

Introduction

“Defeatist and cynical” were the words Fascist censors used to define Paola Masino’s boldest and most controversial novel, *Birth and Death of the Housewife* (*Nascita e morte della massaia*), first published in installments between 1941 and 1942, and then as a single volume by Bompiani in 1945. Indeed, such indignant reaction comes as no surprise, given that the book attacks those very same institutions—marriage and motherhood—that Fascism sought to idealize and promote for the sake of the homeland.

Already at the outset of the novel, the nameless female protagonist strikes the reader as being quite the opposite of a submissive homemaker concerned exclusively with the well-being of her household and family. Emerging, like a character out of Samuel Beckett’s plays, from a trunk “that served as her wardrobe, bed, dresser, table, and bedroom, a trunk full of blanket rags, bits of bread, books, and funeral remains” (*BDH* 17), she displays—already at a very young age—a stubbornly desperate need to feed her mind and unleash her imagination, even at the expense of a body that carries “deadlines, rules, and the need to take precautions” (*BDH* 90). When she agrees, for her mother’s sake, to step out of the trunk and comply with the role society has assigned to her, she gives up her potential as a human being, turns off her intellect, and prepares for a lifelong performance as a female marionette. Her marriage to an ordinary, socially “proper” older man (whose pompous speeches on the function of women as the guardian angels of the hearth echo those of the regime) marks her further metamorphosis into a Housewife, forever tied to the four walls of an abode that neither shelters nor represents her, but that still lays claim to all of her energy, stifling her creativity.

What is most difficult for the Housewife to endure is the realization that literature, which she held as her only support, actually reinforces the traditional, rigid role assigned to women, and that even the great artists to whom she turns

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for consolation and understanding display an equally close-minded view of women as those who have not been blessed by the Muses. Pushkin, Stravinsky, Goethe, Shakespeare, Leopardi, Tolstoy, Cervantes, and Beethoven all depend on the services of female cooks and maids whom they despise but who will cater to their most basic need, that of eating. “Here is our true face,” concludes the Housewife. “Food, slave labor, and eternal dealing with ignorance, deceit, and daily necessities” (*BDH* 65). Although she remains faithful to her duty throughout her life and even beyond it, the Housewife exudes loathing for a society that requires women to become servants to their men and to a home they are supposed to safeguard and honor well above themselves and their intellectual potential, while their male companions are free to pursue their dreams.

Not only does *Birth and Death of the Housewife* lash out against marriage, but it also paints a harsh portrait of motherhood. The Housewife’s mother is depicted as a vain, shallow woman whose concern with appearance and decorum makes her despise her daughter’s “abnormality.” The Housewife herself, although she accepts her duties toward her spouse and her home, draws the line when it comes to bearing children—another function of women according to the Fascist mentality—and she chooses to remain barren. Her rejection of motherhood is a complex matter: it represents a gesture against Fascism and its call on women to produce children who would then be taken from them and made into soldiers, but it is also perfectly in line with her vision of existence as constant compromise, struggle, and shame, and with her refusal to participate in its perpetuation.

In rejecting motherhood, the Housewife is also reclaiming ownership of her own body, a body that she had been forced to translate into a female form when she exited her trunk. From her original appearance (presented as primitive and beastly, but also free and bursting with creative potential), a female needs to be tamed, forced into a standardized body and proper clothes, and finally, chained to a hearth that she will have to guard. When the Housewife undergoes that normalizing process as an adolescent, she is at first fascinated by her own body, which she plans to work on as “if it were a matter of urban planning” (*BDH* 30). Yet, she soon learns that, as the Bible preaches, the female body is indissolubly associated with shame, and that sexuality is meant to be confined. Only nostalgia is left for her “real” body, the body she was forced to abandon: “[the Housewife] thought of her own white, transparent body, her light bones. Where did that body come from? Certainly not from her mother, nor from the trunk, and not even from her own will. Hers was no longer a body, but a representation, a suggestion, a sample of the necessary attributes. Where were

her real bones, her nerves, hairs, nails, all of the semi-solid substances that should be part of her body? Someone must have stolen them when, to please her family, she had deposited them at the bottom of the trunk with the rotten blankets and the bread crumbs” (*BDH* 125).

On entering her new house for the first time, the Housewife wishes she could return to her mother’s womb, find her father’s seed and go progressively back from seed to womb, back to the beginning of humanity, to discover whether the original sin was truly necessary. Here the idea of “original sin” seems to coincide with the separation of roles (physical and social) men and women suffer.

If the body has to be molded and conformed to what is socially acceptable, the same is true for sex. Almost immediately after the wedding, the Housewife and her husband settle down to a placidly mechanical evening ritual from which sex is either absent or prudently limited, and soon the couple ceases to share the bed “out of decorum and hygiene” (*BDH* 69). At the same time, however, the Housewife’s sex drive is consummated in secret, through lonely struggles fought against the shameful flood of “desire and quiver commonly known as those of the flesh” (*BDH* 52). As for the possibility of adultery, it merely consists of another set of rules well formulated in esteemed works of literature, and these rules must be followed scrupulously. Having therefore discarded this mere semblance of freedom, the Housewife puts her sexuality at the service of her tyrant: the house. In a memorable scene, she gets down on her hands and knees and tests the spotlessness of the floor with her tongue, sliding it up and down the cold marble and moaning in a grotesque orgasm.

Although the novel focuses on a single character and the suffocating role she is made to play throughout her life, by merely leafing through the pages one realizes that all of the characters, both male and female, are condemned to act in the same performance. To describe them, Masino draws freely from the virtually inexhaustible genre of the grotesque, so much so that at times the pages read like Expressionist paintings: “For a few minutes, a gaunt but real princess, rented for the occasion, moved cautiously and scornfully through the noisy scene, dragging behind her the trail of her gown as well as a trail of escorts, among whom were two very real counts and a duke. Advancing as one unit—the men glued to the lady’s trail and the lady so thin she was almost transparent—they looked like a floating cluster of jellyfish surrounded and swallowed by a school of sardines or by migrating herring” (*BDH* 33).

Almost no character is spared this treatment, and the result is an ongoing puppet show in which everyone plays a part. The Housewife’s sisters, grotesque

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doubles of Cinderella's sisters, recreate the Housewife's childhood in the trunk as a sort of caricature for the guests' entertainment, but they, too, are pathetic caricatures, just like the respectable ladies whose faces, as the night progresses, turn "green and scaly, with chunks of makeup peeling off like plaster flakes" (*BDH* 41). And the condemnation to play a part is not limited to the members of the upper and middle class, but it extends to servants, too: "You steal," the Housewife tells the gardener accusingly, "and you don't even enjoy stealing; you steal out of duty, because a servant must steal from his master" (*BDH* 86). While both men and women are victims of their roles, the Housewife seems to imply that the situation for women is more unjust because, regardless of their status, they will always be slaves to their men, their children, and their houses. Not even prostitutes are an exception because, by accepting payment for their sexual performance, they merely attach yet another yardstick to what was already regulated and controlled.

The awareness of being no more than a character is what distinguishes the Housewife from everyone else. Perceiving the world around her as a puppet show, she classifies the other characters as types. As usual, she is mordantly ironic when attacking her fellow female citizens, whom she divides into categories such as "Fat, strict women with a hairy mole," "Wives of artists who don't make any money," "Rich, middle-class women," and "Aristocratic women" (*BDH* 168–69). The use of caricatures and the insistence on representing the repression of individuality (particularly women's) by resorting to the stratagems of puppet shows serve an ultimately polemical goal: it is an attack that uncovers the falseness and theatricality of all institutions, but the core of this novel remains the performance that is forced on women, the brutal puppetization of a potentially free individual.

Masino's feminism in *Birth and Death of the Housewife* is not without ambiguity: on the one hand, the protagonist feels compelled to warn and protect other women, encouraging them to seek independence and self-actualization: "Don't identify your fulfillment with a man; have some decency, overcome your loneliness: our only goal should be to go back and turn against Adam, he who gave us the first shelter and the first bed to defend for his sake" (*BDH* 186). On the other hand, she despises women for their corporeity, as an expression of their slavery to a preestablished role: "girdled in elastic waistbands, their bellies and hips ready to burst, always sweaty and moody and unashamed of their animality" (*BDH* 186), the women around her seem incapable of envisioning any other destiny for themselves other than one as wives and mothers. When

confronted with her double, the Housewife is overwhelmed by a mixture of tenderness toward her long-gone unadulterated self, and a sadistic urge to subject her to the same process of “womanization” that she was forced to undergo. The later reappearance of the girl, now reduced to a gaunt baby-popping machine, fills the Housewife with disgust and melancholy. There is no way out: both motherhood and sterility entail a loss. The Housewife is no more fulfilled than the mother she did not become.

Another ambiguous aspect of the novel is the symbolic value attributed to the Housewife. The title itself reflects Masino’s intention to depict the demise of an iconic figure: birth and death of *the* Housewife, not *a* housewife. Significantly, the Housewife has no name except for the word that defines her, which becomes and stays capitalized on the occasion that marks her symbolic entrance into society—as a housewife. Throughout the book, the notion of her being an emblem is reiterated: when she dons a sack and a piece of string around her waist at a formal dinner, the guests’ initial perplexity turns into enthusiastic admiration and she is hailed as a “radiant example of sacrifice, [a] symbol of the unflinching modernity of our country’s Fashion, unsurpassed for tradition and popularity in the whole world” (*BDH* 165) and receives a National Certificate of Merit. Later, she is nominated “National Example.” As a symbol, however, the Housewife presents more than a few incongruities: if Masino meant to represent all women and their frustrated desires to follow their intellectual drives, then the choice of a financially privileged protagonist who has plenty of physical space to pamper her intellect, but does not bond with other women and feels contempt for the servants whose very presence affords her the time to reflect, might sound incompatible with her intentions. In her defense, we should note that the representation of the house as an immense mansion with countless rooms, parlors, stairs, secret chambers, replete with maids, cooks, gardeners, and seamstresses effectively functions as a distorting mirror, one that magnifies the Housewife’s obsession with the space that should be her beloved realm and that instead locks her in, choking her creativity. The Housewife’s inability to deal with servants, however, is harder to penetrate: on the one hand, she despises their passivity and lack of initiative and wishes they would rebel—although not steal from her; on the other hand, she firmly believes in a strict division of labor that will ensure her absolute freedom to cultivate her mind while trapping them in a role from which they can never break free. The Housewife’s contempt for servants is a trait that might make her less congenial to an American audience. There is indeed a certain incon-

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sistency between the Housewife's disparaging attitude toward her servants and her incapacity or refusal to take care of the chores in person, except for very brief episodes. Such pretentiousness, coupled with the lack of a palpable desire for change, may fail to stir much sympathy in readers. Yet, from a cultural point of view, we need to keep in mind that the recourse to house helpers in Italy during the period in which Masino lived (and even nowadays) was not necessarily considered a luxury or an unmistakable sign of social status; it was a common practice even in less affluent households than the Housewife's. While this fact might not be enough to make her complaints wholly justified, placing them in a cultural context is useful.

The nameless housewife is a grotesquely tragic victim of a role that defines her, and the ruthless depiction of how she becomes a slave to her own house (an enslavement that, it is implied, every woman undergoes, whether consciously or unconsciously) is all the more intense because it is at once a painful reflection on femininity and a disenchanting assessment of Masino's own difficulty in reconciling her career with the pressing demands of housekeeping. In February 1938, in a letter to her parents, Masino announced that she was planning to write a novel, *Vita di massaia* ("Life of a Housewife," although the title would later change), a novel that would hopefully "give a little shake to those dear family customs, the slavery of women, and the common cliché of a good housewife."¹ While writing the novel, Masino was forced to adjust to a new life: she and her partner, the Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli, had moved to Venice during the same year following Bontempelli's expulsion from the Fascist party. In March, while still living at a local inn, Pensione Calcina, Masino wrote to her parents expressing great joy about the place, which afforded her a lot of freedom: "I am so very happy to be here; at last, I am nobody's guest and every single hour is my own."² To Masino, this carefree atmosphere probably brought back the exciting years she had spent in Paris as a young woman in the late 1920s. However, things changed when the couple moved to an apartment in Palazzo Contarini, overlooking the Grand Canal. On November 28, 1938, only eight months after welcoming her newfound freedom at the Pensione Calcina, Masino began to experience the bitter taste of responsibility to the apartment into which she was about to move. While the new place was spacious and elegantly decorated, it also required constant upkeep and a domestic staff, the threat of which Masino had already anticipated in 1934, when she and Bontempelli still lived in a much less demanding house in Frascati: "Every now and then the specter of

the house rises like a curtain of fog with the two servants sheathed in spider webs among heaps of garbage.”³ Spider webs, too, will become a leitmotif in *Birth and Death of the Housewife*: soft and deceitful like an unconscious dulling of the senses, spider web threads will haunt the young protagonist in her dreams, anticipating her fate as a mindless, marionette-like housewife enchained to her golden palace.

Masino’s frustration and worry increased by the minute, and by December 3, 1938, the peak was reached, and the Housewife was born, on paper as well as in reality, as testified by a letter Masino had written to her sister:

No, I will never be a happy housewife. I’ll be the Lucifer of housewives, I’ll be the Jewish people in the world of “homemakers” (as it says on the passport), I’ll be the wrongly cursed Cain, and all of my daily life will be but a deluge of dust and broken pipes, or of toilets that won’t flush. It’ll be a Sodom and Gomorrah built on gas leaks and boilers on fire; it’ll be a Noah’s Ark filled with rats cockroaches spiders and fleas, pests that in Frascati, in Rome, and now in Venice have always cheered my dwellings.⁴

The anticonformist Masino, who had thus far proudly dismissed “homemakers’ duties,” now found herself burdened with dreadful practical responsibilities and with the loathsome task of giving orders, something that, despite the idiosyncrasies of her leftist views, she downright abhorred, especially because the need to keep a constant vigil on her maids inevitably distracted her from her work.

In this state of mind, my work cannot flourish. I would have time now, but I’m always obsessed with what is taking place in the servants’ quarters. I’m on the alert all the time, anxiously thinking, “Now I’ll have to order this, now I’ll have to order that.” I doubt that I’ll ever be able to get rid of this nightmare. I hate giving orders as much as I hate associating with the servants, but instead these people want to be ordered around or to order others around. They won’t understand the concept of honest, unsupervised collaboration. I don’t feel comfortable either as a supervisor or as the lady of the house who chats with her maid.⁵

And while a man can, without effort, ignore what goes on inside the house and concentrate on his work, a woman/housewife is constantly on the alert

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lest any of her maids try to steal from her. “I have given up on an intelligent life, and that’s all there is to it,” she claims in the same letter. “Unless, she is a millionaire, a woman is but a servant, and if she is a millionaire she cannot be intelligent because she lives among too many distractions: she never gets to the bottom of anything.”⁶ Her resentment of the privilege that grants men the possibility of devoting themselves exclusively to their career is palpable: “If I could just finish my book! If these damned males knew how greater than theirs is our desire to do the things they regard in high esteem but then prevent us from accomplishing.”⁷

Finally, in 1939, squeezing in time between friends’ visits and social commitments, Masino managed to complete the manuscript of *Birth and Death of the Housewife*, but her dark portrayal of marriage and family led the Fascist censors to criticize the book harshly and demand that Masino remove any and all words that might even remotely suggest that it took place in Italy, as well as words such as “‘Warrant Officer,’ ‘Prefect,’ ‘Homeland,’ and ‘Nation,’ which seemed to be contaminated by the overall disrespectful tone of the story” (*BDH* 211). Despite her notorious rebelliousness, Masino complied with the order. Yet, the odyssey of the novel was not over: in 1944, when the book was ready to be published, the Bompiani printing house was destroyed in a bombing, and all of the copies were lost. The book finally came out in 1945, obtaining good reviews, but it was already too late: as the critic Beatrice Manetti points out, “if the protagonist’s ‘defeatism’ had been deemed offensive by Fascist censors, now, in the midst of the enthusiasm for the recent liberation and the frenzy for reconstruction, it had become simply incomprehensible.”⁸ Incomprehensible even to herself, at times, as Masino confessed in a note at the end of the novel: her attempt to restore the book to the way it was before the bombing, relying solely on her proofs, resulted in “a few absurdities” here and there. At any rate, she concluded, such oddities might indeed complement her contradictory portrayal of the Housewife, although by the time the book was published, Masino could hardly identify with her heroine anymore.

Too bold for some, too bitter for others, *Birth and Death of the Housewife* was and remains an “inconvenient” novel, and just like its protagonist, it resists definition: Masino’s tone is at times aggressive and shocking, at other times somber, almost elegiac. Mirroring a leitmotif of death and decay as inextricably tied to the cycles of history, foul images of a “crushed slug” or a “rotten orange” contain “the splendor and decline of great dynasties” (*BDH* 19). Like a camera lens, Masino’s gaze zooms in on minute details and immediately widens to encompass

the breadth of the universe. Thus, the young Housewife's first menstruation fades into the sunset, and her pain blends with the pain of an aching sky. Such lyrical moments in the novel stand in sharp contrast to the theatrical sections—usually constructed around a social event that marks the Housewife's advancement in the puppet show of existence. In these sections, Masino displays a consummate ability in handling the grotesque genre and manipulates the language accordingly, accelerating the pace and constructing dark, witty dialogues reminiscent of a Grand Guignol play. The influence of Surrealism and of de Chirico's metaphysical art are evident in the account of the Housewife's journey through a valley full of statues. Unpredictability is a distinct characteristic of Masino's style, and if on the one hand it contributes to her multilayered narrative, on the other hand it relegates her to the hazy realm of indefinable writers. Critics commonly agree that her writing is closer to Surrealism than to magical realism in the sense that she is more drawn toward the unconscious and the realm of dreams than toward the acknowledgment of a magical element hidden in everyday things. And yet, although not fully embracing magical realism, she certainly absorbed its main concept. When asked, in 1982, what the literary journal *900* (where Bontempelli had first theorized magical realism, and to which she herself had contributed) had meant for her, she answered:

Who knows? Perhaps it was a natural acceptance of any sort of imagination, an acknowledgment that imagination is the most distinctive human reality. At the same time, it was the tendency to mythicize every ordinary reality in order to expand man's horizons and give him a legendary stature. City or town—as long as their boundaries, beyond the barriers of clichés and rhetoric, could belong to any city and any town.⁹

As it was for Bontempelli, for Masino, too, “fantasy and imagination, just like dreams, belong to humanity and therefore they are *reality*.”¹⁰ But if in Bontempelli imagination was always held on a tight leash, constantly watched and controlled by the weapons of style, more often than not Masino gives imagination free rein, allowing it to delve into the darkest recesses of the unconscious.

The combination of an unrestrained imagination, a metamorphic style, and a controversial subject matter make *Birth and Death of the Housewife* a rich and complex work that does not merely invite readers to reflect on women's fetters and options, but forces them to do so. Masino's demand that

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the Housewife be regarded as a symbol constitutes a provocation that cannot possibly be ignored. Readers may choose to see in the Housewife a female Christ-figure, or a spokesperson for generations of women who, like Masino, have unwillingly turned into housewives, or even an unintentional accomplice in a chauvinistic representation that will not allow for intellectual aspirations to coexist with wifehood and motherhood. Still, defying all interpretations and standing alone as a unique, unjustly dismissed phenomenon among the heroines of twentieth-century Italian literature, Masino's protagonist remains an uncomfortable, enigmatic figure whose impudent determination to challenge the bulwarks of traditional female roles reaches beyond historical boundaries and resounds powerfully with contemporary readers.

About the Author¹¹

In 1948, the forty-year-old Paola Masino gave up her literary career and chose to devote herself exclusively to journalism, translations, and the organization and preservation of her partner's writings. This decision is quite puzzling, coming from a woman who certainly did not epitomize a quiet female figure merely content with performing a support role in her man's career. At age sixteen the precocious Masino had already written a play, *Le tre Marie* ("The Three Marias"), and boldly approached none other than Luigi Pirandello, asking him to stage it. Although the work was never performed nor published, the encounter with Pirandello marked her formal introduction to the literary world, to which she had been attracted since childhood. Paola Masino was born in Pisa in 1908, and her family moved to Rome soon after her birth. Her father first kindled her interest in literature and art. While he banned childhood readings that exuded sentimentality, he encouraged her to read the Bible, Shakespeare, masterful storytellers such as Andersen, the brothers Grimm, and Perrault, as well as the great nineteenth-century novelists, particularly French and Russian. The works of Dickens and Dostoevsky had a profound influence on the young Masino, who set out on a lifelong, almost obsessive exploration of man's dark nature. During the same period, she became deeply interested in religion and delved into the world's sacred texts, from which she reemerged an atheist, but forever haunted by the concepts of sin and sacrifice.

A rebel by nature, Masino interrupted her studies before obtaining a high school diploma, but continued to write and, three years after her encounter with

Pirandello, she met the writer Massimo Bontempelli, who was to become her companion for the next thirty-three years, until Bontempelli's death in 1960. Bontempelli was thirty years older than Masino and separated; consequently, their relationship was considered scandalous, and in 1929, barely of age (which was twenty-one at the time), Masino moved—or was moved—to Paris to avoid rumors, and Bontempelli soon joined her.

In Paris, Masino worked for the Bureau International de Coopération Intellectuelle and for the French periodical, *L'Europe Nouvelle*. At the time, Paris swarmed with Italian intellectuals and artists, from de Chirico to Marinetti, Moravia, Savinio, and Pirandello himself, with whom Masino and Bontempelli maintained a close friendship that lasted until Pirandello's death in 1936. The couple missed no opportunity to spend time with the Italian group, and also made contact with other remarkable figures such as Ramón Gómez de la Serna, André Gide, and Paul Valéry. Masino and Bontempelli returned to Italy in 1931, and during the same year Masino's first collection of short stories, *The Decay of Death* (*Decadenza della morte*) was published. The bold imagery and natural fascination with the fantastic already reveal an uncommon talent in the young writer. Of particular interest, as Giamila Yehya points out,¹² is the protagonist of the short story, "Conversion" ("Conversione"), whose "unbridled desire to be a human monster" and therefore to shun physical beauty in a quest for inner sublimity anticipates some of the themes in *Birth and Death of the Housewife*.

Only a few months later, the novel *Mount Ignoso* (*Monte Ignoso*) was published and was awarded the prestigious Viareggio Prize. Masino's writing, however, did not please everyone: Carlo Emilio Gadda, for example, harshly criticized the novel, mentioning among its "enormous sins" a style that reached "the limits of a Futurism of the worst kind," characterized by "hallucinatory scribbles" and an endless wavering between the "symbolical-fantastic and the real."¹³ Nevertheless, in 1933 Masino's second novel, *Suburbs* (*Periferia*), was awarded another Viareggio Prize. The award stirred criticism because of the novel's crude portrayal of childhood, and Masino subsequently became a target of the Fascist regime, despite the fact that censors had ignored her controversial short story, "Hunger" ("Fame"), published a few months earlier, in which a desperate father yields to the request of his starving children and kills them. Still in 1933, Masino joined Bontempelli and Pirandello in Argentina for the premiere of Pirandello's *When One Is Someone*.

In 1934 Masino and Bontempelli moved to Rome, and Masino began to collect her reflections in a notebook, a practice that she continued for most

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of her life. Pirandello's death in 1936 came as a deep shock to Masino, who wrote in her notebook:

I loved Pirandello, not as a man, a relative, or a friend, but as an element of the world that I know. When they told me he was dead, it was as if all of a sudden they had announced to me that the grass, the clouds, or the herds of sheep had disappeared from the planet. . . . This death has left me so disheartened that, for a few days now, I've been craving for sleep. To sleep so that I won't hear the noise of a life that to me seems hopelessly tattered. Writing is now a useless attempt to mend it.¹⁴

In 1938 Masino completed her second volume of short stories, *Big Tale* (*Racconto grosso*), and began to write *Birth and Death of the Housewife*. In 1938 her short story, "Hunger," was reprinted in the literary magazine *Le grandi firme*, and this time Mussolini ordered the magazine to be suppressed. In November of the same year, Bontempelli was expelled from the Fascist party and sent to Venice on unofficial confinement. Bontempelli and Masino's Venetian home became a regular haunt for intellectuals and artists: Arturo Martini, Giorgio de Chirico, Filippo De Pisis, Corrado Alvaro, and Anna Maria Ortese among others. In 1941 *Big Tale* was published.

Between 1941 and 1942, *Birth and Death of the Housewife* appeared in installments in the weekly magazine *Tempo*. The Fascist censors intervened, demanding several changes. Still in 1941, Masino began to collaborate with the magazine *Domus*, where she published *Dialogues on Harmonic Living* (*Dialoghi della vita armonica*), eighteen reflections on home design and architecture. She also began to write poetry, which had been her passion during adolescence. In 1943, while in Rome with Bontempelli, she published in *Il Popolo di Roma* a disillusioned article titled "Youth between Two Wars" ("Gioventù fra due guerre"). As a result, her name was included among the intellectuals to be deported to the north. For nine months during the Italian Resistance Movement, Bontempelli and Masino hid in Rome. In 1944, together with other intellectuals, Masino and Bontempelli founded and directed the weekly magazine *Città*, in which Masino wrote articles not only supporting the republic and social activism among intellectuals, but also defending autonomy

from political groups. In 1945 *Birth and Death of the Housewife* was finally published.

Masino published more poems, and she wrote for several magazines. Between 1946 and 1949, Masino continued her work as a journalist, and often wrote in support of women's rights. More of her short stories appeared in magazines. Her poems were collected in the volume *Poems (Poesie)*, which was published in 1947. She began to collaborate with the communist magazine *Vie nuove*, but despite her left-wing sympathies, she remained politically independent. In 1950 Masino and Bontempelli moved back to Rome. Bontempelli's illness, which had already started to manifest itself in the early 1940s, became more serious, and Masino intensified her work as a journalist to support her partner. She also published more poems, and she began to write librettos and to translate texts from French. During the same period, she undertook a massive project aimed at organizing Bontempelli's works in an archive, an activity that she continued for the rest of her life. Although the pressure of her work seemed to have exhausted her creative flair, she feverishly continued to write in her notebooks. Massimo Bontempelli died in 1960, and Masino gradually abandoned her work as a journalist to dedicate herself full-time to Bontempelli's archive. *Birth and Death of the Housewife* was reprinted in 1970 by Bompiani, by La Tartaruga in 1982, and by Isbn Edizioni in 2009. Paola Masino died in Rome in 1989.

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“Blood Wedding.” Trans. Louise Rozier. *Absinthe: New European Writing* 9 (2008): 112–18.

Translator’s Note

The challenge of translating a work such as *Nascita e morte della massaia* into English is twofold. First, a justification for taking up such a task is necessary. Does this novel still speak to readers more than sixty years after its publication, and after so many other novels have addressed issues of women’s frustration and inner conflicts? I maintain that it does, and that the reason lies precisely in the element that made the novel unwelcome among Masino’s contemporaries: Masino’s language, with its leaps and spirals, tantalizes the reader and makes it impossible to remain unmoved before the Housewife’s frantic attempt to make sense of her fate. This leads to the second challenge in translating the book: handling a language that neurotically shifts from being fervent and almost lyrical, to dryly sarcastic and theatrical. The translator needs to become a juggler, a funambulist, and chase Masino’s ever-changing style in the hope of capturing (although it sounds like a paradox) its fluctuating quality. This project is at the same time exhilarating and humbling; the translator who undertakes it cannot choose to remain passive, lest she lose control of the language in the process of conveying its prismatic quality to the reader. Hence, the notion of

a “transparent translation” is put to the test and comes away defeated because the original text itself is never transparent.

The translation of loaded terms such as “*uomo/uomini*” was particularly problematic: because the mood and the style of the novel are constantly shifting, opting for consistency in their translation would actually have been less true to the nature of the book than treating them, each time, according to their context. Therefore, I translated the terms as “men,” “humans,” or “human beings” depending on the specific tone of each passage. For instance, “men” (rather than “people”) creates a sharper contrast to the Housewife who, as a young bride, reflects on how afraid she used to be of the looming sky, when instead “some men even walk with their heads tilted back, staring into the depths of the air without feeling dizzy” (*BDH* 48). On the other hand, the divisive power of spider webs affects all human relations without distinction, and thus, “they hung about and stretched across the air between one human being and another” (*BDH* 42). With regard to the cycles of life and death, when the Housewife observes that “what matters is to produce soil, to serve the humans they [the dead] themselves generated” (*BDH* 19), “humans” has a more encompassing meaning than “men.” For the same reason, in the same passage I translated “*figli*” as “children” (not “sons”) and “*padri*” as “parents” (not “fathers”). In several instances I translated the terms “*uomini*” (when referred to both men and women) and “*genere umano*” as “mankind,” which, while being—even etymologically—gender neutral, to feminist ears might seem slightly partial toward males. In doing so I aimed to recreate, at least on a subliminal level, the sense of imbalance that surfaces in Masino’s cry for women’s emancipation by means of a male-dominated language.

Giving voice (albeit a foreign one) to an author whose utter originality and historical significance were misunderstood or ignored in her own country is an ambitious task, but I hope to have recreated the complexity of a voice that, in an era when a woman’s task was to be silent, dauntlessly confronts and destabilizes the dialectics of gender roles.

Notes

1. Paola Masino, *Io, Massimo e gli altri: Autobiografia di una figlia del secolo* (Milan: Rusconi, 1995), 66.

2. *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, cit., 71.

3. *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, cit., 52.

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4. *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, cit., 81.

5. *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, cit., 82.

6. *Io, Massimo e gli altri*, cit., 83.

7. *Paola Masino*, Eds. Francesca Bernardini Napoletano and Marinella Mascia Galateria (Milan: Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, 2001), 23.

8. *Paola Masino*, cit., 52. On January 7, 1946, when Masino finally received her copy of the novel, she commented, dejectedly, “It was printed very poorly, and it is full of typos. It is truly a cursed book.” In Beatrice Manetti, *Una carriera à rebours: I quaderni d'appunti di Paola Masino* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2001), 23. In 1982, just before the new edition of *Nascita e morte della massaia* was published, Masino remarked, “This book needs to be presented as an archeological find, with its cryptic jargon and its deaf areas that reflect—perhaps—the deaf stagnancy of hope, not only at certain times of political history, but also in the history of our own lives.” In Silvia Giacomoni, “Introduction,” *Nascita e morte della massaia*, by Paola Masino (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1982), 5. While the stormy genesis of this novel undeniably affected the unity of the work to the point that Masino later claimed she hardly recognized herself in it, it also (unintentionally) mirrors the protagonist’s (and Masino’s) inner conflicts, resulting paradoxically in a more faithful portrayal of the Housewife’s and of the artist’s development.

9. Enrico Falqui, *Il futurismo—Il novecentismo* (Turin: ERI, 1953), 116. In *La fama e il silenzio: Scrittrici dimenticate del primo Novecento* (Venice: Marsilio 2002) 60, Giuliano Manacorda recognizes some traces of Bontempelli’s magical realism in Masino’s writings, but also, and perhaps more so, an influence of Surrealism, although he admits that Masino’s style is utterly original and hard to associate with any particular movement.

10. Manetti, cit., 63.

11. The following biographical information is drawn largely from the volume *Paola Masino*, Eds. Francesca Bernardini Napoletano and Marinella Mascia Galateria, cit., which also contains precious material on the author’s works and rare photographs not only of Masino and her family, but of Pirandello, Bontempelli, Palazzeschi, Aleramo and many other writers. For a complete list of available material by Paola Masino, see *L’archivio di Paola Masino: Inventario*, Ed. Francesca Bernardini Napoletano. Rome: Casa Editrice Università La Sapienza, 2004. For interviews with Masino, see *Confessioni di scrittori. Interviste con se stessi*, Ed. Leone Piccioni. Turin: ERI, 1951 and Sandra Pettrignani, *Le signore della scrittura. Interviste*. Milan: La Tartaruga, 1984. For an in-depth analysis of Masino’s works, see Louise Rozier, *Il mito e l’allegoria nella narrativa di Paola Masino*, Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004.

12. *Paola Masino*, cit., 64–65.

13. Carlo Emilio Gadda, “Review of *Monte Igroso*, by Paola Masino,” *Solaria* 6 (1931): 7–8.

14. *Paola Masino*, cit., 48.

As a child, the housewife was dusty and sluggish. Her mother had forgotten to raise her and now bore a grudge against her because of it. She would say over and over, “What will you do when I am no more? A day will come when you’ll kill me with all this heartbreak. Then I’ll be curious to see how you manage alone in life.”

The child kept quiet, heavy with resentment against herself for being doomed to kill her mother with heartbreak. Obsessed by that thought, she searched in all the books and newspapers she could get her hands on for cases of death by affliction. Either she could not find any, or there were so few that she plunged into an even more desperate acceptance of the fate that was to turn her into a character, a cruel prototype. Deeply engrossed in the idea that all that was left for her was to perfect her sad role as the murderous daughter, she had already started to reduce all other thoughts and motions to a minimum. Lying inside a trunk that served as her wardrobe, bed, dresser, table, and bedroom, a trunk full of blanket rags, bits of bread, books, and funeral remains (tin flowers from a wreath, coffin studs, widow veils, white ribbons with “TO OUR DEAR LITTLE ANGEL” written in gold letters, and so forth), day after day the child would enumerate her thoughts on death. She would think and bite her nails; when there were no more nails and no more thoughts, she would chew on pieces of bread and leaf through books in search of more nourishment.

Dust fell from ceilings and turned into dandruff on her head, while bread crumbs and pieces of paper got stuck under her nails. Moss grew between the cracks of the trunk, and the blankets in which she wrapped herself to play out the part of the king who is about to be decapitated or the fatal assassin were coated with mildew and spider webs. The trunk reeked of forest and ruins, and inside of it the child took shape. She never had thoughts of pity

for others or herself. Never did she rebel against the idea that she was going to kill her mom with heartbreak. She had a notion of necessity as something superior and unquestionable. Indeed, she was not interested in questioning such a notion; what she wanted was to discover its causes and effects. Because of her indifference, the child had not yet realized that, while her body was made of meat like the one lying on the tables of market stands or hanging in butcher shops, she nevertheless carried, hidden inside that body, a thought and a sex that were her reason for existence. But the child was unaware of thought because she was inside of it, in the same way that algae are unaware of the sea, and birds of the sky. The child had yet to grab an idea from the outside and brandish it against life. She just squatted, oblivious to herself, an authentic lump of thought without the slightest glimpse of intelligence.

Wandering around that gloomy forest of fantasies that she had conjured up around herself, she had invented violence, torture, suicide. From fire and flood, which she had learned about who knows where, she had created her own raptures and children. By then, she had come to feed on that unknown sex that made her dizzy. The pungent odor she emanated inspired her to sing psalms, as if she were wrapped in incense. She sang the products of her imagination and practiced a complex system of sensations that were to bring her bitter disappointments. As soon as she abandoned them, as she would later on, they pushed her to a heroic foolishness. From the agony of the flesh she would glide into images of death, although she was distracted by the notions of death that her family provided day after day. "Pain is when I slap you, death is when the procession takes you to the graveyard." She was attracted by death as by a summit, a flight.

Nothing of what is known as anguish frightened her, but ever since she could remember she had had a recurring dream, one so distressing that it kept her from sleeping: spider webs were all around, above and beneath her, trapping her from all sides. They did not reach her, but they moved together to and fro and tried to wrap themselves around her without managing to even touch her lightly. As soon as they appeared, she immediately started to wave her hands before her face and brush off her neck, suddenly unable to move a step, as if her knees were tied in a knot. Little by little, those astral ties began to clutter inside of her, too. Her brain felt soft and smooth, her heart hanging from a thread, and if she tried to speak, her voice became tangled in a low buzz inside her throat. Then the child's whole body became contracted

as she slept, and her limbs twitched with a fierce shiver, as if she were overpowered by a force that crushed her and sucked every fluid out of her. When at last, after struggling obstinately against herself, she managed to wake up, for a long time she could neither cry nor speak: she just lay as if submerged in a chilly drool.

Years of this torture had estranged her even more from her family, since she would only rest when she was sure the people around her were wide awake and ready to come to her rescue. At night she carried a lamp with her to the bottom of the trunk and read until dawn without even daring to raise her eyes from the page, lest she might catch sight of those ghostly spider webs reflected in the air and ready to slide under her eyelids as soon as she lowered them.

For these reasons, her family had come to regard her as nothing more than a piece of furniture. Every morning the maids would dust her head, sweep her feet, shake the dirt from her clothes and fold them back against her body. On Easter Sunday they would push her onto the balcony among the chairs and the kitchen cupboards. They would wash her with baking soda, polish her hair with wax, oil her joints, and check the skin on her face and hands to make sure it did not have termites; they would arrange a garland of wallflowers on her head and tie ribbons of blue or pink tissue paper around her neck and wrists. Then they would push her into the dining room among the Easter cakes and the trays of boiled eggs so that the priest could bless her, poor creature.

Sometimes the cook, who bragged about her compassion for animals, dragged the child with her when she went to the market so that she could get some fresh air, poor mongrel that no one wanted to be bothered with. But the child did not pay attention to the air. Instead, she stared at the ground, at the things putrefying on the pavement, at the servants' heels as they trod on patches of green, at the rivulets of blood clotting between cracks like centuries against human life. In every crushed slug, in every rotten orange she pictured the splendor and decline of great dynasties; footsteps came and went, forming solid layers and, stepping on the rubble stuck in the holes of the piazza, created geology. Further down, the child saw the dead who, pressing against each other, would push with their bones, grab on to each other's shins, bite the clueless newcomers who would try to resist, and force them to mix their remains with those of their worst enemies; because what matters is to produce soil, to serve the humans they themselves generated. Humans. We were summoned to this

planet from who knows where, and now we have to feed it. Now the dead who carried us in their wombs must carry us on their backs, on their hands and faces. And we must do the same. Children crush their parents' faces and believe themselves unaware of it.

But the child was not unaware of it, although she was unaware of how humans are born, and perhaps even *that* humans are born. The only thing she knew about, and absolutely wanted, was their death. Indeed, she would say “to arrive” or “to be born” meaning “to die.” Therefore, she despised the cook who led her around, or those who dodged the garbage and who made sure they didn't soil themselves with the coagulated blood and stench. At the market, she began to love food because to her it appeared as a new way to give and take death. She would stare at the concave stomachs of oxen hanging from iron hooks on the ceiling beams of the butcher shops. They oscillated slowly, deprived of their organs, which were hanging nearby, no longer tied to their natural receptacles, but to strange roots made of metal, and even that metal did not belong to that place, but had been torn out of the earth's body. The child drew the conclusion that she, too, must have something inside of her that the world needed and that mankind would snatch out of her if she did not offer it willingly. The details of this robbery were still completely unknown to her, but at the very thought she felt as if they were twisting and squeezing her bowels, and was forced to walk in a grotesque manner, with her legs stiff and contracted. In those moments, she also experienced the sensation—a terrible sensation for her—of being immortal, of being unable, despite all her efforts, to be rid once and for all of the body they had put on her. She would then stand on tiptoe and breathe facing up to the sky.

She saw the heavenly vault, well organized around the Zenith. She knew that the Nadir and its stars were on the opposite side. Fixed points, as necessary as the heart, the lungs, the eyes, and the liver in one's body. What if a constellation, like an organ of the body, were struck by an illness and wasted away or went gangrenous; would the celestial face then become livid just like a human face? Would the air, like some foul sick person, turn from blue to yellowish, from clear to thick and slobbering? Would the sky drag purulent rags and scales of infected air over the head of humanity? The child felt overwhelmed by a tempestuous compassion; she wanted the sky to become leprous at all costs, so she could show everyone that she would stick her hands into its sores and feel no disgust. What does the blood of the sky