieth century, with Modernism and Freudian theories, new impulses begin to surface in works of fiction. Focusing the analysis mainly on two novels, Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Musil’s *Confusions of Young Törless*, Moretti posits the link between the protagonist’s encounter with the prostitute and his consequent intellectual awakening. It is thanks to Božena that Törless achieves a “new insight” that will enable him to mature, it is to her that he turns for comfort when the pain of life becomes too much for him to bear. In Joyce’s novel, Stephen “wakes up from a century lethargy” and “feels the obscure presence” of poetry when he gets acquainted with a sex worker. As can be inferred in both instances, the prostitute offers temporary solace and the brothel experience is perceived as a kind of enlightenment. But let us look at a passage in *Young Törless*, which is important to quote at some length:
Even as he hesitated in the doorway, Törless was greedily devouring her with his eyes. [...] At that moment he had suddenly found himself thinking of his own mother, and this now held him in its grip and he could not shake it off. At first it had simply shot across the frontiers of his consciousness, a mere flash of something, too far away to be recognized, on the very edge of his mind, something that could scarcely be called a thought at all. And immediately it had been followed by a series of questions that were meant to cover it up: ‘What is it that makes it possible for this woman Božena to bring her debased existence into proximity with my mother’s existence? To squeeze up against her in the narrow space of one and the same thought? Why isn’t it as plain as if there were an abyss between them that they have nothing whatsoever in common? How can it be like this? This woman, who is for me a maze of all sexual lust, and my mother, who up to now moved through my life like a star, beyond the reach of all desire, in some cloudless distance, clear and without depths. (27, emphasis added)

Törless, like Agostino, is fully enveloped in the oedipal bond, unable to separate the woman he imagines making love to and his mother, whom he now perceives against his will as a sexual creature. The association appears again in Božena’s reproachful words:

“Yes, you may well prick up your big ears, that’s what you boys are like! Good little sons you are, you fine young gentlemen! It almost makes me sorry for your mothers!” At these words Törless recalled his former notion of himself, realizing how he was leaving everything behind him. [...] In this conflict there came a moment when Törless abandoned himself, letting the tempest rage over his suffocating heart.

And at that very moment Božena got up and came over to him.

“Why is our little boy not talking? Miserable, eh? [...] Homesick, eh? Mamma’s gone away, has she? And the moment she’s gone the naughty boy comes running to the like of me.”

Božena dug her fingers caressingly into his hair.

“Come on, don’t be silly. Give me a kiss, that’s right. You fine gentry are only made of flesh and blood, after all, the same as everyone else,” and she bent his head back. (30)

In the same fashion, as we shall see, Agostino associates his mother’s image with that of a prostitute that he sees through a window. He hesitates – as does Törless – in the
doorway before being told that he is not allowed in the brothel. The concluding lines of
Musil’s novel reinforce the association between mother and prostitute:

When they drove out to the railway station, they passed, on the right, the little
wood with the house in it where Božena lived. It looked utterly insignificant and
harmless, merely a dusty thicket of willow and alder. And Törless remembered
how impossible it had been for him then to imagine the life his parents led. He
shot a sidelong glance at his mother.
“What is it, my dear boy?”
“Nothing, Mamma. I was just thinking.” And, drawing a deep breath, he
considered the faint whiff of scent that rose from his mother’s corseted waist.
(140)

In the second chapter of Joyce’s novel, on a night of frustration and disillusionment,
feeling like a “baffled prowling beast,” Stephen ends up in Dublin’s brothel district and
has his first sexual encounter with a young prostitute. He sees her as a mixture of
Mercedes, Edmond’s fiancée in The Count of Monte Cristo, and a motherly figure. She is
youthful in appearance (she wears a pink dress and keeps a doll by the bed), yet she is
confident and maternal (she nurtures him, calming his fears): “She passed her tinkling
hand through his hair, calling him a little rascal” (101). The prostitute, who takes care of
a young man’s sexual initiation and passage to maturity, eases the transition from youth
to manhood, in that she functions as a maternal surrogate. At the same time, as in
Agostino’s case, the substitute-mother through whom he might have perhaps resolved the
oedipal struggle is never encountered.

At an early age, claims Freud, the boy “gains a knowledge of the existence of
certain women who practice sexual intercourse as a means of livelihood, and who are for
this reason held in general contempt. The boy himself is necessarily far from feeling this
contempt: as soon as he learns that he too can be initiated by these unfortunates into
sexual life, which till then he accepted as being reserved exclusively for ‘grown-ups’, he regards them only with a mixture of longing and horror” (*The Freud Reader* 391).

Unlike Törless and Stephen, Agostino’s sexual initiation is interrupted and indefinitely delayed. While the prostitute encounter can be read as yet another example of *Bildungsroman* convention, in Agostino this is further complicated by the unmet expectations of the encounter itself. Nevertheless, he gets a glimpse of a world unknown to him that will confirm the Freudian Mother/Whore association. The episode of the brothel visit, the last in the boy’s journey from innocence to experience, represents a failed attempt to separate the mother from an ordinary and sexual creature. The sexual intercourse, anticipated by Agostino, would have been a way for him to detach himself from his obsessive dependency on his mother. Trusting Tortima’s knowledge in matters of sex, Agostino learns that the house he thought was vacant is indeed inhabited by “women who stayed indoors all day and all night, ready and willing to welcome anyone for a price, but this was the first time he had actually seen one” (81).

The brothel is predominantly a liminal space; not only is it physically located on the edge of the town, but it is also a place of transition, literally and figuratively. Its secrecy and ambiguity is symbolized by a uniformity with the other buildings in the neighborhood. It is a house very similar to others, its front painted a smoky gray with tightly closed white shutters. Not only does it blend in with the surroundings, it is also almost completely hidden by trees. If we consider the anthropological significance of the place itself and Agostino’s attempt to enter it, Arnold van Gennep’s study on initiation rites comes soon to mind. In *The Rites of Passage* the author maintains that human rituals exist in every society and they are divided into three stages: separation, margin (or
limen), and aggregation or arrival in another stage of the person’s life. The margin corresponds to a time when the subject lives in a liminal situation, between death and rebirth, when the initiate is removed from the rest of society. Upon their ritual exclusion from society, adepts enter a liminal zone of indistinction, they are subjects in transition, in a “nowhere land.”

Using the concept of rites of passage from van Gennep, we can infer that Agostino follows the same trajectory but fails to get to a new stage. In other words, he gets stuck at the threshold, literally and metaphorically. The transition for Agostino the neophyte is protracted ad infinitum. To borrow Victor Turner’s terminology, Agostino is a not-boy-not-man, which is exactly what a novice in a male puberty rite is, and his condition is one of ambiguity and paradox (Turner 47-48). At the same time, I would add, the boy’s liminality is not necessarily something that he assumes upon approaching the fictional brothel, it is rather an inherent trait of his personality. Thus, the anticipation of the brothel visit fills the boy with fantasies of what the inside looks like:

On previous occasions Agostino had heard the boys talking about such houses. […] Back then he had hardly been able to believe the existence of such a singular community, the generous and indiscriminate dispenser of the love that to him appeared so difficult. Now the same disbelief made him turn his eyes toward that house as if to detect traces in its outside walls of the incredible life they guarded. By contrast to the fantastic image he had of its rooms, each illuminated by a female nude, the house looked singularly old and grim. (81-82)

Even in the anticipation we can sense a discrepancy between the imagined and the real, expectations and reality. In spite of the hesitation that might arise from not being acquainted with the forbidden place, the boy seems resolute in his decision to follow Tortima: “The idea had come to him, clear and simple, although its sources were complicated and obscure. That very evening, he would go to the house and know one of
those women. It was not a desire or a yearning but rather a firm and almost desperate resolution” (82).

The episode of the brothel is fundamental in the anthropological reading of the text. Tortima, the one who reveals the mystery of the house of prostitution to Agostino, is clearly the instructor and guide in the initiation rite and as Turner masterfully argues in his essay, the initiation bond “is a structure of a very simple kind: between instructors and neophytes there is often complete authority and complete submission” (49). Consequently, the male bonding greatly contributes in transforming neophytes during the liminal stage of the process.

The contrast between the male society embodied by the Vespucci boys and the community of women represented by the brothel finds a correspondence also in the widespread tribal practice analyzed by Bruno Bettelheim in which the neophyte is brought to the female counterpart of the community in order for him to prove his virility. The boy is thus separated from society and brought into the initiation realm, the whorehouse. His peers either anticipate their own rites of passage or have recently undergone such initiation. In our case, Tortima has already experienced the sexual encounter with a prostitute. It is interesting to note how, by the principle of liminality, the neophyte is not entirely on common ground with the group, as they are already initiated and therefore higher in the liminal space than he is. Being observed by the group or by a peer is a necessary step in the initiation process. As Michael Kimmel explains:

We are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance. […] What men need is men’s approval. Women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale.” (214)
The neophyte’s initiation becomes a performance; he is playing the masculine role in order to assume it. In fact, as Kimmel writes, “Masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment” (214; emphasis in original),

According to Psychologist Jerome Bernstein, the “male group” liberates the individual from the “devouring mother” archetype and reveals some of life’s mysteries, “In a psychological sense, the masculine mysteries are learned in the male group. With the assistance of the powerful libido of the group, the individual male is helped to pull free from strong, regressive oedipal forces” (142). The brothel fits within the unveiling of such mysteries and it is a space where the masculine initiation coincides with the conquest of the feminine: women are literally bought and sold in the eyes of the group. This experience of homosocial bonding is clearly an important aspect of the initiation of adolescent males.

The distinction between sentimental and sexual love is a typical feature of the *Bildungsroman*, often represented by the topos of the “double erotic choice.” Moretti maintains that this is particularly evident in the English novel. This recurring motif traces back to a time before the birth of the modern novel, specifically in the primitive initiation rites and in the fairy tales. In modern and contemporary literature, the motif is found also within the context of the group visit to the brothel. In *Symbolic Wounds*, Bettelheim writes that such visit is considered an indispensable experience for middle-class adolescents. He then argues that the brothel experience is important not only for the sexual encounter that may or may not take place, but also for the male bonding created by the visit itself (144). From this perspective, it is easy to see how this becomes a recurring element in the bourgeois novel of formation. In Flaubert’s *Éducation sentimentale*
(Sentimental Education, 1869) for instance, Frédéric and his friend Deslauriers reminisce about the time when they paid a visit to the house of the Turkish woman, a “home of perdition” that exercised a fascination over the minds of all the adolescents.\(^4\) Ironically, the two friends enter the brothel firmly intending to lose their virginity and come out having lost nothing. Instead they have gained the idea of prostitution as loss – not loss of innocence, but rather the failure to lose innocence. In the aforementioned English and French novels, as well as in the Moravian novel, the brothel becomes a *chronotope* of sexual initiation, as well as a re-elaboration of the typical “house for men” in the Russian fairy tale. The brothel is frequently seen through the eyes of the adolescent and many times the emphasis is placed on the aura of mystery and secrecy that it evokes. It is, as it has been called mainly in French culture, a *maison d’illusions*, a “house of illusion.” \(^5\)

Borrowing van Gennep’s and Turner’s concept of liminality, we can deduce that the image of the prostitute and, by association, the brothel may be linked to the idea of threshold and transition. Both seem to underlie or even constitute a suspension of laws, regulations and morality. It is a place where all social and moral restraints are abolished. If liminality, as Turner explains, can be described as “a stage of reflection” (Turner 53), then it can be inferred that the brothel visit, being a liminal experience, constitutes a reevaluation of the past and a foreshadowing of the future for the novice. Agostino is excited at the prospect of visiting the brothel and cannot free himself from the anxiety that the thought of the new experience creates: “So how would he manage to penetrate

\(^4\) Flaubert frequented prostitutes throughout his life, as did most of his friends.

\(^5\) In France, brothels, which were legal until 1946, were called “maisons d’illusions,” because they were viewed as an illusory and secret world and because the women made each man briefly feel like a sexual hero. Everything in them contributed in creating an illusion.
and gain admission to that house? How should he behave in choosing the woman and retiring with her?” (83) and further in Chapter Four: “The success of his endeavor was thus confided to a logical calculation: If there was a house, there were also women; and if there were women, there was also the possibility of getting close to one of them” (84).

Although his thoughts are rife with excitement and anticipation, he finds himself questioning even the existence of the brothel:

But he wasn’t sure the house and the women really existed, and if they did, whether they resembled the image he had formed. It was not that he did not trust Tortima but rather that he had absolutely no terms of comparison. He had never done anything, never seen anything that had a thing in common, remotely or imperfectly, with what he was about to attempt. (84)

As the French terminology suggests, the house is imagined by the boy as something illusory, almost magical:

Agostino couldn’t envision it. Because despite Tortima’s accounts, the house, its inhabitants, and the things that happened inside it were still enveloped in a dense, improbable air, as if they involved not so much concrete realities as a series of hazardous guesses that, at the last minute, might even prove to be wrong. (83-84)
In numerous twentieth-century literary and cinematic works the brothel is a place for young boys to be initiated into heterosexuality and therefore into the politics of masculinity. As previously discussed, its frequentation is an important aspect of male adolescents’ formation. As John Tosh argues, commercial sex was a masculine rite of passage for the majority of pubescent boys during the nineteenth century (181-182).

Paradoxically, and with very few exceptions, historians of prostitution have by and large ignored or minimized the aspect of the boys’ sexual initiation. One of the questions we might ask ourselves is “Why do many adolescents seek their sexual initiation in a brothel?” Gayle Rubin argues that “the social organization of sex rests on gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality” (179). The anthropologist argues that patriarchal heterosexuality can be understood in terms of the traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable property that cements male bonding. The idea of the brothel visit and all that it entails was and, to a certain extent, still is perceived as a rite of passage in many cultures. Often it is a family member – a father, an older brother, an uncle – who accompanies the male adolescent to a brothel so that, by losing his virginity, he can affirm his male heterosexuality and acquire knowledge that will be valuable to him in the future as man, husband, and virile member of society. The bonding ritual of a father initiating his son into manhood via the brothel
has so far received little attention from either sociologists or historians and it is present only marginally in literature. In Giorgio Bassani’s novel *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (The Garden of the Finzi-Continis, 1962), there is a brief but emblematic passage where the unnamed Jewish narrator, after visiting a house of prostitution with his friend Malnate, has an interesting conversation with his father:

‘And…where did you have supper. At Giovanni’s?’ I nodded. ‘Tell me what you had to eat.’ Politely, not without surprise at my own indulgence, I made myself list for him the various dishes: the ones I had chosen, and those chosen by Malnate. Meanwhile I sat down.

‘Good,’ my father agreed finally, pleased.

‘And after that,’ he went on, after a pause, ‘what in the world have you been up to, the pair of you? I bet – here he raised a hand, as if to forestall any denial on my part – ‘I bet you’ve been with women.’

There had never been any confidences between us on this subject. A fierce modesty, a violent and irrational need of freedom and independence, had always impelled me to freeze at the start of all his shy attempts to bring up such subjects. But not that night. I looked at him: so white, so fragile, so old. And meanwhile, within me, it was as if something (a kind of knot, an age-old secret tangle…) were slowly dissolving.

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘You guessed it.’

‘You went to a brothel, I presume.’

‘Yes.’

‘Very good,’ he approved. ‘At that age, at yours especially, brothels are the most sensible solution from every point of view: including health. But tell me: how do you manage for money? Is the allowance Mamma gives you enough? If you run short, just ask me: I’ll help you out, as far as possible.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Where did you go? To Maria Ludargnani’s? She was already active in my day.’

‘No. A place on via delle volte.’ (230-231)

The narrator’s father, praising the son for his recent trip to the brothel, is recognizing the importance of such establishment as a necessary milestone in the path to a normative, heterosexual masculinity and, with few but direct questions and statements, he delineates a cultural paradigm of formation. Although the sexual experience seems to have left the narrator unmoved, it is the shared experience of the bordello that strengthens the bond with the father.
Once the narrator has been “praised,” he is informed by the father about sexually transmitted diseases, a warning that creates a sense of complicity and camaraderie:

‘The only thing I urge you,’ he continued, suddenly assuming the language of the medical profession which he had practiced only as a young man […] ‘the only thing I urge you is never to neglect the necessary prophylactic measures. It’s a nuisance, I know, one would gladly skip them. But it’s so easy to catch a nasty blennorrhagia, vulgo, the clap, or worse. And most of all: if in the morning, when you wake up, you happen to notice something wrong, come at once to the bathroom and show me, eh? If necessary, I’ll tell you what must be done.’ (231, emphasis in original)

In a way, the brothel is perceived as a heterosocial site and its attendance as an act of mimesis, in that the boys see other men (including their own fathers) frequenting them. This male subculture continued to be (and presumably still is in some countries) one of the main sources by which men acquire some form of sexual knowledge.

The commonality of the sexual initiation rite is explored by other Italian novelists and short-story writers, including Vasco Pratolini. In his autobiographical novel *Cronaca familiare* (Two Brothers, 1947), there is a significant episode in which the older brother runs into Dante, his younger brother, while visiting a brothel. It is clearly Dante’s first sexual experience and he appears extremely embarrassed:

Anything can reveal a man: how he reacts to a misfortune, how he accosts a prostitute. I discovered you one day in the waiting-room of a brothel. Before you could see me I lost myself in the group that stood waiting in the hall. Every time the heavy step of a girl was heard coming down the stairs, the men would watch one another, hoping to steal the initiative at her appearance. The girls were half-naked, gay and patient like tamed fillies. They entered the waiting-room and went to the desk, where a middle-aged woman with bleached hair and rings on her fingers was seated. The girls passed by and you sat without moving on your chair, your hat on your knees. At last you stood up to leave. I wanted to go out ahead of you, but I was bottled up in the corridor. (117-118)
The adolescents in Moravia and, as we shall see in Saba, strive to affirm their manhood and to prove their heterosexuality by way of male bonds and ultimately the brothel visit. During the interview with Elkann, the author states that *Agostino* is about a childhood vacation, but it is also the story of the boy’s encounter with modern culture, represented by the work of two great unmaskers, Freud and Marx. As a young Marx wrote, “Money’s properties are my properties and essential power. [...] I am *ugly* but I can buy for myself the most *beautiful* of women” (*The Power of Money* 103; emphasis in original). Sex and money are undoubtedly the two main forces at play in Moravia’s works. Such are the governing themes in *Gli indifferenti* (The Indifferent Ones, 1929), as well as in *La romana* (The Woman of Rome, 1947) and *La disubbidienza* (Disobedience, 1948).

In *Agostino* the tropes of sex and money come together in three different episodes: the encounter with the Vespucci boys, the boat ride with the middle-class man and his son, and lastly the brothel visit. In this regard, the image of the prostitute becomes a synthesis of the two elements representing, at the same time, a symbol of alienation. As in Marxist ideology, alienation is found in modern bourgeois society, which is also the background of many of Moravia’s works. In the three aforementioned episodes social relations are conceived as relations between things as the monetary transaction becomes the link between Agostino and society. Nevertheless, the boy doesn’t quite understand the power of money nor the reason why it is so highly valued by human nature. The one thing he is certain of is the danger money entails if perceived as a necessary element in his growth:

He was particularly worried by the question of money. Tortima had explained to him very carefully how much he would have to pay and to whom, but Agostino still could not wrap his mind around it. What was the relationship between money – which is generally needed to acquire clearly definable objects and verifiable
quantities – and caresses, naked flesh, and the female body? How could a price be set on them, and how could such a price be calculated accurately and not vary each time? The idea of the money he would pay in exchange for that shameful, forbidden sweetness seemed strange and cruel, like an insult, which might be pleasurable to the person who delivers it but is painful to the one who receives it. Did he really have to pay the money directly to the woman or at least to someone in her presence? He felt it would be more appropriate for him to conceal the transaction from her, and leave her the illusion of a less interested relation. Finally, wasn’t the sum indicated by Tortima too small? No amount of money, he thought, could pay for an experience such as the one he expected to conclude one period of his life and inaugurate another. (84-85)

Agostino clearly understands that the financial transaction is a prominent aspect of the brothel visit. However, he doesn’t quite get the connection between money and human contact. How can a price be put on caresses and intimacy? The episode is reminiscent of a scene in Pratolini’s *Cronaca familiare*. If Agostino has difficulty understanding the link between money and intimacy, Dante doesn’t quite get how a man can sexually approach a woman without even speaking to her, nor the mercification of intimacy and sex: “How can one engage a girl with a nod of the head without ever having spoken a word to her? And that woman, counting her money like a shopkeeper.” “Then why do you go there?” I asked you. “It’s the first time and I think it will be the last” (118).

Despite Agostino’s indecisiveness, the plan of action leads him back to his beach house with the intent of gathering the money needed for the visit. The episode is particularly emblematic as all the themes explored in the novel so far find a point of convergence. First and foremost, sexuality and money, already the focus of many conversations between Agostino and the gang during his initiation, converge in the topos of the prostitute and the brothel. Second, the prostitute and the mother, despite Agostino’s

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It is interesting to note that in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx viewed prostitution as the “complement” of the bourgeois family and predicted that both institutions would one day vanish.
attempt to separate the two, merge and blend together. Third, the boy’s inadequacy, a constant motif throughout the novel, is confirmed by his exclusion from the experience of the bordello.

The scene of the piggy bank shattering is perhaps the only moment – together with the episode of the boat ride – when Agostino sheds his innate vulnerability and takes charge of the situation. The little treasure made of clay is an animistic symbol of his childhood; consequently, the act of breaking it is for the boy a desire to let go of the past and, at the same time, a declaration of rebellion and defiance against the power society gives to financial transactions. He suddenly breaks away from his childhood self and naïveté regarding his mother’s sexuality gaining awareness of his psychosexual identity. The boy’s crisis – perhaps the most climatic scene in the book – is a perfect example of loss of illusions. No longer a child, not yet a man, Agostino realizes that in order to escape from the pain of having to share his mother’s love with Renzo, he must act on what he has planned to do:

Agostino switched on the light, grabbed the piggy bank, and with an almost hysterical violence threw it on the floor. The piggy bank broke and through a wide crack spewed a pile of coins of every type. Strewn in with the coins were several small bills. Squatting on the ground, Agostino counted the money in a fury. His fingers trembled, and although he was counting he couldn’t help but see, mixed in with the coins scattered on the floor, the superimposed image of the two people in the living room, the mother tilted back on the stool and the young man leaning over her. (90)

Dacia Maraini, in her interesting interview with Moravia (*Il bambino Alberto*, 1986) points out that many mothers and mother surrogates in his novels are associated with money, whether is is accumulated or concealed (71). This is particularly evident in *Agostino* where the mother not only embodies the source of the boy’s tormented desire,
she is also – unknowingly – the dispenser of the money needed for the brothel. The fact that he uses the money she has given him to pay for his first visit to the bordello implies his unconscious desire to connect the parent to the rite. He makes her an accomplice, so to speak, and a partner in his journey into manhood. As a result, Agostino is not only rebelling against his mother’s desire to keep him innocent but including her in his initiation by using the money she gives him. And this is where the boy lies twice – the first time when he tells her that he needs the money to buy a book and then when he says that he would like the money from her so as not to break the piggy bank.

If we consider the psychoanalytic view of lies, we get a confirmation of their high frequency in adolescence. The child’s successful lie to the parents is seen – in Freudian terms – as a moment of independence and freedom. By making his intentions invisible to the parents, the child proves that they are not omniscient after all. Lying, in this sense, is a developmental achievement. I would add that, in Agostino’s case, besides the actual necessity for money, there is also an unconscious desire for revenge and “payback” toward his mother who favors Renzo’s love and attention over her son’s. In other words, lying is a revenge for the woman’s betrayal, as in the instance of the moment of indecision when the boy, for a brief moment, ponders the idea of stealing the amount needed, “He wondered what he should do, and for a moment he thought of stealing the money from his mother. He knew where she kept it. Nothing would be easier, but the idea repelled him and he finally decided simply to ask her” (90).

The idea of deceit is amplified in the last segment of the chapter when all of Agostino’s great expectations, to borrow the Dickensian title, are shattered within a very short time. And it is in the final part of the novel that the careful reader will perceive a
subtle resemblance to Collodi’s *Pinocchio*. The brothel episode can be viewed as a parody of the journey to the “Paese dei balocchi” (*The Land of Toys*). Agostino, similarly to Pinocchio, lies to his mother (*la fata turchina* in *Pinocchio*) and leaves the house at night in order to embark on an adventure. Like Pinocchio, he goes to his friend’s house to call for him. Together they discuss their plan and set out on a mission with much excitement and anticipation. When asked by Agostino if it is the right time to visit the brothel, Tortima replies with a smile, “It’s always the right time there” (94) an answer that echoes Lucignolo’s words: “In the Land of Toys, every day, except Sunday, is a Saturday” (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 91). Initially, both Pinocchio and Agostino do not want to follow their chaperones but then change their mind.

The topos of deceit, represented by the Fox and the Cat in Collodi’s novel, is here embodied by Tortima who will eventually steal Agostino’s money:

Tortima headed toward the house confidently. But when they reached the middle of the square, beneath the crescent moon, he said to Agostino ‘Give me the money. It’s better if I keep it.’ ‘But I – Agostino started to say, not trusting Tortima. ‘Are you going to give it to me or not?’ Tortima insisted with brutality. Embarrassed that it was all in small change, Agostino obeyed him and emptied his pockets into his companion’s hands. ‘Now keep quiet and follow me,’ Tortima said. (96)

The scene is clearly reminiscent of the *Campo dei miracoli* (Field of Miracles) episode where Pinocchio is tricked by the Fox and the Cat into believing that the golden coins taken from him will be planted and will sprout into a richly laden money-tree. To add to the supernatural and mysterious atmosphere, the narrator describes the night scene in minute detail: “From a dirt road they came out into the piazza. The whole square was dark except a corner where a streetlamp illuminated with its tranquil light a large patch of rough sandy terrain. In the sky, right above the square, you might say, a crescent moon
hung, smoky and red, cut in two by a thin wisp of fog” (96). The magical atmosphere evoked by the house of prostitution is intensified by the secrecy of the establishment, “Where the darkness was deepest, Agostino spied the house, which he recognized from the white shutters. they were all closed tight and not a single ray of light shone through” (96). The dreamy aura of the place mirrors Agostino’s feelings, he is in fact “haunted by a sense of unreality” (95). The madam who appears at the front door resembles a witch “corpulent and older, with a large bosom clothed in black and a white apron tied around her waist […], with her arms to her sides and a bloated, grumpy, suspicious face beneath a knot of hair” (97). Perceived masculinity plays an important role in the woman’s decision and while Tortima is allowed to enter the premises, Agostino is turned away as his attitude and body are not masculine enough to gain entrance. His clothes also reveal his young age; he is in fact wearing short pants, worn as outwear only by very young boys until they reached a certain height or maturity. The feeling of exclusion, already experienced with the street urchins and their scornful attitude, is thus intensified by the reproachful tone used by the madam: “Not you,” said the woman, stopping him with a hand on his shoulder. “What do you mean?” asked Agostino, suddenly losing his timidity. “He can and I can’t?” “I really shouldn’t let either of you in,” said the woman, staring at him, “but he gets in. You don’t” (97). As Agostino isn’t allowed in, Tortima’s deceptive nature reveals itself fully: “You’re too little, Pisa,” said Tortima mockingly. And with a push through the double door he disappeared” (97). Thus, the doorstep becomes a symbol of the limits of the boy’s growth. Crossing the threshold would have meant the beginning of a carnal knowledge and therefore a first step into sexual maturity. The formative journey comes to an abrupt end with Agostino’s “But I – ”, which echoes
the same interjection following Tortima’s betrayal as well as the boy’s hesitation when asking his friend timidly, “But…but…will they take me?” he asked, stopping and casting a glance at his own bare legs” (96, emphasis added).

The image of the doorstep recalls Bakhtin’s \textit{threshold}, a chronotope “highly charged with emotion and value. The word “threshold” itself already has a metaphorical meaning in everyday usage and is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold)” (248). In Agostino’s case, it is not indecisiveness nor fear that prevents him from entering the brothel, it is more his childlike demeanor and his inappropriate attire that reveal his age. Furthermore, it is the correspondence between what he sees across the threshold and what he thinks is beyond it that escapes him, and at the end he learns nothing. The double door with red and blue windowpanes is therefore a screen between his boyhood and manhood: “Before Agostino’s curious eyes appeared a small, completely bare entryway, at the far end of which a double door with red and blue windowpanes glowed in the bright light” (97). The entrance is not perfectly transparent, but covered by colored glass, another degree of separation of the boy from the adult world, and a concrete metaphor of his exclusion. Rather than seeing actual people, he sees shadows: “a massive shadow, like a seated person standing, was projected behind the glass and a woman appeared in the doorway.” And further ahead: “(Tortima’s) squat shadow appeared for a second behind the glass; then it vanished into the bright light” (97).

The \textit{impassability} of the main door reinforces the idea of Agostino’s inadequacy, symbolizing at the same time the \textit{impassibility} of the matron and the two adult clients
who suddenly appear behind the boy: “What does this kid want?” asked the jovial man, pointing at Agostino. “He wanted to get in,” said the woman. A fawning smile was outlined on her lips. “You wanted to get in?” the man shouted at Agostino. “You wanted to get in? At your age you should be home this hour of the night. Go home, go home,” he shouted, waving his arms” (98). The boy’s mortification is thus intensified and all he can think of is that “everything had ended badly” (98). If, in Bakhtinian thought, the threshold ought to bring about a change, whether it is a decision that changes a life or lack of decision, for Agostino it is neither. Having been stopped at the threshold is for the boy a defeat, a failed formation: “He felt a searing sense of disappointment, especially because of the way the two men had treated him, like a child. He found the jovial man’s shouting and the blond’s cold tentative kindness no less humiliating than the matron’s blunt, expressionless hostility” (98).

As I have already suggested, money, mother and prostitute come to a point of juncture in the fourth and last chapter of the novel. The mother, albeit unknowingly and unintentionally, pays for the son’s brothel visit. The amount needed is insufficient, hence Agostino asks her for the remaining sum, saying that he needs it to buy a book (another reference, I would add, to Pinocchio who sells his school book in order to buy tickets for the marionette show). Right before leaving his mother’s room to meet Tortima, he starts comparing her image to the women of the house of pleasure: “Agostino once again felt enveloped by a perfume he knew intimately, and brushing his lips against her neck he could not help but wonder whether the women, back at that house, were as beautiful or as sweetly perfumed” (92). And again, while approaching the brothel: “The image conjured up by Tortima, of a woman who would introduce him to love, was pleasant and sweet and
almost maternal” (96). The boy combines two traditionally antithetical sexual personae, and since conscious binary opposition such as the Madonna/Whore dichotomy often exist in the unconscious as a unit, Freud asserts that the prostitute is a likely “object-choice” for a man, because she functions as a replacement for his now-repressed childhood object of sexual desire, his mother.

The Madonna/Whore dichotomy reaches a climactic moment soon after Agostino’s denied entry into the brothel. The voyeuristic experience echoes in fact the times in which the boy observed his mother in all her beauty and femininity, whether she realized it or not. Hiding in the dark yard “it occurred to him that through the window he would at least be able to get a glimpse of the house [...] he approached the window and looked inside” (99). Agostino is drawn into the spectacle of prostitution as a voyeur. What he sees is a room without any furniture and, opposite the window, a red curtain from which a woman appears. And it is in the likeness of the night gown that the boy perceives a bizarre resemblance between the mother and the prostitute: “She was wearing a loose sheer sky-blue gown that reminded Agostino of his mother’s negligees” (99). Upon returning home and once in his bed, he notices that “her negligee was transparent, like the gown of the woman at the house. Her body was also shaped like the other body, in vague lines and shadows” (101). Toward the end of the novel there is an evident repetition of the same uncanny similarity: “The mother’s negligee reminded him of the gown worn by the woman at the house, the same transparency, the same pale flesh, listless and within reach. Except the negligee was wrinkled, making it even more intimate and his glimpse of her even more furtive” (102). These repetitions create disturbing parallels between the two characters to the point where he fears that the “impure torment
of his relations with his mother would resume” (100). If the “uncanny” is the experience of something double and therefore duplicitous, ironically in Agostino’s eyes the two women blend into each other: “So, he thought, not only did the image of the woman at the house not act as a screen between himself and the mother, as he had hoped, but it had somehow confirmed the mother’s womanhood” (102). Consequently, the prostitute triggers unconscious memories of that first intimacy, the Mother/Infant relationship.

In his essay “Infantile Sexuality” (1905) Freud depicts the prostitute as a manifestation of the “natural” extension of the child’s innate polymorphous perverse sexuality: “Prostitutes exploit the same polymorphous, that is, infantile disposition for the purposes of their profession” (109). Defined by Freud as stemming from oedipal premises, the Madonna/Whore complex originates from a dysfunctional relationship between mothers and sons, when the male child represses his desire for his mother and idealizes her. In this sense, the lost woman and the ordinary woman, the whore and the mother, are united in the unconscious:

This very relation, however, of sharpest possible contrast between the “mother” and the “harlot” would prompt us to study the developmental history of the two complexes and unconscious relation between them, since we long ago discovered that a thing which in consciousness makes its appearance as two contraries is often in the unconscious a united whole. Investigation then leads us back to the period in the boy’s life at which he first obtained more or less detailed knowledge of the sexual relations between adults. The greatest impression on the child who is being initiated is made by the relation the information bears to his own parents. Along with this piece of “sexual enlightenment” there seldom fails to go, as a corollary, a further one about the existence of certain women who practice sexual intercourse as a means of livelihood. He says to himself with cynical logic that the difference between his mother and a whore is after all not so very great, since at bottom they do the same thing. The type of erotic life in men [who choose prostitutes as love-objects] is easily to be understood as a fixation on the fantasies formed by the boy during puberty. (*The Freud Reader* 198-199)
Freud here argues that the man’s choice of a prostitute derives directly from the mother complex, for the prostitute is in many ways a product of the male imaginary and the male unconscious, while the sexuality of the mother, in the male conscious mind, is transferred to the prostitute.

If mother and whore, the maternal and the impure, the sacred and the profane are combined in a sexual object, it can be inferred that Agostino’s psychosexual problematic may very well originate from a fixation with the maternal body and, at the same time, from a desire to free himself from it by trying to replace the image of the mother with that of the prostitute. He goes to the brothel to escape from the feminine hold of his mother. At the same time, his wish to restore a perfect mother-child intimacy on an infantile, pre-oedipal level of development seems to be an important component of the fantasy.

I would argue that although Agostino’s formation isn’t by any means complete, he has been initiated to many aspects of survival and sexuality. He knows much more now than before the summer vacation began, he knows what it means to be ridiculed, manipulated and betrayed; he has a certain knowledge in matters of heterosexual as well as homosexual desire; he is aware of the value men assign to money and the power that it brings. However, he is not yet a grown man despite his excruciating desire to become one. The compelling closing lines of the novel reinforce this ambiguity, showing at the same time the unsolved contradictions of the adolescent boy: “‘Like a man,’ he couldn’t help but think to himself before falling asleep. But he wasn’t a man, and many unhappy days would pass before he became one” (102). As Sanguineti has remarked, the novel concludes without a passage to “the other side” (Alberto Moravia 70-71). Although every thesis (childhood, ignorance, idyllic relationship with the mother) finds its antithesis (loss
of innocence, knowledge of reality, attraction for the mother-woman) there is no
synthesis, and this is one of the reasons the boy appears stuck in his childlike condition.

In the final paragraphs there is a metaphorical return to the womb, symbolized by
the intimate dialogue between mother and son, by the interjection “Mamma!,”
pronounced in a loud and desperate voice, and by the nurturing tone of the woman’s
words, who, although incognizant of the son’s trials and tribulations, senses that there is
something wrong. In this respect, the ending is strikingly similar to Musil’s Törless: “He
looked furtively at his mother out of the corner of his eyes. ‘What is it, my son?’
‘Nothing, Mama, I was just thinking of something.’ And he sniffed the faintly perfumed
smell coming from his mother’s bodice” (The Confusions of Young Törless 165).
Similarly, when Agostino calls his mother, she asks “What’s wrong? Is something the
matter, dear?” (101). Both mothers are unaware of their sons’ recent life experiences;
evertheless, they can sense discomfort and turmoil in their voices and behavior.
Additionally, just as Törless expresses a desire to leave the boarding school in hopes of
forgetting his shameful past, so Agostino wants to leave the seaside resort and return
home in order to leave the sense of disappointment behind:

He was feeling a strong sense of disappointment over his failed venture. At the
same time he was gripped almost by terror at what awaited him in the days to
come. Nothing had happened, he thought. He hadn’t been able to possess a single
woman. Tortima had taken his money, and the next day the teasing of the boys
and the impure torment of his relations with his mother would resume. (100)

If the coming-of-age novel is traditionally a narrative in which the protagonist progresses
from an innocent youth to a mature consciousness and social integration – the characters
find their proper place in society as a consequence of working through the challenges of
physical and emotional growth – in *Agostino* this integration appears to be delayed. However, it is important to note that the narrator reassures the implied reader that maturity will come, sooner or later. Agostino’s “many unhappy days” to come are counterbalanced by the future “liberating experience” (100).

Mascaretti has defined the story’s open-ending as “prophetic” (238) because manhood is delayed, but not denied. I would argue that the idea of a “prophecy of formation” is present not only in the closing lines, but is disseminated throughout the narrative by means of “clues.” At the end of Chapter Three, for example, after getting paid for the boat-ride by the bather and his son, Agostino feels “once and for all that he no longer belonged to the world of children like the boy with the soccer ball, and that, anyway, he had sunk so low that he could no longer live without deceit and vexation” (78). And again, toward the end of the novel, “In fact, years and years would go by, empty and unhappy, between him and the *liberating experience*. Not until he was as old as Tortima, he thought, would he be released once and for all from this awkward age of transition” (100-101; emphasis added).

What truly counts in the economy of the text – more a novella than a novel, written in only one month – is that the narrator knows more than the character does. And the narrator is conscious of the fact that Agostino’s legs will not always be bare, metaphorically speaking.
CHAPTER 2

“If I see myself in him, I am content”: Saba’s Ernesto between Experiment and Confession

The truth is, every son raised by a single mom is pretty much born married. I don’t know, but until your mom dies it seems like all the other women in your life can never be more than just your mistress.

― Chuck Palahniuk

In this second chapter I would like to consider Ernesto by Umberto Saba, and at the same time suggest that the novel is, above all, a confession made by the author to a selected group of readers, including his wife and daughter, and ultimately to himself. At the same time, I will explore the parallelism between Saba’s text and two other important autobiographical works: Augustine’s Confessiones and Les Confessions by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Written in 1953 and published in 1975, fifteen years after the author’s death, Ernesto is the only sustained piece of prose narrative ever written by Saba. It is the account of a sixteen-year-old’s sexual initiation, at first with an older man, then with a prostitute. Handsome and adventurous, Ernesto works in a warehouse as a clerk, handling the business correspondence and supervising the loading and unloading of flour sacks. He

7 In the original Italian the line reads Io se in lui mi ricordo ben mi pare and is taken from Umberto Saba’s Canzoniere (Songbook). It was later chosen by Elsa Morante as epigraph for L’isola di Arturo (Arturo’s Island).
goes though life with the simplicity and candor typical of his age, embarking on a formative journey in search of his true self. And if the quest for love is an important theme in numerous coming-of-age narratives, in Saba it coincides with a journey of self-discovery that leads to an erotic and artistic awakening. Unlike Moravia’s Agostino, Ernesto takes a step beyond the threshold of innocence and is initiated to the secrets of life, albeit with challenges and obstacles along the way.

Saba’s honest portrayal of a homosexual relationship represents the bulk of the narrative and it is the idea of confession, I argue, that makes this novel the most introspective work in the author’s literary production. It is not by chance that he had contemplated titling the novel Intimità (Intimacy). In this regard, Ernesto represents an alternative life, the path to a youthful and liberated self. In fact, it has been pointed out that Ernesto represents the life lived in earnest that Saba discarded for a parallel existence (Van Watson 154). Ernesto was Saba’s secret book and since it was never meant for publication, he shared it in private readings with a few close friends, including Elsa Morante. His daughter Linuccia explains that he was afraid the book would be misunderstood and that it would cause a scandal.

Ernesto’s journey, I posit, doesn’t follow the paradigm found in classical Bildungsromane; it depicts instead a subversion of the canon in that it begins where it should end: the adolescent boy goes from experience to innocence, the latter represented by the friendship with Ilio, Ernesto’s object of affection. Like Agostino, Ernesto is

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8 It is important to note Saba’s perhaps intentional reference to Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), where the play on words Earnest/Ernest echoes Ernesto’s quest for authenticity.
fatherless, an absence that partly explains the intimacy with the factory worker. During one of the initial conversations between the two, the father topic inevitably comes up:

Don’t you have a father?
How did you know?
You only even mention your mother, the man said almost apologetically.
I never knew my father.
Is he dead? asked the man in a low voice.
No, separated from my mother. They separated six months before I was born.
Why?
Don’t know. They quarreled. So I’ve never seen my father. He lives in another city, and I don’t think he’s even allowed back to Trieste. Not that I mind not seeing him: he can stay where he is for all I care. (13)

Ernesto lacks a father figure who could support him in his growth; in this respect, the homosexual relationship can be seen as an attempt to find that fatherly protection he unconsciously seeks. Yet it is more than the mere quest for a father surrogate. One could almost suspect that the unpublishable nature of the novel has more to do with the overbearing presence of the fictional mother than with the homoerotic taboo. La signora Celestina, Ernesto’s mother, controls his existence to such an extreme that the boy becomes defiant to all the rules and conventions imposed on him. The boy’s rebellious nature goes hand in hand with his longing for freedom and independence. That explains his desire to quit the office job Celestina has found for him, or his reluctance in getting a haircut whenever she asks him to. Ernesto’s visit to the barber is particularly important in that the light beard he wishes Bernardo would not shave becomes an emblem of his desired and fledgling masculinity:

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9 It is my belief that Saba chose this name for Ernesto’s mother after La Celestina, by Spanish dramatist Fernando De Rojas (1499). The work is generally considered the first masterpiece of Spanish prose whose protagonist Celestina embodies a strong-willed woman who uses witchcraft to manipulate men.
And he was already half out of the chair when Bernardo brushed his cheek with the back of his hand. Just a moment, he said, there’s a bit of beard here. If you can wait, I’ll have it off in a trice. Ernesto did not have the nerve to object. His instinct was to jump up and run away. […] In the meantime, unaware of his customer’s turmoil, Bernardo had already lathered his cheeks and was very slowly, very carefully grazing the blade over them. […] At last Ernesto was free to stand and go. No one noticed the tears in his eyes. (55)

If getting a haircut is bad enough, the unexpected shave is traumatic for the young man.

In a way, Ernesto’s mortification underlies a strong castration anxiety, or fear of emasculation. Bernardo represents a perfect father surrogate for Ernesto, not only because he is always kind and affectionate toward the boy, but also because there is rumor that he may be, in fact, his biological father:

Two years before this story starts, a cousin of Ernesto’s own age had explained how babies are made and born (matters about which he had only the haziest idea before), then he went on to tell him almost as a corollary that everyone at home knew Bernardo was Ernesto’s real father, and this was the reason (never to be whispered abroad!) for his parents’ (so-called, in one case) separation. (50)

Bernardo’s future hopes for Ernesto reinforce the suspicion that he is indeed his real father:

Ha had known Ernesto and been tending him since he was a tiny boy, for he was the first to cut his hair after his nanny, and looked forward now to trimming his first beard. Bernardo predicted a brilliant future for the boy; according to him he was destined come what may to be rich one day, thanks to some sort of legacy which would be his as if by right. […] Bernardo wanted this customer for himself. (51)

Ernesto teases his mother about his paternity to the point where the woman loses consciousness, a reaction that reveals the probable truth, “Thrilled at discovering the mysteries of procreation and by his secret kinship with Bernardo, he ran home all bright and excited both bits of news. At the first her face fell, and she opened her mouth to denounce his corrupting cousin; at the second, she fainted clean away” (50).
The novel’s third episode, which begins with the traumatic barbershop experience, continues and ends with the crucial scene of the encounter with the prostitute Tanda. As was the case with Agostino, Ernesto, not knowing exactly what “being a man” entails, feels pressured by his peers to prove his masculinity by visiting a prostitute:

Ernesto’s pondering and gloom all led to one conclusion: If only I could lose my virginity today – now – at once! His self-made promise not to go with women before he was eighteen or nineteen was forgotten. With a sort of regret he remembered how many of his schoolmates had already done it, and bragged when they told him about it. They became experts overnight, and the lessons they gave were richly detailed. [...] What he had done with the man did not count: in this sense, life began the day a boy had a woman for the first time. There were diseases, of course (his mates used to talk about those as well; one of them even boasted about catching a venereal infection) but they did not scare him, not just then – not the ones you catch from women, at any rate. (57)

If Agostino is turned away from the brothel, Ernesto does succeed in having sex with a prostitute, albeit with embarrassment and hesitation:

There was a woman in the heart of the old city…she lived on the first floor in an old building in the quarter where all the brothels were. [...] Ernesto’s heart was in his mouth as he climbed the stairs and found her waiting in the doorway. As soon as he entered he noticed the odor in her little room. It was fresh linen, newly sewn – the same odor he used to like so much in his nanny’s house. [...] I bet you haven’t flown the nest yet, have you, said the woman, feeling Ernesto’s embarrassment, for he was neither taking off his own clothes nor laying a hand on hers. I’ve never been with a woman before, he confessed. She looked at Ernesto more closely. He was a handsome boy – and how different to her usual night-time visitors! She did not understand but she sensed something: sensed that fate had sent her this afternoon a strange, unaccountable gift. Don’t be scared, she said, leave it to me. (60-61, emphasis added)

Sex feels familiar, not only because Ernesto has already had it with the man at the warehouse, but also because, as the narrator says, “he had experienced it before, known it more than once – known it always, even before he was born” (62). Aside from the evident oedipal references – Tanda is Slovenian like Ernesto’s nanny – the aspect I would
like to emphasize is the boy’s sincerity and naïveté. He doesn’t lie about his own name
nor about being with a woman for the first time, showing himself so far as possible as he
truly is. Although sexually ambiguous, Ernesto stays true to himself, a choice reminiscent
of Saba’s lifelong search for chiarezza, an elusive term implying not only clarity of
thought and diction, but also honesty with the implied reader and with one’s self. The
closing of the fourth episode, with Ernesto’s double confession to the mother – the
homosexual and the heterosexual encounter – reinforces this idea.

Saba wrote that Ernesto “Non aveva inibizioni, o poche poche. Non era un
decadente, era un primitivo” (“He had no inhibitions, or very few. He was not decadent,
he was primitive,” 145; translation mine).10 A creature of instinct, Ernesto is guided by
the sensuality of the moment. As Elsa Morante described him, he is immune to taboos,
innocent and uncorrupted as his experiences are simple human encounters. Even
Moravia, despite his criticism of the novel, stated that the author had succeeded in
liberating himself of his taboos, thus producing a lyrical autobiographical book
uncorrupted by history or society.

However, as Gnerre suggests, Ernesto’s “liberation” doesn’t always coincide with
that of his creator Saba, whose fear of criticism caused the book to go unnoticed during
his lifetime. The use of the Triestine dialect itself, through which the author recounts the
sexual initiation of the 16-year-old boy by an adult man and all the dialogues between
them, is an evident sign of such reticence. As Moravia rightfully suggests about Ernesto,

10 The Einaudi edition of the novel contains a selection of letters written by Saba to his friends and
daughter about the work.
“il dialetto, in realtà, è una superstite censura” (“the dialect used is actually a surviving censorship”; translation mine). Such reluctance could be linked to self-censorship, which seems to underlie all the arguments put forward by the author to justify his inability to conclude and publish the novel.\footnote{Saba’s justification for not finishing and publishing Ernesto is extensively documented in his letters.} At the same time, it can be argued that it is thanks to the dialect that Saba can elaborate freely on homosexuality and heterosexuality. As Balduino argues, it is through the use of the triestino that Saba succeeds in overcoming taboos and difficult subjects. In this sense, the dialect is a liberating force that coincides with genuineness and authenticity.

**Narratives of Authenticity**

*When you hear a man confessing, you know that he is not yet free.*

― Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*

In *Scorciatoie e raccontini*, a collection of aphorisms and reflections on life, Saba states that “l’opera d’arte è sempre una confessione; e, come ogni confessione, vuole l’assoluzione. Successo mancato equivale confessione negata” (“A work of art is always a confession; and, as with every confession, it calls for absolution. A failed success equals a denied confession”, *Scorciatoia* 68).\footnote{Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations from *Scorciatoie e raccontini* and from the *Letters* are my own.} For this reason and due to the idea of the
Sabian novel as a confession to the implicit reader, I maintain that *Ernesto* can be included in the confessional genre.

As Michel Foucault emphasizes in his *History of Sexuality*, western man has become a “confessing animal.” Confession plays an important part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, love relations, and in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life. Furthermore, he continues:

Confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation. (61-62)

The trope of confession can be traced back to two important figures, Augustine of Hippo and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who represent two different models for confessional writing. Augustine’s *Confessions* – arguably the first work of this kind – is a work based on a religious experience of conversion: sins are confessed in order to be renounced. On the other hand, Rousseau’s *Confessions* narrate the author’s worldly experiences, especially sexual ones, which contributed to his formation. Both texts serve as perfect examples of this literary genre. Although both authors deal with a transformation, Augustine’s *iter* is religious, from sinner to saint, whereas Rousseau’s journey is secular, from young boy to

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13 It is important to recall the irony in Augustine’s text, specifically in passages that refer to mundane pleasures, for instance when he prays, “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet” (8.7).
man. If the former views sin as something to overcome, the latter perceives sin as a natural phase in the individual’s coming-of-age. Upon considering the two different confessional narratives, we can infer that Saba’s novel contains aspects of both: the reluctance to get published fits well with the underlying idea of renunciation, while the desire to write and to disclose the most intimate thoughts and experiences is closer in spirit to the Rousseauian image of growth and maturation.

There is a striking resemblance between the Sabian text and the above mentioned confessional narratives. In the first place, confessional practice seems strongly linked to the mother. Ernesto’s mother, la signora Celestina, is an overbearing presence in the novel and in the boy’s life, as Monica was for Augustine and Madame de Warens for young Rousseau. All three individuals are raised and/or guided by strict and authoritarian women with whom they develop a strong attachment and dependence. When reading the Confessions, it is evident that Augustine never psychologically severed ties with his mother and his mother-bound state. He tries, as Ernesto does, rebellion and “escape” and when he realizes that a detachment is utterly impossible, he succumbs to motherhood.

The acknowledgement of one’s fears and limits is a fil rouge that ties all thirteen books together. “I have become a problem to myself,” writes Augustine, “and that is my infirmity” (Confessions, 10.33). In the very beginning of the first book Augustine writes, “My soul’s house is narrow for you to enter; will you not make it broader? It is in a state of collapse; will you not rebuild it? It contains things which must offend your eyes; this I know and I admit. But who will make it clean?” (1.5). Like many other male confessants, Augustine does not keep his problem to himself but sets instead on a quest for a listener, a reader, a confessor. It is therefore important to point out that Augustine is not forced or
asked to disclose his inner battles and demons, which he self-diagnoses as an illness. He could have shared his turmoil with a trusted confidant, in secret. Instead he chooses to bare his soul to an audience, at the same time engaging in a conversation with himself in order to restore his spiritual health. The confessant invites the readers to become witnesses to the new meaning and vision he has found in his life. If we look at the etymology of confession, the idea of the presence of an audience becomes clear. The Latin *confessare* derives from *cum* (together, with) and *frateri* (to acknowledge) creating an image of a public acknowledgement, which coincides with a full disclosure of one’s life. As Krondorfer puts it, “Confessional writings are a testimony to a transformation of an old self to a new self that requires an “other” as public witness. […] In its best tradition, confessing is the result of a newly grasped awareness of and about the self that is shared with others” (35). However, when taking a closer look at what the bishop is trying to convey with his narrative, we realize that the confessor is primarily God, and only secondarily the public. Today, as social creatures living in a confession-obsessed society, as Foucault would say, we may be prone to think that Augustine was narcissistically aiming at public recognition. If we assume that this was the case, God is employed solely as a figure of speech. “In an age when for many, God is dead,” Coles writes, “Augustine’s confessing self now appears in a different light. The effects of confession as a mode of being must open themselves to questions that were concealed as long as being itself was unquestionably thought to be designed by God and Christianity was considered the only true story of the world” (*Self, Power, Other* 72).

Throughout his confession, Augustine profusely discusses his carnal necessities, as in the very beginning of the narrative, which coincides with a remembrance of his
early childhood: “So I was welcomed by the consolation of human milk…For at that time I knew nothing more than how to suck and to be quietened by bodily delights” (1.6.7). This short passage is particularly important as it contains both a reference to the delights of human flesh and to the presence of the mother, two of the recurring themes in the narrative. Emotionally alienated from her husband, Monica grows attached to her son and places all of her hopes and dreams on him. It goes without saying that she will never be replaced by a wife, since Augustine will never marry. Dittes and Kligerman maintain in fact that the outcome of Augustine’s Oedipus complex was neurotic. Both scholars reference the Freudian narcissism and the oedipal conflict and, in their view, Augustine’s narcissism, centered in his intense involvement with his mother, set him up for a potential rivalry with his father. Specifically, Patricius is depicted as a “weak” father who failed to counterbalance Monica’s controlling presence. This is supported by the fact that he is not mentioned much in the Confessions. Nevertheless, the adult Augustine ends up redeeming his parent— and so does Saba as we shall see— to the point where he considers him not only as the man who guided him in his sexual development, but as a member of the Catholic community. In contrast, instead of being initiated into manhood by his father, Ernesto is abandoned by him. Living on the edge of society, the “murderer” as Celestina calls her ex-husband, is partly accused by the narrator of contributing to Ernesto’s constant quest for a father figure. With this in mind, the dialogue between mother and son at the end of the fourth episode is quite enlightening in that it contains the core of the confessional theme in the novel. There is a double confession that takes place in a short span of time and if Celestina reveals to Ernesto the reason behind the hatred for her husband, the boy discloses his homoerotic relationship with the laborer:
Don’t go, Ernesto said in a voice suddenly soft, almost imploring. Mother, there’s something I have to confess, and it may make you unhappy but I must tell you. […] Mother – he started, but dried up at once. How could he say it? How could he tell his mother? A boy who liked to speak his mind, as Ernesto did, could talk openly to someone like the labourer – but to his mother?... Apart from his own predicament at the moment, perhaps he was just too young to bear his ‘terrible’ secret alone; he needed to confide in someone, as the man had feared he would, and whom should he trust if not his mother? True, she was a dour woman, more often than not unable to understand him, but she was still his mother. And how else could he escape going back to the office? Unless he gave her the ‘real’ reason for his refusal, he foresaw worse scenes than if he confessed everything, and what’s more there would be no end to them. His heart was in his mouth; he was a bit sorry for the man as well: telling their story was a second betrayal. But he could trust his mother never to tell a soul. The difficulty lay in finding the words… (100; emphasis added)

The moment of confession is paramount in that the dynamics between mother and son start to change for the better, as if the avowal of the sexual initiation loosened the ever present tension between the two:

Signora Celestina was seated again, waiting for her son to speak. Her heart too was beating fast. […] Tell me, she said. It was almost a command. Her own ideas were a thousand miles off the mark. But Ernesto still said nothing. He still couldn’t find the words, and stayed where he was on the bed, his head bowed in his hands. […] My son, she said, unwittingly making his confession more bitter, you can’t have done anything so very shameful that you can’t tell your mother without blushing. Here I am, and I’m listening. Ernesto had found the words. (101; emphasis added)

Soon after the boy’s confession, the woman is relieved as if she had expected the worst and what her son tells her, although hard to digest, becomes bearable when compared to an illness or an unlawful act. Strangely, the one thing that she understands the most is the physical/sexual aspect of the homosexual encounter, and not the psychological factor behind it. As the narrator states:

Signora Celestina was blind to everything but the physical dimension of the affair, and more than anything else this simply baffled her. The significance, the psychological motive, utterly escaped her; otherwise she would have had to understand that her mistaken marriage, the total absence of a father, and her own needless severity had each played a part…even making no allowance for
Ernesto’s age and, what was more important, for his singular ‘grace’, which may have sprung from those very same deprivations. (103; emphasis added)

Contrary to Augustine’s recollection of the early years of his repentence, the first thing that the reader learns about Ernesto’s life concerns his sexual awakening paired with a complete absence of shame or regret, at least when it comes to first-hand experiences.

The novel opens in fact with homosexual intercourse between the young boy and an older factory worker. Ernesto’s physiognomy (“hazel eyes and light, curly chestnut hair”), his habitual gestures (“he walked with a loose-limbed adolescent grace – the kind that always thinks itself graceless and fears itself ridiculous”) coupled with his beauty (“handsome, so handsome it’s a pleasure just to look at you” the man tells him) become a foreshadowing of the erotic encounter, which takes place shortly after the boy’s physical description. Surprisingly, the factory worker is not described at all, nor do we know his name. However, he assumes the important role of confessor inviting the young boy to talk about his family situation and his life aspirations. Out of the blue, he invites Ernesto to sit down beside him on the flour sacks and this is where the first confession takes place:

Why don’t you come and sit down? The man suggested after a pause, gesturing to a place beside his own. There’s room here; you can sit on my jacket if you’re worried about the dirt. And he made as if to spread out his jacket, for he was already in shirtsleeves, waiting for the cart. No need for that, Ernesto replied. Flour isn’t dirty, you can brush it off so it doesn’t leave any marks. And even if it did I wouldn’t care what people saw. He stopped the man unfolding his jacket and sat down beside him, smiling. The man smiled back; he did not look tired or angry any longer. (10-11)

When the man tells Ernesto he finds him handsome, so handsome it’s a pleasure just to look at him, the boy replies that no one had ever said that to him before, not even his own mother:
Not your mother even?

Her least of all. I can’t remember the last time she gave me a kiss or hugged me. She still says what she’s always said: you mustn’t spoil sons.

Would you’ve liked her to kiss you?

When I was a kid, yes. I don’t care now, but I’d have been glad if she’d said something nice once in a while. (11)

The absence of a father and the coldness of a mother are certainly contributing factors to Ernesto’s quest for affection. Soon after that, the two characters discuss the value of money and when the man expresses his desire to be friends with Ernesto despite the fact that the boy earns more than he does, Ernesto tells him that he is not rich either and that, in any case, he doesn’t care much about work nor wealth. The worker’s curiosity about how the boy spends his earnings initiates a double confession: Ernesto’s and the narrator’s. And if the character lies about his interest in women, the narrator reveals the truth about his sexual appetite:

So how do you spend your ten crowns? Do they go on women? (The second question was asked as if fearing an affirmative answer.) No, I don’t go with women yet – I’ve decided not to have anything to do with them till I’m eighteen or nineteen. (Perhaps he had forgotten that two years before, his mother had had to give notice to a young servant girl whom Ernesto was forever pestering in the kitchen. After that the poor woman made sure to employ only misshapen, ugly old women: she collected a real gallery of hags. But they never stayed long, always leaving or being dismissed after a month or two). (12)

Similar to Augustine, who in the opening paragraphs of his Confessions begins an intimate dialogue with God, Saba tightly organizes his opening passage around a conversation between the young boy and the man who is enamored by him. However, the point of departure is no longer God but the boy’s past, not the superego but the id. The Triestine dialect used in the dialogical sections functions as a filter, a protective layer of reticence that soon rips open, giving way to details about the intimacy between the two as
well as the homosexual intercourse. This is a reminder that it takes courage to write with an authenticity that transgresses bourgeois expectations of decency. In this regard, the dialect is also a secret code, so to speak, between confessor and confessant, an informal exchange about family, money and sex, three of the tropes dear to Moravia as well.

**Exposing Demons: Rousseau and Saba**

*Even if I confess myself, I am confessing another.*

—*Jacques Derrida*

Rousseau, another important confessant in literature, sets out on a self-discovery journey within himself, without any interlocutor except the implied reader. In doing so, he contributes in paving the way for modernity’s self-centeredness. His example, writes Brooks, “is decisive for the modern confessional tradition” (*Troubling Confessions* 73); he is not calling out for God, but for his fellow man. In other words, his *Confessions* are written with reference to, and in a way in opposition to Augustine’s autobiography. As Krondorfer eloquently puts it, “Rousseau no longer places himself within the universe of revealed religion, like Augustine, nor does he struggle with disciplining his body, like the early Christian ascetics. He articulates modernity’s self-centeredness: *portrait, man, I, myself*” (46).

Rousseau’s book constitutes a modern literary work in that the confessant is self-aware of his subjectivity and solitude: the source of his strength (subjectivity) is also the cause of his anxiety (solitude) (Krondorfer 46). If he mentions God, it is only to state that
when death comes, he will show himself to the creator holding the book in his hands.

Unlike Augustine, Jean-Jacques doesn’t need a listener nor a confessor while the writing is in progress, instead he will hand in the “finished product” to his readers and to the supreme Judge after his death. It must be in fact remembered that the Swiss-born philosopher wrote *Les Confessions* between 1764 and 1776, with the intention of publishing it posthumously, an intention reminiscent of Saba’s. At the very beginning of his twelve-chapter confession, he writes:

I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself. I know my heart, and have studied mankind; I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality, and whether Nature did wisely in breaking the mould with which she formed me, can only be determined after having read this work. *Whenever the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I*. With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues; and if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory: I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth, a conscious falsehood. Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous and sublime; even as thou hast read my inmost soul: Power eternal! Assemble round thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings; let each in his turn expose with equal sincerity the failings, the wanderings of his heart, and, if he dares, aver, I was better than that man (*Confessions*, Book I; emphasis added).

At times, Rousseau’s and Ernesto’s experiences seem to mirror each other. When, for example, young Rousseau recalls being molested by a religious man at a hospice in Turin, Italy, he reports the event without shame or reticence, describing in detail the seduction attempt by one of the friars:

He tried to work up to the most revolting liberties and, by guiding my hand, to make me take the same liberties with him. I broke wildly away with a cry and leaped backwards, but without displaying indignation or anger, for I had not the
slightest idea what it was all about. But I showed my surprise and disgust to such
effect that he then left me alone. But as he gave up the struggle I saw something
whitish and sticky shoot towards the fireplace and fall on the ground. My stomach
turned over, and I rushed on to the balcony, more upset, more troubled and
frightened as well, than ever I had been in my life. I was almost sick. (71)

As Robin Howells has argued, Rousseau is historically the first to examine closely his
own sexuality, and to perceive it as an essential element of the “self.” He is also the first
to trace his sexual drive in childhood. Even the language he uses, continues Howells,
seems intensely sensual, favoring verbs such as to taste, to caress, to take pleasure.

Other than the sex games he plays as a young boy with Mademoiselle Goton and
the spanking by Mademoiselle Lambercier, the encounter with the friar is Rousseau’s
first explicit reference to sexuality. Interestingly, in this pedophile attack, he takes on the
female role, as Ernesto does (the man takes liberties with him and tries to guide his hand)
to the point where he claims that he cannot comprehend what came over the pious man.
He continues, “And really I know of no more hideous sight for a man in cold blood than
such foul and obscene behavior, nothing more revolting than a terrifying face on fire with
the most brutal lust. I have never seen another man in that state; but if we appear like that
to women, they must indeed be fascinated not to find us repulsive” (71-72). In a way,
young Rousseau becomes a male version of Pamela, a representation of innocence lost.

When the boy informs the authorities at the hospice of the incident, he is advised to be
quiet about it. However, his reluctance to drop the issue causes the principal to lecture
him, and this will be yet another confession:

For he believed that I had known what the man wanted when I defended myself,
but had merely been unwilling. He told me gravely that it was a forbidden and
immoral act like fornication, but that the desire for it was not an affront to the
person who was its object. *There was nothing to get so annoyed about in having been found attractive.* He told me quite openly that in his youth he had been similarly honoured and, having been surprised in a situation where he could put up no resistance, he had found nothing so brutal about it all. There was no reason to be alarmed about nothing. (72, emphasis added)

The principal confesses of having been sexually abused by an older man during his youth, and yet he doesn’t seem to find anything negative about it. His words echo what the worker tells Ernesto during their first encounter at the warehouse, “You’re a good lad, said the man for the second time. Handsome too, so handsome it’s a pleasure just to look at you” (11). And as was the case with Rousseau and the friar, sexual advances between Ernesto and the man begin with a touch of the hand:

The man fell silent. He seemed to be struggling with himself, as if he wanted to say something and wanted not to say it. Ernesto felt the man’s hand trembling on top of his own. Then – as someone risking his all to win everything – he looked the boy straight in the eye and burst out in a strange voice:

But do you know what it means for a boy like you to be friends with a man like me? Because if you don’t, I’m not the one who’s going to tell you. He was briefly silent again. Then, when the boy blushed and looked at the floor but still did not move his hand, he added almost aggressively: *Do you know?*

Ernesto slid his hand from the man’s grasp, which had tightened and become damp with sweat, and laid it timidly on the man’s leg. He drew his hand up and along till, lightly and as if by chance, it brushed his sex. Then he looked boldly up at the man, a luminous smile on his face. (*Ernesto*, 15; emphasis in original)

There is an important difference between Rousseau’s and Ernesto’s first homoerotic experience. If Jean-Jacques is completely appalled by the experience, Ernesto is the one who instigates it, being the one in charge. It is the man who feels embarrassed, and not the boy:

The man felt overwhelmed. His mouth was dry and his heart was pounding so hard he felt faint, and all he could say was:

*Do you see?* – which seemed addressed more to himself than to the boy. There was a long silence, which Ernesto broke by answering: I do see, yes, but…where?
What do you mean, where? the man asked vaguely. *It was Ernesto who seemed the more prompt of the two.* If we’re going to do things we shouldn’t do, don’t we have to be alone?

Of course. So where do you want us to go to be alone? asked Ernesto in a low voice, some of his bravado already draining away.

Tonight, out in the country, I know a place...Let’s talk later, said the man, hurried and hoarse. He had taken off the red kerchief during their conversation; now he knotted it again behind his head and set to work. *His legs trembled beneath him slightly as he went.* (15-17; emphasis added)

An important aspect of Rousseau’s sexuality is masochism. In the *Confessions* he declares his taste for sexual punishment, which for him stems from a childhood experience. Being spanked by his surrogate mother gave him erotic pleasure, “I found in the pain, even in the shame, an element of sensuality.” This episode, says Rousseau, “decided my tastes, my desires, my passions, myself, for the rest of my life.” He then continues by saying that his infantile desire led him to seek “an imperious mistress,” a preference dictated by his passion for literature and specifically for French romances, inhabited by heroes submissive to their ladies. Indeed, the courtly love tradition was very important for Rousseau in that it shaped his tastes both in literature and in life. There are several other episodes that underlie his desire for sexual submission, like the role-plays with schoolmate Mademoiselle Goton impersonating the teacher, during which games she would enjoy assaulting him sexually. There is also an episode of self-exposure where the adolescent, living abroad in Turin, Italy, exhibits his naked behind to women. Rousseau exposes himself literally to unsuspecting women in dark alleyways and the act is explained by him as a desire for female punishment.

In the light of these erotic revelations, we can infer that the fact of writing about these episodes is in itself exhibitionist. Rousseau’s libido eventually finds satisfaction in the *jouissance*, which in his case equals both the pleasure of writing and the pleasure of
sharing life experiences with his readers. At the same time, exposing oneself to public view requires from the modern, self-centered subject more courage than from a man knowing himself to be resting in God’s grace. As we have seen with Ernesto, the act of writing is synonymous with exposure. Using his alter ego as a protective screen, Saba tells the whole story of what could have been if things and times had been different.

“This book tells everything about me, even the things that shouldn’t be told,” Ernesto confesses in a letter to Professor Mogno at the end of the book. Revealing an irony typical of the Triestine author he adds, “but he’s sworn never to publish it, he’ll only read it to two or three trusted friends when it’s finished. Let’s hope 1) he never finishes it, and 2) if he finishes it, he keeps his word” (132).

The exposure experienced and expressed by Rousseau and Saba is intensified by the presence of sadomasochism. As we have seen with the former, the quest for sexual submission is paramount in understanding the dynamics in the author’s societal relations. What is striking, however, is that Ernesto, unlike young Rousseau, is the one in control, even if it doesn’t appear to be so at the very beginning of the narrative.

The following quotation is quite important in that it shows the dynamics of power between the two Sabian characters:

Now we’re alone, said the man, when he realized that Ernesto was not going to speak. Out of the bag he always brought to work he had taken a needle and thread to sew the sacks, but he was really waiting for the boy to say something to recall their conversation of the day before – something to encourage him. But Ernesto did not so much as open his mouth. He had positioned himself nearby (nearer than usual, perhaps) and stood staring at the floor, fiddling with the paper label on one of the sacks until it came off in his hand. He tore the label into shreds and tossed the shreds away.

Alone, he said at last. Alone for an hour. There are lots of things you can do in an hour, the man added readily.
What things do you mean?
Don’t you remember what we talked about yesterday? What you as good as promised me? Don’t you know what I’m so longing to do with you?
You want to put it up my arse, Ernesto said with serene innocence. The man was taken aback to hear this crude phrase from a boy like Ernesto. He was hurt as well – hurt and frightened. He thought the kid, already regretting his half-consent, was mocking him. Worse yet, he might have told somebody or – worst of all – confessed to his mother. (19, emphasis added)

It is quite evident that Ernesto, despite his young age compared to the man, is not the one embarrassed or ill-at-ease, and the pattern becomes more and more noticeable as the sexual encounters between the two become frequent:

Through his worry and anger the man knew that he loved him – loved him too much. Yet there was a shade of sadism in his love, and it was this which sought expression under cover of the shout. It went badly for him, as we shall see.
How many do you think you deserve?
How many what?
How many strokes with a birch wand? He was unbuttoning Ernesto’s trousers, following their ritual, while the boy stood still, arms hanging by his sides.
I thought you meant cakes, he said. (The man sometimes brought a few cakes with him, being the only presents he could afford and the only ones which… left no trace. Ernesto was not one to stand on ceremony – he always devoured them on the spot.)

Why do you want to beat me when I’ve only given you what you liked?
As a little punishment.
So it’s little, is it? If I was wrong to do what we did you’re hardly the one to punish me now. […]
You’re too handsome – tease me too much – think it’s a joke making me go out of my mind. (39)

The sadomasochistic game initiated by the man soon comes back to haunt him as the dynamics shift to create a reversal of roles:

I’ve brought it with me, the man said the next day.
What’s that? Asked Ernesto without much interest.
The birch.
What for?
For you, ventured the man slyly.
Ernesto’s eyes widened.
Show me, he said.
The man took the birch wand from behind a sack and showed the boy.
He had just come by way of the Boschetto, where he had selected this particular
wand with loving care. Freshly cut and whippy, it would sting bare flesh like the
devil.
Give it to me.
Only if you promise to give it back.
I’m not promising anything. I said give it to me.
Humbled by the boy’s imperious tone, the man gave him the wand.
Now your hand, Ernesto said, like this – and he held the man’s left hand
open, as school masters do in junior school when they catch someone not paying
attention and want to punish him.
Again the man obeyed. Ernesto took his hand by the fingertips and held it
open and steady. He flexed the birch wand to and fro (as if to test it) and let fly a
cruel lash. The man’s face twisted with pain and his hand flew back as if scalded.
He shook his hand about, to cool it on the air.
Ernesto laughed.
How many did you want to give me? He asked.
Five, came the ingenuous answer.
Ernesto reached both hands behind to touch his buttocks, and he rubbed them as if
they really had been beaten.
[…] Still laughing, he broke the birch wand into little pieces and threw
then away, just as once, their first afternoon, he had thrown away the shreds of the
label from the sack of superfine flour.
Now let’s work, he said briskly, like someone addressing a subordinate.
But when he realized how dejected the man was he added more kindly:
Forgive me for hurting you. I only wanted to play, just as you wanted to
play, I know (he did not know this at all – was sure in fact the opposite was true).
If there is still a bit of pain, remember it was me, Ernesto, who did it to you. Then
it won’t hurt so much. (46-48, emphasis added)
Confessing Motherhood

But there's a story behind everything. How a picture got on a wall. How a scar got on your face. Sometimes the stories are simple, and sometimes they are hard and heartbreaking. But behind all your stories is always your mother's story, because hers is where yours begin.

— Mitch Albom, For One More Day

As Krondorfer reminds us, if in Rousseau’s autobiography women are numerous, in Augustine’s Confessions they disappear almost entirely. The North African bishop hardly ever mentions his female lover and companion of thirteen years. It is almost as if he suppressed his sexual desires by eliminating the object of his lust (Krondorfer 60). It can be thus argued that he was unable to display affection toward his significant others, including his son. His unnamed lover and his child hardly receive mention throughout the thirteen books. In order to attain a close bond to God, Augustine is ready to give up his loved ones. Consequently, both partner and son disappear from the textus of life and narrative. The only exception is Monica, Augustine’s mother, who stands as a constant beacon of light and hope in the midst of the torments of a sinful existence. Monica is idealized and idolized so much throughout the Confessions that the filial affection that bonds mother and son causes the man’s inability to find love in relationships with other women. While the latter are portrayed as sexual objects, Monica is perceived as a confessor and confidante. When finally taking the vows of celibacy, Augustine trades his obsessively sexualized relationship with women for a spiritually intimate relationship with his mother. Augustine’s Confessions are, in this regard, a return to childhood and to the Freudian paradigm of the son’s oedipal desire for his mother.
Interestingly enough, Augustine, who believes that every confession should be truthful, doesn’t spare any details about his mother’s quirks and flaws. She was only human and had bad habits and perverse desires. That is why he stresses the fact that she is always in need of our prayers. The other side of Monica, so to speak, becomes clearer after her death, when her grieving son renews his promise to “omit not a word that my mind can bring to birth concerning my mother.” He touches a few sore subjects, such as his mother’s early issue with alcoholism, which continued later in life when she found herself in an abusive relationship. In Confessions 9.8, Augustine relates the story of how young Monica had “an excessive fondness for wine.” It was only the reproachful comment of a servant that made her realize the issue and helped her overcome it.

Peter Brown notes that, in book 9, “Monica, the idealized figure that had haunted Augustine’s youth like an oracle of God, is subtly transformed by Augustine’s analysis of his present feelings upon remembering her death into an ordinary human being, an object of concern, a sinner like himself, equally in need of mercy.” As Virginia Burrus points out, there are numerous signs of Monica’s flawed character in the text. When, after a visit to the public baths, her husband Patricius proudly reports “the signs of active virility coming to life” in their son, Monica seems more concerned about Augustine’s career than his sexual awakening.

William B. Parsons posits that psychoanalytic studies tend to interpret this experience as a significant memory that helped shape the young Augustine’s attitude toward sexuality as God the “Father” sends a warning against oedipal desire. Episodes
like this are used to argue that Monica cultivated an incestuous relationship with her son. She did, after all, contribute in ending Augustine’s sexual relationships and lived with him as his spiritual companion in Ostia, Italy (Parsons 34). This partly explains why he chose celibacy. As he tells the reader:

My mother was afraid that the bonds of marriage might be a hindrance to my hopes for the future, my hopes of success at my studies. Both my parents were unduly eager for me to learn, my mother because she thought that the usual course of study would certainly not hinder me, but would even help me, in my approach to you. (2.3)

Ultimately, it is carnal desires and worldly attachments that must be avoided at all costs. Not only jouissance – to use a Lacanian term – but also the enticement of the senses.

Certainly, as Parsons has noted, Augustine’s narrative of his youth is selective in the sense that certain life events enable him to explore themes concerning the nature of the soul and the human condition. Among other things he relates are several life changes such as his father’s death when he was seventeen. It is thus clear that for both Augustine and Saba/Ernesto, adolescence was marked by the absence of a father and the presence of an overbearing mother. Surely Augustine’s reference to his father’s death seems somewhat reductive in that it is in parentheses and out of place. As he discusses his studies in book 3.4, he writes:

Among such companions in this unsettled age of mine I pursued my studies of the books of eloquence, a subject in which I longed to make a name for myself, though my reason for this was damnable and mere wind, being simply joy in human vanity. […] Every vain hope suddenly became worthless to me; my spirit was filled with an extraordinary and burning desire for the immortality of wisdom, and now I began to rise, so that I might return to you. I was in my nineteenth year (my father having died two years previously) […] I was on fire then, My God, I was on fire to leave earthly things behind and fly back to you. (Emphasis added)
This is the only time that Augustine mentions his father’s death and the odd parenthetical reference to him makes sense if compared to the emphasis placed on the “new” spiritual Father to whom the adolescent wishes to devote himself. This line of reasoning achieves further explanation when it is noted that the tragic death of Patricius and the loss felt was the spark for Augustine’s interest in theodicy. Interestingly, if we consider the Latin root of *confession*, it is easy to see the aspect of transcendence: *confiteri* is “not only to admit sins but to praise God” (Asher 1998, 230).

A question may be legitimately asked at this point: What do the confessions of a fourth-century Christian bishop of Roman Africa have to do with the intimate and unpublishable novel of a twentieth-century Italian Jew who comes to terms with his sexuality relatively late in life? From a strictly historical perspective, very little. Nevertheless, there are common themes that appear in the confessional narratives of these two men. Both contain a yearning for disclosure: Augustine acknowledges his previous errors as well as the power of God, whereas Saba acknowledges his previous secret life. In both Augustinian and Sabian narratives we find a pattern: the absence of a father, the presence of an overbearing mother, the sexual awakening and the struggle with carnal desire, the quest for a calling in life: religion for Augustine, music for Ernesto, and poetry for Saba. Whereas Augustine’s work portrays a spiritual journey, Saba’s deathbed confession tells of escapes and encounters, of lessons learned and bridges burned. If Augustine briefly mentions his father’s passing, Saba devotes several paragraphs to his parent. We have already commented on the dialogue between Ernesto and the worker about the absence of a father. Further in the novel, specifically at the moment of
Ernesto’s homosexual confession to Celestina, the young man inquires about his father’s persona and personality:

Mother, he said in a strange voice, that childish light in his eyes even brighter now the clouds had dispersed and he was sure of going to the concert – Mother, can I ask you something? (This was his famous Can I? Ernesto adored asking questions, and adored asking permission to ask them.)

What?
You don’t have to answer if you don’t want, mummy…Can I?
Ask me, said Signora Celestina uneasily.

Was my father, came the timid question, really so bad?
Don’t ask about him, his mother said, as if touched on the quick of a wound. He was a murderer, that’s what he was, that’s what he was to me. That, my son, is all you need to know…

But…what did he do to you?
Signora Celestina did not answer her son’s artless question directly.

When you were little, she said, and living with your nanny, I spent every night alone and very sick in this room. Do you see the clock over there? (pointing to an old clock with little alabaster columns, which still told the time in the bedroom with the sloping roof, where Ernesto now slept) I listened to it every night, had to listen to it, and its tick tock seemed to be telling me over and over again Alone, alone, always alone. That’s how I spent my nights, alone and very sick, and it was your father’s fault. There was no one to help me. In those days your aunt… You were in the country with your beloved nanny…

Oh mother! cried Ernesto, and he jumped up to hug her. But she drew back, almost pushing him away: one kiss was all very well, but two…

Now get changed, she said, if you don’t want to be late for the concert. And don’t ring the bell when you come back – knock gently, I’ll be waiting up for you and I’ll hear. Do be careful not to wake your aunt. That is all I ask. (107-108, emphasis in original)

We know very little about Saba’s father, except that he left wife and infant son for no apparent reason. Ugo Edoardo Poli had converted to Judaism in order to marry Felicita Rachele Coen in July 1882. After he abandoned the family, the child was raised first by a Slovene Catholic nanny, Gioseffa Gabrovich Schobar, whom Umberto called Peppa, and from 1887 onwards by his mother, in her sister Regina’s home, though Umberto maintained a lifelong attachment to Peppa, as can be inferred from the numerous poems dedicated to her. Interestingly, in the Confessions it is Augustine who abandons his
concubine and son to pursue his religious vocation. Saba’s mother has much in common with Monica, in that both women had a strong influence on their sons and their formation. When Augustine sneaks away into the night boarding a ship for Rome, Monica’s excessive grief at her son’s departure, “her too jealous love for her son,” is perceived as a divine punishment that fits the female crime of passion.

The striking aspect about the mother/son relationship is that Augustine never blames the woman, not even in thought, for his sexual and existential crisis. If blaming one’s mother is often a recurring theme in both psychological and confessional writings, this never happens in the *Confessions*. If mothers are often perceived as negative mirrors, delaying or inhibiting their sons’ transition from boyhood into manhood, Monica embodies an image of eternal solace. Nevertheless, the unhealthy relationship between mother and son sparks a desperate pursuit – through philosophy and religion – of an elusive substitute for sexual happiness. Dittes maintains that Augustine’s conversion was an inevitable consequence of his oedipal conflict: “It is even less clear that he was ever free – especially in view of the insistent influence of his mother – to achieve a final resolution except within the limits of a Christian commitment” (131). Bakan interestingly summarizes Augustine’s oedipal repetition at the religious level: “Nor can we overlook the fact that it is in the ninth book that his mother dies, with his rebirth in a spiritual form. Monica, so to speak, carried him for nine months in bringing him to his fleshy form, and then he recites for nine books his being borne by his mother until his spiritual rebirth” (151-152). While Augustine’s mother is idealized and idolized, the father is reproached for not being a Christian, for his sexuality and for his anger. The reference to the Augustinian text enables us to find in *Ernesto*, as we shall see, a paradigm of dependence.
and at the same time a desire to break free from the overbearing presence of Celestina.

Furthermore, much of the *Confessions*, as the Sabian text, is devoted to adolescent sexual adventures, including his experience with a concubine who bore him a son. The “conversion” narrative, which tells the decision to live a contemplative life as a celibate, begins the moment Augustine’s concubine is dismissed by his mother.

One way of interpreting his compulsive sexuality is to analyze a passage included in Chapter 11 of Book VIII where the saint describes his sins of the flesh:

So I was sick and in torture. I reproached myself much more bitterly than ever, and I turned and twisted in my chain till I could break quite free. Only a little of it still held me, but it did still hold me. [...] Toys and trifles, utter vanities had been my mistresses, and now they were holding me back, pulling me by the garment of my flesh and softly murmuring in my ear: “Are you getting rid of us?” and “From this moment shall we never be with you again for all eternity?” and “From this moment will you never for all eternity be allowed to do this or to do that?” My God, what was it, what was it that they suggested in those words “this” or “that” which I have just written? I pray you in your mercy to keep such things from the soul of your servant. How filthy, how shameful were these things they were suggesting! [...] So went the controversy in my heart – about self, and self against self. (8.11)

It is clear from the above passage that Augustine dramatizes the fear of sexual desire, equating pleasure with perdition. Even after the conversion, the African bishop continues to question himself. He has taken the vows of celibacy but still struggles with erotic memories, thus never considering himself completely free of temptation. It is important to realize that, even if doubt persists, Augustine seems to be sending a clear message to his readers, which is that even if confession does not change men, nor makes men perfect, it brings them to the realization that they are flawed and finite creatures in need of divine mercy. Self-disclosure is, therefore, always beneficial. In book ten, he states:

When I am confessing not what I was but what I am now, the benefit lies in this: I am making this confession not only before you with a secret exaltation and fear
and with a secret grief touched by hope, but also in the ears of believing sons of men, sharers in my joy, conjoined with me in mortality, my fellow citizens and pilgrims, some who have gone before, some who follow after, and some who are my companions in this life. (10.4.6)

Ultimately, the act of confessing is an ongoing process and even after acquiring episcopal authority Augustine continues to question his motivations to the point that he can never be completely certain about his beliefs and desires.

Confessing Liberation

I am a cage, in search of a bird.
— Franz Kafka

For the caged bird sings of freedom.
— Maya Angelou

At this point in the story, Saba writes several letters to family and friends in Ernesto’s voice. In a letter from Ernesto to Professor Mogno, placed in an appendix at the end of the novel, there is a passage containing a clear reference to Freud’s interpretation of dreams:

My mother does love me, but she doesn’t understand me; which is another reason I so liked the part of your essay where you talk about the adolescent nobody loves, who seeks refuge in the secret world of his dreams. That’s a perfect description of me. And I was feeling so good when I woke up — really happy! Last night, just before dawn, I dreamed I could fly. I was flying around my little room so high I nearly touched the ceiling, and it was so marvelously easy I couldn’t think why everyone wasn’t flying with me; I told Ilio (that’s my friend) that he should try it. And he did, soon he rose from his bed — in my dream he was in the room with me — and there we were, flying together, both of us. (Letter to Tullio Mogno, Trieste, 22 September 1899)
According to Freud, dreaming of flying corresponds to a desire to be free. Similarly, the intimate connection between flying and the idea of a bird makes it comprehensible that this type of dream, in the case of male dreamers, should usually have a sexual significance, and many times dreamers are very proud of their ability to fly. Significantly, Ernesto has a pet bird that he keeps in a cage in his room. Pimpo, the blackbird, is let out on a daily basis, free to fly around the boy’s room. And it is precisely when the factory worker pays Ernesto a visit after having learned that he is ill that the boy talks about his pet:

How hard are you on your mother! Said the man as soon as she had shut the door. That’s the last thing I expected after what you told me. I do love her but she’s too nosy: she always wants to stay and hear everything…Can you see Pimpo? Pimpo? My blackbird Pimpo, there in the window. The man turned to where Ernesto was pointing. He looked at the bird. Does it sing? Too much! We have to cover the cage with a black cloth at night or the whole house is woken up before dawn…I’ve got a hen as well. In a chicken coop? No, not in a coop, I like having her free in the kitchen, at least when I’m at home. I let the blackbird out too, every day nearly. It has a bath in a big bowl here in the middle of my room. It’s the only room with a sloping roof but I like it. I’m happy in here. What does your mother say? What, about the sloping roof? About the animals. Sometimes she grumbles, other times she doesn’t mind. (36-37)

Saba’s Canzoniere (Songbook) is rife with aerial images (birds, insects, balloons floating in the sky) and airy descriptions that represent an antidote to the pain and heaviness of earthly life. The flight imagery in the poet’s literary production can be traced back to the third sonnet of Autobiografia, the story of a divided family in which Saba sees the source of his destiny:
Mio padre è stato per me “l'assassino”;
fini ai vent’anni che l’ho conosciuto.
Allora ho visto ch’egli era un bambino,
e che il dono ch’io ho da lui l’ho avuto.

Aveva in volto il mio sguardo azzurrino,
un sorriso, in miseria, dolce e astuto.
Andò sempre pel mondo pellegrino;
più d’una donna che l’ha amato e pasciuto.

Egli era gaio e leggero; mia madre
otti sentiva della vita i pesi.
Di mano ei gli sfuggì come un pallone.

“Non somigliare - ammoniva - a tuo padre”:
ed io più tardi in me stesso lo intesi:
Eran due razze in antica tenzone.

The third of the fifteen sonnets included in *Autobiografia* has Saba’s father for protagonist, whom he met for the first time when he was twenty years old. What is striking about the poem is that the author creates a mirror image through which he sees himself. The estranged father’s naïveté and immaturity are used to justify his incapacity to be a husband and a parent. Further, the idea of lightness as opposed to the weightiness of life’s duties and obligations is expressed by the image of the floating balloon, escaped from the hand of Saba’s mother who tries to warn her son to not look up to the man. In a way, the sonnet is in itself a confession of the family dynamics that greatly influenced Saba’s life and work.

In a letter to his daughter Linuccia, dated May 2 1951, Saba encloses three new poems including one titled “Il canarino e il giovane comunista” (“The Canary and the Young Communist”), later published with the shortened title “A un giovane comunista” (“To a Young Communist”), where the image of the songbird returns along with the idea of hybridity, already encountered in the above sonnet.
Ho in casa – come vedi – un canarino.
Giallo screziato di verde. Sua madre
certo, o suo padre, nacque lucherino.

È un ibrido. E mi piace meglio in quanto
nostrozino. Mi diverte la sua grazia,
mi diletta il suo canto.
Torno in sua cara compagnia, bambino.

Ma tu pensi: I poeti sono matti.
Guardi appena; lo trovi stupidino.
Ti piace più Togliatti.

Interestingly, the poem ended up in Quasi un racconto (Almost a Tale, 1951) the last
collection of poems published by Saba while alive, which together with the previous
collection titled Uccelli (Birds, 1948) is based on a unique bond between the poet and a
pet canary. Saba, who at the time was struggling with depression, finds in the innocence
of such “friendship” a source of solace and comfort. The bird represents, in a way, the
freedom and lightheartedness that the author always strived to reach.

The idea of confession as liberation is implicit in many letters that Saba writes to
his family and friends, including one to Linuccia, dated July 20, 1953: “Ernesto, my
Ernesto, wants to emerge whole into the light.” According to his daughter, Umberto
continued to work on the story, adding autobiographical details. This extra-textual
material represents a significant addition to the novel, as it explains all the doubts, fears
and hopes of the author himself. This coexistence of past and present is also described by
Augustine as “the fields and spacious palaces of my memory” (Confessions, 10.8) and is
shaped through a retrospective reconstruction. The introspective gaze becomes a
retrospective gaze in that Saba travels backwards, to a point in time when his life could
have taken a different turn. And it is during this therapeutic process that words flow
freely, like a dam breaking and releasing hidden things, as the poet describes the book’s gestation to his wife Lina (May 30, 1953): “il libro si intitolerebbe Intimità. Sogni! Ma quello che ho scritto è così bello che la gente diventa come matta: è stato come se si fosse rotta in me una diga, e tutto affluisce spontaneamente” (“I would like to title the book Intimacy. Illusions! What I have written, though, is so beautiful that people go crazy over it: it is as if a dam within me burst, and everything flowed out spontaneously”). If we consider all thirteen letters that accompany the book’s gestation, great emphasis is placed on the idea of authenticity and transparency, a constant necessity for Saba as a poet, novelist and human being. Having reached the age of seventy and dealing with health issues, the author longs to reveal his true nature, albeit to a few selected readers. In a letter to Bruno Pincherle dated June 30, 1953 Saba speaks about the urgent need to break free: “La gente, Bruno mio, ha un bisogno, un bisogno urgente di “mettersi in libertà”, di essere insomma liberata dalle sue inibizioni. Questo sarebbe il mestiere della mia vecchiaia” (“People, my dear Bruno, have a need, an urgent need to ‘free themselves,’ in other words they need to be freed from their inhibitions. This would be the task of my old age”). I would argue that the task Saba refers to is the reason he writes Ernesto in the first place, the ultimate confession to himself and to the “happy few” who had the privilege of reading the manuscript as it was being written page after page, episode after episode. In this sense, the act of writing functions as therapy and the author’s claim that he could only have written the novel while in the Monte Mario clinic confirms its healing nature.

In another letter to Pincherle, the author uses the metaphor of pregnancy to describe the book’s gestation: “Il racconto è tutto impregnato di maternità: io stesso ho avuto, mentre lo scrivevo, la netta impressione di essere incinta” (“The whole story is
saturated with maternity: while I was writing it, I myself had the clear impression of
being pregnant”). During that same summer of 1953, in a letter to Linuccia, the image of
labor is reiterated: “[…] ho Ernesto, Ernesto mio, che vuol venire per intero alla luce.
Con fatica e spasimi (lavorando dalle 4 e mezza alle 9 della mattina) ho finito il secondo
capitolo del quarto episodio” (“I have Ernesto, my Ernesto, who wants to come to light.
With effort and agony – working from half past four to nine in the morning – I have
finished the second chapter of the fourth episode”) The careful reader will certainly
wonder why Saba wants to give life to Ernesto, being at the same time extremely
skeptical as to its reception. It is, after all, a private book. Nevertheless, unlike a journal
or diary, a novel requires an audience and it is to a group of selected readers that Saba
addresses his doubts.

As is the case with Augustine’s Confessions, Saba’s Ernesto too is necessarily
unfinished. If Augustine’s life escapes the frame of holiness, Saba’s existence escapes the
finiteness of a potential ending in order to embrace the possibilities of life and literature.
Ernesto’s life doesn’t end on the last page but continues on thanks to the freshness of the
encounter with Ilio. The last paragraph reminds us that our destiny is written in the stars
and that everything happens for a reason:

Two boys passing the time on the steps outside their violin teacher’s room, talking
about their lessons and shaking hands as they part: it would have seemed a banal
enough fact of daily life to any passer-by. But thanks to the particular
constellation watching over them, and because of its far-flung results, this was
(everything else apart) a rare encounter: an event such as happens in one country
only once every hundred years, if even once. (Ernesto, 121)
An Autobiography?

When they hear me speak about myself, how do they know whether I am telling the truth, since no one knows a man’s thoughts, save the man’s own spirit that is within him?

— Augustine, Confessions 10.3

Confessional practice, as Jeremy Tambling suggests, as a way of getting inside the mind of the confessant, has greatly developed since Augustine’s time. This means that the confessant becomes more and more open to interpretation – the confessor’s power – and not fully intelligible (though to be that is another source of power for the confessor); and this duplicity structures confession. Confessional narratives share many analogies with autobiographical writings; however, as Krondorfer maintains, if the latter can be written with the awareness that changing the circumstances in one’s life is not advisable nor feasible, in confessiographies the confessant invites the reader to become witness to the new meaning he or she has attached to life. The question that arises at this point is how much of Ernesto can be considered confessional and autobiographical. As Philippe Lejeune reminds us, autobiography is based on “le pacte autobiographique” (“the autobiographical pact”), which he describes as the author’s commitment to the reader that he or she is producing a text based on a truthful recounting of his/her experience. Like Saba, Ernesto was an adolescent growing up in fin-de-siècle Trieste. Like his creature, the author lived with a strict mother and a well-off elderly aunt who supported them financially, as his father had abandoned the family a few months before his birth. Like Saba, Ernesto left school to become an apprentice in a firm which imported flour from Hungary (Saba was an apprentice in the citrus fruits trade). At work Ernesto undergoes a homosexual initiation with a casual laborer. His spontaneous and unashamed reaction to
the advances of this man is treated by the author, in some of his most revealing pages, as a foreshadowing of one of Saba’s personality traits, “quello che, molti anni più tardi, dopo molte esperienze e molto dolore, sarebbe stato il suo “stile”: quel giungere al cuore delle cose, al centro arroventato della vita, superando insistenze ed inibizioni, senza perifrasi e giri inutili di parole” (“what many years later, after much experience and much suffering, would become his own ‘style’: his reaching to the heart of things, to the red-hot core of life, overcoming dogma and inhibition without evasion or word-spinning” 14).

However, despite all the parallels, any reader approaching Ernesto should keep in mind the fact that there is a chance that the narrator may be at times “unreliable.” Memory is essentially a reconstructive process and has a tendency to play tricks on the individual, as the distance between the youthful and the mature self broadens and what is forgotten or removed is replaced by imagination. Given the profound influence of human self-deception, one should be prepared to suspect what is written in any introspective lyrical memoir, as Ernesto has been defined. The powers of self-deception are nearly limitless and the opportunity to publicly recall one’s past surely increases those powers. Faced with the prospect of public self-disclosure, most authors carefully select the details and subtly craft the overall image.

As Miranda Sherwin points out, it is important to keep in mind that not even “real” autobiographies can be relied upon to tell the “truth.” Furthermore, most readers of autobiographies believe that the story told by the author is one that accurately recounts to the best of his or her ability both personal and historical truth. Sherwin continues by stating that the main difference between confession and autobiography is that confession “makes possible the utterance of otherwise forbidden subjects. […] In fact, the genre of
confession, unlike standard autobiography, in many ways parallels the act of confession: both become a means of ‘transforming sex into discourse,’ to borrow from Foucault” (5). If confession equals full disclosure regarding one’s sexual experiences, then it can be inferred that Saba’s novel belongs to the confessional literary genre. After all, the idea of confession is synonymous with self-examination, a kind of introspective journey. Upon considering the correspondence between the author and his family and close friends, one can almost leave any doubt behind about the authenticity of the text and the frankness in the recollection of things past. Interestingly, Saba defines his manuscript “insieme lieto e spietato: spietato per aver superato, scrivendone quello che ne ho scritto, tutte le possibili inibizioni” (“happy and merciless at once: merciless because it helped me overcome, through writing, all inhibitions”; Letter to Pier Antonio Quarantotti Gambini, August 20, 1953).

It is important to recall that Saba’s approach is psychoanalytic in nature rather than religious: having to deal with depression and chronic neurosis throughout his life, he considered the Villa Elettra mental health clinic in Monte Mario (Rome) a home away from home. Intertwined with the role therapy played in the author’s life is the effect it had in his poetic shaping not only the poems of the Canzoniere, but also the prose of Scorciatoie e raccontini and ultimately Ernesto. Even after putting his novel aside, Saba continued to compose letters in the liberating guise of Ernesto’s persona, his alter ego and

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14 Saba returned to this clinic repeatedly throughout his life, particularly in his later years. His daughter Linuccia explained, “In the clinic he felt protected because he could filter his interpersonal relationships”; see Costantini. Newspaper reviews cited herein were consulted at the library of the Centro Sperimentale Cinematografico in Rome. While the library diligently collects such reviews, it fails to include their page numbers; thus the page numbers are mostly missing here as well.
scapegoat. Some of these discuss Saba himself in the third person in a dizzying *mise-en-abîme*. The author also wrote numerous letters in the first person to Ernesto, projecting onto the young aspiring violinist his own life story and identity as a poet. As a part of this mirroring game, Saba at times addresses the reader directly throughout the narrative, sometimes using the plural pronoun *we* to include the reader as an observer of Ernesto’s life. It is thus important to note that the author himself acknowledged the psychoanalytic context of his writing. For Michel David, Saba was *naturaliter freudianus*, a Freudian by nature who explored some of the topics studied by the father of psychoanalysis.

In a letter dated September 22 1899, written after Saba had abandoned his book project, Ernesto writes about the future that his creator has envisioned for him. And once again, the boy’s image mixes with the author’s:

Dear Professor Mogno, pardon me if I take the liberty of writing to you before I have had the honor of an introduction, but Signor Saba just read me your marvelous essay about the poems you say I shall write when I grow up. Of course, I was amazed and happy to know that I will make such beautiful things and find all those rhymes. […] But at the same time your essay made me very sad as well, so sad I burst into tears, as if I was still ten years old, not sixteen at all—almost seventeen. If you want to know why I cried, it’s because I realized I’m never going to be head clerk in a colonial trading company, or a great violinist either; no, it’s my fate to be a poet.

It is clear from the intertextual nature of the book that from its very inception *Ernesto* was conceived as having a readership.

The idea of “clarity” or reaching the core of one’s self finds its culminating moment in the fifth and last episode where we see Ernesto as a young aspiring violinist, clearly a double of Saba the artist as a young man, to borrow a Joycean image. After receiving the money from his mother, a scene reminiscent of Moravia’s *Agostino*, Ernesto
can at last buy a ticket for Franz Ondricek’s concert, his favorite violinist. And this is where he meets Ilio, an adolescent boy like him, with whom he becomes close friends. The Platonic infatuation with Ilio coincides with a shift in emphasis from the sexual knowledge gained from the laborer and Tanda respectively and a return to innocence. In this sense, Ernesto’s voyage of discovery can be read as a return to innocence, to a pure and simple friendship sealed by a mutual passion for music. No longer a child, not yet a grown man, the “boy with a purity that people would not understand,” as Saba described his creature, has come full circle.
CHAPTER 3

On Impure Thoughts: Mario Soldati and the sinful formation

Even if God did not exist, religion would still be holy and divine.
— Charles Baudelaire

In this chapter I present a specific focus on La confessione (The Confession) by Mario Soldati, a fairly neglected novel, published by Garzanti in 1955. The analysis of Soldati’s narrative will shed more light on the topic of adolescent boys and their sexual awakening. At the same time, I will continue exploring the idea of formazione mancata, a failed or interrupted formation.

During a 1984 lecture held at Columbia University, Soldati spoke of narration as a form of substitution, a way to recover equilibrium. While giving advice to young aspiring writers he stated: “Every time you start writing, you should lose your head. You must write for some purpose besides art: because there is someone you love and cannot win; because you are poor and would like to be rich; because you dream of traveling but haven’t the means; because you long for health and are ill.” I would like to begin my analysis of Soldati’s novel by positing that La confessione is a way for the author to recuperate his teenage years, and with them the memory of his sexual awakening. Viewed in this light, the novel constructs a deliberately enigmatic situation by associating two contrasting and never fully completed formations: a religious and a sexual formation.
providing, at the same time, a narrative where the novelist is in search of his own adolescent self, a fictive moment before history and adult sexuality took hold of him.

Although *Ernesto* and *La confessione* share the autobiographical pretext – meaning, at the same time, the origin and the excuse for the narrative – as well as their nature of *Bildungsromane*, it is in the formative process of their protagonists that the two texts reveal some differences. In Saba’s novel, the careful reader will spot the signs of the protagonist’s integration as a well-rounded character and man: the office job at the warehouse, the heterosexual and homosexual experiences, the desire and will to participate in Trieste’s social events, such as Ondricek’s concert. On the other hand, the fourteen-year-old Clemente Perrier, protagonist of Soldati’s novel, is still a child at the end of the narrative. If, from a strictly biological point of view, the boy’s sexual maturation can be defined complete, the narrator seems to suggest that from a psychological perspective the adolescent boy fails in his attempt to fit into gender, familial, societal, and religious expectations.

To better explain Clemente’s formative conundrum, it is important to reflect upon the environment in which the character is brought up. First, he lives in the city of Turin during the 1920s, and he is one of the more promising students at the Jesuit school where he spends most of his days. Like Moravia’s Agostino, Clemente belongs to an affluent middle-class family composed of his mother and maternal grandmother. As is the case with Agostino and Ernesto, he lives in a matriarchal nucleus, an extremely important detail along with the absence of a father or father-figure, to which topic I shall return later in this chapter. Clemente’s relations to the outside world are limited to summer vacations
at a Ligurian beach resort and to brief interactions with his mother’s friends, especially Jeannette, a long-time friend of the family.

Clemente’s pure adolescent state is disturbed by a sudden sexual turmoil, sparked by a fleeting encounter with a mature woman in a Florence hotel elevator. The memory of the accidental brushing of their hands becomes a constant source of erotic fantasies for the young man who starts living a double existence: the diligent Jesuit student and the adolescent obsessed with the memory of the unnamed and mysterious lady. The teen’s innocent adolescence is thus troubled by thoughts about sex, which are typical of his age. However, what differentiates Clemente from his peers is the fact that he fantasizes about a much older and somewhat unattractive person described by the narrator as a “plump, blonde woman, with rounded eyes, pouting lips, and that sad, jaded expression which, much more effectively than any other, stimulates the imagination and arouses desire” (*The Confession* 19). Furthermore, the boy’s desire is ignited not so much by the presence but by the remembrance of the lady in black. In his mind, he will return to the elevator encounter on a daily basis, “for ten minutes in the morning as he lazed in the warmth of his bed, for ten minutes in the afternoon during the initial stupor of his siesta, and for ten minutes every night before falling off to sleep” (19). The memory of the hotel woman gradually morphs into the image of Jeannette, a close friend of Clemente’s mother and guest of the family vacation house. In the struggle between sensuality, openly exhibited by Jeannette toward the young man, and the fear of sin, it is the latter that will prevail at the end. The split between a guilty conscience due to the erotic fantasies and aggravated by a religious upbringing constitutes the thematic pivot until the encounter with Luisito,
where the shift from a heterosexual to a homosexual desire alleviates the tension that permeates throughout the narrative.

Clemente’s unusual adolescence raises questions about initiations. Are initiations to be explained in biological, psychological, sociological, or spiritual terms? How does a boy in any culture undergo the transformation from the weakness and vulnerability of childhood to the strength and self-confidence required of manhood? If primitive and traditional initiations lead youths to a heightened feeling of self-worth, personal and group validation, to what extent does a religious upbringing contribute to an individual’s formation? When discussing Soldati and his work, we must take into account not only his Jesuit upbringing, but also his milieu, which he calls the Italian “buona borghesia.”

Brought up in a very religious household, in the shadow of an overly devout grandmother and a possessive mother, the author reminisces on his formative years through Clemente’s experience, clearly his alter ego. The young boy, who is studying to be a priest, is on an exploratory journey of discovery in which the religious imagination intersects with the quest for sexual gratification. Hence the constant sense of guilt.

The Elevator Lady

The pivot of Clemente’s sexual fantasy is the memory of a nameless woman with whom he shares a brief elevator ride in a Florence hotel: “The blonde woman had made a long journey with him. Shut up, just the two of them, in that tepid and isolated elevator as in the compartment of an old-fashioned train, standing close to each other, without fear of witnesses, they had risen mile after mile, hour after hour, in the tallest of skyscrapers”
The idea of ascension permeates the entire passage, echoing the boy’s religious education. Thus, this particularly emblematic episode suggests that Clemente, like Jesus, parted from the earthly existence by being taken up into heaven. Unlike Jesus, however, the boy’s ascent isn’t witnessed by anyone, as if the sinful nature of his desire must remain a secret. The boy’s ascension is also symbolic of the arduous journey from childhood to manhood. In stark contrast to the religious aspect of the scene is the description of the devilishly voluptuous woman, who appears oblivious of the boy’s gaze:

Once again, Clemente saw the white pudgy hand, with scarlet, sharply pointed nails and on one finger a huge pearl ring. […] Clemente saw again the black velvet dress that clung to the woman’s figure: the pinkish, plump legs that stood out against the sharp black of the skirt’s hem, the black satin slippers with diamond buckles (it did not occur to him to think, even about these gems on her slippers, that they might be false), the naked arms, the deep slit down her back—all that flesh which the velvet cloth, the pearl necklace, and the other jewels endowed with the arcane, heavy preciousness of an idol, an idol who stood very close to him and in whom, he sensed, lived his happiness, yet whom a superior and cruel will prohibited his hands from even touching ever so lightly. (19-20)

The presence of the red fingernails, paired with the black of her dress and shoes create in the boy’s mind the image of a mysterious being, whom he reveres as if she were an idol. Again, the spiritual and the mundane are closely connected as the expression of a confused adolescent state. Another important detail is the woman’s eyes:

But, above all, he had been fascinated by her eyes, dark, shining, and like a doll’s. Now and then her heavy lids would lower and her eyes would shut tightly; the skin all around them would become wrinkled and the woman’s face then suggested the fulfillment of a pleasure, yet with that almost ugly, almost sad grimace which comes from great sensual experience and a knowledge of all its refinements. (21)

As I have pointed out, although the elevator ride may be compared to an ascent into heaven, the presence of the mysterious and seductive lady in black creates a highly
charged sexual situation and, paradoxically, the ascent to the skies could also be interpreted as a descent into the deep and remote corners of desire. The woman’s sensuality commands the gaze of the boy in a way he cannot fully understand. The intense sexual presence is at once intensified and obfuscated by her memory:

He seemed to remember that he had pretended a moment’s distraction and, as though he, too, wanted to push the button, had placed his hand over hers and felt its warm softness. But, as often happened to him in such fantasies, he was not completely sure whether he hadn’t merely confined himself to desiring that contact and, having quickly conceived the trick by which to obtain it and yet lacking the courage to act, he had cherished it, afterward, as something that had actually taken place, even to the point of deceiving his own memory. (20)

The memory of the elevator lady becomes a constant source of daydreaming, especially during the sleepy hours of the afternoon lessons:

Clemente remembered the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed, and the faint pulsations that ran along the folds of her velvet dress, at the waist and over the belly. […] Even now when, returning to that scene for the thousandth time, Clemente traveled up the woman’s body and at last saw again that exquisite, withered face, those eyes that seemed closed in pleasure, his blood would pound in his veins. (21)

The woman exudes a unique sexuality, which makes her image remarkably potent in the eyes of Clemente, and her ability to hold him spellbound continues throughout the narrative. One element of particular note is the masochistic nature of the boy’s admiration: “He would have liked to slake himself in that sweetness, that sadness, that knowledge and enjoyment of life which he felt he lacked. And he imagined finding himself again in the elevator and flinging himself without a word at the woman’s feet, embracing her legs, her knees, begging her to be taken, subjected, dominated, crushed.” (21) Thus, Clemente’s imagination creates a mistress/servant boy situation:
He had thought of becoming her little servant and, with the idea of greater humiliation and voluptuousness, of wearing the absurd red uniform of the hotel bellboys. No longer for anyone would he be Clemente Perrier, the boy who studied with the Jesuits. [...] No, he would vanish from the world. They’d search for him in vain. He’d go to that woman’s country, which, he imagined, was either Hungary or Sweden. He’d become her servant for life. Nobody could ever track him down again. At the start he would forget everything, even his surname. Then at last he would feel annulled in her, sacrificed, her slave, and therefore happy.

(22)

Not only does the boy imagine himself as a slave to her mistress, he dreams of being subjugated to the woman’s will.

The Allure of Temptation

Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.

— William Shakespeare, Henry VI

During a 1983 interview with Davide Lajolo, Soldati explains that the main force behind his storytelling is a need to confess: every short story and every novel is a way of uncovering and understanding what is beneath the surface (Lajolo 25). The author wishes to guide his readers beyond the surface of the text and experience this tension between what is apparent and what is hidden. Not surprisingly, from the very beginning of La confessione, Clemente is a Jesuit novice in the midst of a spiritual crisis. He appears to be existing on two different planes: the sinful thoughts connected to memory and the desire to be granted absolution. At the same time, he feels an almost perverted pleasure in lingering in the idea of sin and this will be a constant situation throughout the novel. One can almost admit that he is at times attracted to sin. In addition to his guilty conscience,
there is a persistent need in him to ponder the question of what constitutes sinning. Upon reminiscing about the elevator episode, he says to himself:

You see, you see how I have sinned again. Isn’t this a sin? A sin of thought? A sin of desire? Certainly it’s not a simple temptation. No, for after the first moment I should have been able to control myself, to stop thinking about it and pay attention to the lesson. Instead, using my full capacity to understand and will, I continued. I purposely persisted in doing it. With the aid of my imagination I reconstructed the events from life, the circumstances that would give the most zest to the sin. For sin only exists if there is will to sin. (23; emphasis in original)

After several instances of nocturnal emissions, Clemente decides to consult with his

Padre Spirituale, his Spiritual Director. The enigmatic force of the confessional ritual begins, in the narration, with the echo of Father Genovesi’s words “it’s not a sin, if you do not will it,” a foreshadowing of the central confession scene. The priest’s words become a mantra for the boy, who never stops doubting the righteousness of his own thoughts.

In Scientia Sexualis, the third segment of The History of Sexuality, Foucault draws attention to the concept of confession, maintaining that there is a certain satisfaction in confessing the truth and confiding it in secret (71). He also posits that there is a substantial difference between willing to confess as opposed to being forced to do so. In Clemente’s case, the ritual seems the only antidote to his torments: “He got a magnificent idea: confess, just like that, there and then, in a rush! Only Holy Confession would be able, in one way or another, to liberate him from these torments. In Holy Confession he would immediately resolve his doubts or obtain absolution for his sins” (26). If, as Foucault argues, from the Christian penance to the present day, sex has been a privileged theme of confession, in Soldati’s narrative, and in Clemente’s mind, sex is the only topic
of confession. At the same time, we have to keep in mind that in the young boy there is a certain amount of satisfaction in sharing his impure thoughts. Clemente is attracted to sin and to the idea of being sinful. Consequently, he contributes actively to worsen his situation and reinforce his sense of guilt. Shortly before visiting the Spiritual Director, he says to himself: “With the woman in the elevator in Florence, the matter was quite different! Quite, quite different… This time, perhaps, it was really a mortal sin. And, after all, why should it be only venial? “The matter is serious,” he said to himself, rapidly reviewing the catechism, “consent is complete, the will to sin is deliberate! What more do I need? It is really a mortal sin” (25, emphasis in original).

The journey to the Spiritual Director’s room is far from being easy. Not only because the hallway that leads to the room is very long, but there is also the boy’s obsessive-compulsive disorder that prevents him from reaching the destination in a timely fashion. Religion has often been thought to play a part in the genesis of some cases of OCD and, many times, individuals with a religious upbringing show obsessive-compulsive symptoms (Steketee 360):

He distracted himself for a moment by staring between his half-closed lids at the gray and white tiles in the pavement. He had seen them so many times and they were not at all unusual. But when he was alone he could never grow tired of looking at them, of counting them, of walking over them, placing his feet exactly on just the gray tiles, or just the white ones, or one time on the gray tiles and next on the white, or the right foot on the gray and the left foot on the white or vice versa, and so on, and so on, according to a thousand different combinations. (26-27)

Clemente’s obsession with sex is clearly what triggers these episodes, the obsessive thought being the cause of distress, whereas the compulsive behavior becomes a way to cope with and reduce such distress. Additionally, his case falls into the category of
“Confessional Thoughts.” This happens when OCD can make children second guess their actions, behavior, and thoughts. They might feel guilty about their thoughts or they might worry they did something that in reality they did not do, a disorder called scrupulosity, or religious OCD. Relief is only achieved when the child confesses his or her intrusive thoughts to a parent. In Clemente’s case, the parent is replaced by a priest and the confessing behavior is the compulsion component of the OCD.

What is most interesting about the boy’s compulsive behavior is the imaginative power employed to turn the condition into a game. In his imagination, the gray and white checkered floor morphs into a chessboard, while he turns into a Pinocchio-like figurine:

Square, laid out diagonally, the tiles fit into each other and formed a bare, compact chessboard on which there remained a single piece, a pawn fascinated by the tiles’ alternating successive life, by the perpetual interchange that went on between them. The pawn was he himself, Clemente. And if someone had seen him at that game, he would have noticed that the boy’s body was rigid and his movements wooden. (27)

The puppet reference and Clemente’s self-perception as a pawn are extremely important in that they remind us of the boy’s self-imprisonment. We learn that the boy’s OCD started in elementary school, along with his solitary-passive behavior. Clemente’s OCD caused by the pattern of the floor makes him temporarily oblivious of his destination. He forgets why he wants to confess. When the reason comes back to his mind, he realizes that he needs to feel like a sinner, and that is why the elevator lady appears so often in his thoughts:

When he stood before the door and recalled why he had come, he felt absolved of all sin. But he forced the fire of his imagination to converge again on the woman in the elevator: immediately, her image resumed its exciting vividness. The doubt also crossed his mind that, by such behavior, he might be willfully thinking of sin,
in fact sinning, so as not to lose his sense of guilt and remorse, so as to be able, later on in the Spiritual Director’s room, to feel very moved and repentant. (30)

Like other confessing individuals, Clemente is aware of the cathartic power of self-disclosure. He knows that once he shares his forbidden thoughts he will be liberated from his burden. Put simply, he needs his impure thoughts so that he can confess and thus be cleansed. Such personal disclosure must be regarded as pleasurable as there is a certain pleasure in the danger of exposing oneself to the judgmental eye and ear of others.

Confessing Confusion

Give me my sin again.

— William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

In his enlightening study on male confessions Björn Krondorfer argues that what may compel an individual to confess is confusion. He posits that:

Confessions are a pouring out of personal memories and thoughts and may originate in a state of being confounded, of being disturbed by the way we have arranged ourselves with our lives. Etymologically, the term confusion derives from the Latin cum (together) and fundere (to pour), and carries the meaning of “pouring out together,” “mingling,” of being “overwhelmed” and “perplexed.” In order to manage our confusion, we confess. (Krondorfer 34)

If confession originates from a state of confusion, then it is easy to understand why most of Clemente’s troubled formation seems to be the result of inner chaos and turmoil.

By extension, a constant focus of Soldati’s work, both literary and cinematic, is on ambiguity. The reader/viewer is often uncertain about the desires and intentions of the characters, or of the author himself, for that matter. The same ambiguity functions as a leitmotif throughout La confessione. The scene of the first confession, the longest in the
novel, provides numerous examples of obscurity. In the first place, Clemente is unsure whether he’s supposed to confess. Second, after the long journey down the hallway, he finds himself at the door of the Spiritual Director’s office and feels innocent again, as if musing on his problems has freed him from his sense of guilt. Nevertheless, he is inexplicably drawn to the dark room cluttered with books and documents. In light of Clemente’s readiness to self-dramatize, he automatically turns to mannerism from the drama in a way so intense that the reader is left uncertain about the genuineness of his feelings: “He let himself fall into the armchair that stood beside the desk, as though crushed by long sufferings. He rested his hands and forehead on the desk’s edge. Now that, with his very first words, he had hit on the right tone, he was certain the whole piece of play-acting would come to him very easily” (35). Despite the appearance of a mock confession, the episode reveals the boy’s wholeheartedness when he, once again, is convinced of having sinned. Of course, the confession scene is not devoid of a certain irony, evident when the priest, still unaware of the reason Clemente wants to confess, thinks that the boy has visited a brothel:

“What’s the matter? What’s wrong with my Clemente, my dear Clemente? Come now, get hold of yourself and tell me.” […] Clemente remained silent.

“Now, tell me… have you been in some ugly place?”

“Oh, no, no!” Clemente hurried to say, almost amazed that the Father could suddenly suspect him of such a thing. […] And this time the affair was more complicated, for he wasn’t dealing with those overgrown louts who came to confess a visit to a brothel […]. Father Genovesi knew that sex was the sole, truly fearful enemy which the Jesuits encountered in the education of the boys. And he knew that there was little one could do with certain simple, robust, unimaginative temperaments in whom the flesh spoke with a powerful voice. (36, 42; emphasis added)
After hearing the episode of the elevator and Clemente’s obsession with the memory of the lady in black, Father Genovesi perceives the boy’s sense of guilt as an opportunity to convince him to pursue the Jesuit Order. Since he is one of the best students in the school, he says to himself: “One must not let him escape” (41).

A peculiar dynamic between confessor and confessant drives the whole passage. On the one hand, the priest intensifies the gravity of the situation to instill fear and shame in the boy’s mind; on the other, the boy dramatizes his recollection of the elevator episode in order to fit the mold of the sinner in the eyes of the priest. If Clemente had perceived himself as a puppet while carefully treading on the grey and white tiles before entering Father Genovesi’s office, he now becomes a marionette in the hands of the priest: “The Fathers had passed the word around. Clemente did not have a formidable physique. All nerves, brain, imagination, sensitivity, one could make of him anything one wished” (43).

In Chapter 3 of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* we find a similar confessional scene. Stephen Dedalus, a sixteen-year-old boy who attends a Jesuit college, decides to confess his sins to a priest. Unlike Clemente, who has never acted upon his sexual desires, Stephen has had intercourse with women and, ridden with guilt, sees full disclosure as the only solution: “No escape. He had to confess, to speak out in words what he had done and thought, sin after sin. […] Confess! He had to confess every sin” (128,140). When it is his turn to kneel down in the confessional booth, he almost changes his mind, as does Clemente, thinking that he “could still leave the chapel. He could stand up, put one foot before the other and walk out softly and then run, run, run swiftly through the dark streets. He could still escape from the shame” (142). Another striking
resemblance between the two male characters is their devotion, which comes to the attention of the Jesuits who encourage them to consider entering the priesthood. When Stephen is summoned by his spiritual director, he is asked if he has ever felt a desire to join the order, to which he replies:

— I have sometimes thought of it, said Stephen.
— [...] In a college like this, [the priest] said at length, there is one boy or perhaps two or three boys whom God calls to the religious life. Such a boy is marked off from his companions by his piety, by the good example he shows to others. He is looked up to by them; he is chosen perhaps as prefect by his fellow sodalists. And you, Stephen, have been such a boy in this college, prefect of Our Blessed Lady’s sodality. Perhaps you are the boy in this college whom God designs to call to Himself. (157)

Similarly, Father Genovesi tells Clemente that he is the chosen one: “Yes, it was you, and that is a sign, you see, that Jesus wants you to be His. That’s why I held you up as an example before all your fellow students” (The Confession 53). Both Jesuit priests listen attentively after asking the prescribed questions to the boys and, at the end, implore them to give up the sinful thoughts speaking the grave words of absolution. As much as they would like to be in charge of the two boys’ Christian formation, they cannot deny the power of temptation personified, in Clemente’s case, by the elevator lady: “When he heard about the hand, Father Genovesi understood that it was necessary at all costs to prevent Clemente from ever in the future having the slightest contact with a woman. On this point, he had to terrorize him. To mold his very nerves so that he would always feel automatic revulsion, insurmountable fear in the presence of a woman” (43-44). While Genovesi is intent on increasing Clemente’s sense of guilt, the boy is tempted again by the memory:

He had immediately and subconsciously associated the repeated metaphors of filth with which the Father was trying to excite his contrition, with the original
cause of his sin: he had materialized that seventeenth-century Jesuit and abstract rhetoric in the plump, black-velvet-wrapped flesh of the woman in the elevator, and so it was natural that, bowing his head beneath the outburst of accusations—which this time were being made not by himself, all alone, in the harsh, sought-out humiliations of his bad thoughts, but were being leveled at him by somebody else—he should feel that they were almost like the intervention, so necessary to real pleasure, of some other person, and, finally, discover in them a secret voluptuousness. (47; emphasis in original)

Soldati’s Bildungsroman concentrates on two elements at odds with each other:

*temptation* and *religious formation*. Although the formula of absolution gives the boy a momentary sense of peace, this soon morphs into an unexpected feeling of detachment:

“With absolution, all of his sins and evil desires had departed. But also all of his remorse, all of his high aspirations, all of his enthusiasm for the Sacred Heart of Jesus” (61). It is not a chance that this moment of apathy comes after the confession and right before Part Two of the novel in which the sexual tension shifts from the elevator lady to Jeannette, a friend of Clemente’s mother. It is, after all, an episode of doubt in which the boy feels disconnected from his environment. The final scene of Part One is a perfect example of the difficult balance between faith and perdition:

“Oh, my Jesus,” he said, “I adore you. Jesus, I am completely yours, sweet Jesus, loving Jesus…” And he sincerely believed that he believed. Meanwhile, as in a state of double awareness, it appeared to him as he prayed like this that his entire being was dangling on a single slender thread and all that he had to do was let go of that thread not to believe anymore. In other words, he felt empty inside. (67)

Following the spiritual unburdening, which provides his troubled conscience only temporary relief, Clemente, once again, perceives himself as a marionette, a puppet hanging by a string.
Vocation and Vacation

I fear not the sea, for I am able to swim.
I fear my thoughts, in which I drown.

— Puran Chand

Similar to Saba’s *Ernesto*, Soldati’s novel was interrupted and completed in a span of several years. The second and third part of the novel were written twenty years after the first one as if the war and the resistance allowed little time for inspiration and creation. The author returned to the novel presenting a complete change of setting for young Clemente and his distressing thoughts. This time, instead of the dark and claustrophobic world of Turin and the Jesuit school, the character is in a vacation home in Chiavari, a small town on the Ligurian coast. His situation, however, doesn’t seem to have changed. Instead of a resolution, the boy experiences a replacement of the elements that construct his dilemma: devotion or temptation. The spiritual director, no longer represented by Father Genovesi, is now embodied by a devoutly religious grandmother, whereas the temptation shifts from the elevator woman to Jeannette, a friend of the family.

The idea of a troubled religious formation paired with a constant temptation resurfaces very early during Part Two of the novel and it is this tension, I posit, that constitutes the main narrative pivot. Thus, for example, when Clemente reveals his desire to join the priesthood, his emotional grandmother, although ecstatic to hear the news, gives the boy a lecture about temptation, as though she were aware of the boy’s secret thoughts: “The world is ugly, my dear Clemente. Oh, if you only knew how ugly it is! You will do well to escape from it,” his grandmother used to say. “But the devil is hidden everywhere and one finds him where one least expects it. One must pray! Pray to
overcome temptations. Otherwise one would not have the strength to overcome them by oneself” (80-81). It is further significant that the grandmother, who represents Clemente’s spirituality, is not too fond of Jeannette, a clear symbol of sexuality. Suggesting that Jeannette might be as perilous to the adolescent boy as the elevator woman, the narrator seems to suggest that this time in the boy’s mind there is no doubt as to the sinful nature of his thoughts: “Possibly Jeannette could have been an even greater temptation for Clemente than the woman in the elevator. And if three months before, in that famous confession, Clemente had not compelled himself to believe that he had committed a mortal sin of desire, he would certainly, now, have really committed it” (82-83).

The progression of the plot validates Clemente’s theory, as the vivacious woman reveals her charms. As the description of Jeannette suggests, there are details about her body that not only remind the boy of the Florence hotel guest, they also become symbols of the fetishistic attraction that draws the boy to her. The protagonist’s attention concentrates on two specific parts of the woman’s body: her fingernails and, above all, her elbows. If in the elevator, Clemente’s gaze had been focused on the scarlet, sharply pointed fingernails of the unnamed woman, this time he is obsessed with Jeannette’s nails:

Her nails had a unique characteristic, a fascinating peculiarity, which Clemente had never observed in any other human being: white, oval-shaped flecks, delicate and pretty, were scattered on the pink of the nail like veins in an agate or those designs which the waves of the sea sometimes leave behind on the sand. Clemente knew that he would never grow tired of gazing at those marvelous white flecks on Jeannette’s nails; on the contrary, out of some obscure instinct, he didn’t quite know why, he associated them with a sensation of savage refinement, of exquisite cruelty, and attributed to them a magical power. Involuntarily, for a very brief moment, he thought of being scratched by those nails. For another instant, still briefer and less voluntarily, he thought of kissing them. Were they sins, these
instants? Or only temptations? Jeannette’s presence tormented him every evening with anguishing scruples. (83-84; emphasis added)

The boy’s gaze provides the rhetoric of desire that underlies his fantasy of being physically hurt. It also, fleetingly, turns Jeannette into a sorceress who has a mysterious power over him. Later in the same description, the attention is diverted to her elbows whose skin “especially when she did not bend her arms, was all wrinkled, traced over by a very fine, thick network, like the belly of a snake” (85; emphasis added). The reference to a serpent to describe the skin on the elbows is obviously not casual, in that it adds to the idea of enticement. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that Clemente is attracted both to Jeannette’s wrinkled elbows and, as I have previously discussed, to the elevator woman’s withered face (21). Both details underlie a peculiar attraction to women’s aging bodies to the point where admiration becomes fetishism: “Yes, he’d stare at Jeannette’s elbows, not thinking of a thing, not desiring, save very confusedly, anything definite. Yet to caress them, to kiss them, to press them against his closed eyes, these were desires which, though not yet formulated, he had always terrifiedly thrust down into that mysterious darkness called temptation.” (86; emphasis in original)

Clemente’s vulnerability to Jeannette’s sexually charged body goes hand in hand with a constant sense of guilt, as he is at once fascinated and terrified by it: “Perhaps that’s why he stared with such anguish, almost terror, at Jeannette’s elbows; and, as he stared, even before realizing that he was staring and before forcibly tearing his eyes away, as Jesus commanded, and the Madonna, invoked by a desperate, hurried prayer, helped him to do, he felt a suffocating, crushing, painful weight against his breastbone” (87). If fetishism is a powerful aphrodisiac, then Clemente’s dangerous attraction is easily understood as it coincides with prolonging pleasure by dissecting the female body and
focusing on one detail at a time. Self-control then becomes a form of autoeroticism, the means of momentarily deflecting the gaze only to return to the exploration of another body part. The issue of the boy’s voyeuristic behavior returns to prominence in the emblematic scene of the *pattino*, reminiscent of a similar scene in Moravia’s *Agostino*. Clemente is out on the sea with his mother and Jeannette and, after the former decides to swim back to the shore, he is suddenly, and pleasantly we might add, left with the latter. The boy’s dilemma, once again, is about how much of the enjoyment of looking is willed and how much is not, thoughts that echo Father Genovesi’s mantra “If it’s not willed, it’s not a sin”:

Clemente was rowing and following with his eyes, from a distance, his mother swimming to shore; yet, every so often, *absolutely without willing it*, he was obliged to look at Jeannette, who had stretched out in front of him on the catamaran’s other seat and had dangled one leg over the side, her small foot immersed in the water which flowed around it. Now, just look, Clemente had thought, that foot dipped in the water acts as a brake, and so I have to make a greater effort to row. (88; emphasis added)

This time, Clemente’s fetishism is directed to Jeannette’s foot, which hinders, metaphorically, the boy’s spiritual progress. Although he avoids looking at her, she, on the other hand, is conscious of his gaze and at times returns it: “Signorina Jeannette seemed to be aware of something. It appeared that she had seen, in Clemente’s involuntarily, unconsciously dazed expression as he stared at her, the reflection of her own fascination […]. And at other times, unexpectedly, in the middle of a conversation with other people, she would fix him with her eyes” (90). Guilt and desire, the two opposing forces that create Clemente’s struggle, are most evident in the paragraph where the narrator reveals the character’s internal conflict: “It was the Devil, it was certainly the Devil who, through Jeannette, was tempting him. But the Hotel Baglioni episode had
been sufficient; the remembrance of it combined with the memory of his confession and Father Genovesi’s terrible speech was very vivid” (91).

As Agostino in Moravia’s novel, who is aware of the male gaze directed toward his mother and experiences the pang of jealousy, Clemente is painfully conscious of Jeannette’s admirers and shows unsympathetic attitude toward them: “It is true, of course, that Jeannette had several suitors there at the seashore. And Clemente instinctively hated all of them. […] Perhaps they were contemptible fellows, superficial, insignificant people. But Clemente was not so naïve as not to understand why he hated them. And this hate, he asked himself, was it a sin?” (91-92). Significantly, the more he shows signs of jealousy, the more Jeannette appears to be enticing him. The boy’s predisposition to repent is yet more pronounced in this section of the narrative where his examinations of conscience, diligently made every night before bedtime, counteract the growing obsession with the thirty-five-year-old woman. The adolescent boy is aware, now more than ever, that reflection and overthinking could be detrimental to his resolution to join the novitiate. Thoughts of Jeannette, albeit employed in the examination of conscience, can be dangerous. The demonization of female sensuality is made clear by constant references to temptation and sin, more evident now in the stark light of summer than the dimly lit elevator of Hotel Baglioni:

No, there was no doubt of it, that time Clemente had not resisted temptation: for, after a few instants, he had looked up from his book and stared at her long and carefully. […] There was no escape, save by prayer and distraction. For it was clear that Jeannette seemed to be doing it on purpose, to tempt him. Perhaps she didn’t even realize it. It was the Demon who was using her to torture poor Clemente in every possible way, to make him lose his Vocation. […] Best, he told himself, to cut short his examination of conscience right there, for, otherwise, it could transform itself, without his wishing it, into a real sin of thought. (95-96)
From the evidence of the text, Clemente’s efforts to protect himself from temptation appear very arduous, as each examination of conscience has the potential of inciting forbidden thoughts. At the same time, it could be posited that his devotion is a protective mechanism employed to ward off sexual energy. As English sexologist Havelock Ellis has argued, the “obscure promptings of the organism at puberty frequently assume on the psychic side a wholly religious character. The activity of the religious emotions sometimes tends to pass over into the sexual region, and the suppression of the sexual emotions often furnishes a powerful reservoir of energy to the religious emotions” (*Studies in the Psychology of Sex* 325).

As I have suggested, the presence of a pious grandmother is important in that she represents the spiritual realm and, at the same time, functions as the surrogate for Father Genovesi. Not only is she constantly at Clemente’s side and sleeps in the same room with him, she is a confessor who listens to her grandson and assists him during the daily ritual of prayer and atonement. Additionally, her role is to guide the boy on the right path and to remind him of his vocation. Whenever her grandson confides in her, she replies with words very similar to those of a priest:

“Grandma,” he had said, “today I have been tempted more than usual.”

“It is a sign,” his grandmother replied gravely, “that today the Lord has loved you even more than usual. It is a sign that He is starting to put you to the test to see whether you are strong and truly worthy of Him, to see whether your Vocation is sincere.” (99)

If Jeannette embodies temptation, Clemente’s grandmother is clearly the epitome of salvation. Earlier in the section dedicated to the summer vacation she had expressed a certain relief at Jeannette’s momentary departure, as though she had sensed the threat that
the attractive guest represented for her grandson. By now she is fully aware, as the narrator suggests, by whom her grandson is being tempted. In fact, she continues by telling him:

“But you must pity and forgive also the person whom the Demon uses to tempt you, even if these persons are very close to you…” From his grandmother’s words, even more from her tone, Clemente had no doubt that she had immediately understood that the temptation had been Jeannette. (99)

Conversely, Clemente’s parents are not particularly present in the adolescent’s life. It is rather striking that the narrative seldom references the father, and when it does it is to stress the fact that he is away for business reasons. An essential aspect in coming-of-age narratives, as Kenneth Millard points out, “is the way in which finding a place in society is coterminous with finding a satisfactory relationship with the father. For the young male protagonist especially, the relation to the father is a vital means to socialization, and he is often the principal figure through whom the codes of society are learned” (Millard 15). By extension, coming of age equals coming to terms with the father. Although the reader learns that Clemente loves his father, there is no indication of the latter’s presence. During the critical period of the boy’s illness, for example, the narrator tells us that:

“Even during the days when he was sick with typhus, the days of crisis when Clemente’s life was really in danger, his father was, as usual, away from home. He traveled for business reasons, in Italy and abroad. He would stay out several months in the year” (110-111). Fatherhood, of course, is also represented by Father Genovesi, Spiritual Director of the school as well as the boy’s main confessor. One could extend the metaphor to God the Father, invoked by Clemente every night before bed, indicating that the search for a literal or corporeal father is for the boy analogous to a search for a
fulfilling spiritual belief. As for Carolina, the mother, the reader only gets a glimpse of her motherhood when the narrator describes her concern for the boy’s health. It is during the analeptic episode of Clemente’s typhus that we also learn about Doctor Besozzi, a present though unlikely father figure. During the illness, in fact, the physician appears terrified at the thought of losing his young patient, an expression of a personal, rather than professional anxiety. When the boy reminisces about his own convalescence, the reason behind the doctor’s excessive attachment becomes evident: “Did Clemente realize that Doctor Besozzi was in love with his mother, and for a long time now had been courting her unsuccessfully and perhaps hopelessly? Not clearly, at least” (111). Besozzi appears as a weak individual suffering from low self-esteem; he is trapped in a situation of unrequited love and when Carolina, in a moment of desperation and fear of losing her child, reproaches him scornfully, he bursts into tears, a sound that the boy describes as feminine: “At first he had thought that it was his mother who was crying. Then he realized that, on the contrary, it was the doctor; for, as the crying, with its almost feminine sobs, continued, his mother’s voice, suddenly firm and clear, had quietly said: “All right, doctor, I forgive you. I know that you are doing all that you can. But you must also forgive me. I’m a mother” (110).

Besozzi’s suicide attempt due to Carolina’s rejection becomes a representation of a failed male role model for Clemente. More specifically, the doctor passes on to the adolescent boy his own sense of powerlessness and inadequacy. Despite his scientific knowledge and his fatherly demeanor, he is characterized not in terms of his authority but of his emasculation. As the significance of his ulterior motive sinks in, Besozzi recedes into the background, and when he is later spotted by Clemente at the trolley stop at the
corner of Corso Vinzaglio he smiles “with a kind of aggrieved melancholy” (114). Before leaving for Somalia, the doctor asks to see Carolina for one last time and the secrecy of the encounter coincides with the woman’s decision to send her son to the town of Paraggi, with Jeannette as his chaperone, to return a visit to the Fraschini children. The pretext of the visit to the family provides Clemente with a precious opportunity: spending a consistent amount of time with the object of his desire. However, having overheard the true reason behind the impromptu trip, the boy reverts to his old dilemma, vocation or temptation:

Clemente realized that he liked Doctor Besozzi much more than he had thought. And the idea that he would never see him again for his whole life seemed to him sufficient to overwhelm every temptation Jeannette might offer. There, you see, Clemente said to himself, the Lord has been good, he has wished to help me overcome temptation, and, for this reason he so arranged it that this evening I didn’t fall asleep, but instead heard this conversation. Otherwise I wouldn’t have known the truth, I really would have believed my mother’s excuse, and then, going off alone with Jeannette, who can tell how much I might have been tempted? But now I know the sadness hidden behind this trip to Paraggi, I shall think of Doctor Besozzi, and Jeannette won’t mean a thing to me. (120)

The visit to the Franchinis represents yet another trial as their youngest daughter Mareska awakens in Clemente a certain curiosity. Soon enough, however, the boy realizes that he doesn’t desire her physically, therefore she doesn’t pose a threat to his purity:

All three of the girls were very pretty, but particularly Mareska, with her extraordinary gray-green eyes glinting with silver. Taken as a group, they represented to Clemente just the sort of girls of his own age who he knew should have attracted him if only his education had been a normal one. […] But not even Mareska was dangerous. Her small boney body, her brown skin, her peeled nose, her silvery-gray eyes were undoubtedly strange. But they were not Evil. They were not Evil because Clemente, even when he carried Mareska on the crossbar of his bike, had never experienced the slightest thrill, or shudder, or feeling of bewilderment; and even when, as a joke, on the highway at the bottom of the hill,
he had taken his hands off the handlebars and hugged her, he hadn’t felt even a thousandth part of what he felt when Jeannette leaned over the table to pick up a saltshaker and brushed against him with her elbow. No, Clemente realized, he did not desire Mareska; and therefore there was no temptation. And, therefore, Mareska could in no sense be Sin. […] Jeannette, instead, was a natural, physical force which, without God’s grace, would have swept him into sin, dominated by it all the way to Damnation. (123-126)

Nevertheless, the Fraschini girls represent a distraction from the recurring thoughts about Jeannette and, at the same time, they contribute to fueling the boy’s ego. Clemente, in fact, enjoys showing off in front of them, displaying his accomplishments in swimming or the study of English. It is during the game of hide-and-seek that another opportunity for physical contact presents itself and, once again, Clemente’s religiosity hinders the possibility of a sexual initiation with a peer. The excuse of the game provides Clemente and Mareska with some privacy and one-on-one interaction where the dynamics between the two teens resemble yet another confessional act. The emphasis placed by Soldati on the value of the confessional dimension is seen in the particular relations that it creates between teller and auditor. Specifically, in the following passage, the teenage girl becomes an extemporaneous confessor and, after sitting down on the ground, asks Clemente to share a story with her:

“What story?” Clemente said, surprised.

“Any one you want to.”

“I’m not good at telling stories…” and, after a moment, a single moment’s hesitation, as though propelled by a sudden, irresistible force outside himself, he added: “I’m going to become a Jesuit.”

Oh God, Lord God, why had he said it? Just six words. If he could only take them back! Why had he come out with them? And why precisely to Mareska? […] She did not say anything. But Clemente saw that the look on her face was very perceptive, intelligent. From those six words Mareska had understood everything;
they’d explained, just in time, all that had until then remained mysterious about Clemente. (129)

The boy’s persistent thoughts about priesthood become an obstacle to any possible connection with the girl, whose request underlies not only her escapism but also a certain fascination with Clemente and his aura of mystery. She is intrigued by his taciturn nature and sees his storytelling as a means to an end: learning more about her friend in order to seduce him. However, the boy’s honest yet abrupt statement destroys all chances of a deeper knowledge and all that remains is a sense of regret for having spoken the truth. Simultaneously, the protagonist’s perception of disclosure as a faux pas reveals discomfort and awkwardness, as well as the equation of priesthood with emasculation:

And now a faint smile (Clemente did not delude himself, he too understood immediately what kind of smile it was), a faint, ironic, deprecatory smile had formed on the girl’s tight, chiseled lips. With that smile, with that look Mareska was now saying to him quite clearly: Jesuit! Priest! Ugh! To me you are not a man anymore, you’re finished. To me you don’t exist any longer. I’ve already forgotten even your name. I won’t even bother to say hello to you. (130)

It is at this point in the drama of Clemente’s consciousness that other voices in his head begin to compete for his attention. In the depths of his mind he is painfully aware of his weakness and inadequacy in matters of interpersonal interactions. This scenario of paranoia is further illustrated by his ultimate esame di coscienza, where the complete avowal of ineptitude coincides with the acknowledgement of his own true nature:

Yet at the bottom, at the very bottom of his conscience, in that core of truth and justice, perhaps hidden yet always given to all those whom a just and true God does not want to lose, he heard, beyond the pride of the future Jesuit martyr and saint, beyond the habits, prayers, confessions, the false feelings of remorse, the absurd aims, a voice of genuine, healthy reproach. The voice said: Although you understood right from the start that your natural duty was to hug Mareska and cover her with kisses, you lacked the courage. And because you didn’t have the courage, you got angry: you felt humiliated, small, good for nothing. And to save
yourself somehow, both in your own and her eyes, you announced that you wanted to be a Jesuit, as though, in that way, you made it clear to her that it was not because of fear that you hadn’t embraced her, but because you intended to become a Jesuit. (132; emphasis added)

Interestingly enough, Mareska, who represents ‘femininity’, seems to be more assertive and direct than her male counterpart. She is the one who leads, literally and figuratively: “It was the little girl who had offered him her hand and led him away behind her.” And, once she finds the perfect hiding spot for the two of them, she says resolutely: “Let’s stop here” (128). Further, her mannerism is a clear indication of her assertive nature, “Panting, laughing, she leaned back against a tree, her legs spread apart and tensed in the pose of a tomboy. She was sweating, the fringe of her hair cut in a boyish bob fell halfway above her eyes. Still laughing, she stared at Clemente between half-closed lids” (128). After hearing Clemente’s confession, she remains silent, and yet she uses a nonverbal kind of communication to express her disappointment. She stops smiling and starts to walk back to the villa.

If, as Stephen Whitehead has argued in his study *Men and Masculinities* (2002), masculinity is an approach to space and objects that is not preconditioned by hesitation but by confident expression and a purposeful, outward intentionality (189), we must conclude that Clemente’s timid and careful nature necessarily works against his social and sexual formations. After all, it is Mareska who, by means of her bodily presence and occupation of space, dominates the scene; she is wholly defined by her will to explore not only the setting where she leads Clemente, but also the boy himself and his private world.

In many ways, *La confessione* is a novel with orality as its central subject; it is a novel about the importance of speaking and thus revealing one’s story. Yet it is the oral
tale that holds the dangers of uncovering hidden truths, and therefore orality is also associated closely with guilt and shame. For this reason, Clemente ends up begging Mareska not to disclose their conversation to anyone: “Wait a minute, Mareska,” Clemente said, catching up with her. “Please, wait a minute, I want you to listen to me. I must beg one thing of you. Don’t repeat to anyone in the world, not even to Bi and Ba, what I just said to you a moment ago. Do you promise?” Mareska did not reply” (131). Once again, the girl chooses silence.

The Assumption of the Virgin

I was too young to know how to love her.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

As I have argued, temptation and vocation become consistent structural features of Clemente’s adolescence. The novel is structured in terms of the difficult balance between the two forces whose effect is to hinder the boy’s formation. Clemente’s sojourn with the Franchinis represents a crucial point in the dynamics of the attraction to Jeannette. On the eve of their return to Sestri, Clemente is informed that they will stay an extra day with the family and that he and Jeannette will spend the night at the Hotel Imperial in Santa Margherita. The episode, albeit fundamental in the narrative, represents the character’s failure to come to terms with a sexual initiation by an older woman. Despite being a defining moment in the protagonist’s adolescence, it is presented in ways that are never
satisfactorily resolved. One consequence of this is a paralysis and inertia due to a lack of courage, very similar to the feeling experienced with Mareska.

While talking to Jeannette on the way to the hotel, Clemente experiences yet another confessional moment. Having witnessed the scene of the two teenagers’ return from their hiding place, the woman asks:

“What did you do today with Mareska, you little rascal? Don’t think I didn’t notice. I pretend not to see anything, of course. But I see everything.”

“Nothing, Jeannette.”

“Oh, now, come, come, you can talk to me. What’s the matter? Are you afraid I’ll tell your mother? Now let’s be clear. There’s nothing wrong in what you did. I’m as sure of this as if I had been there all the time with the two of you. Nothing wrong.” (136)

Jeannette’s role as temptress suddenly shifts into that of confidante. In a sense, she takes on the role of a friend, and perhaps a parent, ready to initiate a sex talk with an adolescent son. While she becomes a sensible confidante, the boy is hindered by his guilt and burdened by his religiosity. Ironically, Jeannette’s insistence hides a certain ambiguity, and one might argue that there are voyeuristic elements in her impromptu confessional practice. The blurring of lines – between friend of the family and object of desire, between temptress and confidante, and between confessor and voyeuse – extends to the rest of the confession/conversation between the two characters:

“But, you see, Clemente, these are the sort of things one never tells one’s mother. Instead, one tells them to a good friend. To a good friend like me. You do think I’m your friend, don’t you? Well, answer me!”

“Yes, Jeannette,” Clemente said in a very low voice, making an effort not to burst into tears.

“So tell me. What did you do with Mareska?”
“But I didn’t do anything,” Clemente said, almost crying. (136)

This hint of a submerged complicity between the woman and the adolescent boy doesn’t make matters any easier for the latter. For him, confession involves a highly suggestive release of stored-up tensions. His emotional reaction to Jeannette’s inquisitive demeanor is followed by a question asked by the woman that perfectly encapsulates the boy’s troubled state of being, “What the devil is the matter with you now?” (137), a question that appears formulated to elicit his secret and that will echo the boy’s effort to resist temptation once again, “Angele Dei qui custos es mei, he repeated inwardly to himself, to chase away the demon” (137).

The promenade walk to the hotel is set against Clemente’s recognition that his circumstances are not ideal as Jeannette’s closeness reminds him of past temptations, “Jeannette now slid her arm down around Clemente’s waist and, hugging him close to her, walked, still in silence, slowly up the hill. Clemente felt the pressure of that rounded thigh and soft breast, he smelled Jeannette’s perfume, that perfume he knew so well, now closer and more penetrating than he’d ever smelled it before” (137). The narrator’s insistence on closeness brings us back to the elevator scene at the Hotel Baglioni and the obsessive memory of the nameless lady. Not surprisingly, both women are defined by their “softness”. The “warm softness” (20) of the lady’s hand – touched accidentally by Clemente when pushing the elevator’s button – is now replaced by Jeannette’s “soft breast” on which he deliberately leans. The boy prays to his own guardian angel, not only to resist temptation on the way to the hotel, but also to ward off what might happen afterward, “when he would be all alone in the hotel’s new room, and when he knew that the image of those thighs, the memory of that perfume, would assail him with greater
violence than the reality itself, since not only religion had defended him from the reality but also his own timidity” (139).

The repetition of the elevator scene is evocative of the idea of “Assumption”, of ascending into a different plane of existence. Ironically, the elevator ride brings the boy back to the torments of the past, as everything reminds him of the Florence hotel guest:

During the short ride up Clemente, raising his eyes to Jeannette, suddenly remembered the woman in Florence. […] The elevator stopped. The clerk opened the door. Once again Clemente thought of the elevator in Florence, of his mortal sin, of Father Genovesi’s terrible words, of Jesus who, because of his sinning, he was about to crucify. Jesus! Confusedly he prayed to Jesus, to the Madonna, to his guardian angel and Saint Aloysus Gonzaga. (140-141)

While the elevator ride at the Hotel Baglioni had been compared to a “long journey” (19) in which Clemente and the lady “had risen mile after mile, hour after hour, in the tallest of skyscrapers” (19), the same experience with Jeannette seems to be fleeting, short-lived, due perhaps to the presence of the hotel employee who disrupts their closeness. In fact, the boy wishes the employee would disappear so that he could be free to confess his love to her: “Oh, yes, he would do it! In a few seconds! As soon as the clerk had left and they were alone! Alone together, in either his or her room. And he would say it clearly, too, in words: Jeannette, Jeannette, I adore you, I have always adored you!” (140).

Clemente’s existential despair is also associated with a strong sense of original sin, as we have seen when he prays in order to fight temptation in the elevator. His quest for redemption is complicated by the proximity to Jeannette in ways that will become a serious problem when he finds out that their rooms are connected by a short hallway. Retrospectively, Clemente describes the prevailing mood felt once he and Jeannette are left alone in their respective rooms:
Clemente felt that the moment had come for him to be strong. Either strong in sin, walking decisively over to Jeannette, throwing himself at her feet and kissing them; or strong in virtue, responding to Jeannette’s smile with a polite smile, thanking her and saying good-night. But he realized that he could not be strong, neither in one way, nor the other. He noticed that he was trembling. And he concentrated all the strength left in him on the effort to hide his trembling. (142)

Sin and virtue, temptation and vocation return to haunt the boy, whose masculinity is once again put to the test. Particularly, Jeannette’s female gaze renders him symbolically impotent; we may speculate, in fact, that her gazing at him while smiling politely – a polite smile, yet full of pity – might have been more than he could tolerate. Like Mareska, Jeannette remains silent; however, her silence is connected to her unawareness, to her not knowing what is troubling the boy. Now more than ever, speechlessness becomes a significant and pervasive source of anxiety. From the outset, Clemente’s dilemma is conducted in specifically linguistic terms. Through confession, he attempts to compose a version of his own past in order to come to terms with it. This time, however, silence prevails and the only audible voice is that of nature which comes “whispering that sin and the devil did not exist, or, at least, that they were not there; that this evil was on the contrary a good, that virtue was only cowardice” (143; emphasis in original). The formative value of courage is emphasized by the boy’s honest musings about his healthy and natural desire. He is aware of what he needs to do not only in order to possess the object of his desire, but also to grow into manhood. Yet he chooses immobility and thus fails to seize the moment of what could have been an important turning point for him.

The sense of urgency is implied in the narrator’s voice:

[…] that chance, for the duration of these precise instants, in this narrow hallway between these two hotel rooms, in this silence, this secrecy, this nocturnal sacredness, was offering him the opportunity to perform a heroic act; but also that this opportunity was unique and irrevocable: it would never present itself to him
again, for if, unluckily, as he feared, he were not capable of performing this heroic act, if he continued to believe in temptation and sin, he would never, for his entire life, become a man. (143; emphasis added)

The idea of regret returns throughout the second section of the novel like a repressed anxiety, to remind Clemente of something that was never satisfactorily resolved and that will haunt him for the rest of his life. In contrast to Clemente, Jeannette is not entirely speechless; the few words she utters to dissipate the awkward silence reveal a deeply caring bond between her and the teenage boy, especially after witnessing his torments:

“Come here, Clemente,” she said gently. “Come here and let me look at you. Don’t you even want to say good-night to me?” (143). The invitation seems to worsen the boy’s uneasiness as approaching Jeannette will entail considerable risks. Nonetheless, he takes the five steps toward her only to realize that the beautiful thirty-five-year-old woman is just as lost and confused as he is:

Was desire concealed behind that very dismal look? Or was it understanding, a feeling of pity for the torment that the boy was at the moment undergoing because of her? Or uncertainty about making a misstep? To corrupt a small, fourteen-year-old boy, and, what was more, her best friend’s son – after all, one does not do such things! But who knows? Jeannette was unconventional, though perhaps not to that extent. It was probably a confused tangle of all these emotions fused indistinctly together. (144; emphasis in original)

The closeness of the tacit sympathy between Clemente and Jeannette is expressed in their mutual glances. Yet if the woman’s look is seen by the narrator as questioning and inquisitive, it is perceived as “wicked” by the boy: “To him Jeannette’s look appeared neither serious nor sad; it seemed wicked and he liked it, and perhaps it seemed wicked just because he did like it. […] For that look which he believed to be wicked was precisely the look that most attracted him. It is the look of evil, the wretched boy said to himself with a desperate start, it is the look of the demon” (145). Once again, the idea of
the demonic concealed in the feminine resurfaces in Clemente’s mind. Jeannette is, after all, a figure who rejects normative behavior in that she represents a sexually active unmarried woman in a highly censorious bourgeois context. Her nonconforming behavior in matters of sex is encapsulated in the narrator’s description of her serious look:

Or perhaps Jeannette’s eyes were simply serious. This beautiful thirty-five-year-old woman, who loved to flit from flirtation to flirtation (about whom in the salons at Turin and the summer-vacationing social set, they said, laughing, that she had a great bent for amour), was at bottom a serious person; and she always wore, at the imminence of each new adventure, that serious look, as if she were preparing herself for a rite. (144-145; emphasis in original)

If Jeannette’s look is quizzical but direct, Clemente’s inability to come of age is dramatized by his loss of courage in returning the woman’s gaze. He peruses her breasts, her shoulders, the wallpaper and the furniture in her room but he doesn’t look straight into her eyes.

In Writing Masculinities (1999) Ben Knights argues that flight is a recurrent motif in narratives about men. He states that “to deal with intolerable circumstances by escaping from them rather than confronting them may turn out to have more in common with the paradigmatic male life plot than we tend to think” (Knights 113). Following Knights’s lead, I suggest that the final sequence of the hotel scene depicts a paradigm of flight, an escape from threat represented by the older woman. When Jeannette breaks the silence by caressing his face and murmuring “my little man” (146), Clemente chooses flight instead of fighting with temptation: “[He] lowered his eyes and then, without lifting them again, after a last instant of hesitation, he twisted away, threw off that caressing hand, spun around, plunged into his room, and locked the door behind him” (146). As it happened in the past, Clemente’s conscience becomes the site of turbulent and conflicting
forces; this time around, agony is brought about by denial of true inner needs and faith is viewed as the only antidote to desire:

He got into bed, switched off the light, dived deep under the covers. He didn’t want to hear Jeannette’s footsteps, in the bath or the other room. Cowering in bed, he could hear only his own, nearly deafening pants. He tried to control himself and, determined to fall asleep, he repeated in a choked voice the ejaculation which for years he recited every night as his very last prayer: “Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, I give you my heart and my soul.” He thought for a moment and then added: “You see, I’m happy. I’m happy because I’m pure. Thank you, God. Thank you. Thank you for having saved me.” (147)

The First Time

The companions of our childhood always possess a certain power over our minds which hardly any later friend can obtain.

— Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

Earlier on I argued that in Soldati’s narrative universe ambiguity is a fundamental feature. I have also suggested that La confessione centers around two forces, vocation and temptation, whose contrast hinders Clemente’s spiritual and sexual formations. If he did not indulge in his erotic fantasies, he would be an exemplary Jesuit novice. On the other hand, if he hadn’t had a religious upbringing and education, he would have been free of all guilt and remorse and, consequently, would have acted upon his sexual desires. More specifically, spirituality and sexuality obliterate each other causing the character’s formative conundrum. As a result, Clemente never moves clearly and convincingly from point to point in his personal story because of this impasse, hence his failed formation
and inability to come of age. However, this line of reasoning might be too neat, too deceptively logical, especially if we consider the narrative denouement in the third and last section of the novel.

The anticipated encounter with Luisito, where the shift from a heterosexual to a homosexual desire alleviates the tension that permeates throughout the narrative, is preceded by a suggestive scene at a railroad crossing, the site of a rather disturbing encounter between Clemente and a band of *squadristi*, the fascist squads identified by their black shirts. Unsure as to whether to acknowledge or ignore them, he responds to their defiant stares by lowering his eyes, similarly to his timid reaction to Jeannette’s gaze. This time, not only does he lack courage, he also hides his Catholic Youth pin, symbol of his religiosity and affiliation to the Jesuit order. The very poignancy of the gesture depends upon a sense of shame not too different from the humiliation felt in the presence of Mareska. The band of *squadristi* with their grim faces and stubbly unshaven cheeks represents action and masculinity in contrast to Clemente’s reflection and self-doubt: “Stealing a glance at them, Clemente’s eyes encountered some of the angry, flashing looks that shot from those dark, surly faces and he was seized by the absurd fear of being stopped, searched, and, at the discovery of his Catholic Youth pin, beaten up as he knew was the *squadristi’s* custom” (154).

Soldati’s veiled critique of fascist discourses of virility and masculinity is taken even further in the final sequence of the novel where the memory of Jeannette and the elevator lady seem to dissipate in the irony of the narrative. When Clemente finally finds the courage to meet his new friend at the beach resort, his sense of inadequacy vanishes, albeit briefly:
Luisito reached his beach cabin, took out the key which he carried stuck in the belt of his bathing trunks, and unlocked the door. [...] Clemente stared at his shiny, smooth, muscular back. He drew closer, still holding the basket in his right hand, and stretched out his left hand, curving it like a seashell until it fitted lightly over the boy’s hip. Luisito didn’t say a word. [...] Using only his left hand (his right hand still held the basket), he clung close to him. It was a sensation which he had never experienced until that moment, yet so simple and natural, like drinking a cool glass of water after you have run and played for a long time and become very thirsty. [...] And the dismay which for an instant had appeared on his grave, reflective little boy’s face had, this time, not been at the thought of sinning, but rather at the idea that Luisito, who had at that point broken away from his embrace to shut the door, might be so cruel as to run off just then, at the climactic moment, thus denying him the fulfillment of his desire. (157-161)

Although the sense of guilt and the fear of sinning still linger in his mind, the irony that permeates throughout the last section of the novel seems to relieve such tension.

When Clemente and his devout grandmother go to confession the next day, the boy tells Monsignor Baldelli – a much humbler priest than Father Genovesi – about the events of the last few days and his temptations regarding Jeannette. This time, however, the priest tells him that the cure for these impure thoughts is prayer and leisure time spent with friends. When the priest asks him: “Don’t you have any friends?”, the boy replies:

“I have one friend.”

“There you are, you’ve got a friend. Excellent. Try to stay with him as often as you can, take him with you to play in your games, to go swimming or for walks. Avoid solitude. Solitude favors evil thoughts. Vae soli.[…] Try to forget and amuse yourself happily, healthily with young boys of your own age…ego te absolvo ab omnibus peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, Fili et Spiritus Sancti.” […] After so many scruples and so many subtle feelings of remorse solely due to thoughts dedicated to women, it had seemed natural to Clemente not to say anything in confession about Luisito. (168, 172, 175)

The priest’s permission seems to echo the grandmother’s enthusiasm in learning that her grandson has been sent a friend by the Lord so that he can distract himself.
At the end of his journey, when guilt is replaced by a childhood game, Clemente’s homoerotic moment reveals its regressive character, very much akin to the final scene in Saba’s *Ernesto* where the encounter between the protagonist and his friend Ilio coincides with a return to an earlier and happier period of his life and an entry into a more primitive stage of existence.
CHAPTER 4

Reflections on a Vicarious Boyhood: Elsa Morante’s *L’isola di Arturo*

Make an island of yourself, make yourself your refuge.

— Gautama Buddha

And when I was young, did I ever tell you? I always wanted to get inside a book and never come out again.

— Peter Ackroyd

If Saba’s and Soldati’s narratives of formation end on a somewhat hopeful note with their protagonists anticipating better days, *L’isola di Arturo* (Arturo’s Island, 1957) is painfully akin to Moravia’s *Agostino*. Both works, in fact, seem to suggest that the awakening to reality can be harsh and rife with regret. In some ways, the parallels with Moravia’s novel are unmistakable. Like sorely disillusioned Agostino wishing to leave the Tuscan seaside resort, Arturo chooses flight over fight for what he desires and, at the end of the narrative, hides his face to shun his beloved island. The image of Procida, and with it the memory of Nunziata, fade in the distance. Ultimately, Agostino and Arturo are protagonists of an introspective and retrospective voyage in search of their boyhoods as their stories are essentially a remembrance of things past, to use a Proustian expression.
In Morante’s oeuvre, childhood and adolescence can be analyzed and rationalized only if lived retrospectively, through memory. The same rings true for *L’isola di Arturo*, in which the narrative is filtered through the reminiscence of the solitary existence on the island of Procida, in the Bay of Naples. As Luisa Guj argues, “Procida is itself the ambiguous symbol of Arturo’s bondage to his own fantasies from which he has to break free in the final crossing of the sea” (144). Another interesting point established by the scholar, and relevant to my reading of Morante’s novel, is that the blend of myth and reality contributes necessarily to a narcissistic perception of the self (150). I would add that it is in fact this confusion that leads to Arturo’s failed formation. Specifically, an aspect of the novel that, to my knowledge, has not yet been discussed is its homage to a cultural icon and protagonist of one of the masterpieces in children’s literature: Peter Pan. Similar to J. M. Barrie’s character, Arturo refuses to grow up. Procida, in this sense, coincides with Neverland, while the *Casa dei guagliioni* channels “The Home Under the Ground” where Peter and the Lost Boys reside. Meaningful is also the fact that the passage of time on the island of Neverland is ambiguous, very much like the distorted perception of time one gets in Procida. Barrie writes: “it is quite impossible to say how time does wear on in the Neverland, where it is calculated by moons and suns, and there are ever so many more of them than on the mainland” (*Peter and Wendy*, Ch. 7). In a sense, Arturo represents the reincarnation of the myth of Peter Pan, who was forever a boy and who defied authority and adulthood as symbolized by Captain Hook. It is a noteworthy coincidence that Barrie originally titled his play about the boy who wouldn’t grow up *The Great White Father*, a detail that reminds us of Wilhelm and his pearly white complexion. I shall explore further the image of the young man’s departure from the
island later in this chapter, but for now I would like to concentrate on the topos of confinement, a constant motif in the narrative.

**No Man is an Island: The Law of Enclosures**

_The eyes of others our prisons;
Their thoughts our cages._

— Virginia Woolf

In Morante’s world, writing itself becomes a form of self-imposed reclusion. During the ten-year gestation of _Menzogna e sortilegio_ (House of Liars, 1948) and _L’isola di Arturo_, the Roman author would spend much of her time in a room with her beloved cats as the only company (Garboli 1995, 15). As Giuliana Zagra reminds us, “in the solitude of her study, Morante develops a most personal, secret way of opening herself up to writing. […] Her authors, Mozart, Beethoven, Stendhal, Rimbaud, Saba, Simone Weil, along with [her] ever-present cats assist, substantiate, sometimes even suggest ideas and form” (Zagra, 34-35). In her self-imposed solitary confinement, Elsa would write notes and quotes in notebooks and on the back of postcards acquired during her travels. There is one postcard from Vienna, in particular, with a verse on the back that reads: “Ampia è la Terra, ma in piccola prigione intristisce l’anima mia” (“The Earth in vast, but my soul languishes in a small cell”; translation mine). The relevance of this jotted line becomes clear when we think of the concept of imprisonment and the identification of Elsa with her alter ego Arturo Gerace. Since Morante described her soul as trapped “in a small
cell,” it is perhaps not surprising that Arturo’s microcosm as depicted in the novel appears circumscribed, geographically and metaphorically.

In a brief article published in the newspaper “L’Unità” in 1952, Morante discusses the inception of *L’isola di Arturo*, described as the story of a young prisoner during the war in Africa. In a 1955 interview with Sergio Saviane, the author reiterates that Arturo is a very lively and intelligent 18-year-old man who, after being held captive in Africa, decides to recount his childhood and early adolescence. Although the narrative makes no reference to the young man’s captivity, it is clear that the idea of imprisonment was an initial inspiration for Morante. The manuscript preserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emanuele II of Rome (National Library) reveals in fact that the first page was revised numerous times but most of it was not included in the final draft. In the incipit, which did not make the final version, Arturo is in a concentration camp in Ethiopia:

In the moments of deep silence, especially at night, I sometimes think I hear the sound of the sea; but it can’t be real, the sea is very far, and in order to reach it, I believe, one would have to cross more than one hundred kilometers of desert. One night, I dreamed that a large female camel with merciful eyes knelt down in front of me; I got on top of her, and off she went with a high and light pace. She crossed the barbed wire fence without the guards shouting or shooting and already I could see appearing from a distance a beautiful violet hue, similar to certain parts of the sea in Procida or in the nearby islands. I told my dream to Rosario, the Sicilian; and while I was telling him about it, its meaning, that wasn’t clear before, became clear: the female camel that was taking me away represented Death. I have a feeling I am destined to die in captivity. Many omens, before the dream, confirmed it. And if, using my memory, I go back in time to when I was a free man and lived on Procida, it seems to me that many signs would suggest that *I had to die before knowing life, prisoner in the desert*. This shack will be my last dwelling, this sand the last land that I shall see. (*L’isola di Arturo*, MS, Biblioteca Nazionale Roma. Translation mine; emphasis added)
Arturo’s captivity becomes more poignant since it is not evident in the narrative and is to be found in the beginning – and the ending, we might add – both of which were discarded. If we keep in mind the original opening and closing of the novel, as in the manuscript, it is apparent that a sense of restraint permeates the whole narrative. Arturo is a prisoner and the freedom that he recalls belongs to a particular moment in time and space. Procida, and the memory of a past existence, are thus the “pre-text,” in the sense that they represent what happened before the imprisonment and the act of writing about the past childhood.

The idea of confinement is present everywhere in the narrative. Procida, in this regard, is an island that secludes its inhabitants from the mainland, not only because it is surrounded by water, but also because far removed from the festive atmosphere of the nearby islands. There is a sense of xenophobia and resistance to change as the islanders appear suspicious of visitors/strangers and modernity in general. Indeed, it is as if time stopped on the island:

Procidians are small and dark, with long black Oriental-looking eyes, and are so much alike that you’d think they were all related. The women live cloistered like nuns, the way the always have. Many still wear their hair long and braided, shawls on their heads, long dresses, and in winter clogs over thick black cotton stockings. In summer they go barefoot; and as they pad swiftly and silently by, avoiding everyone, they have a sort of polecat look about them. They never go down to the beaches; it’s a sin for women to swim in the sea, or even to watch other people bathing. (5-6)

The seclusion of Procidians is evident in their physical and personality traits to the point that they resemble one another, as if they were all related. Furthermore, homogeneity is visible in the way women dress and wear their hair.
The main symbol of imprisonment in the novel is the Citadel, an area of the island called Terra Murata, which looks like a fortified castle. Thus, Procida becomes a microcosm where isolation is not only physical but, more importantly, psychological.

Arturo the narrator describes the penitentiary as an ancient fortress:

The castle stands on the highest hill, which looks like a mountain compared with the others; a building that has been added to so often through the centuries that it’s now like a giant citadel. When ships pass the island, especially at night, there seems to be nothing there but the great dark hulk, making it look like a fortress set in the middle of the sea. For nearly two hundred years the castle’s been used as a prison, one of the oldest in the whole country, I believe. People who live far away often think of Procida as just the name of a prison. (6)

Arturo lingers on the description of the penitentiary, as if he intended to set the stage for his own captivity. It is a section of the island that the boy has never visited before, perhaps because he is afraid of it. It is apparent that not only human beings but also animals are held captive on the island:

The windows are narrow as loopholes, with carnations sometimes growing in milk cans on the windowsills, or tortoises languishing in cages the right size for crickets. […] The man in the wineshop, which stands opposite the statue of Christ the Fisherman, once kept an owl chained to a shelf high up on the wall, a delicate black and gray bird with a dashing tuft of feathers, blue eyelids, and big reddish brown eyes flecked with black; one wing was always bleeding where he pecked at it. If you held out a finger to tickle his breast, he bent his head down, looking surprised. At evening he’d start struggling, try to fly, flop down, and sometimes end up fluttering upside down on the end of his chain. (4-5; emphasis added)

The owl, commonly associated with desolation and loneliness, is also a symbol of freedom. In this case, bound by a chain, it becomes a reflection of the inmates at Villa

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15 Nunziata initially mistakes the prison for Arturo’s house not only because his father Wilhelm has boasted living in a castle but, more importantly, because she senses the boy’s confinement.
Murata and of Arturo himself. Besides Procidian men, women are also confined, as I noted earlier, in the dark rooms of their minds, cloistered like nuns (5).

As the narrative text progresses, Arturo fails in liberating himself from another dependence: the idolatry of his father Wilhelm Gerace. As Luisa Guj argues, the young boy is, “infatuated with the image of his father and, in a sense, with the image of himself. The narcissistic nature of these feelings is clearly stated in the text and is, in Arturo, a reflection of his father’s outlook and of his self-centered cognition of love” (149). I would add an additional detail to Guj’s reading by positing that the obsessive nature of the boy’s love for his father reveals an autobiographical element, in that Morante never fully overcame the longing for a father figure. Her biological father, Francesco Lo Monaco, committed suicide and her legal father, Augusto Morante, was treated cruelly by his wife Irma, allegedly because he was impotent. As a result, Lily Tuck informs us, he became quieter and solitary and didn’t spend much time with his children (Tuck, Woman of Rome 11).
In her essay “A King and a Star: The Cosmos of Morante’s *L’isola di Arturo*,” Alison Cornish analyzes the misogynistic aspect of the novel arguing that all male characters feel constrained by women, and it is for this reason that they end up diminishing and despising anything that is remotely associated with femininity. When Wilhelm decides that he wants to leave Procida to spend some time alone, he has a moment of sudden rage that reveals his intolerance toward Nunziata and all women:

Silently, sulkily, my stepmother listened to him, but her eyes unconsciously expressed dependence and fidelity.

He flung his feet off the bed and stood before her. I could see welling up in him the old dark anger that only his wife seemed able to arouse, and I’d already seen it the first day in that very room. But that time I’d defended her deep down in me; whereas today I was glad he was ill-treating her, and, what’s more, hoped he’d vent his rage on her physically, fling her on the floor, even, stamp on her. I almost felt I’d find peace in an outrage like that. (123)

Arturo’s identification with the father is, in a way, a defensive mechanism. Since he lives vicariously through Wilhelm, he is in complete reverence – and fear – of him to the point that he imitates his personality traits, behavior, and attitude. His tendencies to emulate his father reveal a sense of inferiority, not so dissimilar from the feelings of inadequacy experienced by the protagonists of the *romanzi di deformazione* analyzed previously: Agostino, Ernesto, and Clemente.
Paul Mussen and Luther Distler maintain that “a high level of masculine identification does not appear to depend on any one specific type of father-son relationship. From the child’s point of view, the significant factor seems to be the father’s salience – his importance in the child’s life – rather than the particular techniques he uses in dealing with his child” (354). In other words, the developmental identification with the father is contingent upon the latter’s value in the eyes of the son. If the acquisition of masculine interests, attitudes, and patterns of behavior is primarily determined by the boy’s interactions with his father, the relationship between Arturo and Wilhelm becomes problematic when the latter’s homosexuality is revealed and Arturo must renegotiate his masculinity. Further, the father’s ambiguity dictates the fragility of the son’s sexual identity. Identification is described as “a psychological process in which a subject assimilates an aspect, a property, or a characteristic of another and transforms himself totally or partially on the basis of this model” (Laplanche and Pontalis 184). This innate tendency, which Jung later called an archetype, makes it possible for a son to recognize himself in his father. In order for the son to mirror his father, however, the father has to be present. If the father is absent, as Wilhelm is most of the time, this identification is clearly problematized. In Arturo’s case, there is no transfer of identification from the mother to the father as he never knew his mother. Therefore, the triangle never gets a chance to form properly and the boy remains imprisoned in his identification with the mother and the father. It is clear, therefore, the reason behind Arturo’s attempted suicide, an act provoked not only by jealousy toward the motherly bond between Nunziata and Carmine, but also by a deep need for attention from his father. Nunziata and her child, after all, remind the motherless child of the parental affection he never received. In the
section titled “The attempted crime” the realization of the lack of parental love and of the exclusion from the mother-child bond is painfully evident:

Now that she had Carmine, she was so happy that she was singing and laughing from morning to night; when her mouth wasn’t laughing, her eyes were. In a few weeks she had blossomed into such unexpected beauty that it really seemed like a miracle that had come out of happiness […] The clumsiness (a sign of her humble birth, I suppose) that had previously spoiled her movements, suddenly disappeared; as light as a cat she went running when she heard Carmine’s voice. And when she carried him, she seemed not to feel his weight; in fact, the more he grew and the more he weighed, the greater honor it seemed to her. And when she carried him proudly about, she flung her head back a bit, joyously contrasting its darkness with Carmine’s golden curls. […] Early in the morning I’d hear them from my room the minute they got up, laughing and playing together the way they did. I listened to the words better than a poet’s she thought up to praise him, and as I listened I was flooded by a bitterness sometimes so great that I wished I had never been born. It was the injustice, more than anything else, that got on my nerves, as I had never, in my whole life, had the satisfaction of hearing anyone praise me. […] More than ever, I now realized how happy a man must be who has a mother. (211-212; emphasis added)

What is striking in this passage is both Arturo’s voyeuristic stance and his sense of exclusion from the idyllic connection between mother and child. If motherhood drastically changes a woman, in Nunziata’s case the transformation is evident in her appearance and mannerism. The act of simply caring for Carmine is a source of constant happiness which shows both on the inside and the outside. To be sure, motherhood itself is perceived as a vicarious experience of childhood: Nunziata is not simply a mother, she becomes one with her child, in a symbiotic relationship, and she has a newfound selflessness that only maternal love can bring. Indeed, Arturo is aware of her physical transformation from an awkward girl to a responsible and loving mother, and this metamorphosis increases his desire for her, along with pangs of jealousy:
I didn’t know there were so many kisses in the world, and just to think that I had never had any or ever given any! I watched those two kissing each other as, from a solitary ship out at sea, I might watch an approachable, mysterious, enchanted country full of flowers and foliage. [...] And when I saw her lovely mouth giving him those pure, those blessed kisses, I would keep telling myself what a wretched place the world is, where one person has such a lot and the next has nothing at all, and I felt transports of jealousy, delight, and melancholy all at once. (213)

In one of her rare interviews, Morante confessed that she would have liked to be a mother, but that she couldn’t have children. She clearly adored children, and this is evident not only in the numerous short stories and poems published for young readers in the Corriere dei piccoli and other juvenile publications of the time but also in the emphasis given to children and teens in her literary production.

A Vicarious Boyhood

We’re talking about the novel, right?
But maybe we’re not.
We’re talking about ourselves.
And I guess that’s what can start to happen when you talk about a book.

— Meg Wolitzer

It is indisputable that Morante, as evinced by some of her letters to and from friends and colleagues, expressed her childhood desire to be a boy. Antonio Debenedetti, son of journalist, literary critic and author Giacomo Debenedetti, thus describes Elsa during a conversation with Tjuna Notarbartolo: “She was exactly as she wanted to be. [...] If I were to identify her with one of her male characters, no one would resemble her more than Arturo. She is Arturo. (Cahiers Elsa Morante, 63; translation mine, emphasis


added). Stefania Lucamante, in her introduction to a recent collection of essays dedicated to the author, thus describes the issue:

Morante’s ambitious aim at classicism reveals her uncanny ability to use her characters as fantastic alter egos for herself, her *alibis*. […] Morante’s assertion that the adolescent Arturo in her 1957 Strega Award-winning novel *L’isola di Arturo* was, in fact, herself, hides a profound truth that justifies the author’s self-dedication of her novel, that “to Remo N.” […] The author – as is her praxis – reflects herself in the image of Arturo; in all truth, however, she cannot reflect herself into this adolescent whose life is already embittered from sad events, not least his own father’s disavowal, because her doting gaze over this boy is too motherly.” (Lucamante, *Elsa Morante’s Politics of Writing* 2-3)

In a letter penned on June 30 1953, Saba tells Morante that her nostalgia of being a boy is the nostalgia of not having a child of her own: “Your longing to be a boy is – in reality – a regret for not having given birth to a son of your own: you look for him in art because you didn’t want him [sic] in his physicality. This does not mean anything, my dear friend: every life is a failed life, one way or another: art exists to make up for these failings. Were they not there, art would be pointless: it wouldn’t meet a need anymore” (*L’amata*, 127; translation mine). Significantly, Saba equals the creation of a male character with desire of having a son. Thus, literature becomes a substitute for motherhood. Saba, who was Morante’s favorite living author, had theorized the importance of *chiarezza*, an elusive term implying not only clarity of thought and diction, but also honesty with the implied reader and with one’s self. His honest letter to Morante references her childhood desire of being a boy, which is also evident in a line she chose as an epigraph to *L’isola di Arturo*, taken from one of Saba’s poems, “Il fanciullo appassionato”: “Io, se in lui mi ricordo, ben mi pare.” (“If I see myself in him, I am content.”) On another occasion, in a letter to Giacomo DeBenedetti dated February 18, 1957, Morante confesses that *L’isola di Arturo* is her favorite work and that the only reason she had – at least consciously, she
adds – for telling the life-history of Arturo, was her ancient, incurable longing to be a boy. Her correspondence with friends and literary critics makes it possible to argue that writing Arturo’s story for Morante is a substitute for motherhood and, at the same time, for the boyhood she never experienced. Indeed, as Giuliana Zagra reminds us, “in more than one instance, Morante underscored how all her literary and poetic production contains a strong autobiographical trait, as if all her characters had a root in the lived experience even when they were made unrecognizable in their fictional transformation” (32-33).

Motherhood and boyhood, like two sides of the same coin, are deeply connected in the narrative text to the point that they become one of the main motives of storytelling. Incapable of being a mother and unable to be a boy, Morante finds she can be both thanks to her writing and her art.

Preformed and performed masculinity

Maybe while I’m trying to be the hero of my own story,
I am being the villain of another.
— Sophia Carey

Sharon Wood argues that, “the rejection of women by Wilhelm and the young Arturo is a rejection of the dimension of time and death, the power of life and death which women are seen to represent. Both Arturo’s mother and Immacolatella die giving birth, and Wilhelm speaks clearly of the fear which this view of women holds” (320). While Wood has convincingly argued that men refuse and refute the passing of time symbolized by
women, I would add that femininity is often associated with candor and sensitivity, and this is the main reason behind Wilhelm’s misogyny. In other words, Wilhelm’s scorn for women stems from his own latent homosexuality and from an attempt to relieve his inner turmoil. By demolishing the source of femininity, he frees himself, albeit momentarily, from the feminine threat. Wilhelm’s restlessness is another manifestation of his unresolved inner conflicts.\textsuperscript{16} There is only a certain amount of time that he is willing to spend on the island with his son and Nunziata before he becomes miserable and restless:

> Boredom seemed to weigh on him as bitterly, and as tragically, as disaster. [...] And so I found something fascinating even in his killing boredom. I could see that he was now longing to leave the island, and I regretted those last lost days bitterly, days when he’d been there, and I could have spent my whole time with him, but had avoided him instead! All this was my stepmother’s fault, and I felt vindictively angry with her (121).

Arturo’s veneration of his father coincides with contempt for Nunziata, a feeling that he shares with his father. The toxic masculinity of the father is passed on to the son in the form of fear of the feminine. Since Arturo is motherless and is raised, like his father, in a male-chauvinist environment, he acquires a contemptuous attitude, which coincides with the island’s (and Italy’s) conventional patriarchal mentality.

This \textit{Horror mulieris}, or fear of women, however, has a flip side. Misogyny can be ambivalent, in that most men love and hate women simultaneously: they need women and, at the same time, want to suppress such need for fear of losing their virility. The

\textsuperscript{16} It is interesting that Wilhelm avoids inactivity at all costs. Quoting Messerschmidt: “Masculinity is never a static or finished product. Rather, men construct masculinities in specific social settings. The situation of men in prison provides an obvious example. Behavior by men is obviously considerably more complex than is suggested by the idea of a universal masculinity that is preformed and embedded in the individual prior to social action. In contrast, the study of masculinities shows that men are involved in a self-regulating process whereby they monitor their own and others’ gendered conduct” (Messerschmidt 67).
capacity to attract men is precisely what men despise in women. In other words, loving women is dangerous because it threatens and diminishes one’s masculinity. This is especially true in Italian culture, where the specter of patriarchy often obliterates the influence that women – and particularly mothers – have on Italian men at any age.

The theme of the overprotective mother, an essential aspect of the novels that I have discussed in the previous chapters, is here embodied by Arturo’s mother, a strong presence on the island, despite the fact that she is no longer alive. A ghost – and sometimes a mermaid – she still inhabits Procida, watching over her son. Dying in childbirth – like Arturo’s faithful dog Immacolatella – she never left the island nor her son’s side. In a way, she too is a prisoner, stuck in a different plane of existence, neither alive nor dead:

She died because of me: it was as if I had killed her. I was the power, the violence of her destiny, but she consoled me, and healed my cruelty. This was the first bond between us – my remorse, melted in her forgiveness. […] My mother was always wandering about the island, and she was so present, suspended there in the air, that I seemed to be talking to her, the way you talk to a girl leaning out from a balcony. She was one of the island’s enchantments. (40-41)

She gave birth to Arturo and at the same time engulfed him with her affection and devotion, like the sea does with the island. She, in turn, is a prisoner of her grave, of the island and of the eternal love she bears for her son. Further in the narrative, during a power outage at the Casa dei guaglioni, Arturo has a vision in which he sees a familiar image from the past, which coincides with that of his mother:

I found myself somewhere pretty far away. What the place was, I don’t know. It was a clear night, but there was no moon in the sky. […] I called someone and wept as I lay on the sand, and a rather large woman appeared and sat on a stone a step away from me. She was a little girl, yet she had a majestic maturity in her;
her mysterious childhood seemed unlike a human age – it was more like a sign of eternity. And she was the one I’d called, that’s quite certain, but I now could no longer remember who she was, whether she was a goddess of ocean or earth, or a queen related to me, or a prophetess… I was so drowsy that I didn’t notice when the lamp came on again. (95-96; emphasis added)

The complexity and polymorphism of the woman in the vision – a large woman and a little girl at the same time – suggests a connection with la fata turchina (The Fairy with Turquoise Hair) in Collodi’s Pinocchio, who is first portrayed as a young girl living in a house in the middle of the woods. When Pinocchio meets the Fairy for the second time, she has transformed from a young girl to an older woman, which underscores the motherhood that she evokes:

“Do you remember? You left me when I was a little girl and now you find me a grown woman. I am so old, I could almost be your mother!”

“I am very glad of that, for then I can call you mother instead of sister. For a long time I have wanted a mother, just like other boys. But how did you grow so quickly?”

“That's a secret!”

“Tell it to me. I also want to grow a little. Look at me! I have never grown higher than a penny's worth of cheese.”

“But you can't grow,” answered the Fairy.

“Why not?”

“Because Marionettes never grow. They are born Marionettes, they live Marionettes, and they die Marionettes.”

“Oh, I'm tired of always being a Marionette!” cried Pinocchio disgustedly. “It's about time for me to grow into a man as everyone else does.”

“And you will if you deserve it.” (The Adventures of Pinocchio; Chapter 25, 70)
Nunziata, perhaps more than Arturo’s mother, embodies the same internal contradiction. She is both motherlike substitute and object of desire, child and woman. When Arturo recalls seeing her for the first time he tells the implied reader: “You wouldn’t really have thought that she was a bride. Her figure was quite womanly, but her face (as I guessed at once, unpracticed as I was in guessing women’s ages) was still a child’s, and a child very little older than myself” (63). After Carmine is born, motherhood changes her completely to the point that she epitomizes *la vera madre* (the true mother), as theorized by Morante herself. *Le vere madri* are the authentic mothers, who are simple and down-to-earth individuals. At the same time, as Grace Zlobnicki Kalay maintains, “in depicting her *vere madri*, Morante always distances them from the world of adults, where they would ordinarily belong, and stresses their relation to the world of children. Not only are these mothers completely dedicated to their children and spend their time in the exclusive company of children, but they are also very much like children themselves in various aspects” (46-47). When Arturo runs away from home and Nunziata goes looking for him, not only does she lose her humanness, she also seems to be aging rapidly, as if her friend’s disappearance intensified her motherly instincts:

She prowled up and down the beach again like a murderess turned desperate. Perhaps at that very moment she saw me leaping into gorges, rolling unimaginable distances. She ran about shouting “Artù” in all directions in a strange new sensual voice that was heartbreakingly high-pitched, letting the wind tug at he dress quite without shame. Her black shawl had slipped off her head, disclosing the tousled curls I untidied when we struggled, and as she ran against the wind, her hair covered her face, stopping her mouth and stifling her shouts. Occasionally she slowed down, her knees gave way, and her lips, which looked pale and almost swollen from all the shouting, were still looking brutal, disheartened, violent. In the few minutes since we had parted up at the house she seemed to have developed into a woman of thirty, and her innocent soul seemed
suddenly to have changed into a sinner’s. And from her ruined, earthly, old woman’s ugliness shone a splendor at once sweet and barbarous […]. (335)

Like Nunziata, Pinocchio’s Fairy reveals herself both as a child and a mature woman representing all stages of life, including death. In order to make the puppet feel guilty for not being truthful nor obedient, the Fairy stages her own death. When Pinocchio, after his wanderings, returns to her house, he finds a tombstone which reads that she died of heartache for having been abandoned by Pinocchio. Interestingly, in Morante’s novel, Arturo avoids visiting his mother’s grave:

I never went to her grave, because I’ve always hated cemeteries and all the paraphernalia of death; yet one of the spells that Procida wove for me was that little grave. Because my mother was buried in it, I almost felt her fantastic person was a prisoner there, there in the island’s blue air, like a canary in its golden cage. Perhaps for this reason, as soon as I had gone a short way out to sea in my boat, I was suddenly seized with a bitter loneliness that made me turn back. It was she who was calling me back, like the sirens. (41; emphasis added)

The above passage is essential to fully understand the Morantian image of the mother and her fluidity. In her February 2, 1938 journal entry, for example, Morante describes one of her recurring dreams where the motherly presence is clearly connected to the sea and the supernatural:

In the beginning, I was facing with A. (Alberto Moravia) an immense sea. It was a beautiful sea. […] It was at the same time the color of night and the color of morning, like mother of pearl. […] Suddenly, the storm breaks; pearly waves start rising, I am frightened because in the distance I can see ships struggling to stay afloat, my dear ones are on one of those ships, my mother is there too. The ships disappear, swallowed by the sea perhaps; but here comes my mother walking on water: she is wearing a black dress, with puffed sleeves floating in the wind, she is taller than in real life. (Diario 1938, 27; translation mine)

The idea of the mother as a guiding star for seafarers is an evident reference to Mary, Star of the Sea or Stella Maris, and it provides a clear analogy with the aforementioned
passage of Arturo’s vision. As Alison Cornish argues, in place of God, it is the mystical figure of the mother that Arturo worships. Despite being brought up in a male-dominated and often misogynistic environment, the boy never gives up on the memory of his parent. Yet, it is precisely this elusive figure that prevents him from growing up and the departure from the island is an attempt by Arturo to separate himself from his mother – and stepmother Nunziata – and to break out of the chain that holds him captive. Earlier in the novel, we learn that death is Arturo’s biggest fear:

In my own natural happiness, I chased all my thoughts away from death, as if it were something impossible – a dreadful amalgam of vices, hybrid, complex, full of evil and shame. But at the same time, the more I hated death the more I exaltedly enjoyed giving proofs of my own temerity: no game was enough fun if it lacked the fascination of risk. And so I grew up paradoxically, loving risks while I hated death. But maybe it wasn’t a paradox, after all. (24-25)

When, toward the end of his life on Procida, Arturo reunites with his nurse Silvestro, they have an important conversation about death and the imminent war. The young man is unaware of contemporary events but expresses his desire to go to war in order to prove his manhood:

If war was really on the way, I had definitely decided to volunteer on the first day we entered it. Whatever happened, I wanted to take part in the war, even if it meant getting secretly onto the battlefield (supposing my request to join up was refused, because of my age). […] He wasn’t too keen, it appeared, about […] my idea of volunteering for the war. I saw that he was puzzled and set against it, so I declared, as fervently as I could, that I felt that a man wasn’t a man until he had proved himself in war, and that to stay at home without fighting while others were fighting seemed to me the most disagreeable and dishonorable thing that could happen. […] What I wanted was to fight so as to learn fighting, like a samurai in the East. The day I was sure of my valor, I’d choose my cause, but I had to test myself before I could be sure, and the test that had turned up was this war. I didn’t want to miss it, and it was all I cared about. […] Some boys were afraid of the dark, and that was how I was afraid of death; only of death. My revulsion at the
thought of it poisoned the certainty of life for me, and until I had learned to be casual in the face of it, I couldn’t know if I had really grown up. Or worse: *whether I was a brave man or a coward.* (340-341; emphasis added)

In a way, Arturo and Pinocchio share a temerarious trait. Although they fear death, they are attracted to danger. It is interesting to note, in fact, that Pinocchio, despite numerous warnings from the *Grillo parlante* (Talking Cricket), is hanged, tied up, almost eaten alive and turned into a donkey. Similarly, Arturo likes to live recklessly on the island and out on the sea. Like Robinson Crusoe who was shipwrecked on the “Island of Despair” and who taught us that “fear of danger is ten thousand times more terrifying than danger itself,” Arturo lives self-sufficiently on Procida and sets out to explore around the island’s perimeter. Not only is he brave enough to do extraordinary things just to please his father, like swimming for hours to retrieve a lost watch, he is also unafraid of the sea creatures. During one of Wilhelm’s rare visits, Arturo recounts an important episode that underscores the former’s weakness:

His vulnerability was as mysterious as his casualness. I remember that once he touched a jellyfish while we were swimming. Now everyone knows what will result when that happens: the skin turns red, but there are no bad or lasting effects. He must have known that perfectly well, but when he saw the marks on his chest – those red stripes – he was overcome with horror, and even his lips turned pale; he ran to the bank and flung himself flat on the ground, his arms flung out like a man who had fallen overwhelmed by nausea, by agony! I sat beside him: more than once I myself had been the victim of sea urchins, jellyfish, and other sea creatures, and I’d never bothered in the least about their attacks. (22)

Unlike Collodi’s *Pinocchio*, where the existential theme of becoming human coincides with the idea of acquiring maturity and responsibility in order to transition into adulthood, Morante’s novel seems to suggest that childhood is not a preparation for adulthood nor a stage in someone’s life but a dimension all of its own, a sort of alternate
plane of existence. In order to dramatize her theory, argues Zlobnicki Kalay, “Morante isolates Arturo from practically all contact with the outside world. Like a mythic noble savage or perhaps even Adam, the boy leads an existence of pure and total freedom devoid of any of the influences associated with civilization” (56).

Besides the analogies among Nunziata, Arturo’s mother and la Fata turchina, there are some other interesting similarities and differences between Collodi’s and Morante’s narratives. If Geppetto, in Collodi’s novel, represents the loving father who sets out on a quest to find his son, the father-son quest is inverted in Arturo’s case, where the latter is the one desperately seeking his parent. Even when Wilhelm is around, the boy perceives his father’s elusive nature: “My father spent most of the time away. He’d come to Procida for a few days, then leave again, and sometimes he’d stay away for a whole season. If at the end of the year you added up his rare fleeting visits to the island, you’d find that out of twelve months he’d spend maybe two at Procida with me. […] He was always just passing through, always leaving” (18-19). Arturo’s filial admiration for his father is undermined in the course of the narrative, specifically when the boy finds out about Wilhelm’s secret life. Morante describes this change of heart beautifully:

Often the affections we suppose magnificent or downright superhuman are, in fact, rather insipid; only some down-to-earth bitterness can work like salt and, though atrociously painful, bring out their mixed, mysterious flavor. All through my childhood I had thought I loved W. G., and perhaps I was mistaken. Maybe I was beginning to love him only now. Something extraordinary was happening to me, something I should certainly not have believed before if it had been predicted: I felt sorry for W. G. […] For the first time, I now knew the inhuman violence of pitying my own flesh and blood. (296)

There are moments when Arturo’s pity turns into contempt, which escalates into hatred when sparked by rivalry: “In certain moments, I felt I almost hated Wilhelm Gerace. […]
I found myself hating him more than ever, because he had taken over [...] my island, like an invader. Yet I knew I would not have liked the island so much if it had not been his own” (215; emphasis added). 17 Mimetic desire, according to René Girard, happens when the object of desire has some value only because it is owned or desired by another: “The desire according to the Other is always the desire to be the Other. There is not only the single metaphysical desire but the particular desires which concretize this primordial desire and that vary ad infinitum” (Deceit 101). If Wilhelm’s (real or imagined) desire for Nunziata sparks an equal desire in Arturo, it is because Arturo wishes to be like his father, despite the contempt he feels for him. Mimesis happens again during Arturo’s escape after the fatal kiss. This time, his actions mirror Wilhelm’s perfectly. He disappears and spends long days away from the house, indifferent to the feelings of others. It is precisely at this moment that Arturo reconnects with a long-lost mentor and friend. Forever on a quest for a father figure who would at once receive his affection, and, reciprocally, protect him from disappointments, Arturo reunites with nurse Silvestro, whose wisdom reminds us both of Collodi’s grillo parlante and of the goddess Minerva,18 significantly depicted on the cameo of his ring. More than a father figure, however, he embodies motherhood. In fact, Silvestro nurses him with goat’s milk as if he were a newborn baby and is the one who brings him food during his escape consisting of fresh eggs, fresh cheese, and bread. In a way, the natural cave where they both spend the night evokes a womb and is the perfect setting for an intimate reunion during which they

17 As Della Coletta points out, it is evident that by the term “island” Arturo means the body of Nunziata (144).
18 Silvestro’s ring, a gift from Arturo, bears the image of Minerva, the Roman goddess of warfare and poetry. Both topics of the conversation between Arturo and Silvestro.
talk about “a thousand things” (345) and where their symbiosis suggests literary references. Silvestro is a guide for Arturo, as Virgil was for Dante. In Purgatorio, Dante compares Virgil to a traveler in the night who carries a lantern behind himself so that, although he himself cannot see, the way of those who follow is illuminated (Purg. XXII.67-69). In the first canto of Inferno, when Dante is lost in a dark forest, Virgil appears out of nowhere to save him from his perdition and is described by the Florentine poet as “light and honor of all other poets” (“O de li altri poeti onore e lume,” Inf. I.82). Similarly, Silvestro appears when Arturo needs someone to guide him through his darkest hour. He, in fact, carries a lantern with which he illuminates Arturo’s cave. In a way, Silvestro dà alla luce Arturo, he gives Arturo to the light (dare alla luce is an Italian expression that can be translated into the English “to give birth”); in fact, he brings Arturo out of the darkness of the cave – and of his ignorance – into the light of history at the outbreak of World War II.

In one of the most poignant passages in the novel, Arturo thus describes the return of his caregiver and long-lost friend:

Maybe our nature makes us see the unforeseen tricks of fate as more pointless and arbitrary than they are. In a story or a poem, for instance, every time the unexpected happens to fit in with something that fate secretly intended, we accuse the writer of being too fictional. And in real life, too, unforeseen events that in themselves are natural and simple appear to us, just because of the way we happen to feel at that particular moment, extraordinary or downright supernatural.

Supposing that on my fatal birthday my one friend on earth had unconsciously and intuitively realized my desperation from a distance, and so had come to me… Well, even if that had happened, it wouldn’t rationally and scientifically have seemed a miracle. Even swallows and other simple migratory creatures like them know by intuition, and quite alone, the moment they must leave, find their way with no one to direct them. (337)
Arturo’s Manzonian musings on providence remind us of the power of faith even in the most desperate situations and, above all, of the power of storytelling. It is not by chance that, when Silvestro goes to the Casa dei guaglioni to pick up all of Arturo’s belongings, he brings back all of his notes. “Bring all the paper that’s written on,” Arturo tells him, “Don’t leave any behind. It’s important, because I’m a writer” (343), words that resonate with Morante’s passion for writing and storytelling. War and Poetry, intertwined as in a Virgilian epic, become the topic of a candlelight conversation in which Silvestro tells Arturo about the imminent global war and then asks the young man to read him some of his poetry before going to sleep:

When supper was over, Silvestro and I stayed awake talking until late. Luckily he had thought of bringing a pair of extra candles for our lantern. We talked of a thousand things: of the past, but above all, of the future, of the Absolute Certainties, of the revolution, and so on. Silvestro asked me to read him some of my poetry, too; and of course I chose the best and most effective poems, and saw that while he listened he actually had tears running down his face. (345)

Significantly, the only other poem that Arturo shares with his implied reader is about the beauty of sleeping women, a poem that he would later instinctively rip to pieces. He writes it after watching Nunziata while she sleeps:

Women’s beauty glows at evening,
Like night flowers
And proud owls that flee the sun;
Like crickets, like the moon, queen of heaven.
But because they are sleeping, women cannot know
The lofty eagles in their nests
That fold their wings on a rocky cliff
Breathing in silence.
No one, perhaps, will ever know
The grandeur of their beauty. (139-140)
Arturo’s fascination with the oneiric is rather evident. Almost like a voyeur, he claims that he loves watching people while they sleep, especially Nunziata who seems to be smiling when she dreams:

But this smile could obviously come only from some beautiful dream. Whatever sort of dream could she have, someone like her? This had always been one of my crazes: when I saw people asleep, I often wanted – I was even tormented by the longing – to guess their dreams. Making them tell them afterward when they woke up wasn’t the slightest use (even if they didn’t lie about them). […] And what about her? What dream could she possibly be having to make her laugh with joy? Maybe she thought she was home in Naples with her whole family in the one bed, and her godmother as well. Or at a great party in the middle of heaven among carts and lights and a crowd of little boys turned into cherubs. Or else that my father was bringing home a basketful of jewels from his travels. I wondered whether I came into any of them, too. […] I was tempted to infiltrate slyly into her dream. (140-141; emphasis added)

The reference to the procession in the dantesque Earthly Paradise is yet another Morantian homage to literature and, at the same time, a connection between Nunziata and Beatrice, two women who represent at once perdition and redemption for their devotees.

Morante expressed her fascination with dreams at length in her diary. In one of the entries, in particular, she draws a connection between dreaming and creativity: “Is this then the secret of art? Remembering as the work was seen in a state of dream, telling it as we have seen it, trying above all to remember. Because perhaps all inventing is in fact remembering.” (Diario, Roma, 23 gennaio 1938) Soon after Arturo and Silvestro fall asleep in the cave, Arturo dreams of a war scene that is important to quote in its entirety:

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19 Kessels explains that, after the fourth century B.C., it was common to sleep in a temple in hopes of receiving medical healing or some other advice from the gods (394). The so-called incubation dreams
In contrast to the wonderful evening I had just spent, I had the most disturbing dreams, in which N., Carminiello, and my father all appeared muddled up. Then armored cars, black flags with skulls on them, and black-uniformed fighters all mixed up with dark kings and Indian philosophers and pale, blood-splashed women came rumbling past together, a great crowd that roared over the walled trench in which I was crouching. I wanted to climb out of it and get into battle, but there was no way out, and all around me I felt the weight of sand swallowing me up, sucking me down with a kind of horrible human sigh. I shouted to all the people passing above me, but nobody heard. (345-346)

Arturo’s dream is clearly an instance of sleep paralysis which reveals a certain anxiety about the future, caused in part by the strained relationship with Nunziata, Wilhelm, and Carmine. His intention to enlist in the imminent conflict and the conversation with Silvestro explain in part the setting of the dream – a walled trench – which evokes not only a womb, but also a grave. Moreover, the presence of pirates, kings, philosophers, and damsels in distress reveal Arturo’s passion for literature. War and poetry, fiction and non-fiction resurface in Arturo’s subconscious mind in the form of dreams. There is a passage in Virgil’s *Aeneid* where Aeneas’s war dream causes him great anxiety. His speech to the dream-image of Hector, his late friend and comrade, reveals the Roman poet’s intention to suggest that many dreams are produced by anxiety. Indeed, in the *Aeneid*, the most recurring type of dream is the anxiety-dream. Although the war seemed to be over, and things were looking up for the Trojans, there is still a great amount of anxiety in Aeneas’s mind. In the same fashion, Arturo’s war dream strikes the reader with the desperate sense of conflict within one’s mind. His screams symbolize fear and the fact that no one can hear them underscores his repressed anger and frustration, most

were widely channeled in historic times primarily for two reasons: to obtain prophetic dreams from the dead and to acquire medical cures.
likely because of the forbidden love he feels for Nunziata. Ultimately, Arturo is at war with himself and his conflicting feelings for the people he loves.

On Carnal Knowledge

I pedaled as fast as I could, as if I were escaping from longing, from innocence, from her.
Time has passed, and I have loved many women.
And as they've held me close and asked if I will remember them
I've said, “Yes, I will remember you,”
But the only one I’ve never forgotten is the one who never asked.

— Luciano Vincenzoni and Giuseppe Tornatore, Malèna

When Assunta comes into Arturo’s life, she destabilizes the status quo of the boy’s absolute certainties. Not only does he become “friendly” with a Procidian woman, thus breaking the fourth law, he also betrays Nunziata’s friendship, his mother’s love, and Wilhelm’s authority.

A friend of Nunziata’s, Assunta visits the Casa dei guaglioni on a daily basis and gets to know Arturo, despite the latter’s reticence. She is different from Nunziata and from all Procidian women, mainly because she owns her sexuality and is not afraid to give in to her carnal desires. Furthermore, she stands out because she walks with a limp, a physical trait associated with sexual drive.  

20 Antianara, Queen of the Amazons, when reproached by a Scythian prince for her slave’s limping gait, explained that the lame are superior in the art of love. In his essays, Montaigne references the same belief in Italian popular culture: “It is a common proverb in Italy that ‘He knows not Venus in her perfect sweetness who has never lain with a lame mistress’.” (Chapter XI, Of the Lame or Crippled).
One of N.’s friends was a widow about twenty-one called Assuntina. Although I saw her often, I had never noticed that she was more attractive than the others who came to the house. The only thing that distinguished her from them, and that made me notice her, and perhaps be less churlish toward her, was the fact that she limped a bit because of an illness she had had as a child. This handicap of hers seemed rather attractive to my skeptical and peevish eyes, especially because, out of some kind of basic vanity, she often enjoyed posing as a melancholy invalid, though she was now bursting with health and youthful exuberance. (253)

Assunta’s prowess in matters of love and sex derives from her experience of marriage at a young age. Now a coquette and maneater, she clearly doesn’t fit the mold of a typical Procidian woman. The narrator describes her feline movements, bare feet, long black hair, black almond-shaped eyes, and drooping eyelids, creating an association with the animal world. Even her voice sounds like “the noise dogs or donkeys make” (256).

Arturo is repulsed and at the same time attracted to her, especially when she teases him and challenges his manhood:

“I have a feeling,” she went on after a pause, “that you must have a girlfriend down in the village, to make you stay away from home all day!”

“I haven’t a single girlfriend!” I declared, glum and haughty.

“Haven’t you? Haven’t you really got a girlfriend? Oh, I don’t know that I really believe that…”

She was daring to disbelieve me! All the same, this wasn’t as insulting from a woman as it would have been from a man, and all I did was pick up a stone and hurl it far away, threateningly, without deigning to answer. (256)

Knowing how to flatter and manipulate men with her charms, Assunta boldly confesses her love to Arturo and, while doing so, emphasizes the differences between masculinity and femininity, action and reflection:

You must have seen that I’m always here alone in the afternoon, so every day I start brooding about it … and brooding. You’re a man, of course, and so you don’t brood. Men have got only one idea in their heads and that’s to run round in
circles the whole time, drinking in cellars, in taverns… They don’t brood. But women do! And when I saw you dashing past, like today, I always thought: *He might just stop in sometimes and cheer poor Assuntina up a bit, as she’s here all alone.*” (257; emphasis in original)

Ironically, Assunta’s virginal name does not match her coyness and, in a way, she embodies the opposite of Nunziata whose name fits perfectly with her naïve religiosity and morality. Without hesitation, in fact, Assunta takes Arturo by the hand and leads him to her house initiating him to sex:

And, taking my hand with an important, mysterious smile, she led me with her into her little house. […] And so, that day, I first made love. While the great hour lasted, my eyes would stray, now and then, to the coral necklace lying there beside the bed, and since then the sight of coral has always brought back my first impression of love, with its flavor of blind joyous violence, of precocious ecstasy. The fact that I tasted its flavor with a woman I didn’t love doesn’t matter. I liked it all the same, and I like it still very much, and occasionally at night I dream of those corals again. (258-259)

In the very instant that he has intercourse with Assunta, however, he thinks of his stepmother and becomes aware of his incestuous passion for her:

And so I made this remarkable discovery; that therefore, without any doubt at all, I was in love with N. So it was she who was the first love of my life that novels and poetry kept talking about. […] Of all the women who existed in the world, if there was one who was completely impossible for me, supremely inaccessible to my love, it was N., my stepmother and the wife of Wilhelm Gerace. (259)

Ironically, if Arturo had initially laid down the laws that made up his “only possible idea of reality” (24) he is now the one breaking all of them. He ends up betraying Wilhelm and Nunziata (“The greatest baseness is betrayal, and to betray your father, your own

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21 See Cornish’s insightful analysis of the religious names in the novel (“A King and a Star: The Cosmos of Morante’s *L’isola di Arturo,*” 78)
chief, or a friend, etc., is the very lowest depth of infamy”), his mother (“No love in life equals a mother’s”), Assunta (“For a Gerace to become friendly with a Procidian would be degrading”), and ultimately himself (“A man’s true greatness consists of courage in action, scorn of danger, and valor in combat”).

**Terra Firma? A Delayed Formation**

You have to leave the island in order to see the island.
We can’t see ourselves unless we become free of ourselves.

― José Saramago, *The Tale of the Unknown Island*

Much has been said of Morante’s idyllic vision of a state of pure innocence before adult experiences destroy it. Along with Leopardi and Pascoli, Morante reminds us of the importance of acknowledging *il fanciullino*, the child within us. Although I am in agreement with the nostalgic reading of Morante’s oeuvre, I would like to add that *L’isola di Arturo* belongs more to a disenchanted rather than a romantic vision of adolescence. As we have seen throughout the course of the novel, Arturo falls prey of his own machinations. No longer a child, not yet a man, he appears stuck in an existential limbo, much like Moravia’s character Agostino. Had he decided to come to terms with both his father’s indifference and Nunziata’s rejection, he would have come of age without delay. Instead, he chooses to leave his past behind to embark on a very unsteady journey, in pursuit of a war he knows nothing about. Arturo’s journey out of the island only further complicates his naïveté. In this light, Procida becomes a symbol of Arturo’s dependence on fantasies. Arturo, after all, lives vicariously through his literary heroes
who problematize his connection to reality. As Guj rightfully remarks, “L’isola di Arturo is about literature and its mystifying effects on a young mind” (145). The boy’s romanticized perception of reality will be the main cause of his rude awakening when leaving the island, clearly a geographical metaphor for his dreamlike childhood. In a sense, Arturo is similar to Flaubert’s heroine Emma Bovary in that they make literature a surrogate for reality. Both characters are essentially dreamers who evade from the “real world” and create a fantasy world as a way of coping with their condition. In other words, they both substitute the fictional dimension for the factual one thus complicating the enigmatic relationship between life and literature. At the same time, if Morante’s L’isola di Arturo and Flaubert’s Madame Bovary remain so relevant, it is because their protagonists suffer from the malady of idealism, the inability to accept life for what it is. Instead, they conjure up fictionalized accounts that distort their perceptions to fill the intellectual and emotional void that surrounds them. Wilhelm too is guilty of this tendency to romanticize reality and it is Arturo who acknowledges this trait in his father and in himself when he sees Tonino Stella, the object of Wilhelm’s desire:

This attractive vision, like a sword crashing down of my scorn of him, but into my heart with anguish, startling me. Suddenly, instead of an unfortunate ghost buried in prison, I saw a fabulous bandit, to whom perhaps even the police and the guards acted as servants. And to betray me, various romantic prejudices of mine returned from my childhood to adorn him. When I was a child, the title of convict meant to me more than a coat of arms; and, I might add, it still meant as much to Wilhelm Gerace, who was grown up! Indeed (as I now realize) Wilhelm gerace’s devotion needed the crude glitter of something conventionally seductive like that to kindle it, and the theatrical figure of that convict suited his melancholy very well because it was everlastingly childish. In just the same way the theater

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22 In the original Italian the term galeotto (convict) represents a clear reference to Dante’s episode of Paolo and Francesca and to the influential power that literature has over life.
audience wants conventional heroines to believe in *La Traviata, The Slave Girl, The Queen*. And thus every pearl in the sea eternally copies the first pearl, and every rose the first rose. (277)

At the end of the novel, learning the truth about Wilhelm means for Arturo reconsidering his childhood (and his childishness). The adolescent narrator looks back at Arturo the child with a sense of regret for allowing himself to live a lie. Thus, he considers his experiences retrospectively and acknowledges his misinterpretation of reality.

*Fuori del limbo non v’è eliso* ("There is no paradise except in limbo") recites the last line of the poem/lullaby that precedes the novel in which Procida, a metaphor for childhood, is described as "a little spot of earth." Again, the emphasis is on existential limits and the literary focus is not on the transition to adulthood but on childhood as a whole. The addressee of the poem, a sleeping boy, is protected by the insularity of his condition but he is also confined to the island where he resides, hence the idea of imprisonment. The last line of the poem, reminds us Cornish, is often referred to by critics as the novel’s ultimate message: the disillusionment of growing up and the belated appreciation of childhood innocence seen from the perspective of the experienced adult.

While I agree, to a certain extent, with Cornish, I would like to stress the idea of the island and childhood as separate realms that have very little to do with the adult Arturo, of whom we don’t know anything except for his will to write about his childhood and adolescence in order to make sense of them. As Cristina Della Coletta rightfully points out, "[Arturo’s] narrative journey explores not only a different land, but also a different “self,” that of his own childhood in Procida. […] Critics have duly noted that there is a substantial lack of information about the adult Arturo. We know that he no longer lives in Procida, but know nothing about his present situation – where he lives, what he does,
when and why he has decided to commit his memories to the page” (131). We are not even certain – I might add – that he went to war.

As I have discussed in this chapter and the previous ones, these postwar novels represent stories of essentially failed formations. Focusing largely on family dynamics, particularly the bond between the male protagonists and their mothers, I showed how the relationship with the father is necessarily unrealizable. Indeed, what these narratives underlie is that the object of desire is not so much a parent, a lover, or a friend. It is masculinity itself. However, the quest for manhood represented by the four adolescent boys (Agostino, Ernesto, Clemente, Arturo), and by their male adult counterparts (Saro, the unnamed laborer, Doctor Besozzi and Wilhelm), betrays their insecurity, weakness, and often amorality.

Researching men and masculinities in the second half of the twentieth century, Michael Kimmel observed that “men are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval and the father is the first man who evaluates the boy’s masculine performance” (Kimmel 65). Kimmel’s words were prophetic. From then until now, masculinity has become a test by which men prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to themselves, that they have mastered the part.
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