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Identities in Progress:
Coming of Age in Contemporary Italian Literature

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Declaration

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Summary

This doctoral dissertation presents a comparative study of the challenges of growth portrayed in contemporary Italian literature, by looking at six coming-of-age stories published at the turn of the millennium (1995-2008). The study aims to unveil what it means to grow up in the early 21st century, and to generate a meditation on the status of the genre by understanding how the novel of formation is adapting to, or resisting an increasingly liquid society. In order to achieve these objectives, the methodology draws on theories from sociology of youth to philosophy, and from literary criticism to youth studies, to feed back into the analysis of the novels. In this way, the study uses interdisciplinarity to capture the vibrant dialogue that literature is able to establish with the social world.

The novel of formation has historically not only represented, but also provided symbolic resources, to make sense of the process of growth, especially when dealing with young characters. Above all, teenagers are at the forefront of change: they are in a status of liminality in-between childhood and adulthood, and they are facing the difficult challenge of constructing their identities while being subject to the forces of social change. Even more in the context of a liquid society, as described by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, dynamics of transition, continuity and instability redefine young people's experiences. This is why the study begins, in *Chapter One*, by establishing how our understanding of identity has changed by analysing three paradigmatic shifts; from essential to constructed, from solid to liquid, and from adult to children.

After a brief overview of the tradition of the coming-of-age story in Italian literature, the research focuses on the analysis of Mohsen Melliti's *I bambini delle rose* (1995), Simona Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (1997), Niccolò Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura* (2001), Diego De Silva's *Certi bambini* (2001), Isabella Santacroce's *Zoo* (2006) and Tiziano Scarpa's *Stabat Mater* (2008) as a representative but not exhaustive sample.

Chapter Two discusses how different temporal configurations and different focalisations are able to challenge the idea of growth as a linear trajectory. *Chapter Three* focuses on the spatial arrangement of the story as a lens to expose the physical and symbolical locations of the characters in respect to society. *Chapter Four* looks at the role of otherness in constructing one's identity and to develop a sense of agency.

In conclusion, the study advocates for a renewed critical effort to engage with coming-of-age stories that subvert our traditional understanding of growth as a linear, empowering, gradual process of discovery of the self and the world. Being true to the constitutive

liquidity of contemporary society, as much as to the inherent dynamism of the novelistic form, this study wants to move past the traditional idea of formation as the unique paradigm of growth, to pave the way for a debate on new patterns of coming of age.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Coming of age: The Process of Becoming

Life experiences of young people in contemporary Italian society have changed quite significantly in the last decades. Many of these changes are shared across many western societies, due to the rise of a globalized and capitalistic economic market, which in turn has affected the employment market, but also due to the rise of new social policies and lifestyles. As sociologists of youth, Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel explain:

young people today have to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents: this is true irrespective of social background or gender. Moreover, as many of these changes have come about within a relatively short period of time, points of reference which by serving as clear route maps previously helped smooth processes of social reproduction, have become obscure.¹

These changes have been explored in different ways by critics in the field of sociology, such as Andy Furlong, Fred Cartmel, Joanna Wyn and Dan Woodman, who recently focused on young people's subjectivities and the changing nature of contemporary cultural practices. A key consideration emerging in the past 30 years, is that traditional frameworks are no longer able to cast light on the "obscurity" of contemporary experiences of growth. For this reason Furlong and Cartmel advocate for a sociology of youth that looks back at some key theoretical concepts in order to adapt them to suit the modern condition.²

Here, I argue that a similar effort is required from literary criticism when dealing with contemporary coming-of-age stories. With this expression, I refer to a specific configuration of the novel of formation: while the novel of formation generally "lega la storia di un soggetto a eventi sociali, fissandone l'avventura di vita tra traversie, esperienze varie, crescita del proprio sé e della coscienza che gli è propria,"³ the coming-of-age story refers specifically to characters who are on the cusp of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. Acknowledging that the novel of formation continues to have

¹ Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, *Young people and Social Change: New Perspectives* (McGraw Hill: Open University Press, [1997] second edition 2007), p. 1.

² Ibidem (Furlong & Cartmel).

³ Franco Cambri goes back to Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-1615) as inaugurating a modern sensibility that is later developed once the novelistic form "lega la storia di un soggetto a eventi sociali, fissandone l'avventura di vita tra traversie, esperienze varie, crescita del proprio sé e della coscienza che gli è propria. Si pensi solo a *La principessa di Clèves* di Madame de la Fayette (1678), romanzo psico-socio-esistenziale che sarà prototipo e farà scuola nella narrazione moderna." See Franco Cambri, "Formarsi tra i romanzi" in *Studi sulla formazione*, 22, 2019, pp. 125-135.

something to say in portraying the tensions of today's world, I argue that it also demands a critical effort of retheorization to keep pace with the changes of contemporary experiences. As Massimo Galimberti declares, the novel of formation “è una forma che evolve con il passare dei decenni, che si adatta all'evoluzione del contesto cui si riferisce, per cui è sempre in divenire e mai stanca.”⁴

Therefore, the question that arises is whether the traditional parameters which we have used to understand growth are still relevant, and to what extent. In many respects, the study of contemporary coming-of-age stories provides an ideal opportunity to discuss the changing impact of experiences on young people's lives, bringing to the forefront key questions of growth and identity.

Given these premises, this study investigates coming of age as it is represented in contemporary Italian fiction at the turn of the millennium. My critical approach is to bring together and discuss ideas and theories that occur in different fields, such as literature and sociology of youth, which nevertheless share the same focus on growth. The aim is to understand young people's experiences in relation to their identities as well as in dialogue with contemporary Italian society. My analysis is grounded on the close reading of six novels, which are Mohsen Melliti's *I bambini delle rose* (1995), Simona Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (1997), Niccolò Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura* (2001), Diego De Silva's *Certi bambini* (2001), Isabella Santacroce's *Zoo* (2006) and Tiziano Scarpa's *Stabat Mater* (2008)⁵ as a representative, but not exhaustive corpus of coming-of-age stories.

The common thread of these works – which are written by both male and female writers and present both male and female children – is the age of the protagonists, which is between 10 and 18 years old, based on what the World Health Organization defines as adolescence.⁶ This age range is particularly interesting because it is devoted to physical,

⁴ Massimo Galimberti, “Il romanzo di formazione” in *Romanzo popolare: narrazione, pubblico e storie del cinema italiano negli anni duemila*. Edited by Pedro Armocida Pedro and Laura Buffoni (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2016).

⁵ The editions of the novels used in this dissertation are: Mohsen Melliti, *I bambini delle rose* (Roma: Edizioni Lavoro, [1995] 2000); Simona Vinci, *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997); Niccolò Ammaniti, *Io non ho paura* (Torino: Einaudi [2001] 2011); Diego De Silva, *Certi bambini* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001); Isabella Santacroce, *Zoo* (Roma: Fazi Editore, 2006) and Tiziano Scarpa, *Stabat Mater* (Torino: Einaudi, 2008).

⁶ Adolescence is generally the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. The exact age range is still debated, because different societies have different ways of understanding adolescence; for some adolescence is narrowly equated with puberty culminating in reproductive maturity. In other societies adolescence is understood in broader terms that encompass also the psychological, social, and moral maturation. However, here I use the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of an adolescent as any person between 10 and 19 years old.

psychological and social development: not only are these years attached to “growing up”, but during these years identity is also framed as an uncertain structure to be explored. Adolescence is in effect a life-stage still in oscillation between childhood and adulthood, when individuals are looking for self-definition and agency, yet still needing guidance and support. As sociologists Wyn and White explain, everyone grows up, but youth is a specific life-stage in which young people engage deeply with other social actors such as family, school, welfare, peers and so on while discovering their selves.⁷

My aim is not to account for all literary representations of growth in Italian literature, but rather to unveil some broader concerns about growing up today. Therefore, this study is guided by a main research question, which is ‘*What does growth look like at the turn of the 21st century?*’ and also responds to a secondary question, that is ultimately ‘*What does this genre look like in the 21st century?*’

To answer the first question, it is important to understand that the concept of growth is closely connected to the one of identity, even more when considering that – quite literally – during adolescence “each year passed is a step towards full personhood”⁸. This idea of growing up into a fully formed identity corresponds to the horizon of the coming of age in Italy, that legally happens at 18 years of age and marks the transition to “adulthood” as the definitive end of dependency. These years see a process of constant negotiation between physical change, familial dynamics and experiences of recognition through socialization and in relation to the models suggested or imposed by the dominant culture. On this basis, I argue that a framework to understand the growth today must include identity, formulated in terms of both continuity and change, but also social determinants (such as class, gender, ethnicity and geography) and social processes, as explored by Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity.

To answer the second question and look broadly at the genre, I have selected six novels that allow to help question many traditional aspects of formation (such as sexual awakening, disillusionment, call to moral responsibility, relationship with otherness) in the light of the liquid society that has produced said novels. These novels are exemplary because of the dialogue they entail with some key trends that I will discuss in chapter one; in this sense, they are not necessarily to be praised aesthetically but rather function as literary lenses to look at some social processes in place. In this thesis, I indeed argue that

⁷ Wyn Joanna and White Rob, *Rethinking Youth* (London: Sage, 1997).

⁸ Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Growing-up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependency in the Life Course* (London: Sage, 1993), p. 61.

these coming-of-age stories are not to be considered as a degraded version of novels of formation, nor as mere commercial products, but instead as new narrative configurations that account for the liquidity of contemporary experiences, leading not only to new representations but also to new patterns of growth. If growing up is the task specifically of young people, then the coming-of-age story is the subgenre devoted to portray such a process. Since literature provides a vicarious experience of reality, the coming-of-age story becomes the best suited to expose what growth looks like.

2. Terminology

2.1 Coming-of-age story, *Bildungsroman* and *romanzo di formazione*

Focusing on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist, the German novel of education – the *Bildungsroman* – ⁹ has been the privileged genre to portray growth between the end of the 18th and 19th century. Driving emphasis on the process of formation of the young hero, these narratives were concerned with the realization of emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and moral potential, the so-called *Bildung*,¹⁰ as portrayed in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-6). The *Bildungsroman* has not only provided a lens to interpret the modern process of growth, but it has also created a deep-seated image of youth.

Among the vast number of scholars studying the structural and theoretical components of the genre, Franco Moretti has examined the hero of the *Bildungsroman* by looking at the concept of youth. By focusing on young characters, who are naturally inclined to transformation and longing to define their identity, the *Bildungsroman* was able to portray a dynamic world, changing under the forces of industrialization and driven by the new bourgeoisie.¹¹ According to Moretti, the *Bildungsroman* entered a phase of crisis at the turn of the century when the premises of modernity change. New theories (such as psychoanalysis and Marxism), together with the rise of the political tensions that

⁹ Retrospectively used in 1819, when philologist Karl Morgenstern coined the term, the definition of *Bildungsroman* was attached to a certain kind of narrative, such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister Apprenticeship* (1796), rooting the genre in the German Enlightenment culture.

¹⁰ According to a study of the female *Bildungsroman* by Abel, Hirsch and Langland, the traditional male *Bildungsroman* was founded on the belief of a coherent self, on the faith in the possibility of development, on the emphasis on the social context and, however adverse, on the hero's integration with the community as an adult. The book expands this model to incorporate female patterns of realization but also of failed realization, in line with the limited social opportunities provided to female characters in comparison with male peers. See Abel, Hirsch and Langland, *Fictions of Female Development* (Dartmouth College Press, 1983).

¹¹ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The "Bildungsroman" in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987).

resulted in World War I, led the novelistic form to change irredeemably, devaluing the idea of growth as *Bildung* and projecting the individual in a completely different milieu.

Moretti's contested position on the "death" of the *Bildungsroman* is part of an unresolved debate on terminology, with some critics keen to narrow down the definition of *Bildungsroman* to the novels produced between the late 18th and 19th century, while others more willing to expand it to encompass also modern and contemporary stories of formation.¹² The Italian term "romanzo di formazione" somehow eludes this terminological debate: more than the German term, it mirrors the naturally dynamic attitude of the novelistic form by maintaining a degree of neutrality. Still, it is strongly indebted to the same idea promoted by the *Bildungsroman* of formation in terms of aiming towards "l'apprendimento, una progressiva assunzione di responsabilità e la maturità" from the hero's part.¹³ Like the definition of the *Bildungsroman*, the definition of the *romanzo di formazione* has to take in account different and unresolved critical positions. As Valentina Mascaretti notes "l'incertezza terminologica non è che l'aspetto esteriore di una profonda confusione teorica: questo genere viene esaminato infatti con troppa approssimazione, tanto che spesso si sente dire che tutti i romanzi, in fondo, possono dirsi di formazione."¹⁴

In fact, in the last decade this definition has also been addressed as problematic, since a lot of *romanzi di formazione* happen to present no signs of formation at all, so much that different definitions are constantly proposed by scholars. For example, in opposition to the realism of the *Bildungsroman* Ronald De Rooy suggests the concept of '(De)formazione', as an umbrella term applicable to specific transmedia narratives of deformation in the 1990s, because of their use of de-formative themes and stylistic choices.¹⁵

¹² "The term "Bildungsroman," or "novel of formation," remains at once one of the most successful and one of the most vexed contributions that German letters have made to the international vocabulary of literary studies. [...] The term is sometimes – especially within English departments – used so broadly that seemingly any novel might be subsumed by it. [...] Amongst specialists of German literature, however, a much more restrictive usage prevails. Generic classification is here carried out according to deductive principles, and texts are subsumed under the label if and only if they represent a specific aesthetic ideology. [...] The rise of feminist, post-colonial and minority studies during the 1980s and 90s led to an expansion of the traditional Bildungsroman definition; the genre was broadened to include coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models". Tobias Boes, "Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends" in *Literature Compass* (Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 230-232.

¹³ Massimo Galimberti, "Il romanzo di formazione" in Armocida and Buffoni (eds), *Romanzo popolare: narrazione, pubblico e storie del cinema italiano negli anni duemila* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2016).

¹⁴ Valentina Mascaretti, *La speranza violenta: Alberto Moravia e il romanzo di formazione* (Bologna: Gedit, 2006), p. 25.

¹⁵ "Alla base del realismo deformato si coglie spesso una delle forme più appariscenti e più frequenti di deformazione, cioè l'interazione tra il discorso letterario, le altre arti e i media di massa: accogliendo tecniche narrative, personaggi e procedure non strettamente letterarie, come per esempio quelle del cinema,

However, because the genre is by definition connected to the idea of transformation, its features also change and the “fixity” of new definitions scarcely appealed, so that even De Rooy *et al.* have to balance these instances of de-formation with a return to order happened in Italy post *gioventù cannibale*.

Particularly relevant to understand the status of the genre in Italy is *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento*, edited by Papini, Fioretti and Spignoli which, thanks to the contribution of sixty essays – presented in occasion of the annual conference of the *Società Italiana per lo Studio della Modernità Letteraria* in 2005 – reflects on the evolution of the *romanzo di formazione*.¹⁶ In particular, Clelia Martignoni's overview of the genre traces its evolution in Italy, from the *Voci* group to the coming-of-age stories of Nievo, Tozzi, Moravia, Bassani and Siti, with a brief reference to young writers such as Santacroce, Ballestra and Ammaniti.

What emerges from these critical works is that the idea of formation itself has changed over time, yet the generic nature of the Italian denomination has allowed enough space to show that the changes in the characteristic traits of youth corresponded to changes in their literary manifestations.

In the course of the reviewing the literature on the *Bildungsroman*, it became increasingly clear that much of the research focused strongly on the idea of adulthood rather than on the process of growth *in fieri*. Franco Moretti's study for example looks at the concept of youth and its significance for the genre by focusing on characters in their twenties, whose concerns are marriage, social achievement and career, struggling either to become integrated with society, or refusing such integration to indulge in a prolonged youth.¹⁷ This perspective excludes from consideration adolescent characters, those who have been in fact traditionally protagonists of fairy tales or adventure novels more than *Bildungsroman*.

della televisione e della pubblicità, la narrativa si è fatta sempre più intermediale”. De Rooy Donald, Mirisola Beniamino and Paci Vivian, *Romanzi di (de-)formazione* 1998-2010 (Firenze: Franco Cesati Editore, 2010), p. 13.

¹⁶ Papini, Fioretti and Spignoli, (eds), *Il romanzo di formazione nell'Ottocento e nel Novecento*, (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2007). Sixty essays are part of this collection. Among them identity becomes a core theme in Maffei, “Romanzi dove si formano le donne: ‘Le Confessioni di un Italiano’ e ‘Senilità’”; Manetti, “Formazioni di gruppo: il Bildungsroman collettivo del momento studentesco operaio, femminista”; Carotenuto, “Formazione e identità in ‘Effetti Personali’ di Francesca Duranti”; Trevisan, “Il romanzo di formazione resistenziale”; Iacoli, “Il Bodybildungsroman di Walter Siti”.

¹⁷ Moretti uses Lotman's principles of “transformation” and “classification” to distinguish types of novelistic emplotment. On this basis, he finds two alternative modalities; when the classification principle prevails, youth is experienced as a turbulent and transitory state towards adulthood, and it is typical of English and German *Bildungsroman*. When the transformation principle prevails, as in the case of many French and Russian novels, the integration between the young individual and society cannot happen harmoniously, so that achieving adulthood partially loses its appeal.

Building on this understanding and dealing with characters that are minors, I decided to use the term ‘coming-of-age stories’ to define the novels hereby examined. On this basis, I excluded those novels whose protagonists are already in their twenties or more, such as Brizzi’s *Bastogne* (1996), Stancanelli’s *Benzina* (1996),¹⁸ and several novels by Isabella Santacroce, Tiziano Scarpa and Niccolò Ammaniti published in their “cannibal” phase.¹⁹ The reason being that these older characters are in a different life-stage, dealing with college years, love affairs, professional life and employment, so that their growth involves a different set of concerns. Also, differently from the coming-of-age story, the novel of formation might cover a wider lifespan, moving from youth into full adulthood years of the protagonists, as in Giordano’s *La solitudine dei numeri primi* (2007) and Veronesi’s *Brucia Troia* (2008).²⁰

In contrast to the *Bildungsroman* that followed the entire arch of the hero’s development, the coming-of-age stories in this study portray young characters *before* they reach adulthood and often leaves them with their identity unresolved. Therefore, a core difference that lies in my decision to use the term coming-of-age story, is that the novels in this study fail to provide a holistic and comprehensive development of a coherent self.

As Paola Carmagnani suggest in her study of the genre, the coming-of-age story can even be considered an alternative model to the *Bildungsroman*, because it developed on a parallel trajectory. Appropriating and elaborating features of other genres (such as the fairy tale, the initiation and the adventure novels) it shows open-ended formations that usually reject the value of adulthood. While I believe that a wider study on the structural features that Carmagnani identifies is needed in support of this theory,²¹ I agree that ‘coming-of-age story’ seems a more flexible term, able to embrace that same dynamic nature of the Italian *romanzo di formazione*, disentangling the idea of growing up from the achievement of a status of maturity, so that it becomes more suitable to discuss what growth looks like in Italy today.

¹⁸ See Enrico Brizzi, *Bastogne* (Milano: Baldini e Castoldi, 1996) and Elena Stancanelli, *Benzina* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998).

¹⁹ Examples are Ammaniti’s *Branchie* (Ediesse, 1994), Santacroce’s *Trilogia dello Spavento: Fluo, Destroy, Luminal* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995-1998), Scarpa’s *Occhi sulla graticola* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997)

²⁰ See Sandro Veronesi’s *Brucia Troia* (Milano: Bompiani, 2007), Paolo Giordano’s *La solitudine dei numeri primi* (Milano: Mondadori, 2008).

²¹ Paola Carmagnani argues that the coming-of-age story is rooted in the adventure chronotope, so that instead of presenting a gradual accumulation of knowledge and an episodic structure typical of the *Bildungsroman*, it is built around an epiphanic moment culminating in a rite of passage that determines the fate of the character. Also, while the *Bildungsroman* revolves around the principle of reality, the coming-of-age story embraces an initiation structure that allows for more space for trauma and loneliness. See Paola Carmagnani, “The Coming of Age Story: narratives about growing up after the *Bildungsroman*” in *A Warm Mind-Shake* (Torino: Trauben, 2014), pp. 109-116.

Even though the theme of identity has been explored vastly in Italian literature, and it is today assuming even more of a central stage position,²² still adolescents seems to be insufficiently looked at. Despite a few key studies focusing on child characters, most notably within the field of children's literature such as Milena Bernardi's *Il cassetto segreto: letteratura per l'infanzia e romanzo di formazione* (2011) which discusses the itineraries of formation by looking at recurrent thematical representation, a direct and comprehensive view of the different models of growth for an adult readership is lacking.

This pointed to a gap in the most recent understanding of young characters, and this is the reason why I decided to look at the developmental experiences of the 9 year-old Michele from Niccolò Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura*, the 10 year-old Martina from *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, the 11 year-old Nico of *I bambini delle rose* but also Rosario from Diego De Silva's *Certi bambini*, the 16 year-old Cecilia from Tiziano Scarpa's *Stabat Mater* and the 18 year-old unnamed character from Isabella Santacroce's *Zoo*.

Many of these novels have been bestsellers, as in the case of Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura*. Others have been awarded prizes, the most notable being *Stabat Mater*, awarded the *Premio Strega* in 2009. Few have been adapted into movies, not only Ammaniti's but also *Certi bambini* by Diego De Silva, whose representation of a baby killer growing up a *camorrista* runs in parallel with Melliti's migrant characters working in the business of selling roses in *I bambini delle rose*. Others, such as Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* and Santacroce's *Zoo* have raised numerous debates because of the transgressive representations of underage female sexuality.

Lastly, these novels belong to a specific category of stories with adolescent characters that target an adult readership. Except for Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura* which can be considered a cross-over narrative, the other novels are clearly aiming at adult readers, because of their stylistic and thematic choices. This excludes novels that are explicitly considered part of contemporary children's and young-adult literature such as those of Bianca Pitzorno.²³ Other novels that might belong to the category of the coming-

²² It is not a coincidence that in the past ten years many novels dealing with coming-of-age years as part of a wider life-narrative have been awarded the prestigious *Premio Strega*; it's the case of Paolo Cognetti's *Le otto montagne* awarded in 2017, Alessandro Piperno's *Inseparabili* in 2012, Tiziano Scarpa's *Stabat Mater* in 2009, Paolo Giordano's *La solitudine dei numeri primi* in 2008 and Niccolò Ammaniti's *Come Dio comanda* in 2007. Many more novels have been successfully adapted into movies, signaling a precise interest in portraying childhood and youth years as key developmental moments for one's identity.

²³ Bianca Pitzorno (1942) is the most famous living Italian writers devoted to children's literature. In 1970 she published her first picture book for young readers, *Il grande raduno dei cow boy* and her last book was published in 2021 by Bompiani, and is entitled *Sortilegi*. Throughout her long career she has published more than 40 books, becoming an established author for children and young readers in Italy. Pitzorno has also focused specifically on female characters, exploring the challenges of being a girl in contemporary society.

of-age story and even present similar insights, such as the works of Erri de Luca or Stefano Benni²⁴ have been referred to briefly in the text or in the footnotes, opening up the opportunity for future investigations on the theme.

In regards to the authors,²⁵ with the exception of Stefania Lucamante's monography on Isabella Santacroce²⁶ there are no book-length studies on them. There are few doctoral dissertations which discuss aspects of their novels that I have used as references when relevant, such as Lara Santoro's analysis of the movie adaptation of De Silva's *Certi bambini* in her *I bambini e la mafia: Rappresentazioni letterarie e cinematografiche dell'infanzia nel genere-mafia del xxi secolo* (2011) and Giuliana Adamo's work on De Silva and Ammaniti, which provides an overview of the evolution of their poetics.²⁷ The majority of publications have analysed these authors' works in relation to the literary phenomenon of *gioventù cannibale* to which most of these authors (with the exclusion of Melliti) have been directly or indirectly affiliated in the 1990s.

Yet, the novels in this study have never been analysed together, in a dialogue that aims to discuss contemporary experiences of growth. The limited presence of critical literature on these novels is partially explained by the recent date of publication, so that we miss the temporal detachment necessary to fully understand the reach of these texts. Margherita Ganeri's observation that "il panorama 'maledetto' degli anni Novanta è ancora troppo magmatico per poter essere storicizzato. La mappa genetica delle ultime ramificazioni resta ancora in buona misura imperscrutabile"²⁸ remains pretty relevant.

Also, the novels examined in this thesis have been received with contradictory responses by critics, mainly because they belong to that "romanzo medio"²⁹ rooted in

²⁴ For example, *Montedidio* (2001) by Erri de Luca and *Margherita Dolcevita* (2005) by Stefano Benni.

²⁵ Niccolò Ammaniti is today a prolific novelist, film-maker and screenwriter, collaborating with television, radio and newspapers, not dissimilarly from Tiziano Scarpa who is a novelist, poet, translator and playwright also experimenting with radio drama and comics. Mohsen Melliti, born Tunisian, has recently moved from novels to film-making while Diego De Silva, a former Salernitan lawyer has used his personal experience not only to depict the criminal society in *Certi bambini*, but also to create the popular saga of Vincenzo Malinconico, a temp lawyer. Simona Vinci has also explored different genres in the last decade, from coming-of-age stories to fairy-tales, also publishing an autobiographical novel on depression while working as a translator. Lastly, Isabella Santacroce remains one of the most controversial presences in the media; she occasionally works as a songwriter and continues to publish pulp novels under her own publishing house, accompanying the launches of her books with performance-like appearances in line with her 'dark lady' persona.

²⁶ Stefania Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce* (Firenze: Cadmo, 2002).

²⁷ Giuliana Adamo, "Riflessioni sulle opere di due scrittori italiani contemporanei: Niccolò Ammaniti e Diego De Silva" in *The Italianist*, 27 -1, 2007, pp. 166-184, and Adamo Giuliana, "Nota su uno scrittore italiano contemporaneo: Diego De Silva" in *Narrativa Italiana recente / Recent Italian Fiction*, Edited by Roberto Bertoni, (Torino: Trauben and Trinity College Dublin, 2005), pp. 104-118.

²⁸ Margherita Ganeri, *Postmodernismo* (Milano: Edizioni Bibliografiche, 1998), p. 83.

²⁹ Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno: Dal romanzo medio degli anni sessanta alla giovane narrativa degli anni Ottanta* (Milano: Mursia, 1990).

popular culture, challenging a model that has been long evaluated according to the notion of political commitment, what Italians call “impegno”.³⁰ More generally, if we attempt to survey those critical works which deal with patterns of youth identity in contemporary Italian literature, it is clear that the study of these particular novels has not held the same attention as other works, such as the numerous ones devoted to the works of Pasolini, Palandri, Arbasino and Tondelli.

My work aims to fill this gap: by looking at a number of factors which directly or indirectly shape the growth of the characters, I will explore the ways in which literature speaks about our society and articulates the topic of growth in a contemporary liquid society. This reflects one of the aims of this study, which is to highlight the connections between theory and the texts to illustrate how literature entails a constant and lively dialogue with the world.

3. Methodology

It is my belief in the importance of understanding the dynamic nature of growth that has informed the research questions and the appropriate methodology. The idea of liquidity is indeed at the core of the title of this dissertation, as expressed by “Identity in progress”, and it has influenced greatly the orientation of this work.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman deploys ‘fluidity’ as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era, now that the frameworks that encapsulate life conditions and prospects are “malleable to an extent unexperienced by, and unimaginable for, past generations” so that “like all fluids they do not keep their shape for long”.³¹ This idea of a society in a constant state of uncertainty is reflected in the lives of individuals, who increasingly wear the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for their success in life. This particular postmodern epistemology will be used in the course of the study to connect the experiences of the characters to the changes happening in society.

In the early stages of my research, the main influence to understand the dynamic nature of identity derived from Paul Ricoeur’s (1913-2005) work. The philosopher offers a complex interpretation of the tension between permanence and change, elaborated in

³⁰For the debate on Italian literature at the end of the century see: Giulio Ferroni, *Dopo la fine*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1996) and Alberto Asor Rosa, *La letteratura italiana del 900: bilancio di un secolo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000).

³¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 7.

terms of a dialectic between idem-identity (*mêmeté*)³² and the changing nature of ipse-identity (*ipséité*).³³ While *idem-identity* is founded on the unity, singularity and oneness of the individual that constitutes its necessary status of being,³⁴ *ipse identity* implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of personality, but it focuses on a self-reflective and adaptive structure of the subject that allows space for change.

To formulate further the interplay between these two types of identity and to reconcile them, Ricoeur develops a theory of “narrative identity”. Because of his strong belief in the power of narrative meaning-making, he asserts that it is through narrative that we are able to produce a unified life story. The more the individual is able to make sense of life by retelling it, the stronger identity is. Identity is therefore constructed as a reflective process of sense-making that opens up the space of the individual to the space of the world. In this way, the process of growth gets embedded into a permanence of the self that ensures continuity.³⁵ Because of this reflexive meditation on identity that takes into consideration both essential and constructed aspects of selfhood, Ricoeur will be instrumental when it comes to understanding the dynamics of recognition taking place once the characters meet otherness and their moral self develops.

To ground the understanding of the representations of the hero’s identity, I have mainly looked at Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895-1975) famous works on the hero and on the forms of novelistic time.³⁶ Bakhtin’s theory of the novel provides the coordinates to discuss how representations of heroes have changed within literature, exploring how the dialectic between permanence and change has been developed in different novelistic genres and forms. Bakhtin’s studies on the polyphonic nature of the novel, on the conjunction between time and space in the forms of the chronotope and the reference to the grotesque body will be also used to respond to some of the secondary research questions.

³² According to the Oxford dictionary the entry for the Latin word *idem* is: same, the same, the very same, identical, the same number of, this or that same (proper name) the same unchanged/continuously (819).

³³ In the Oxford Latin Dictionary, under *Ipse*, these entries are attested: himself/herself/itself as opposed to others, in person, the very/real/actual himself, himself in addition to others (964).

³⁴ “We can assign to character this first kind of identity in the sense of all the features of permanence in time, from biological identity grounded in the genetic code, and picked up in fingerprints, to which we can add physiognomy, voice, and gait, moving on to stable, or, as we say, acquired, habits, and finally to those accidental marks by which an individual can be recognized, such as Ulysses’ scar.” Paul Ricoeur, *Course of Recognition*, Trans. by David Pellauer (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: Harvard University Press 2005), p. 12.

³⁵ See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Ed. and translated by Michael Holquist (Austin: University Texas Press, 1981).

My intention, however, is not to impose these theories on the texts but rather to examine ideas of growth implicit in texts in the light of the insights offered by the theories, by asking *What are the distinctive experiences that these young characters have in the different spheres of their lives that impact on their identities? And How do other individuals and different social conditions constrain or enable the characters' growth?'*

Since growing up is becoming “an increasingly extended and complex experience”³⁷, literary representations have also presented new ways of telling stories that partially build on the legacy of the *Bildungsroman*, and partially substantially deviate from it. Ultimately, understanding adolescents' experiences in relation to their identities requires accepting that today young people do not make simple, linear transitions from childhood to adulthood. Boundaries between adulthood and childhood are changing; they are becoming porous so that the social meaning of both these phases need to be redefined³⁸ while young people continue to build meaning and shape their identities.³⁹

3.1 Conceptualizing Identity

While it is not within the scope of this thesis to include a thorough discussion of the theoretical issues surrounding youth identity, a few clarifications are required in respect to the use of the term “identity” within this study. First, it is important to acknowledge that identity is both a loaded term and a contested concept, used in different ways by different disciplines, so much that the only shared agreement is on the impossibility of giving a unitary view.

Having witnessed increasing attention from scholars, identity studies have become a prolific field of interdisciplinary research. Indeed, identity can be framed as one of those “travelling concepts” in the humanities, using Mieke Bal's understanding that “concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities.”⁴⁰ This

³⁷ Joanna Wyn and Rob White, *Rethinking Youth* (London: Sage, 1997), p.1.

³⁸ Dan Woodman and Andy Bennet, *Youth Cultures, Transitions and Generations: Bridging the Gap in Youth Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 5.

³⁹ Youth studies have been characterized by two twin strands: the “transition” pole and the “cultures” pole, each with its preferred field of enquiry, theories and methodologies. While the transition pole focuses on finding patterns of transitions to adulthood with a specific eye for structures of inequalities, culturalists focus more on the production of youth subcultures and their symbolic role of resistance against norms. Scholars in the field, such as Andy Furlong, now advocate for a common ground able to provide a more holistic view of youth experiences.

⁴⁰ Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto press, 2002), p. 11.

constant move across disciplines makes them “dynamic” and therefore a perfect backbone for an interdisciplinary study: not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but precisely because they do not.⁴¹

The word identity was first introduced in the late 1960s⁴² and popularized in the 1990s by sociological studies, when it became a useful category to explore politics of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, fashion, and nationalism. In the 21st century the concept has been approached by many strands of research, all using their own critical tools to challenge the notion of an essential, integral and unified self, to progressively embrace the concept of identity as “increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions” in Stuart Hall’s words.⁴³ Chapter one will specifically address the shift from essentialism to identity as socially constructed.

When it comes to youth studies, as Andy Furlong explains, different social sciences have conceptualized youth identity differently, with psychologists, for example, exploring adolescence as a crucial time of psychosocial development through a series of sequential stages, aiming to shape a sense of identity. In this case, failure leads to confusion and a poor sense of self.⁴⁴ In contrast with this approach, classical sociology has seen identity more as a social product: building on this perspective, contemporary youth researchers regard identity as a project constructed on multiple sites and, from a postmodern perspective, often phrased in terms of fluidity and instability.⁴⁵

Within youth studies, identity intersects with the theme of growth when discussing life stages and transitions to adulthood.⁴⁶ Furlong traces back a tradition of “emphasis on

⁴¹ “Concepts not so much as firmly established univocal terms but as dynamic in themselves. While groping to define, provisionally and partly what a particular concept may *mean*, we gain insight into what it can *do*. [...] Even those concepts that are tenuously established, suspended between questioning and certainty, hovering between ordinary word and theoretical tool, constitute the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture – primarily because of their potential *intersubjectivity*. Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they don’t.” *Ibid.* (Bal) p. 11.

⁴² In opposition to the consideration of identity as substantial, the present idea of identity is derived mainly from the work of psychologist Erik Erikson that in the 1960s started a debate on identity as both concerning feelings, personality and ambitions – therefore related to interiority – and the modes of social construction.

⁴³ Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Los Angeles, London: Sage, 1996).

⁴⁴ Andy Furlong, *Youth Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 236.

⁴⁵ Furlong explains that the distinction between late modernist and post-modernism positions is connected to the view of agency and to the potential for individuals to direct their own lives. Referring to Côté, he explains that “for writers in the late-modernist tradition, people may have to cope with uncertainty and setbacks and navigate complex pathways without adequate route maps, but they are frequently able to maintain a stable sense of self and have sufficient agency. [...] In contrast, postmodernist writers regard identity as fluid and de-centred because interactions have lost any stability.” See Andy Furlong, *Youth Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 241.

⁴⁶ According to Woodman and Bennet, youth studies are an interdisciplinary field build around a sociological core but drawing contributions from psychology, anthropology, history, education, popular

‘growth task’ models in which young people’s routes were linked to the successful accomplishment of a developmental project which resulted in the establishment of a vocational identity.”⁴⁷ Transitional metaphors have evolved in the last decades in response to changing times and theories, so that in the 1970s critics spoke about ‘routes’ and ‘pathways’, in the 1980s they preferred the idea of ‘trajectory’, and in the 1990s theorizations moved past structural explanations to focus more on the idea of ‘navigation’. In this sense, according to Furlong, these shifts in thinking are symptomatic not only of different theoretical trends, but also of the objective changes in the experiences of young people in the last decades.

From the 1970s onwards a wide range of sociological works have produced a significant shift in focus, increasingly recognizing adolescents as social actors with a specific generational identity. The importance of investigating young people’s experiences is now well established as having significant implications for understanding the wider society, for adolescents are often at the forefront of change. Adolescents are indeed agents as much as subjects of both social and individual change, and the way they construct their identities is symptomatic of wider concerns of growth, transitions, and of the status of adulthood itself.

Secondly, far before being appropriated by social sciences, identity has been explored by literature as a privileged lens to read the interplay between the inner and the external life of the individual. Identity theories have been connected and applied to the *Bildungsroman*, but also other literary and non-literary models have been used to unveil how the process of identity formation has been portrayed by literature. Most recently for example, the advent of Levi Strauss’ structuralism in the 1960s opened up the critical space for the emergence of cultural studies which have, in different ways, explored the multiple facets of a concept that appears in continuous evolution and that keeps opening up controversial debates. In this sense the coming-of-age story truly becomes a point of convergence between different theories and disciplines.

4. Structure

The first chapter of this thesis provides a contextual understanding of what growth and identity-making have looked like in the past, and how Italian literature has portrayed such

cultures, media studies and even economics. See Woodman Dan and Bennet Andy, *Youth Cultures, Transitions and Generations: Bridging the Gap in Youth Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid. (Woodman) pp. 29-30.

processes. The first section of the chapter is articulated around what I have identified as three major paradigm shifts which are broadly concurrent, and helps framing how ideas and considerations around identity have changed over time.

The first shift, which is from essentialism to constructionism, looks at how the idea of growth has changed once we have moved from considering selfhood as something essential, unchangeable, and unique, to the understanding that identity is constructed within society, and therefore subjected to a number of forces, in a constant negotiation between the individual and the world. The second shift, which is strongly informed by Bauman's theory, is from solid to liquid identities and considers the impact that a globalised, capitalistic society had on the conception of identity. The third and last shift is from adults to children characters, and it is particularly relevant for the sake of investigating the coming-of-age story.

The second section of this chapter delineates an overview of how Italian literature has responded to (or even anticipated) these shifts by looking at the intersection between coming of age and literature. Indeed, the novels selected are part of a complex web of literary traditions which reach back to the *Bildungsroman*, and as Italian texts they emerge from a specific history and literary heritage, that they either accept or resist. Starting with the pedagogical novel of the Italian Unification (1861) Italian literature has in turn privileged adult characters or younger ones to capture the sensibility and the tensions of the changing times. By approaching the second half of the 20th century, we will get closer to the cultural landscape in which the six authors in this study have done their own coming of age, – since they were all born between 1960 and 1970 – to discuss how the impact of new media (such as television and video games) and the rise of youth subcultures have been portrayed, and even “cannibalised”, by Italian coming-of-age stories at the end of the century.

Since the aim of the study is to shed light on how experiences of growth are represented in 21st century Italian coming-of-age narratives, from chapter two onwards the six novels will be discussed together. This allows to foreground the similarities between texts and sets them in dialogue one with the other, rather than reading them in their isolated contexts, as existing scholarship has tended towards. For this reason, chapters two, three and four will be guided by different research questions which aim, nevertheless, to answer the overarching ones I am formulating in this thesis, in order to unveil how formal and thematic elements alter the traditional features of the genre to emphasize the idea of growth as a fluid process, rather than as a fixed achieved status.

The second chapter for example, will look at the novels to respond to the following questions – *How do narrative time and narrative voice inform the understanding of the characters' identities and their coming of age?* and *How do narrative choices ripple out across the narrative to set up new patterns of growth?* Here for example, I will show how the traumatic experience of growth is reflected through the circularity of the plot and through a recursive use of memory in Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente*. Diego De Silva's *Certi bambini* instead subverts the narrative flow through a long series of fragmented flashbacks which give access to the inner world of a baby-killer, aiming to signpost an irreducible unawareness.

The third chapter looks at how the economic and cultural resources provided by the physical and metaphorical location of the character impact growth. The questions considered are the following: *What kind of metaphors emerge from the spatial and geographical arrangement of the story? How do the experiences of being displaced, alienated and marginalised shape the pathways of these characters? What sort of agency can these characters exercise in these social contexts so that they can construct their identities? How constrained are the characters by economic and cultural forces when it comes to growth and how they react?* In the case of *I bambini delle rose*, for example, I explore how belonging to a gypsy community in Rome provides differential material resources to the character, and how social inequalities emerge from such disadvantages. In contrast, in the rural village of Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura*, the coming of age of the protagonist happens while moving through a series of symbolic spaces of death and rebirth. Either moving or being stagnant in one place, the experiences these children undergo seem to be mantled by an existential solitude that is representative of a society that has lost the connection between inner life and collective life.

The last chapter is focused on otherness and asks: *What role does otherness, framed as the relationship between the characters, peers and adults, play when it comes to identity development? How the relationship that these young characters have influence on how they see themselves and how others see them? How are gender and cultural norms transmitted and how much autonomy in their lives do the characters experience when it comes to adhering to or challenging these norms?*

Here, I will discuss how growth is affected by otherness. Otherness, in this case, is represented by peers, adults and parental figures, but the discussion also incorporates the relationship between selfhood, social forces, ideologies and other selves. The construction of masculinity and femininity, as much as the subversive power of bodies and embodied

experiences of growth emerge as topics of particular interest to understand how identities are negotiated in regard of wider social expectations. For instance, I discuss how solidarity between peers becomes a way to subvert the commodification of children in *I bambini delle rose* or to understand the harsh reality of the adult world in the case of *Io non ho paura*. I also look at the presence of a surrogate father figure in *Certi bambini*, and at the impact of having an absent mother in the case of Scarpa's *Stabat Mater*, or a far too present mother in the case of Santacroce's *Zoo*. Thus, chapter four considers the complex representation of alterity in the novels to understand how growth happens in relation to other people.

Lastly, the conclusions will uncover some key insights that can guide the understanding of contemporary coming-of-age stories by going to the core of key aspects of our liquid societies such as individualism, prolonged youth and identities, and will discuss the implications for the genre going forward.

CHAPTER I: REPOSITIONING GROWTH

This first chapter serves to locate the coming-of-age story within an historical and literary context, concentrating on how growth has been understood and constructed over time, showing the continuities but also the contradictions and tensions.

As anticipated, the idea of growth naturally encompasses ideas of identity in progress, of liquidity and recognition, but it also questions what it means to be a child and what it means to be an adult. In fact, growth holds in itself that Ricoeurian dialectic between sameness and selfhood, since it is within the idea of growth that change ultimately results in a mature and coherent identity. These two themes, identity and growth, from now onwards considered together, define the coordinates of the study.

The first part of this chapter wants to record some key shifts and displacements in sensibility that have occurred and still occur when understanding identity, and subsequently how literature has responded or anticipated these shifts. In fact, when it comes to identity we can distinguish two different volumes of change. The first one follows the change of generations, whereby every few decades the challenges posed to the individual's growth are revisited by apparently minor events; changes in language, fashion, politics, media and technology impact the everyday experiences of individuals and guide their identity choices. A second volume derives from larger historical, social or theoretical displacements, for example new psychoanalytical theories, which are able to influence entire worldviews, debunk current ideas or values and build the pathway for a different understanding of subjectivity.

In order to set a contextual understanding of the evolution of the concept of identity, in this chapter I will focus on three main paradigm shifts that, in the 20th century, have redefined the ways in which we understand and discuss identity and, by extension, the challenges of growth. The shifts that I have individuated are (i) from essentialism to constructionism, (ii) from solid to liquid, (iii) from adult to children.

I see great value in showing a trajectory rather than simply presenting the contemporary features of identity, because the concept of identity still lives within many different tensions. The reality is, despite theoretical assumptions, identities are still a contested territory in which these movements from essentialism to constructionism, from solid to liquid, from adult to children are far from being resolved, with a constant return and revival of debates. Debates on essentialism are for example still alive within gender

studies, especially in the popular arena,⁴⁸ as much as the notion of the soul remains foundational for the religious or spiritual identity of many communities.

Despite being framed as different trajectories, I do not want to indicate these shifts as unidirectional and simplistically moving forward through neat turns; instead these shifts are constituted of smaller and bigger movements coming in waves, often identifiable because literature has presented them in forms of eccentricities and exceptionalities.

Maintaining these three shifts as the general backbone for the discussion, the second part of the chapter will look at the coming-of-age story in Italian literature; it provides an overview of different Italian models of the coming-of-age story from the Unification to the late 1990s, moving closer to the time in which the six authors considered in this study live and write. The aim of this section is to delineate some key forms and themes that have been used to portray the young hero's identity, but also to elaborate on the socio-historical reasons that led to that specific configuration of growth in that given moment in time. Indeed, how youth is both perceived and conceptualised can have major consequences in shaping not only the genre, but also in creating images of youth, since literature not only reflects or represents experiences of growth, but it also has an ideological role when constructing and perpetrating depictions of adolescents.

Hence, this chapter serves two purposes: to outline the various ways in which the issue of identity has been discussed by individuating three paradigmatic shifts that happened in the late modernity, and to sketch an account of how coming of age has been represented in literature, moving from general premises to a deeper exploration into Italian literature in the second part of the chapter. This overview cannot and does not wish to be exhaustive, instead it serves to provide coordinates that will be useful to orient the reading of the novels.

1. Three Paradigm Shifts of Contemporary Identities

1.1 From Essentialism to Constructionism

Current definitions of identity according to dictionaries are:

⁴⁸ An exemplary case is the renewed attention to the topic brought in June 2020 by a debate happening between writer Michela Murgia (b.1972) and psychoanalyst Raffaele Morelli (b.1948) on *Radio Capital*, centred on the ontology of femininity as the root of women's identity. The recording became soon viral not only because of the paternalist attitude of the psychoanalyst towards the writer, but also because it exposed to the public the question of female's identity seen through the lens of different disciplines, with positions perceived as impossible to conciliate. The full debate can be seen here: <https://video.repubblica.it/cronaca/raffaele-morelli-perde-il-controllo-con-michela-murgia-stai-zitta-e-ascolta/362918/363473>.

The fact of being who or what a person or thing is. The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is. (Oxford Dictionary)

Who a person is, or the qualities of a person or groups that make them different from others. (Cambridge Dictionary)

A: the distinguishing character or personality of an individual (Individuality)

b: the relation established by psychological identification c: sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing (oneness) (Merriam Webster)

s. f. [dal lat. tardo *identitas* -atis, der. di *idem* «medesimo», calco del gr. ταυτότης].

– 1. L'essere identico, perfetta uguaglianza: i. *di due firme, di due concetti; i. piena, vera, totale, assoluta*. 2. L'essere tutt'uno, di persona o cosa che in un primo tempo sia apparsa con nome o aspetti diversi che abbiano fatto credere trattarsi di persone o cose distinte: *riconoscere, scoprire l'i. di due specie animali, di due corpi celesti*. 3. Di persona, l'essere appunto quello e non un altro: *stabilire, provare l'i. di qualcuno*, chi egli sia veramente; *controllare l'i. di qualcuno*, verificare che le sue generalità corrispondano veramente a quelle indicate in apposito documento (*documento d'identità*). (Treccani)

As James Fearon notes,⁴⁹ dictionary definitions usually reflect an older meaning of the word, that is engaged in the definition of core qualities, stable characteristics and traits of identification; it is a very partial and very essentialist view, compared with the meaning of identity as we currently use it.

Debates of identity have a very long history in western philosophy, from the ancient Greek to the contemporary analytical one, but overall they were concerned with the existential “problem of permanence amidst manifest change, and of unity amidst manifest diversity”.⁵⁰ In the introduction to *Oneself as Another* (1996) Paul Ricoeur stresses that, historically, western philosophy from Descartes onward has built up on an “essential” view of identity, by analysing the concept in light of substantialism, essentialism and transcendence, as an unbroken continuity of the conscious self. For centuries, philosophers have conceived the human existence as dependent on an individual and precious “essence” that could change definition – soul, nature, reason, spirit⁵¹ – but was nevertheless an interior quality of the self that made each individual unique.

⁴⁹ James Fearon, *What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)* (California: Stanford University, 1999).

⁵⁰ Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond Identity” in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Feb, 2000 Springer), p. 4.

⁵¹ Ricoeur quoting Descartes’ *Meditations*: “I am therefore precisely only a thing that thinks; that is, a mind, or soul, or intellect, or reason—words the meaning of which I was ignorant before.” Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 9.

Such essentialism lies at the core of epos; according to Mikhail Bakhtin's *Epic and Novel* (1981) the epic hero was represented as a "fully finished and completed human being"⁵² living in a distant and detached mythical time which had no connection with the historical reality. Since the premise of epic rests in representing a world that is self-contained and self-sufficient – with only one truth, one worldview and one possible fate for its characters – therefore the hero had to be "hopelessly ready-made". Totally transparent to himself or herself, there was no gap between the hero's essence and what was manifested in the world, no space for change and no movement towards growth: the hero "had already become everything that he could become"⁵³, a quintessentially extraordinary human being.

Even when changing genre, moving from epic to earlier novelistic forms, Bakhtin outlines how this configuration of the hero's selfhood as transparent and completed remained for long unaltered at its core. The different events and adventures typical of Greek romances, picaresque novels, adventure novels and so forth, left no traces in the character, in his/her development or personality. The challenge for these heroes was to prove their interior qualities to the world by showing their heroic nature, their moral values or their affection. The adventure did not provide any significant new knowledge nor did it result in radical growth; the space for change, for questioning and even subverting the normativity of identity in artistic representations was restricted to the realm of popular folklore, satire and parody, consistently discarded by the dominant arts.⁵⁴

Hence for centuries, despite an episodic and gradual acknowledgment of the role that the social world played in the life of the individual, the process of identity formation was portrayed as happening inside the human being, in the interior of a man that was one with the world. Such a movement of inward-oriented discovery was advocated by Christian theology, as exemplified by Augustine's maxima in *De Vera Religione* (ca. 389-390): "Do not go outward, return within yourself; in the inwards dwells truth". As philosopher Nick Mansfield explains, during the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance this

⁵² Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. and translated by Michael Holquist (Austin: University Texas Press, 1981), p. 34.

⁵³ It is not by chance the use of the masculine personal pronoun in Bakhtin; because, needless to say, the epic hero was always a him. For a comprehensive critical perspective of the subaltern position of young female characters in literature, from classic epics to the contemporary age, see Maria Serena Sapegno, *Figlie del padre: passione e autorità nella letteratura occidentale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2018).

⁵⁴ In *Epic and Novel*, in parallel with a consideration on the portrayal of heroic worlds in canonical genres, Bakhtin also accounts for the importance of the fertile and lively imaginary that folklore created to ridicule the world's presumed integrity and order. According to him, the novelization of literature happened because of the direct contact with these popular genres, which sit at the roots of the heteroglotic and dialogic nature of the modern novel.

idea of possessing a determined, unique and fixed essence was widely accepted as the foundation of human life and experience.⁵⁵

This deeply humanist view of selfhood is the paradigm that influenced the development of the characters of the chevalier and the saint, with those heroes devoted to lives in forms of quests; in the first case, a quest to test the hero's integrity of selfhood, despite all challenges and temptations, and in the second case to show the necessary conversion that could fulfill the renewed and improved version of the hero's self.⁵⁶ Needless to say, these archetypal heroes were already adults, so the problem of coming of age was never articulated.

Following Descartes' (1596-1650) input, the Enlightenment further posed the question of the individual as a free, autonomous and rational being, initiating that long period of philosophical enquiry on the nature of Cogito. In this sense, the self was no longer tied with the medieval supremacy of Christian religion, but it could be investigated scientifically, focusing on the rational processes that defined one's being.⁵⁷ While being fundamentally different from earlier representations, this premodern view of identity still aimed at an organic integration of the individual with the world, enabled by a centralized sense of meaning that acted as that unifying force able to provide consistency among the different life experiences. This is because in European premodern societies, people were born into a fixed social role within a structural hierarchy based on birth and blood, two circumstances that would strictly determine one's past, present and future identity.⁵⁸ To be able to question one's given identity, it is necessary to wait for the 17th century when the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie created the premises for an unprecedented social dynamism.

In literature, this paradigm of a totally transparent, unified and coherent identity dominated until the *Bildungsroman*, that "symbolic form of modernity"⁵⁹ which in the 17th century gave literary shape to this time of social and economic change, redefining the coordinates of heroic identities in the bourgeois society. Although the *Bildungsroman*

⁵⁵ Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (St Leonards, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2000).

⁵⁶ See Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981).

⁵⁷ This emphasis on the conscious and rationale self as the defining aspect of one's identity is at the root of a long-lasting philosophical tradition that passes through Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). In regards see Nick Mansfield, *Theories of the self from Freud to Haraway* (St Leonards, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2000).

⁵⁸ Victor Seidler, *Embodying Identities* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010), p. 2.

⁵⁹ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The "Bildungsroman" in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987).

succeeded in presenting the individuals in the process of being at one with their own historical time, still the decisions of identity-making were relatively simple and oftentimes required a compromise between expectations and reality.

Even if it is undeniable that the *Bildungsroman* presents an original social dynamism, correspondent to a dynamism in relation to the hero's identity, the number of possibilities for self-development were quite predictable and stable if compared to the possibilities that the new centuries would reveal. Also, far well before the dramatic discovery of adolescence as the age of transition, growth was still a linear trajectory from the child's self into his/her adult version, arranged in a plot where the coming of age was achieved gradually through an increasing awareness of both one's own selfhood and the world. Growing up suddenly became the greatest adventure, one, citing Moretti, made of great expectations and lost illusions, so that the trials that the protagonists of the *Bildungsroman* underwent managed to "substitute the admiration of precocity with the image of a gradual growth, few steps at a time".⁶⁰

According to Moretti, the *Bildungsroman* naturally dies at the turn of the 20th century, once the established worldview is completely shattered by those thinkers that Ricoeur has defined the "Masters of Suspicion"⁶¹. Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867), Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1883), as much as Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1889), shifted the perspective from self-evident meanings to disguised truths, from religious ideologies to economic ones and from the conscious to the unconscious mind, casting light onto the instability of identity and creating a seismic effect on many fields.

The impact of these theories spread across all disciplines; from psychology to politics, from economics to literature and social sciences and constituted a sea-change in the view of humanity itself.⁶² In response, literature voiced a rising sense that essentialist and humanist views of identity were inadequate to portray not only the distress of the modern individual, but also the dynamics of a world soon to be understood through the lens of even newer scientific discoveries, such as those of Darwin (*The Origin of Species*, 1859) and Einstein's (*Theory of Relativity*, 1905).

⁶⁰ Ibid. (Moretti) p. 46.

⁶¹ Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, were defined by Ricoeur in his influential work *Freud and Philosophy* (1970) as the *Masters of Suspicion*. Ricoeur identified Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as founders of that "School of Suspicion" that led to the so-called "hermeneutics of suspicion".

⁶² Rick Roderick, "Paul Ricoeur: The Masters of Suspicion", in *The Self Under Siege: Philosophy in the 20th Century*, video lecture series (Virginia: The Teaching Company, 1993). Available online [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1dZq8IZxLI>]

As the image of the essential man disintegrated, so did the narrative forms that sustained it; and the attempts made by Modernism, for example by Virginia Woolf with the interior monologue, James Joyce's stream of consciousness, but also Luigi Pirandello's poetics of self-reflection, are possibly the highest examples of a coherent self that gradually dissolves in the layers of the psyche.⁶³

However, this crisis of selfhood was destined to deepen in the second half of the century, once other disciplines started to investigate the structures of social life. Berger and Luckmann's major sociological study *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) constitutes the last turning point in this brief history of identity, since the two sociologists openly assumed an anti-essentialist account, arguing that individuals construct their own as much as other's identities through everyday social interactions.

To be given an identity involves being assigned a specific place in the world. As this identity is subjectively appropriated by the child ('I am John Smith'), so is the world to which this identity points. Subjective appropriation of identity and subjective appropriation of the social world are merely different aspects of the same process of internalization, mediated by the same significant others.⁶⁴

According to this perspective, identity is no longer conceived as an *essential* component of the self, but rather becomes an *existential* one, so that it is not given by nature or somehow "essential" but rather socially and historically constructed.

From here, the social theory of "identity construction"⁶⁵ that was developed in the American and British strand of sociology permeated the languages of social, cultural and political practices. Also, in the late 1970s, sociology of youth moved from proto-research on the role of socialisation among young people to looking specifically at youth identities, by focusing on the role of culture for example through music and fashion, paving the way

⁶³ Literature had to cope with the new topography of the subject expressed by Freud, according to which there is "an interior life split between the socially and culturally integrated processes of the conscious mind (Ego) and the threatening or non-confessable impulses of the unconscious (Id), which the conscious hopes to keep in its place by a quantum of mental force called repression (Super-Ego)". See Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (St Leonards, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2000), p. 30.

⁶⁴ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1966]), p. 152.

⁶⁵ According to social constructionism people *construct* (create, make, invent) their understandings of the world, the meaning given to the encounter with the other and their own identity. This process happens jointly within society, in coordination with others, rather than individually. In relation to identity studies, social constructionism's viewpoint rests on the assertion that the content of human consciousness and the modes of relating with otherness are taught by culture and society; thus, it claims that all the metaphysical beliefs taken for granted are actually learned from the cultural world.

for the rise of youth studies. Simultaneously, youth unemployment and the rise of liberal capitalism shaped the interests for youth policies and transitions to adulthood.⁶⁶

By the end of the 1970s the concept of identity was being extensively employed by many different disciplines, and even more so in the 1980s and 1990s when the weakening of those institutions – religious faith, social hierarchies, unitary family – that had for long offered a sense of certainty for individuals, together with new phenomenon like multiculturalism and consumerism, turned identity into a useful lens to explore politics of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationalism and so on. The traditional humanist view of the subject had been systematically put into question by structuralist, poststructuralist and Marxist literary and critical discourses, shifting the debate from a subject that is essentially or socially given, towards interrogating what kind of subject it is and what are the conditions of its coming into being. As Stuart Hall suggests

perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact which the new cultural practises then represent, we should think instead of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in progress and always constituted within, not outside representations.⁶⁷

The idea of representation is central in contemporary studies of identity, especially after the narrative turn that from the 1980s has acknowledged the existential and cognitive relevance of narrative processes in making sense of both the self and the world. Once it is assumed that identity is constructed, and that there are several ways to make sense of it, for example through narrative, new questions arise such as: *is identity constructed brick after brick, or is it more like a castle of sand? And if so, what does growth mean today?*

1.2 From Solid to Liquid

The very concept of an essential identity was tied to the idea of a singular, coherent and unitary sense of selfhood. Therefore, another key shift is from the consideration of a singular and unitary identity towards a view of identity as multiple and layered, which has constituted one of the key debates of modern sociology. For example, from the 1990s the concept of intersectionality has been useful to move past seeing a range of identity factors

⁶⁶ See Woodman Dan and Bennet Andy, *Youth Cultures, Transitions and Generations: Bridging the Gap in Youth Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, quoted in Seidler, *Embodying Identities: Culture, Differences and Social theory* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010), p. 44.

(such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, age, corporeality, role) as separate issues, to understand instead how they intersect and “become integral to an individual’s position in the social world.”⁶⁸ As Steph Lawler explains, one of the biggest threats to the notion of a stable, unitary and coherent self – in its internal homogeneity – is the recognition that nobody has only one identity, but rather multiple identities that “are seen as interactive and mutually constitutive, in a dynamic interaction”.⁶⁹

Even before sociology, literature had already presented characters moving past the idea of a unity of the selfhood developed around a centre of permanence and singularity. Going far back to epic, the ability to perform different identities was exactly what made Odysseus a ‘polytropos’, a unique hero with a multifaceted nature. This was just the beginning of a long series of metatextual experiences of multiplicity,⁷⁰ so that in novels such as *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), protagonists were already presenting masks, doubles and alter egos that fragmented their identities. This fragmentation assumes characteristics increasingly more dramatic with modernism, as voiced by Bernard in *The Waves* (1931): “What I am? I ask. This? No, I am that [...] then it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many”⁷¹, expressing no longer a binding integrity but a complex and multifaceted selfhood.

This consideration finds echoes in Italian literature with the works of Pirandello (1867-1936) and Svevo (1861-1928), as I’ll discuss in the second part of this chapter, and in the widespread idea that identity is no longer a safe haven, but instead the ground for an irresolvable tension. As observed by Seidler, once the ties of birth and blood weakened, “identity became a matter of becoming as well as of being”.⁷² The 20th century has therefore testified to a crisis of the individual in its traditional dimension of a unitary

⁶⁸ Scholars in different disciplines across humanities and social sciences have been using the intersectional approach to “socially locate individuals in the context of their ‘real lives’” and to “examine how both formal and informal systems of power are deployed, maintained, and reinforced through axes of race, class, and gender.” See Berger & Guidroz (Eds.), *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class and Gender* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 1.

⁶⁹ Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 3.

⁷⁰ Italian poetry provides another great examples of multiplicity with Petrarca, who put his own conscience at the core of his *Canzoniere* (1304-1374), constructing his identity of a poet, both subject and object, through poetry itself.

⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Wordsworth Editions, 2000) [1931], p. 42.

⁷² Stuart Hall, quoted in Seidler, *Embodying Identities: Culture, Differences and Social theory*, (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010), p.44. Hall’s position is framed within a wider debate that, almost uninterrupted from the 1960s, gradually shifted the discourse to embrace those neglected identities, in light of the consideration of concepts such as differences, normality and discrimination that shaped a wider movement of human rights and identities policies, which in turn challenged the dominant heterosexual, white, masculine and patriarchal mindset.

being, solid and stable, putting under scrutiny in its own unity.

Moving from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ means to look at the shift from singularity to multiplicity, drawing from one of the most influential metaphors of the last decades, the one of liquidity, which depicts the essence of the 21st century world as rapid, permeable and mutable. According to its creator, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, those values of solidity and certainty that were established during modernity (between the 16th and 17th century) in order to ensure enough social stability to sustain new economic development, have been partly nullified by that same progress that modernity has endorsed.⁷³

Indeed, late “solid” modernity presented a very stable set of meanings and life goals, thanks to stable institutions and a solid economic environment that allowed secure, reliable, and predictable outcomes for individual’s choices. These circumstances allowed identity to be constructed systematically, grounded on a life-project which provided a solidity to the individual’s self.⁷⁴ Traditional milestones of growth have been disrupted by a liquidity that has infiltrated all aspects of life – from markets to institutions to social relations – so that people have ceased to be *identity builders* and have become *identity shifters*, embracing the same liquidity that postmodernity has endorsed.⁷⁵

Globalization, social and geographical mobility, the crisis of the welfare state and new capitalism, the flexibility in the employment market, the changing nature of personal and familiar relationships and so on, have all contributed to turning the solid society into a liquid one, framed in a world metaphorically unable to hold its own shape.

Indeed, it is precisely this continuous change that contributes to accentuating that sense of fragmentation and insecurity, so that traditional resources of identity formation seem no longer valid,⁷⁶ because identities cannot be anchored in traditions, religions, laws, truths and customs which are changing themselves. Also, according to Giddens, modernity has seen a “pluralization of lifeworlds” – often mediated by globalization and the mass media industry – in which each individual has to constantly negotiate multiple and sometimes contradictory identities, for example as it moves from private to public spheres

⁷³ See Bordoni, “Introduction to Zygmunt Bauman” in *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 2016/3, p.286.

⁷⁴ “Level by level and brick by brick, following a blueprint completed before the work started. The construction called for a clear vision of the final shape, careful calculation of the steps leading towards it, long-term planning and seeing through the consequences of every move”. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 20.

⁷⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁷⁶ “These days patterns and configurations are no longer ‘given’ let alone ‘self-evident’; there are just too many of them, clashing one with another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers. [...] Rather than preceding life-politics and framing its future course, they are to follow from it, to be shaped and reshaped by its twists and turns.” See Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 7.

of life.⁷⁷ Against the long-lasting consideration of identity as something given by culture, cogito or nature, Giddens also declares that the curse of modernity is that “we have no choice but to choose” because identity is no longer something unproblematically assigned to us. Therefore, the process of identity formation has become entangled in such a volatile and uncertain state of the world, and as a consequence

no more could it be seen as ‘given’. Instead, it turned into a task which every man and women had no choice but to face up to and perform to the best of their ability. ‘Predestination’ was replaced with ‘life project’, fate with vocation – and a ‘human nature’ into which one was born was replaced with ‘identity’ which one needs to saw up and make fit.⁷⁸

This perspective creates a new set of problems, that assume a dual facet. On one hand, in liquid modernity everything depends on the ability to understand the changing conditions of life and to adapt to the socio-economic environment; in such case, the ability to keep the pace of fluidity defines those who are fit for success as the ones capable of embracing multiple identities. According to Bauman, this multiplicity is no longer seen as a betrayal of the presumed ‘true’ and ‘whole’ self, but a new, complex, strategy of adaptation to the liquidity of life. The results of this liquidity is still debated; according to post-modernist positions, identity has been shattered by this constant pace of change, while late-modernist theorists argue that instead it has provided new opportunities for self-determination.

If we consider the specific setting of liquid modernity, then being able to adapt, evolve, and even change identity is the price to pay to not be left behind. The metaphor that Bauman uses is the one of lava crust, as the new, complex strategy of adaptation to the liquidity of life.

The search for identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless. Yet far from slowing the flow, let alone stopping it, identities are more like the spots of crust hardening time and again on the top of volcanic lava which melt and dissolve again before they have time to cool and set.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 81-84.

⁷⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, “Identity in the Globalizing World” in *Journal of Social Anthropology*, 9 (2), June 2001, pp. 121-129.

⁷⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 83

On the other hand, in societies challenged by phenomena such as globalization and massification, individuals and communities seem to long even more for definition, recognition and stability. Once the essential and unitary facets of the self are under siege because of the pressure of what Bauman defines the “unholy trinity of modernity” (uncertainty, unsafety and insecurity) there seems to be a counter-movement towards achieving some sort of stability. According to Donksis the individual is longing for identity even more today, since “the weaker our sense of belonging becomes, the stronger our inclination grows towards identity building, identity shifting or identity forging”.⁸⁰ Despite such liquefaction of the self, individuals continue to resist the fragmentation of existence, searching for new definitions that can come to terms with the complexity of the contemporary age. And indeed, identity politics have guided the vindications of the last decades; as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, if solid modernity was about wars of liberation, liquid modernity is the time of wars of recognition.⁸¹

What emerges from this perspective is the continuous oscillation between the desire for a unique and harmonious shape, and the acceptance of life in its chaotic and fragmented nature. This necessity for plurality as the recipe for survival entails a dialectical relationship with the necessity of unity, stability and singularity that keeps the individual adherent to his selfhood, establishing the identity problem as unresolved.

It is the widespread characteristic of contemporary men and women in our type of society that they live perpetually with the ‘identity problem’ unsolved. They suffer, one might say, from a chronic absence of resources with which they could build a truly solid and lasting identity, anchor it and stop it from drifting [...]. While making oneself an identity is a strongly felt need and an activity eloquently encouraged by all authoritative cultural media - having an identity solidly founded and resistant to cross-waves, having it ‘for life’, proves a handicap rather than an asset for such people as do not sufficiently control the circumstances of their life itinerary; a burden that constrains the movement, a ballast which they must throw out in order to stay afloat.⁸²

Bauman does not provide a solution, but by bringing back identity to a perpetual *status*

⁸⁰ Leonidas Donskis, *Troubled Identity in the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 5.

⁸¹ Zygmunt Bauman, “The Great War of Recognition” in Lash and Featherstone (eds.) *Recognition and Difference: Politics, Identity and Multiculture* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 132.

⁸² Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 27.

nascendi he manages to frame the facets of this problem of “the entity of belonging”⁸³ that chronically affects people in contemporary society. Today the idea of “belonging” to one entity or community is no longer an exclusive option, since “hardly any belonging engages the ‘whole self’ and each person at any moment of her or his life is involved in, so to speak, ‘multiple belongings’”⁸⁴ so that every person simultaneously assumes different identities and belongs to different communities or entities.

The question that arises now is how much such a multiplicity and liquidity of identities corresponds to an enhanced freedom in choices and self-determination, and how much it leads to a fragmentation of the individual. There is indeed a nuanced but substantial difference between being able to choose different identities, and the risks and anxieties of being dispersed with no reference points. This is particularly relevant when considering teenage subjects, who are already invested in a range of fears and anxieties about their identities that, if unresolved, might burden their adulthood. As Italian writer Marco Mancassola, generation 1973, wrote in 2010 for the newspaper *Il Manifesto*:

La dispersione è l’orizzonte in cui siamo cresciuti. Abbiamo identità sincretiche, sfaccettate, frammentate e dislocate. Il mercato delle merci e delle esperienze ha instillato in noi, volenti o nolenti, la percezione che la vita vera fosse sempre altrove, sempre un po’ più in là, in un altro luogo: non solo nell’acquisto di un’altra merce o in un altro piano del centro commerciale, ma proprio in un’altra esperienza da fare, in un altro incontro da consumare, in un’altra emozione da non lasciarsi sfuggire, in un altro viaggio da intraprendere, in un altro capitolo del nostro romanzo interiore. Siamo cresciuti pensando che la nostra vita vera fosse altrove solo per renderci conto, infine, che forse non è più da nessuna parte.⁸⁵

1.3 From Adults to Children

As seen, identity is formed in dialogue with society, and adolescence years – the stage between childhood and adulthood – are usually thought of as a period during which notions of selfhood undergo rapid and radical transformation. Becoming aware of one’s own self as distinct from others, capable of deliberate thought or action while at the same time occupying a specific place in society, are all experiences typical of youth years.

⁸³ Zygmunt Bauman, “Migration and Identities in the globalized world” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 37 (4) 2001, p. 434.

⁸⁴ *Ibid* (Bauman).

⁸⁵ Marco Mancassola, *Generazione Locked In* in «*Il Manifesto*», 7 Novembre 2010.

Adolescents specifically live the contingency of all the different tensions that constitute the fabric of identity itself – the rational self and the bodily instincts, agency and subordination, expectations and reality – while at the same time needing a sense of integrity, of uniqueness, of recognition. This is what makes the transition so difficult, and these years such a vulnerable and crucial moment of a person's life.⁸⁶

As pointed out by French historian Phillipe Ariés, before the 17th century children were thought to be merely small adults, possessing their same qualities and nature; the notion of childhood hardly existed and let alone the one of youth. At the beginning of modern times, children were considered proper adults at about the age of seven, to say as soon as they were able to do things without the help of their mothers or nannies. Especially among the lower classes, at this age they started working, thus becoming part of the adult community with no consideration for education.⁸⁷ While this position has been challenged today, arguing that there was a form of grading based on the concept of dependence and independence, and that transitional routes varied between aristocracy and working classes, still it remains true that youth as a linguistic category did not exist. We actually need to wait until 1904, when Stanley Hall in his *Adolescence* clearly articulates the idea of a status in between childhood and adulthood.

At the roots of the consideration of children both as real and fictional subjects, is Jean Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) pedagogical novel *Émile ou De l'éducation* (1762)⁸⁸ which presented the child character as a subject with a precise and structured self.⁸⁹ It is indeed Rousseau who, thanks to his vast production, set in motion the discovery of childhood and youth years as crucial stages in the development of the self. In this respect, Rousseau's work might be easily seen as walking the line to create a true

⁸⁶ See Ulrick Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage, 1992).

⁸⁷ See Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (London: Pimlico, [1961] 1996). Ariès study, which led to the understanding of young people as "little adults" was based on an analysis of paintings mainly of the 15th and 16th centuries. Contemporary scholars argue that methodologically this approach resulted in considering only representations of wealthy and bourgeois children, leaving out the different experiences of other classes. In this respect see Alan France, *Understanding Youth in Late Modernity* (McGraw Hill: Open University Press, 2007).

⁸⁸ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or on Education* (London: Dent, 1961 [1762]).

⁸⁹ "Per tradizione, le belle lettere avevano dato dignità di protagonisti sempre e solo a personaggi d'età adulta, riservando a bambini e adolescenti un'attenzione episodica, magari altamente suggestiva ma di scarso rilievo nell'economia funzionale del testo. Ora invece i ragazzi entrano a pieno titolo nella pagina, come soggetti dotati d'una personalità ben strutturata. [...] Il punto obbligato di riferimento emblematico è costituito dall'apparizione dell'Émile di Rousseau, nel 1762". See Vittorio Spinazzola, *Pinocchio & C.* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1997), p. 4.

pedagogical revolution⁹⁰ by locating the child's development at the centre of the enquiry, and establishing the myth of childhood as the foundation of identity.

Before Rousseau, under Puritan morality children were considered innately sinful, and only through strict discipline of both the body and the mind could they move from this 'animality' towards a state of civility. By the 18th century the situation was reversed, thanks also to the work of John Locke who argued that children were a *tabula rasa* waiting for social and moral education.⁹¹ Discounting Puritanism, but also the idea of children being a "blank sheet", Rousseau individuates in the children an innate purity and innocence that must be protected. Instead of forcing a social education upon the child, Rousseau saw growth as happening spontaneously through a periodic movement through certain natural stages of development. In this sense, he also informed the theme of a pure and uncorrupted child which became foundational for European literature.⁹²

Rousseau's philosophy was founded on the consideration that every individual is born unique according to a precise "nature". This nature is considered a state of identity prior to socialization and it is located inside the human being; it becomes the point of origin whence identity starts to take shape, and it defines the authentic self as opposite to the demands of society. Thus, we are still indebted to Rousseau when it comes to considering childhood as both the deposit of the best qualities of human nature and childhood years as the foundation of adult personality. According to Stefano Brugnolo, we owe Rousseau this very powerful and long-lasting image of childhood years as foundational for our identities, an image that

porta un'attenzione appassionata a tutti i cominciamenti, a tutte le fonti del suo essere, rovesciando il ruolo dell'infanzia dentro lo sviluppo della personalità col saldare in uno stretto rapporto le nozioni di origine e verità. A partire da Rousseau, l'infanzia va a costituire la scena fondatrice di ogni conoscenza di se.⁹³

⁹⁰ The new attention to childhood stemmed from Rousseau has concurred in the interpretation not only of the child itself but also on the role of formative institutions, such as school, family and religion. In this regard see Cambi, Di Bari, Sarsini (eds) *Il mondo dell'infanzia* (Milano: Apogeo, 2012).

⁹¹ Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependence in the Life Course* (London: Sage, 1993), pp. 64-65.

⁹² "Non è un caso che proprio la letteratura dell'età borghese, con il suo culto dell'infanzia, conferisca per la prima volta dignità letteraria all'eroe bambino. Il primo romanzo che ha per eroe un bambino e che di conseguenza termina con la fine dell'infanzia (giovinezza) del suo protagonista è *l'Émile* di Rousseau. Narra la storia della formazione di questo eroe intesa come sviluppo delle sue predisposizioni naturali e intona, con l'idea del bambino "puro" e "incorrotto", il grande tema che da allora in avanti accompagna la letteratura europea." Cit. Leonelli, "Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini", in De Nunzio Schilardi, Neiger & Pagliano (eds.) *Tracce d'infanzia nella letteratura italiana fra Ottocento e Novecento* (Genova: Liguori, 2000).

⁹³ Stefano Brugnolo, (Ed.) *Il ricordo d'infanzia nelle letterature del '900* (Pisa: Pacini editore, 2012), p. 28.

With Rousseau, the years of youth acquires a new value; it is the beginning of a path that will lead to the precise choice of having young characters represented in their years of personal development and struggles, rather than mature heroes.

After Rousseau, child characters start to dominate not only the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, which often presents childhood years as the first part of the hero's biography, but become even more prevalent in other forms of coming-of-age stories, for example in the 'novel of initiation', a complementary model to the *Bildung*⁹⁴ that, according to Paola Carmagnani, brought forward the presumed death of the *Bildungsroman*. Linear and essentialist, the *Bildungsroman* presents a fundamentally humanist model of growth whereby individuals are both able to achieve subjective agency and being harmoniously accommodated within society. Carmagnani argues that this model was already challenged at its core by a pattern that was seeded to deconstruct the humanist subject, and novels such as *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), *Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1902) already embraced the fragmentation of experience of adolescent heroes. Once the *Bildungsroman* manifested its inability to cope with the insurgence of trauma and unconscious, many writers thus turned to the long-lasting pattern of initiation.

This allowed to better represent those unknown dark parts of the individual, and to first problematize the representation of both the good hearted and innocent child, setting the model for the later development of novels such as the *Lord of the Flies* (1954) or *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). As such, these coming-of-age stories were creating a new model of child characters, who

acquire a new, complex inner being and their initiation was no longer a mere consecration of their very heroic, innate and unchangeable nature: the adventure became a narrative about growing up, by putting the hero's uncertain identity to the test and leading him to the unknown forgotten places deep within himself.⁹⁵

The coming-of-age story that stemmed from Rousseau underwent, across all different genres, a great fortune so much that the Swedish educator Ellen Kay in 1900 advocated for a new child-centrism in what she anticipated would to be "the century of

⁹⁴ Paola Carmagnani, "The Coming-of-age Story: narratives about growing up after the *Bildungsroman*" in *A Warm Mind-Shake* (Torino: Trauben, 2014), pp. 109-116

⁹⁵ Ibidem (Carmagnani).

the child”,⁹⁶ bringing a renewed attention to children as true bearers of meanings and as privileged lenses through which to read historical and societal changes.

In addition to literature, sociological studies have also contributed to establishing adolescents as precise subjects of enquiry, giving particular attention to the ways in which their identity is constructed and structured within society. The 1990s have witnessed an increased interest in youth studies, focused in particular on the processes of growth as the transition to adulthood. Traditional pathways towards adulthood have witnessed a crisis in the new millennium, in a world “in which old certainties are ruptured and meaning becomes more contingent, less indebted to the dictates of reverence and established truth”⁹⁷ and youth studies has developed a profound interest for the mechanisms that structures the process of growth. Notably, youth has been for long conceived as a relational concept, understood in relation to adulthood, which is considered as the arrival point; as Wyn and White observe, if youth is a state of “becoming”, adulthood is the necessary “arrival”.⁹⁸ As a result, adolescence has been considered as significant because it is the threshold to adulthood, so that in turn young people have been defined as incomplete adults.⁹⁹

Such “deficit of adulthood” has been challenged in the last decades in favour of a perspective that recognises growth as a more extended and complex process. Also, while young people had been long considered a homogenous social group, an increasing number of studies in the last decades of the 1990s have devoted attention to youth lifestyles and sub-cultures as determinants of multiple identities. For example, by using intersectionality to unveil the complex social locations that these teenagers experienced, social studies managed to get richer conceptual pictures of young people as social actors.¹⁰⁰

The context has changed to such an extent that we are witnessing a shift from adulthood as the normative social destination, to youth years as having an inherent value. This is not surprising, considering the crisis that the status of adulthood is facing, reduced

⁹⁶ *The Century of the Child* was published in 1900 and translated in English in 1909, and it became pretty controversial because of the feminist, socialist and utopian perspective that called for a radical change to the perspective of children’s lives, upbringing and education.

⁹⁷ Giroux quoted in Wyn & White, *Rethinking Youth* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 20.

⁹⁸ Joanna Wyn and Rob White, *Rethinking Youth* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 5.

⁹⁹ Ibid (Wyn & White).

¹⁰⁰ Berger & Guidroz (Eds.), *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class and Gender* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

to “an army of infantile adults with little idea about the real world” according to Kate Crawford’s provocation.¹⁰¹

2. The Legacy of Coming of Age in Italian Literature

All of the above shifts represent some of the principal challenges that literature had to respond and react to, when not participating in the process. Although there are some key turning points that set the definitive passage from one paradigm to the other – the advent of social constructionism, Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity, Rousseau’s *L’Émile* – these different tendencies have coexisted and gradually changed over time and literature has captured those movements.

For example, the shift from adult characters to teenage characters that started with Rousseau in 1792 had a first apex with the great bourgeois novel, such as Dickens’ characters in *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (1837), but also with the classics of children’s literature such as Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), and *The Sisters Grow Up* (1869), Montgomery’s *Misunderstood* (1869) and Burnett’s *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885). In parallel with the emergence of this distinct archetype of the child character moving from misfortune to a pre-destined success, youth also assumed a privileged status thanks to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, when portraying heroes in their early twenties allowed to dramatize the challenges and opportunities provided by the social mobility of the modern age. However, when it comes to Italy, the historical circumstances were radically different when compared to other European countries.

Italian unification happened only in 1861 after decades of uprisings, wars and political struggles and the whole socio-cultural and political project of the *Risorgimento*, first unification and later post-unification, deeply informed *i romanzi di formazione* of the 19th century. Foscolo’s *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802) and Ippolito Nievo’s *Le confessioni di un Italiano* (1867) for example, constitute an interesting variant of the *Bildungsroman* in which the philosophical notion of *Bildung* gets embedded within the political struggles of the Italian youth fighting for its *patria*.¹⁰² In this sense, the necessity

¹⁰¹ Kate Crawford, “Buying In: On Adulthood and Homeownership Ideologies” in *Contemporary Adulthood*, edited by Burnett Judith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 39-55.

¹⁰² In Italy political struggle was a key concern for intellectuals, as reflected onto the heroes of the *Bildungsroman*, whose main aim was to contribute to the freedom of the country while realizing their political and poetic vocation. Foscolo’s *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802) is possibly the best incarnation of this *Bildung* “*all’italiana*” portraying the tension of conciliating the internal with the external world of the hero.

of creating an Italian identity collectively grounded on renewed nationalism became that centripetal force that ensured the unity and solidity of the selfhood of the character. Also, Nievo's *Le confessioni di un Italiano* presents an original and innovative focus on a very young female protagonist, "Pisana", a true prototype of a young ante litteram feminist against the traditional representation of female characters embodied, for example, by Lucia in Manzoni's *Promessi sposi* (1827).

Although the creation of Italy was primarily a political project, the importance of cultural artefacts to sediment the sense of belonging was vastly acknowledged, since "for intellectuals, and for writers in particular, the age-old problem of identity, support and recognition were ever more crucial in the new Italy", as Robert Dombroski explains.¹⁰³ Because of the confluence of several points of origin, this was a significant moment for the coming-of-age story in Italy. As a "newborn" state, Italy was participating in its own creative interpretation of childhood years as both the foundational moment, and the departing point for educating the nation into growing modern and civil. In this respect, elements from different genres such as the pedagogical novel, the fairy tale and the *Bildungsroman* all converged into the creation of a very peculiar coming-of-age genre that aimed to sustain, ground and advance the new national identity. Compared to the earlier Italian novelistic tradition – which gave little or no attention to child characters, privileging young soldiers and intellectuals – this constituted a paradigmatic shift that gave birth to a specific children's literature, the so-called "narrativa per ragazzi", that had a deep influence also on narratives for adults.

2.1 Creating the Italian Child: The Pedagogical Novel

In this socio-historical context the coming-of-age story had a unique position in terms of creating Italian national identity, because of the ways in which it appropriated and refurbished the mythology of youth to define a new "Italian" pathway of growth. As a result, a sophisticated Italian form of coming-of-age story emerged, one not developed as a narrative *about* youth – as it was the European *Bildungsroman* – but as stories of formation *for* young readers, especially children. As Vittorio Spinazzola explains, a group of influential *romanzi di formazione* was produced right after the Unification with precise educational and therefore ideological significance, aiming to identify and characterize

¹⁰³ Robert Dombroski, "Writers and Society in the New Italy" in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, edited by Brand and Pertile (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 459.

some specific qualities in Italian children. These circumstances led to the success of novels such as Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1883),¹⁰⁴ De Amicis's *Cuore* (1886),¹⁰⁵ and Vamba's *Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca* (1912),¹⁰⁶ defined by Roberto Carnero as the first examples of a "letteratura giovanile" that aimed to educate younger readers – and their parents – according to the values of the Italian society¹⁰⁷.

Consequently, there is a backward shift in the age of the characters; no longer Nievo's passionate young soldier Carlo Altoviti or the tragic intellectual Jacopo Ortis of Risorgimental literature, but children deprived of all problematic emotions of adolescence and without the fervour of early adulthood years.¹⁰⁸ The narrative of Risorgimento that advocated for a passionate patriotism fuelled by the glory of battle was no longer fit for purpose; instead a new representation of national identity, embodied by the *Italian child* had to be constructed and transmitted to all Italians. It is not by chance that, Vamba dedicated *Il Giornalino di Gian Burrasca* "ai ragazzi d'Italia... perché lo facciano leggere ai loro genitori", as Spinazzola observes.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, as opposed to the continental tradition of portraying the adventures of young aristocrats or bourgeois, the Italian coming of age stories post-unification portrayed children from many backgrounds, from peasants to professionals, and from the north to the south of Italy (as in *Cuore*), in an attempt to create narratives that could resonate across a very diverse and fragmented new-born state.

¹⁰⁴ With the title *Storia di un Burattino* Carlo Collodi, pseudonym for Carlo Lorenzini, published the story of Pinocchio in instalments (1881-1883) in the *Giornale per i bambini*, a weekly supplement of the journal *Il Fanfulla*. In 1883 the different parts were collected and published as *Le avventure di Pinocchio*, a series of comical and grotesque adventures that happen to a puppet-boy inclined to escape his duties of schoolboy. Significantly, in the original version Pinocchio dies, yet Collodi was forced by his editor to revive the puppet, to continue the story and eventually, he decided for the final transformation in a real boy.

¹⁰⁵ *Cuore* (1886) is a fictional diary written by a child, Enrico Bottini, and reviewed by his father, and it is the story of Enrico and his classmates' everyday life at school in the new unified Italy. The aim of this book was to integrate the pedagogical effort made by the school by stressing the importance of the process of socialization and of the adherence to rules, to shape the "right" Italian identity.

¹⁰⁶ *Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca*, was published from 1907 in instalments in the *Giornalino della Domenica* and in 1912 as a standalone book. Luigi Bertelli, alias Vamba reprises the diarist model used by De Amicis but purifies the story from that educative self-righteousness, to shift towards an irreverent, comical perspective, by making Gian Burrasca writing a diary about his own mischiefs.

¹⁰⁷ Carnero adopts the definition of "letteratura giovanile" to define both those educational novels ('di educazione') written for child readers, but also those novels that (even if written for adults) have found in younger readers a predilected audience – these last ones are defined as novels "d'elezione". In the first category he counts *Cuore* and *Pinocchio*, while in the second categories he counts novels as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). To these two categories he adds a third one that emerged in the last decades of the 20th century and that sees novels written by young authors and targeted for peer readers. For further discussion see Roberto Carnero, *Under 40* (Milano: Mondadori, 2010).

¹⁰⁸ See Vittorio Spinazzola, *L'egemonia del romanzo* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2007).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. (Spinazzola) p. 113.

These three coming-of-age stories, despite the great differences amongst them,¹¹⁰ all present in essence a number of important thematic and formal nuclei that subsequently define the development of the genre. First, the choice of using a diary-like narration by both De Amicis and Vamba empowered the child narrator, since they presented the events through the lens of the child's eyes. The young Enrico Bottini in *Cuore* is a reliable, naïve and genuine narrator, highly confident in the righteousness of the social world, willing to learn and to be amazed by moral actions. The narration made by Enrico is later integrated with annotations and explanations belonging to some adult characters which assist the child narrator, thus showing the collective effort required to construct the new Italians.

On the contrary, *Gian Burrasca* is the sole narrator of his adventures and Vamba leaves the narrative perspective to a mischievous but spontaneous child, completely alien to the petty and controlling logic of adults. The pedagogical and cautionary role is not assumed by the narrator, but it is delegated to different adult characters within the story, thus inviting a meditation on the child's behaviors. In the case of Collodi's *Pinocchio*, the extradiegetic narrator¹¹¹ is not at all condemning the puppet boy, on the contrary, it seems to be taking the parts of *Pinocchio* with a sly smile, leaving to the Blue Fairy and Jiminy Cricket the role of reprising him. The authorial choice to use children as either narrators or focalizers creates a meaningful precedent in Italian literature, exposing society and its dynamics from the unfamiliar perspective of a child, not dissimilarly from what was happening in another countries with novels such as *A Pál utcai fiúk* by Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnár (1907) or *La guerre des boutons* by Louis Pergaud (1912).

Together with this centrality of the child within the narration, the metatextual consideration of the character as a "good hearted boy" of Rousseauan nature also strongly emerges. This *topos* is recurrent in coming-of-age stories, especially those which assumes innocence as a constitutive trait of children. As Spinazzola observes, these child characters often misbehave and are subsequently severely punished. However, their mischiefs are dependent on naïveté, enthusiasm, vitality and stubbornness, which are constitutive traits of childhood years; so that the emphasis is on the capacity of learning from mistakes, and ultimately to possess a good-hearted nature, making the happy ending possible.¹¹² In this respect, while *Cuore*'s primary aim was to promote through the experiences of Enrico the

¹¹⁰ For a detailed comparative analysis between *Cuore*, *Pinocchio* and *Gian Burrasca* see Spinazzola's *Pinocchio & Co.*

¹¹¹ For the different types of narrative voices in my study I refer to Genette Gérard, *Discourse du Récit, Figures III*, (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1972).

¹¹² Spinazzola, *Pinocchio & co.* pp. 15-16.

values of sacrifice, solidarity and, not less importantly, obedience to adults,¹¹³ *Pinocchio* and *Gian Burrasca* were instead concerned with portraying a typical “monello”, a child that refuses to behave and constantly ends up in troubles, similarly to a young picaro. Despite their mischiefs, both *Pinocchio* and *Gian Burrasca* are substantially good-hearted boys. Despite their happy ending, there is no compassion for mistakes and a rigid discipline made of a vast array of punishments, beatings and extortions is needed to make them grow into responsible and devoted Italians.

These coming-of-age stories have become the canon for many generations of children, constituting a key and long-lasting reservoir of images connected to childhood within Italian culture. It is enough to cite the numerous adaptations made of these stories, from the internationally famous *Pinocchio* by Walt Disney (1940) to the version of Roberto Benigni (2002); from *Cuore*'s miniseries adaptations in 1984 and again in 2001 to *Gian Burrasca*'s series adaptation with the famous singer Rita Pavone in 1964, rerun almost every decade. The exceptionally long-lasting impact of these stories on Italian popular culture is witnessed by the success of the song *W la pappa col pomodoro*, sung by Rita Pavone dressed as Gian Burrasca for the *Rai dei Piccoli* in the 1960s and 1970s. In those decades a specific cultural project was promoted by the Italian communist party, targeting the younger audience with programs such as *Lo zecchino d'oro*,¹¹⁴ recalling the same attempt of educating young Italians made during the Risorgimento.

Overall, the historical circumstances in which these stories were born presented a solid and prescriptive view of the "right" identity to assume, with adult characters oftentimes strongly involved in directing the process of growth. Good behaviors were ultimately rewarded and mischiefs punished, in order to provide fruitful lessons for the development of the character. Needless to say, this paradigm was defined in masculine terms, since not much space was left in the Italian literature of the Unification to girls, with the exception of *Pisana* and some young female figures in Grazia Deledda's works.

¹¹³ As Moretti notices in his critique of *Cuore*: “the diary framework of heart is a great panopticon open to the rigorous gaze of authority. Enrico Bottini cannot even make a move without running into someone who puts him back on the straight and narrow with a good talking to. [...] Family and school are superimposed in a single, escape-proof disciplinary structure. [...] At the end of the year, Enrico has not changed a bit. What is required of him, rather, is that he should remain a permanent minor”, emphasizing the normative role of adults, entitled to educate the child in assuming the sole possible identity. See Moretti, Franco, *Signs taken for Wonders* (London and New York: Verso, 1983) pp. 165-166.

¹¹⁴ *Zecchino d'oro* is an annual international children's song competition broadcasted by RAI, established in 1959 and still ongoing. The host was Ciriaco De Mita, whose Mago Zurlì was a well-known character for children thanks to its own RAI show *Zurlì, il mago del giovedì*. The first edition of the *Zecchino d'oro* was inspired by the story of *Pinocchio*, whose influence is also present in the title of the festival which recalls ‘the gold coin’ buried by *Pinocchio*. One of the songs in the competition, *Lettera a Pinocchio*, written by Mario Panzeri achieved a cult-like status in Johnny Dorelli's adaptation of 1960s.

Nobel Prize winner in 1927, Deledda was read by Virginia Woolf, by George Steiner and loved by D.H. Lawrence for the sexual liberty of her young female characters, who nevertheless remained marginal for a long time in the canon.¹¹⁵

In post-unification Italy the experimentation of different identities, as much as the concern to voice new ones, could not be a priority, and the pole of *idem*-identity, the one of permanence and identification was predominant. Complicit with the good-hearted nature model and thanks to rigid educative protocols, these child characters became exactly what they were requested to become in order to fulfil the dream of a unified and modern Italy. Despite the differences amongst these novels, the message is a utilitarian, practical and secular view of growth: the importance of hard work, respect of rules and the alignment with the moral values of new-born Italy constituted the ideal foundation of a solid, stable, unified and levelled identity across the entirety of Italian society, from children to adults.

2.2 Growing up in Wartimes

As previously said, a key shift in the trajectory of identity is the one from unity to multiplicity; even before sociological studies started to investigate the different relationships that the selfhood established with multiple forms of belonging and recognition, literature was already exploring the theme of identity fragmentation. Before Freudian psychoanalysis, the 19th century was witnessing an increasing concern about the essential unity of the self. The shadows of duplicity, fragmentations and irrational impulses were already threatening this core unity and, as the modern age progressed, literature dramatized concepts of mistrust, fear, isolation, and madness, usually by projecting them onto alienated figures.

Within the Italian context of the early 20th century, writers such as Luigi Pirandello¹¹⁶ and Italo Svevo¹¹⁷ engaged in a wide production, from novels to short stories and plays, that explored the problem of identity in dialogue with new psychoanalytic

¹¹⁵ In 2006, Antonella Anedda curated for Donzelli an edition of Deledda's *novelle*. With this work, Anedda has given back voice to Deledda's work, long neglected by critics, and especially to the women and the culture of Sardinian matriarchy.

¹¹⁶ With regard to Pirandello's novelistic production, are worthy of mention both *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904) and *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1925), two novels that focus on the crisis of identity of an adult character that has to deconstruct all truths that he had taken for granted.

¹¹⁷ Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923) is a novel that reflects the profound impact that Freudian studies had on the perception of the self. This novel is a journey into Zeno's consciousness in form of an autobiographic diary, and therefore the organization of the plot revolves around the reveries of the protagonist.

discoveries. As Enrico Testa explains in reference to Pirandello, one element of modernity is “una sorta di congedo dall’ ideologia del continuo” seen as that interpretative frame connected to a wholeness of the self, as much as a solidity of the world.

Il tempo della crisi si origina da questa frattura del senso della continuità, che trova l’uomo insufficiente, incapace di comprendere. Nasce così il progressivo aumento della componente autoriflessiva, la lettura dei fatti come sfuggenti e interpretabili e non più in naturale successione, la dissoluzione dello scenario [...] ovvero una messa in scena della distruzione dell’io e sconvolgimento della logica tradizionale del narrare.¹¹⁸

This emphasis on the adult man, struggling to find coherent selfhood amidst a rapidly changing world, pushed back against the centrality of child characters. According to Emanuele Zinato, after Freud the representation of childhood and adolescent years became “un groviglio di contraddizioni logiche”,¹¹⁹ so that the presence of child characters was set at the margins of the novelistic production for a few decades; with the stability of the identity of the adult now questioned, little attention could be given to the younger selves. When childhood was presented, it was framed as the bigger enigma, as epitomized in *La Coscienza di Zeno* (1923) by Zeno’s incapacity of even remembering his childhood years, metaphorically signalling the disappearance of that unifying point of origin. Zeno tries unsuccessfully to recall some childhood memories following the explicit request of his psychoanalyst, who assumes that the key to understanding the problems of the adult Zeno lies in the past. So that it is not by chance that the entire novel is founded on this pathological impossibility of getting access to childhood memories.¹²⁰

This attitude stands in contrast with the tendency elaborated abroad, for example within surrealism, which explored both the creative, visionary force of childhood but also the deeper, darker and uncanny aspects of growth, as with Cocteau’s *Les Enfants Terribles* (1929) which explores the destructive and ill infatuation between a brother and sister that ultimately leads to their premature deaths.¹²¹ Instead, in Italy the problems of young adults

¹¹⁸ Enrico Testa, “Uno, nessuno e centomila (Luigi Pirandello, 1925-26)” in *Il Romanzo*, edited by Franco Moretti, V.I. (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), p. 825.

¹¹⁹ Emanuele Zinato, “Zeno, Gonzalo, Berto, Pin, Arturo, Ueseppe e tutti gli altri. L’infanzia rappresentata nella letteratura italiana del Novecento” in *Il ricordo di infanzia nelle letterature del Novecento*, ed. Brugnolo, (Pisa: Pacini, 2012), pp. 95-114.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem* (Zinato).

¹²¹ In 1978 Ian Mc Ewan’s *Cement Garden* further elaborates the theme by narrating with profound psychological complexity the story of incest between two teenager orphans. On this same thematic trajectory is also worth citing Simona Vinci’s *Brother and Sister* (2003) a short story made to be read for Radio Tre,

are the ones to assume central stage; one thinks for example of Alba de Cespedes's college girls from *Nessuno torna indietro* (1938) and Alessio Mainardi of Vittorini's *Il garofano rosso* (1948).¹²² According to Spinazzola, it is only in the second half of the 20th century that Italian literature progressively moves towards adolescence as the preferred field of enquiry to understand the challenges of growth in between and after the world wars.

Certo è che lungo il secolo diciannovesimo i nostri narratori appaiono restii a focalizzare i turbamenti fisiopsichici dell'adolescenza: ciò avverrà solo assai più tardi, nel corso del Novecento, con opere come *Agostino* di Moravia (1944), *L'isola di Arturo* della Morante (1957), il postumo *Ernesto* di Saba.¹²³

Also, in this historical moment the coming-of-age story is finally established in Italy as a genre intended for an adult readership, due especially to the influence of the realistic and neo-realistic wider cultural production,¹²⁴ which used the child's gaze to provide an original perspective to explore the trauma of the wars. Children are therefore invested with the role of unveiling what adults have sacrificed on the altar of the wars, explicitly disclosing the guilt of their fathers.

From the second half of the century adolescents rapidly populate the pages of some of the most influential Italian novels of the century, as Moravia's *Agostino* (1944), Calvino's *Il sentiero dei Nidi di Ragno* (1947) and Morante's *L'isola di Arturo* (1957).¹²⁵

that also engages with the description of one night – the night when these children became orphans – during which two adolescent characters (Cate is 17 years old and Matt is 14 years) confront their fears, the sense solitude and loss, the value of memory and lastly the tender and torbid sexual attraction that constantly haunts them.

¹²² Vittorini started publishing *Il Garofano Rosso* in instalments for the journal *Solaria* in 1933 and proceeded relentlessly despite the continuous cuts and changes requested by the fascist censorship, until 1936. Rejected in 1938, the novel will be published in one volume only in 1948.

¹²³ Vittorio Spinazzola, *Pinocchio & Co.* (Milano: Il Saggiatore 1997).

¹²⁴ “Con il Neorealismo i bambini assunsero sullo schermo un rilievo nuovo. Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini e, in misura minore, Luchino Visconti scelsero spesso come protagonisti delle loro opere proprio i bambini, in virtù delle caratteristiche del cinema neorealista che cercava di cogliere l'immediatezza della realtà. La loro macchina da presa catturò l'ansia, il desiderio, il dolore racchiuso nello sguardo dei giovanissimi interpreti non professionisti. [...] Il binomio artistico Vittorio De Sica - Cesare Zavattini realizzò il primo ritratto neorealista dell'infanzia con *I bambini ci guardano* (1944), in cui viene privilegiato lo sguardo e la solitudine di Pricò un bambino di sette anni costretto a confrontarsi con una dura realtà familiare (l'adulterio della madre). E se di *Roma città aperta* (1945) di Rossellini resta emblematica l'immagine finale (un gruppo di ragazzini che si allontana mestamente dopo aver assistito all'esecuzione di don Pietro), altre opere di questo periodo vollero invece raccontare storie private, intime.” See Giovanni Grazzini, *Dolci pestiferi perversi. I bambini nel cinema* (Parma: Pratiche Editrice, 1995). Available online at https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bambini_%28Enciclopedia-del-Cinema%29/

¹²⁵ See Alberto Moravia, *Agostino* (Milano: Bompiani 1963 [1944]); Italo Calvino, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Milano: Mondadori, 1993 [1947]) and Elsa Morante, *L'isola di Arturo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005 [1957])

The representation of children and young protagonists at this point has ceased to be an empty category inhabited by the desires, demands and interests of the adult world, and has moved towards a more realistic representation of the social and natural anxieties of growth. Also, the gaze of the young character is established as the privileged means to interrogate a world that has become incomprehensible. Although the pedagogical novel already presented the child's perspective, the 20th century further elaborated the child-narrator and focaliser by adopting two formal devices; what Zinato defines as "lo sguardo dal basso" of the child character on the world, and "lo sguardo all'indietro" of the adult character who remembers.¹²⁶

Another emblematic child's gaze and pivotal point in the Italian literature of the century, is provided by Calvino in his *Il Barone rampante* (1957) in which the young baronet Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò refuses the historicity of the social life to retreat into a life on trees, definitely dismissing the formula of the *Bildungsroman* with its myth of an harmonious integration with the social world. As Moretti has declared, after the war "the relevant symbolic process is no longer growth but regression. The adult world refuses to be a hospitable home for the subject? Then let childhood be it."¹²⁷

Through the adoption of these different gazes and narrative choices of focalization, the growth of the character is symbolically developed under the sign of a key unresolved issue which acquires a double connotation: an impossibility of making sense of the world and a nostalgic revocation of childhood years as something precious that has been lost. A new configuration of growth emerges, one that oscillates between the concepts of the *infantia felix*, and the one of *the lost infancy*, as magnificently expressed by Morante's deeply painful yet necessary transition to adulthood experienced by Arturo.

The genre has therefore seized upon the trauma experienced by these generations of writers to regenerate its own features, moving away from portraying a determined, solid and singular identity informed by the collective and performed in the public space of the school – as the one portrayed in *Cuore* – to shift toward an irreconcilable and intimate search for a selfhood that is becoming increasingly more fragmented, and that gets

¹²⁶ "Lo 'sguardo all'indietro' che il memorialista maturo rivolge al sé stesso bambino è uno degli artifici letterari impiegati per rendere dicibile lo spaesamento davanti al mondo dell'autodistruzione innovativa, in cui tutto ciò che è solido si dissolve nell'aria. [...] Eppure la consapevolezza di un presente che si rivela inabitabile ed estraneo e di un passato irrimediabilmente perduto, si manifesta nell'immaginario italiano assai più tardi che in quello europeo." Emanuele Zinato, "Zeno, Gonzalo, Berto, Pin, Arturo, Usepe e tutti gli altri. L'infanzia rappresentata nella letteratura italiana del Novecento" in *Il ricordo di infanzia nelle letterature del Novecento*, Edited by Brugnolo (Pisa: Pacini, 2012), p. 8

¹²⁷ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The "Bildungsroman" in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 231

constructed outside of institutionalized spaces. Yet, there are still a few more decades to cover before we witness the full achievement of all three paradigm shifts, confronting constructed, liquid and purposely juvenile identities.

2.3 Youth at the End of the Century

This last section not only concludes the overview of the coming-of-age story in Italian literature, it also delineates the cultural milieu in which all the authors considered in this study grew up in, since all of them were born in the decade 1960-1970.¹²⁸ According to Roberto Carnero's analysis, the economic boom of the 1960s established young people in Italy for the first time as a precise category of consumer. At the roots of this change there were some determining factors such as a higher disposable income and the crisis of the traditional structure of the patriarchal family, which were further fuelled by the revolutions of 1968.¹²⁹

These events contributed to that wider movement against a traditional set of values established in Italian society, to which corresponded a renewed interest in researching a narrative form suited to express the experiences and the socio-cultural identity of contemporary youth. Indeed, from the end of the 1950s Italian society started to perceive young people increasingly as a separate social subject, with a precise generational identity, performatively constructed through popular media such as televisions and magazines.¹³⁰ Meanwhile, as explored by girlhood studies,¹³¹ new attention was given to girlhood as a subset of female-centred juvenile identity. For example, Rita Pavone's unconventional and parodic depictions of femininity in the years of the economic boom created an alternative narrative of female empowerments and gendered behaviors for a youth audience.¹³²

¹²⁸ Tiziano Scarpa (Venezia, 1963), Mohsen Melliti (Tunisi, 1967), Diego De Silva (Torino, 1964), Niccolò Ammaniti (Roma, 1966), Isabella Santacroce (Riccione, 1970), Simona Vinci (Milano, 1970).

¹²⁹ See Carnero Roberto, *Under 40* (Milano: Mondadori, 2010)

¹³⁰ Cecilia Brioni is currently exploring the social construction of Italian youth from the late 1950s to today by looking at a variety of cultural artefacts, including film, television, magazines, novels, and social media content. See for example Brioni Cecilia, "Rita e «La Zanzara»: la costruzione dell'identità giovanile italiana nei film Musicarelli (1958-1968)" in Parigi, Uva, and Zagarrìo (eds.) *Cinema e identità italiana: cultura visuale e immaginario nazionale fra tradizione e modernità*. Roma: Roma TrE-Press, 2019, pp. 711-720.

¹³¹ While adolescence and gender construction in Italy have been mainly investigated by sociology and psychology, in recent years girlhood studies have also focused on the role of media and material culture in the identity-building process. In this respect, Danielle Hipkins' work on narratives of girlhood and representation of the female child in Italian cinema highlights how female identity is culturally constructed and represented.

¹³² Hotz Stephanie, "Rita Pavone's Musicarelli: Rethinking Genre and (Young) Women's Representation" in *gender/sexuality/Italy*, 4 (2017), pp. 63-80.

In the second half of the century, thanks to the end of fascist censorship, it was the reception in Italy of American literature¹³³ that provided some inspiring new models to narrate the experience of adolescents, and three novels in particular are recognized for their great influence on the definition of contemporary coming-of-age stories; Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) – translated in Italian in 1952 as *Vita da uomo* and later retitled as *Il giovane Holden* in 1961 – Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Roberto Carnero recognises *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road* as the archetypes of young characters that inspired a generation of young Italian narrators and that, together with movies such as *Rebel without a cause* (1955) by Nicholas Ray, shaped the basis for a juvenile collective consciousness that spread all over the western world.¹³⁴

These novels present a strong alternative to the model of the *infantia felix* in terms of narrative perspective; there is no longer the integrated adult version of the character looking back with nostalgia at youth years, but instead a young narrator immersed in the time of the narration, with little knowledge about his adult fate, suspended in the moment of growth while dramatically trying to make sense of his identity. Also, considering the established model for childhood as the one derived from Rousseau and later reinterpreted in literature as the “good hearted boy”, the *Lord of the Flies* is probably the most powerful example of a counter-narrative on childhood's identity. The representation that emerges from this novel is far from in line with the paradigm of the good, uncorrupted nature of the child, as the portrayed children are characterized by being uncontrollable and profoundly charged with malice.¹³⁵

From this international mosaic of representations of growth, childhood and teenage years emerge as far more layered and complex. Characters explore the drama of constructing their identity going through feelings of anger, incompleteness, restlessness and insecurity, but at the same time they are animated by a frantic energy of revolt against social norms. As Spinazzola explains,

¹³³ As Guido Bonsaver explains: “Nell’Europa letteraria curva su sé stessa, modernista prima e postmoderna in anni più recenti, la narrazione ‘nuda e cruda’ dei romanzieri americani ha costantemente fornito l’antidoto contro ogni eccessivo pessimismo sulle sorti del romanzo, sulla morte dell’autore sprofondato nelle sabbie mobili dell’intertestualità e del metaletterario.” Guido Bonsaver, “Raccontare all’Americana: Io non ho paura tra autodiegesi letteraria e soggettività cinematografica” in *Narrativa Italiana Recente / Recent Italian Fiction* (Torino: Trauben, Trinity College Dublin, 2005), pp. 53-73.

¹³⁴ Roberto Carnero, *Under 40* (Milano: Mondadori, 2010).

¹³⁵ As Susan Honeyman explains, “*Lord of the Flies*, populated with emotionally complex and menacing children, challenges the security of adults who insist on oversimplified constructs of child innocence.” Honeyman Susan, *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction* (Ohio State University Press, 2005), p. 84.

In fondo questa narrativa può essere letta anche come un elogio dello spirito di intraprendenza della nuova gioventù, in quanto tesa tormentosamente ad acquistare consapevolezza della propria diversità rispetto alle generazioni precedenti; sulla spinta dell'esigenza sentita di un codice di valori più spregiudicato e libero. Certo, un simile ritratto ha un risvolto di inettitudine: la fiacchezza di chi vorrebbe ma non sa darsi una identità né adeguandosi né contrastando i criteri vincenti nella competizione interpersonale; e si ritrae in un angolo, più o meno conciliato con sé stesso. Siamo già di fuori dall'area della *Bildung* classica.¹³⁶

Hence, the emergence of these new features sets a clear differentiation from the narratives of the *Bildungsroman*, embracing a paradigm of growth that problematized the process of identity formation and uncovered dramatic tensions within the self.

Italian literature, also nurtured by American models, elaborated in the following decades a particularly vibrant national youth voice. The 1970s saw a confluence of young and talented writers in the University of Bologna, including Enrico Palandri (1956-) and Pier Vittorio Tondelli (1955-1991) who under the guidance of Gianni Celati (1937-) and Umberto Eco (1932-2016) disrupted both the representation of the individual subject and the literary and linguistic conventions needed to explore it. As Margherita Ganeri observes, in the 1980s “lo scontro generazionale di cui i trenta-quarantenni si fanno esplicitamente portavoce si iscrive entro il clima di delusione ideologica derivante dall'esaurimento delle contestazioni giovanili degli anni Sessanta e Settanta.”¹³⁷ Within this frame, Aldo Busi, – with his *Seminario sulla gioventù* (1984), is possibly the loudest voice of what has been gathered under the label of “nuova narrativa” in the occasion of the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1985.

Yet, it was Pier Vittorio Tondelli who quickly became pivotal in portraying a youth his peers could relate to, both in terms of images and language. His *Altri libertini* (1980) is undoubtedly assumed as an Italian generational cult book: described by Tondelli as a *romanzo ad episodi*, the characters are a group of marginalized young people that refuses to conform to Italian bourgeois society by adopting a transgressive lifestyle. Stylistically, it became the progenitor of that “letteratura eversiva e gergale, impastata di linguaggi tutti

¹³⁶ Vittorio Spinazzola, *L'egemonia del romanzo*, p. 44.

¹³⁷ Margherita Ganeri, *Postmodernismo* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1998), p. 39.

antiletterari, ipermimetica”¹³⁸ that reconfigured the relationship between fictionality and reality. By portraying a “gioventù bruciata”, it provided the gaze from within Italian youth subculture to show new habits, feelings and languages. Carnero defines Tondelli as “uno scrittore generazionale” because “oltre a essere giovane (nel 1980 ha venticinque anni) è uno scrittore particolarmente letto dai giovani, di cui, soprattutto nei primi due libri, rappresenta la vita, i problemi, le ansie, le frustrazioni, gli entusiasmi”.¹³⁹

Tondelli had also the merit of giving a particular attention to other young voices in Italy, in particular thanks to the creation of the “Progetto Under 25”; a challenge¹⁴⁰ that led to the publication of three volumes of short stories between the 1988 and 1990, launching the career of many young writers such as Silvia Ballestra, Giuseppe Culicchia and Andrea Canobbio, leading the way for those “narrative giovanili d’elezione” written by young writers and aiming for a peer-generational readership. Interestingly enough, Carnero individuates this young generation of both writers and readers as the ones *Under 40* years of age, unveiling a mainstream tendency of moving forward the threshold to adulthood in the liquid society. This fluidity of age boundaries supports the idea that, differently from the coming-of-age story, the *romanzo di formazione* is more a series of recurrent themes and patterns rather than a genre tightly connected to a specific age-range.

The following decade witnessed the proliferation of other “young” writers, the so-called “*seconda ondata*” which followed the stylistic and thematic road traced by their “maestri” (such as the already cited Culicchia and Balestra), but were also inspired by new voices, such as Enrico Brizzi, whose *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal Gruppo* (1994) soon became another generational cult. Praised by Marino Sinibaldi, this novel managed to renew and revitalize the tradition of the novel of formation by embracing the challenge of portraying an authentic identity *in progress*, by using the language, myths and stereotypes of Italian youth subculture.¹⁴¹ In this respect, from the late 1980s onwards Italian literature

¹³⁸ See Alberto Casadei, *Stile e tradizione nel romanzo italiano contemporaneo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2007), p. 53.

¹³⁹ See Roberto Carnero, ‘Dalla “letteratura emotiva” alla “letteratura interiore”: L’itinerario narrativo in Pier Vittorio Tondelli’, *Critica letteraria*, 97 (1997), p. 744.

¹⁴⁰ In the call for the Project *Under 25*, Tondelli suggested: “Scrivete non di ogni cosa che volete, ma di quello che fate. Astenetevi dai giudizi sul mondo in generale (ci sono già i filosofi, i politologi, gli scienziati) piuttosto raccontate storie che si possano oralmente riassumere in cinque minuti. Raccontate i vostri viaggi, le persone che avete incontrato all’estero, descrivete di chi vi siete innamorati [...], raccontate di voi, dei vostri amici, delle vostre stanze, degli zaini, delle università, delle aule scolastiche...” Tondelli cited in Carnero, *Under 40*, p. 86.

¹⁴¹ “Così nel limpido catalogo di Brizzi non manca nulla della costellazione esistenziale e psicologica che contraddistingue il gioco letterario dell’identità in formazione: gli adulti distanti e irriconoscibili, gli amori inspiegabilmente infelici, l’irrisolta identificazione col mondo e con la sua apparente compiutezza e felicità. Ma il linguaggio, la trama dei riferimenti culturali e oggettuali provengono tutti dal mondo dei gusti e

has tried to give a new voice to those generations of young people increasingly dispersed, with contested, multiple and fragmented identities, parting from the idyllic vision of youth to portray the deep seated fears, anxieties and upsets that moved these young characters.

Worth noting, on side of the *nuovi narratori* is the emergence of another subgroup of young authors, defined as *giovani cannibali*, from the title of the anthology of short stories published by Einaudi in 1996 *Gioventù Cannibale*,¹⁴² which adopted the stylistic hallmark of American pulp and pop culture. Among the original members of the *Gioventù Cannibale* can be counted Aldo Nove, Andrea Pinketts, Simona Vinci and Niccolò Ammaniti, and by extending the label to similar authors, the critics have also encompassed Tiziano Scarpa and Isabella Santacroce.¹⁴³ Yet, it is Tiziano Scarpa that, in an interview with Stefania Lucamante clarifies that it was more of a branding than an expression of a programmatic artistic intent. For this reason he advocates for the necessity of considering their literary works as independent, without drawing superficial correspondences.¹⁴⁴ Four of the authors in this study at the beginning of their careers were “cannibals”; in this respect, although the novels I will analyse are past this mostly ephemeral cannibal phase,¹⁴⁵ I will trace back the impact that this experience had on their narrative style and thematic choices.

The phenomenon of *Gioventù Cannibale* has been for few years at the core of a vibrant debate between academics and critics, generating either appreciation for the experimental value of their works, or labelling the production of this group as trash literature. Stefania Lucamante, in her *Italian Pulp Fiction*, defends the literary legitimacy

consumi giovanili.” In Marino Sinibaldi, *Pulp: letteratura nell'era della simultaneità* (Roma: Donzelli, 1997), p. 34.

¹⁴² *Gioventù Cannibale: La prima antologia dell'orrore estremo* edited by Daniele Brolli and published by Einaudi in 1996 gathered the short stories in 3 sections: *Everyday Atrocities*, *Ferocious adolescence and Melancholies of Blood*.

¹⁴³ Stefania Lucamante gathers these writers under the umbrella term of *Giovani Cannibali*, although she acknowledges the differences in style, content and thematics: Aldo Nove, Simona Vinci, Tiziano Scarpa, Isabella Santacroce, Daniele Luttazzi, Silvia Ballestra, Niccolò Ammaniti, Luisa Brancaccio, Carlo Lucarelli, Francesca Mazzuccato, Matteo Gializzo. See Stefania Lucamante, *Italian Pulp Fiction* (London: Associated University Press, 2001).

¹⁴⁴ Tiziano Scarpa, in his interview with Stefania Lucamante, challenges the labels of pulp and cannibals, by suggesting that it was just a coincidence – not a plan – that many authors turned to a particular type of narrative in Italy in those years: “Infatti, prima di quell'antologia, [Gioventù Cannibale] uscita a fine '96, i giornalisti letterari, con la pigrizia e il provincialismo e la sudditanza culturale tutte italiane nel chiamare le cose importando etichette dagli Stati Uniti, ci aveva definiti “Pulp,” da *Pulp Fiction* di Quentin Tarantino. Io invece direi che, se proprio ci si fosse dovuti paragonare per forza a un fenomeno statunitense, noi eravamo l'equivalente dell'Avant-Pop che si faceva esattamente in quegli anni negli Stati Uniti. See. Stefania Lucamante, “Intervista a Tiziano Scarpa di Stefania Lucamante” in *Italica*, Vol. 83, No. 3/4 (Fall - Winter, 2006), p. 697.

¹⁴⁵ Despite the ongoing critical debate on the value and legacy of this movement, the experience of the cannibals had a very short lifespan, so much that so in 1999 Fulvio Pezzarossa entitled an essay “C'era una volta il pulp”, proclaiming the death of the trend.

of the group, by recognising that the portrait that these new writers offer of Italian youth is “a desperate and alienated one, and the piecing ability with which they achieve the desired effect is what constitutes perhaps their innermost original trait”.¹⁴⁶ On the other side of the barricade, Fulvio Panzeri provocatively asks, instead: “dove va la nuova narrativa italiana dopo che sono state usate tutte le finte etichette (pulp, rock, cannibalismo) e si sono dimostrate contenitori vuoti che servono solo a dare dignità ai brutti libri?”¹⁴⁷

These narratives – often stylistically fragmented and characterized by pastiche, code mixing and transmedia references – present teenagers and young adult characters in highly dysfunctional relationships, grotesque and ferocious familiar dynamics, usually on the setting of a total commodification of life, of a redundant fetishism of the body, all within a corrupted and ill society. In terms of growth, the young characters get lost in a series of events that they are unable – or unwilling – to control; dragged into this flux of gratuitousness and excess, they lose track of moral reference points and eventually get trapped into an everlasting youth with no sense of responsibility and no willingness to transition into adulthood, despite their age. As referred to Ammaniti’s *Fango* (1996) this story presents “i nuovi grotteschi eroi di un’umanità giovane e metropolitana, sbandata e anticonformista, capace di passare con leggerezza da una modesta aspirazione a un efferato delitto.”¹⁴⁸

Marino Sinibaldi links back this narrative trend to a fundamental and radical loss of traditional models, suggesting that “il paesaggio morale e spirituale rispetto al quale questi fenomeni andrebbero misurati è piuttosto quello descritto da Zygmunt Bauman nella sua analisi delle etiche postmoderne”.¹⁴⁹ Margherita Ganeri observes that across the different labels of pulp, trash and punk, “si coltiva una rottura generazionale il cui retroterra è la radicale trasformazione dell’immaginario culturale”.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, these young writers were hungry for new media, comics, movies, television series, music and pop sub-

¹⁴⁶ Stefania Lucamante, *Italian Pulp Fiction* (London: Associated University Press, 2001), p. 13.

¹⁴⁷ “La domanda si formula in questo senso: Dove va la nuova narrativa italiana dopo che sono state usate tutte le finte etichette (pulp, rock, cannibalismo) e si sono dimostrate contenitori vuoti che servono solo a dare dignità ai brutti libri? In certi periodi la questione diventa ancora più urgente, quando il bilancio è in perdita su tutti i fronti, con libri nettamente al di sotto di una media apprezzabile, con storie all’insegna della mediocrità stilistica, della sperimentazione a tutti i costi, del gusto dell’eccesso o solamente, in molti casi, segnati da una banalità, presa terribilmente sul serio.” Fulvio Panzeri, *Senza rete: conversazioni sulla “nuova narrativa” italiana* (Ancona: Pequod, 1999), p. 9.

¹⁴⁸ Niccolò Ammaniti, *Fango* (Milano: Mondadori, [1996] 1999), bookcover.

¹⁴⁹ Marino Sinibaldi, *Pulp: letteratura nell’era della simultaneità* (Roma: Donzelli, 1997), p. 57.

¹⁵⁰ Margherita Ganeri, *Postmodernismo* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1998), p. 80.

cultures, thus widening the stylistic and thematic array of choices in order to portray new, transient and often ephemeral aspects of Italian youth culture.

What is worth noticing, when referring to these authors and novels cited from Tondelli onwards, is the attention given to early adulthood more than adolescence. Whether or not adulthood is rejected, refused or unaccomplished, the main protagonists were around the age of twenty – an exception is the 17-year old *Jack Frusciante* –, thus dealing with the core problem of integration with adult society. Often aiming explicitly to revolt against the society of adults, the process of growth refocuses on the necessity of understanding the rules and the laws that govern the world to decide whether or not to align with them.

Even if starting from different premises and arriving at a totally different outcome, the structure and the aims of these novels are not dissimilar from the ones of the *Bildungsroman*: integration with adult society is indeed the pain-point for these characters, that instead of being regenerated by the bourgeois social dynamism feel now trapped in a hypocritical and devalued bourgeois society that has lost any positive formative impact on their identity. Instead, the novels that I will be discussing in the following chapters generally present younger characters so that the challenges of identity formation partially deviate from the problem of being incapable or unwilling to accept the status of adulthood to focus more onto the process of growth that is contained within adolescence itself.

Conclusions

In the first part of this chapter I have discussed three paradigmatic shifts in understanding identity and reflected on how the feelings and perceptions connected to these shifts have been elaborated by literature. The first shift is from essential to constructed identity: moving from the idea of identity as something given and unchanged, almost an ontological state of the self, towards understanding identity as a position to be constantly renegotiated internally and externally.

The paradigm of essential identity has had a long-lasting influence on literary productions, as embodied by characters such as the epic hero and, within the novelistic realm, by archetypal heroes such as the chevalier and the saint. In this case, these characters had to prove to the wider world some key inner qualities that they already possessed, and the challenge was a matter of according the internal world with the external one, as explained by Bakhtin. The hero of the *Bildungsroman* started to challenge such a

harmonious development by embracing the dynamism of a bourgeois society (often indulging in a blind optimism towards progress), and portraying the formation of a character in need to prove his or her social value. In this sense, there was a renewed space for self-growth and self-awareness, even if the trajectory towards adulthood was a linear one, with precise milestones and learnings to achieve along the way. The turn of the 20th century, with its new discoveries and world wars, witnessed a deeper understanding of the role of social, economic, religious and scientific forces that act upon the formation of an individual. This progressive movement away from essentialism had its culmination in the second half of the century, when social constructionism provided the framework to discuss identity as something constructed truly within society and not outside of its influence, to fully embrace later intersectionality approaches.

The second shift is the one from solid to liquid, rooted in Bauman's theory of liquid society. The solid society of modernity, based on strong ideologies and institutions has lost its shape, once the pace of change of the world assumed uncertainty as its guiding principle. Similar to a liquid, contemporary society metaphorically adapts to its environment, especially the fast-paced economic one which dictates the form of the contemporary world. Once life became unpredictable and change became the norm, individuals learned to adopt agile identities; multifaceted, plural, unstable, prone to change and to evolution. However, if this strategy creates a necessary space for survival, at the same time it annihilates the foundations of traditional sense-making. When it comes to young characters, the emerging trend is to portray characters that are fragmented, lost in the flux, unable to control their growth and to make sense of the world.

The last shift is from adults to children and it is particularly relevant for the coming-of-age story. Heroes have traditionally been older – and male – characters, and it was not until Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) that we witness a child character whose importance is equal, if not bigger, than an adult one. Rousseau sets childhood years as the innate deposit of the best qualities of an individual but also as the entire foundation of one's life-story. From here, we see not only developments in pedagogy and a renewed child-centrism in many disciplines, but also the proliferation of many famous child characters in the pages of novels. With different emphases in different times and geographies, child characters provide various ways to explore the theme of growth across different genres, creating a collective archive of characters such as Alice, Peter Pan, Tom Sawyer, Pinocchio, Gian Burrasca, Holden Caulfield and Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, which are today a defining part of our collective literary history and of childhood representations.

In the meantime, the last decades of the 20th century have witnessed the fortune of youth studies which have helped reorient debates on contemporary transformations of social identity among youth and in society and culture. Youth studies have interrogated from a wide range of perspectives what it means to be a young person, what the social and cultural thresholds of adulthood are and how young people perform and construct their identities, providing a crucial lens to triangulate the experiences portrayed by literary characters today. Looking at Italian youth studies specifically, together with the recent interesting development of girlhood studies,¹⁵¹ a number of scholars are mapping the cultural experiences and performances of youth identities, looking at topics of subcultures, consumption and media.¹⁵²

In the second part of the chapter I have mapped Italian coming-of-age narratives and their development on the premise of these shifts. Italian literature of Unification provides three great examples of child characters, Pinocchio, Enrico Bottini and Gian Burrasca as representative of a time in which the ideological and pedagogical project was to create the image of the “new Italians”. The identity of the children had to be shaped according to this project, either through the strict guidance of adults or through a vast array of punishments when needed, so that a normative, collective identity shaped on the values of the new-born state could be transmitted through literature to the wider population of children and parents altogether.

After a brief parenthesis at the turn of the 20th century, when adult characters seemed to assume central stage in the narratives of formation, the aftermath of the Second World War saw a renewed interest in children, whose gaze and focalization is privileged when trying to make sense of past and present horrors. Children and adolescents are increasingly characterised as more than recipient of ideologies, and the tensions typical of these years are explored with great psychological, emotional and ethical depth, as in the works of Elsa Morante and Italo Calvino. Characters such as Arturo and Pin indeed define a way of looking at life which unveils the beautiful yet painful struggles of growing up in a world that seems both incomprehensible and familiar at the same time, creating a strong lineage of Italian characters complementary to models proposed by foreign literatures.

¹⁵¹ See for example Romana Andò, “Girls and the Media: Girlhood Studies Agenda and Prospects in Italy”, in *Gender/sexuality/Italy*, 4 (2017) and Hipkins Danielle, ““Come fossi una Bambola?” Girlhood Studies and Memory in Italy” in *Gender/sexuality/Italy*, 4 (2017), pp. 96-102.

¹⁵² See Paolo Capuzzo, “Youth and Consumption” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* edited by Trentmann (Oxford University Press, 2012), Patrizia Dogliani, *Storia dei giovani* (Milano: Mondadori, 2000), Valerio Marchi, *Teppa: storie del conflitto giovanile* (Roma: Red Star Press, 2014).

Finally, the last decades of the century put children, adolescents and young characters back at the core of narratives of formation by going even deeper into Italian youth subcultures and lifestyles. Thanks to globalisation and the circulation of other literary and non-literary models mainly of American influence – such as movies, comics, fashion icons and musical trends – the specificity of Italian youth gets entangled in a global dimension rooted in consumer culture. Early adulthood years seem again privileged by a first generation of writers such as Busi and Tondelli who managed to incorporate new thematic, formal and linguistic choices within the genre of the coming-of-age story in order to achieve a renewed mimesis of youth experiences.

A second iteration of generational writers moves away from the ethical and political concerns of their predecessors to experiment with pulp, trash and kitsch elements, exploring excesses and destructive behaviours of a generation that wishes to cannibalise itself and everything around indistinctively. The *Gioventù Cannibale* is possibly the highest example of this literary trend, and it constitutes the cultural milieu in which most of the authors considered in this study begin to publish their works.

From this wider context-setting chapter, a few key considerations are worth taking further to guide the development of the following chapters. First, that identity is both personal and contextual; it cannot be given nor assumed as something essential, immutable and exempt from negotiation. Economic, social, cultural and globalising forces are acting upon individuals at an unprecedented pace, and while the liquidity of society can provide opportunities to break out from traditional schemes and find new pathways of growth, the danger of feeling helpless, lost and deprived of reference points is a strong counter-argument, especially when dealing with adolescents. Also, as I will show in the course of the next chapters, liquidity does not necessarily involve freedom of choice and many novels in this study will provide strong evidence for a liquefaction of experience that does not correspond with new, empowering opportunities.

For this reason, my second consideration is that it would be today impossible and probably disadvantageous to have the completeness witnessed in previous narratives of formation, such as in the *Bildungsroman*. We know today that the process of growth is not linear, let alone neutral; thresholds of adulthood have changed so that milestones of growth such as marriage, employment, house owning and child bearing have progressively moved further from late teenage years to mid-twenties if not thirties,

redefining the whole experience and boundaries of coming of age.¹⁵³ If youth studies have long acknowledged the increasing non-linearity of models of formation, literary criticism still relies on a humanist model of formation which fails to take in account the evolving trends in youth transitions.

In addition, contemporary ethics is witnessing a crisis of epistemological models: reality has been fragmented into a thousand of parts that no longer seem to constitute a meaningful whole. This complex environment, subject to constant change and dominated by the logic of individualism, has led to a permanent crisis that is requiring the individual to review the very possibility of self-definition. Therefore, the traditional linear model of growth has lost its power to shape knowledge, generating narrative scenarios in which is impossible to relate to any ready-made solutions.

Challenges of meaning making, as the capacity of connecting past, present and future within one's narrative, provide a portal to understanding growth, and this is what I am going to explore in the next chapter by looking at the narrative configurations of time and voice.

¹⁵³ Dan Woodman and Andy Bennet, *Youth Cultures, Transitions and Generations: Bridging the Gap in Youth Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

CHAPTER II: BEING AND BECOMING – NARRATIVE TIME AND VOICE

From a formal point of view, the identity of the character depends hugely on the choices in terms of narrative voice and focalization adopted in the story, since it is almost impossible “not to locate the story in time with respect to the narrating act”,¹⁵⁴ to quote Gérard Genette, to make sense of the characters. Narrative time also becomes very relevant when considering the instances of growth, the knowledge of the world that the characters possess and the degree of insight into their psychology, since, as Wayne Booth explains, the aim of the storyteller is “to allow going beneath the surface of actions to obtain a view of the character’s mind and heart”.¹⁵⁵

Especially when considering growth, the ability to connect past, present and future in creating a sense of continuity of selfhood is something that the characters have to construct. If children are living in a constant present – responding to a hedonistic drive –, teenagers are already capable of looking back at their previous experiences while being also capable of projecting themselves in the future, actively questioning their personal story.

Therefore, a first challenge is how to turn temporal continuity into self-awareness to sustain a process of growth which is dynamic in itself, aiming for stability but constituted by change. According to Ricoeur, by structuring identity as a story that is simultaneously internalised and evolving – a narrative identity – people can embrace past, present and future towards a degree of unity, to bring a necessary coherence to the individual’s sense of self. Yet, as psychologist McAdams discusses, temporal stability might suggest the happy notion of continuity, as much as it could mean stagnation. Similarly, the notion of change can be seen as either growth or flux.¹⁵⁶ In this sense, literary criticism has failed to take in account these different options, relying almost exclusively on a traditional model of linear growth, one that presents formation and deformation (or regression) as the sole options, a perspective which fails to account for the multiple, differentiated and complex experiences of growth.

This attitude can be traced back to the *Bildungsroman*, which has conventionally represented the process of identity formation as a linear, cohesive and empowering process of self-understanding. It presented the hero’s progression from the familial space

¹⁵⁴ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, [1972] 1980), p. 215.

¹⁵⁵ Booth Wayne, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press [1961] 1963), p. 3.

¹⁵⁶ See Dan McAdams, “Continuity and Growth in the Life Story—or Is It Stagnation and Flux?” in *Qualitative Psychology*, 2019, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 206-214.

into the wider social sphere throughout a linear and straightforward process that, as Franco Moretti explains, was built on a gradual and inductive accumulation of experiences. Thus, the plot was arranged through a series of repetitions that could build up such an accumulation of experience, in a world that offered multiple opportunities to the individual's moral, spiritual and social development.¹⁵⁷ In this context, the narrative closure was generally contingent on the character's ability to acquire self-knowledge, unlocking agency and allowing the integration in the world of the adults, seen as the normative outcome.

In contrast, the six novels discussed in this study - Mohsen Melliti's *I bambini delle rose* (1995), Simona Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (1997), Niccolò Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura* (2001), Diego De Silva's *Certi bambini* (2001), Isabella Santacroce's *Zoo* (2006) and Tiziano Scarpa's *Stabat Mater* (2008) – rarely present a linear transition from childhood to adulthood, so that the sequence and configuration of the events is also complicated within the plot. Instead of disclosing a movement towards a stable and acknowledged sense of self, growth here is treated as a process made of constant, often unresolved challenges. In addition, the characters in these novels are never portrayed while transitioning to adulthood, but always left, at the end of the story, suspended in the liminal state of youth.¹⁵⁸

In the course of this chapter I analyse the novels by clustering them around some main themes, to help framing the temporal unfolding of the story and its significance for the portrayal of the characters' growth. In the first section, I will discuss De Silva's *Certi bambini* and Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* through the lens of memory, since both these stories present an interesting use of flashbacks and retrospective narrations as attempts to construct meaning-making. The guiding question is: *If growth presumes that young people are able to create their identity as a story, what happens when the fragmentation of the characters' identities ripple across the narrative?*

¹⁵⁷ In this regard, Moretti explains how in the *Bildungsroman* there is a great series of events apparently of no consequences – such as the recurrent meeting in *Wilhelm Meister* and countless conversations in *Pride and Prejudice* – that become meaningful only for the development of the subjectivity of the character, who gradually enhances his or her understanding of himself/herself and of the world. See Moretti Franco, *The Way of the World: The "Bildungsroman" in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 45.

¹⁵⁸ Drawing on Van Gennep's (1960) much used notion of liminality as an in-between phase, Victor Turner (1974) famously applied this notion to the transition to adulthood, defining youth as a condition of liminality, 'neither here nor there', neither child nor adult, therefore a subject bound to a necessary incompleteness. See Harry Blatterer, "The Changing Semantics of Youth and Adulthood" in *Cultural Sociology*, 4(1), March 2010, pp. 63-79

Then, I move to the analysis of Scarpa's *Stabat Mater* and Santacroce's *Zoo*, which use the device of a diary-like narration to give exposure to the character's voice. The act of writing in effect provides some kind of anchoring for the character's thoughts, while giving visibility to the web of confusion and nightmarish experiences that haunts them.

Lastly, I will discuss *I bambini delle rose* and *Io non ho paura* as they present more of a linear temporality. This choice mirrors the characters' gradual acquisition of knowledge, making them able to turn their adventures into opportunities for understanding both their world and the one of adults. Nevertheless, the temporal arrangement of the story does not correspond to an empowering process, since there is no happy ending for these child characters.

Overall, the key question is: what happens when, as in such novels, the temporal arrangement of the story reflects upon traumatic, hectic and disempowering experiences of growth?

1. The Role of Memory

In *From Pilgrim to Tourist* (1996) Zygmunt Bauman presents a shift that loosely summarizes the turns that I have analysed in the first chapter; from an essential, solid and singular identity towards a constructed, liquid and plural consideration of identity, representative of the challenges of postmodernity. The previous model relied on a presumed unity of the individual, engaged in constructing his or her identity by making sense of all experiences cohesively. This model is tied to the adoption of a linear timeframe, one where "life itself was directional, continuous and unbendable. It 'marched on' and 'passed by'"¹⁵⁹ sequentially. For the modern individual this model corresponded to a linear trajectory of growth¹⁶⁰ based on the certainty "that the straight line of life-ahead will not bend, twist or warp, come to a halt or turn backwards".¹⁶¹

This consideration of identity as a continuous, sense-making life story gets substituted by the idea of a fluid identity able to respond to the challenges imposed by contemporary times. As the world changes too fast to sustain a life-long identity project, people focus more on their present subjectivity according to a "determination to live one

¹⁵⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist" (eds. Hall & Du Gay) in *Questions of Cultural identity* (London: Sage, 1996), p. 22.

¹⁶⁰ I refer to growth here, even though Bauman never really considered a distinction between adults and children or young people – he always discusses in general terms of individuals. Still, Bauman does consider identity as a lifetime project, hence incorporating all different and necessary steps in the development of individuals.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid* (Bauman).

day at a time”¹⁶² rather than on future outcomes. Bauman’s theory ultimately sees in liquidity a precise strategy to avoid a fixed identity, turning individuals into shape-shifters, adaptable to live in a liquid socio-economic environment. Yet, Bauman’s perspective will prove itself self-defeating when it comes to the identities of these child characters, whose traumatic and fragmented memories prevent them from establishing any conscious elaboration of their own self, for the present and the future.

When it comes to the novels discussed in this study, in *Certi bambini* and *Dei bambini non si sa niente* the impossibility of envisioning, nonetheless controlling the future outcome of the self, makes these children abolish time in its future form to embrace what Bauman defines as “a flat collection or an arbitrary sequence of present moments”¹⁶³ that are mediated by memory. This is a significant change, because using memory as the sole resource for identity construction represents a backwards movement rather than a forward one. As such, the arrow-like time of experience to be used to measure one’s growth gets challenged at its core.

1.1 The Anarchy of Memory: Making Sense of Growth

Certi bambini by Diego De Silva (2001) is the story of a baby killer named Rosario who is 11 years old. The opening pages of the novel portray Rosario preparing breakfast for his grandmother, right before committing his first commissioned homicide. In terms of arrangement of the plot, the first four chapters follow Rosario’s preparation for the homicide, which constitutes a first narrative climax; after killing the man, Rosario takes the underground to go back home. It is within the wagon of the underground that both the readers and the main character get tangled into a discontinuous series of flashbacks that reconstruct the events that has led Rosario to become a child assassin for the Neapolitan criminal organization “la camorra”.

Despite a dispassionate third-person perspective that governs the story,¹⁶⁴ the narrator leaves to Rosario the duty to describe his interior world, through the use of a

¹⁶² Ibid. p. 24.

¹⁶³ Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist” in *Questions of Cultural identity* (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 18-36.

¹⁶⁴ The narrator acts as if it was a witness in a murder trial, never expressing judgments; in this regard, it is worth mentioning that De Silva was trained as law practitioner and this element influenced not only his authorial style but also directly inspired this novel: “Ricordo esattamente la mattina in cui, in un’aula di udienza penale del tribunale che frequentavo da praticante agli inizi degli anni ‘90, questo bambino molto poco immaginario mi s’incistò nella testa, dettandomi nei mesi seguenti la sua storia.” *Certi bambini: Mai chiedere l’età a un romanzo*, published on Einaudi website as appendix to the 16th edition of the book. Available online. <https://www.einaudi.it/approfondimenti/diego-de-silva-2/>

recurrent free direct and indirect speech. In this way the author plays on the emotional distance between Rosario and the reader since, if described only from the third person narrator or through the gaze of another character, Rosario would probably emerge as a sadist, violent and merciless child.¹⁶⁵ Inherently part of the treatment of time and of the narrative voice, the importance of memory is presented from the very beginning as the lens through which the story is filtered. The incipit of the novel appears as *in medias res*¹⁶⁶ but actually presents Rosario remembering a failed attempt to steal a motorbike – “Ancora oggi, se ci pensa, Rosario si contorce dalla collera” (3).

This incipit serves the double function of presenting Rosario’s social context and life as a scoundrel, but it also serves to draw the reader into the flow of Rosario’s mind, wherein memory occupies a dominant place. Rosario is constantly invested in a flow of involuntary remembrance that begin gradually and then expands so much within the plot, that the main results in a long series of flashbacks. Rosario’s challenge is therefore to cope with these memories, that are often random and painful, and to use them to uphold his selfhood and to generate understanding.

Right from the beginning, Rosario has no control over his memories as they are triggered by random details: “Scarta il formaggino e col coltello incide la mollica lungo il contorno della crosta. E allora s’incanta. (Solo i cornuti e i guappi pisciasotto si fanno buoni col coltello. Ricordati. Chi ti vuole fare male veramente non perde tempo)” (9). Here, this simple action involuntarily activates the association with some very specific words that belong to Damiano, the *camorrista* put in charge of Rosario’s criminal training.¹⁶⁷ For the purpose of the formal construction of the coming-of-age story this is

¹⁶⁵ As Booth explains when discussing Jane Austen’s *Emma*: “The solution to the problem of maintaining sympathy despite almost crippling faults was primarily to use the heroine as a kind of narrator, reporting her own experience”. As such, the sustained inside view leads the reader to bound, and hope for the best, for the character and the same device is here used with Rosario. See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press [1961] 1963), p. 245.

¹⁶⁶ Giuliana Adamo has extensively published on novelistic incipits; in her study of more than 60 literary incipits (mainly of the Western novelistic production) she shows the importance of *incipits* as a narratological hallmarks. “In tutti gli inizi sono sempre presenti (più o meno esplicitate e con una certa varietà di dislocazione e successione testuale) le risposte alla triade incipitaria ‘Chi? Dove? Quando?’” (271). The *in medias res* incipit also projects the reader right in the middle of the action and, as such, it often requires some back-tracking to explain the events that occurred before that moment. See Giuliana Adamo, *L’inizio e la fine: I confini del romanzo nel canone occidentale* (Ravenna: Longo, 2013).

¹⁶⁷ When it comes to remember Damiano’s teachings, not only the extradiegetic narrator leaves space to the protagonist’s focalization, creating an overlapping between the discourses of the two characters Rosario and Damiano, but Rosario’s effortful concentration also allows him to focus sharply on the instructions against the background noise of thoughts. Damiano’s instructions, in contrast to the rest, are perceived and retold not as memories but as a present voice that physically echoes, as expressed by the unique use of a direct speech of Damiano in brackets. “(Da vicino, subito. Tieni la mano ferma e tira. Se non lo pigli subito in faccia non fa niente, ma non devi scendere più sotto del petto). Il colpo entra tra la spalla e il collo. L’uomo non dice e non urla. Si afferra la gola e sbarra gli occhi su Rosario. Rosario si sposta all’indietro di un passo

particularly relevant, because it challenges the idea of the process of identity formation as made by a linear sequence of learning opportunities, by presenting instead a chaotic layering of events randomly filtered by the character's consciousness. According to Margherita Ganeri, this is a typical aspect of today's processes of memory, when the ability to connect past, present and future turns instead into a "ricezione passiva di un'informazione non più controllabile, selezionabile e rielaborabile a livello individuale".¹⁶⁸ The implications are obvious in terms of identity formation, as experiences cease to be tied to a coherent life-story.

For example, while travelling on the underground after the homicide, Rosario's memories are constantly triggered by the presence of a girl that reminds him of his friend Caterina, whose death by childbirth is the indirect reason why Rosario becomes an assassin. Rosario will try to avenge Caterina's death by shooting her doctor, which leads him to join the criminal organization as a debt of honour.¹⁶⁹ In the underground, the gradual return of memories connected to Caterina interrupts the chronology of the narration and generates those flashbacks that become autonomous and fragmented parts of a retrospective storyline. In this respect, together with the physical journey of Rosario who is going home, the reader embarks on a metaphorical journey into the protagonist's repressed, narcotic memories, as explained by the directors of the movie adaptation of *Certi bambini* (2004).

Abbiamo pensato a *Certi bambini* come alla storia di due viaggi: un viaggio fisico, che è quello che Rosario compie in metropolitana [...] e un viaggio mentale che lo stesso protagonista compie nei ricordi del proprio passato. La chiave di lettura è proprio la memoria di Rosario: tutto è visto e filtrato attraverso il suo sguardo.¹⁷⁰

Thanks to this extensive use of flashbacks, the linear chain of time is broken and the story assumes an oneiric dimension, as introduced by the words "poi, come quando ci si abbandona alla stanchezza per isolare la quantità di un dolore che chiama, si distende e

continuando a puntargli in faccia la pistola. Sente l'odore di bruciato. Vorrebbe essere già fuori. (Da questo momento non guardarti più indietro. Pensa solo all'uscita)" (35).

¹⁶⁸ Margherita Ganeri, *Postmodernismo* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1998), p. 16.

¹⁶⁹ "Ma 'o ssaje qual è o' problema, Rosa'? Che certe cose se uno non le sa finire, è meglio che non le comincia proprio. Perché poi sai che succede? Che si caca sotto, e per levarsi dai guai va dicendo che appartiene a gente che manco conosce. E si sbaglia. [...] Ma gli sbagli si possono pure acconciare, - cambiò tono Sciancalepore ad un tratto - se uno dimostra che ci tiene le palle." (143)

¹⁷⁰ See Lara Santoro, *I bambini e la mafia: rappresentazioni letterarie e cinematografiche dell'infanzia nel genere mafia del XXI secolo*, Doctoral dissertation, State University of New Jersey, 2011, p. 25.

ricorda” (41). These memories move in parallel with the temporal dimension of the journey on the underground, creating an internal time of memory that is blended with the chronological time of present action: the memory of past events is indeed triggered by what happens in the present – a detail, a gaze, a movement. The child is unable to control this flow of memories fuelling each other in a loop, so that two dimensions of narrative time are here intertwined, which are “the circularity of the imaginary travel and the linearity of the quest as such”.¹⁷¹

Indeed, while the story is punctuated by the metro approaching the different stations, the plot instead follows the circularity of Rosario’s memories, which detour after detour, always go back to Caterina’s death as the moment of inescapable trauma.

Il treno riparte. La ragazza mette il segno al libro, lo chiude, se lo incastra tra le ginocchia [...] Chissà dov’è Caterina adesso. Questa domanda lo raggiunge allo stomaco. Il groppo che segue lo fa piegare in avanti, anche se così corre di nuovo il rischio di vomitare. [...] Rosario lo sa che Caterina è morta, e lo sa sempre, tutti i giorni, ma gli manca nelle cose, e nelle cose la cerca. (73)

Because of this deep-seated trauma, Rosario’s ability to use these fragments to build self-awareness comes to an impossible resolution, because any logical evaluation, moral consideration and emotional experience seem to be annihilated by the perceived unfairness of Caterina’s death, which nullifies any horizon of meaning: “Caterina è morta, pensava ogni tanto. Ma non capiva che significava” (137). Because of his incapacity to deal with such trauma, Rosario is unable to straightforwardly deconstruct the meaning of its actions, and the authorial choice of telling the story through a constant overlap of flashbacks intensifies this fracture in the process of both understanding and self-understanding, which are constitutive elements of growth.

Apart from the fragmentation created by the sequence of flashbacks, the ambiguous relationship between past and present causes another effect of disconnection in the textual and literary configuration. If we go back to the *Bildungsroman*, the principles of accumulation and repetition, and the ability to re-member, re-collect and re-cognise were critical for the character’s growth and thus for the process of identity formation as a whole.

¹⁷¹ See Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative time” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Autumn, 1980, pp. 169-190.

The repetition of actions, together with a moment of reflection,¹⁷² ensured that the characters could achieve a gradual awareness of both their agency¹⁷³ and of the consequences of their actions, to become socially integrated. But in the late 20th century individuals have grown used to the instant payoff of our entertainment focused, fast-paced culture, so that allowing knowledge to sediment through repetition is no longer an efficient answer.

Today, there is no time for repetition; everything has to happen and to make sense instantaneously, responding to a culture of speed – what Gianluigi Simonetti refer to as the “estetica della velocità”¹⁷⁴ – and to the imperative of immediate intensity. This aesthetics of velocity was a key trait of Italian “cannibal writers” in the late 1990s, in their attempt to reproduce movie sequences by creating fast narrative circuits with high emotional and visual impact.¹⁷⁵ This is partially a reason why many of the novels published in those decades have been successfully adapted in movies, including *Certi Bambini*, whose overlapping of images and flashbacks makes it a perfect example of this cinematic quality.

Therefore, it is no surprise that a slow creation of knowledge through the accumulation of momentous rituals is no longer a viable option for a character like Rosario. In contrast to traditional narratives of growth, the challenges that Rosario face are not a forecasted and controlled scenario made of opportunities, encounters, duels, debates and romances which always add something to the character’s understanding of the world. Instead, they are part of a route in which incidents and intentions are

¹⁷² In the *Bildungsroman* the moment of reflection was a necessary step to evaluate and monitor the self, in order to progress in the process of identity formation. Especially when it came after a crucial event, it allowed the character to review the actions done from a situation of enhanced understanding that, in turn, generated an informed understanding of the world and the possibility to remedy mistakes. Hardin has significantly chosen the terms *reflection* and *action* to title the volume he edited as the two most important characteristics of the genre of *Bildungsroman*. See James Hardin, *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* (University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

¹⁷³ Agency is here understood as the capacity of conscious and deliberate thought and action, so that the character acts reflectively and purposively and, through reflection, learns how to rewire its own self and its actions. For an interesting reading of the interplay between agency and subjectivity through a Bakhtinian lens, see Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999).

¹⁷⁴ Cfr. Simonetti “tra l’inizio e la metà degli anni Novanta – la ricerca di velocità sembra nascere soprattutto dalla voglia di enfasi, di iperbole, di sensazioni estreme da infliggere al lettore, quasi a suscitare una reazione, e a significare una certificazione di presenza.” Simonetti Gianluigi, “I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana” (1996 – 2006)” in *Allegoria*, XX, 2008, n. 57, p. 97.

¹⁷⁵ “Questa scrittura romanzesca aspira vistosamente alla velocità dell’immagine, dell’audiovisivo, e infatti il risultato finale ricalca notevolmente la forma dello script cinematografico con un grado altissimo di mimesi ed uno bassissimo di diegesi.” Simone Castaldi, “Tra pulp e avanguardia: realismo nella narrativa italiana degli anni Novanta” in *Italica*, Summer - Autumn, 2007, Vol. 84, No. 2/3, pp. 368-381.

inextricably mixed, in a way that the child is unable not only to control, but even to make sense of.

Flashbacks are also phrased as a dreamlike, confusing experience: “forse ha dormito, come succede davanti alla televisione, che poi si accorge che nel frattempo sono successe tante cose perchè del film non si capisce più niente” (146). In effect, Rosario’s experiences rarely underpin a proper psychological and emotional development. Instead, the character’s approach is to go through life with a sort of ‘spectatorial’ detachment’, as if constantly watching a television show, as explicated by statements as “Rosario guarda succedere le cose fino alla fine” (13).¹⁷⁶ Even remembrance is experienced as an act of observation rather than of agency in an environment which feels as much controlling as uncontrollable. Through this spectatorial device Rosario is able to control his emotional investment, detaching himself from his own memories and observing his life as passing by, without really acknowledging the implications of his actions.

Rosario’s spectatorial detachment aligns with Giorgio Agamben’s idea of the “destruction of experience”¹⁷⁷ as a process that started with the exceptionality of the First World War only to become a component of everyday modern life. As the philosopher clarifies, this “does not mean that today there are no more experiences, but they are enacted outside the individual [...]” so that “the individual merely observes them”¹⁷⁸. This attitude is very different from the emotional and moral distress experienced by other characters, such as Michele of Ammaniti’s *Io non ho paura*, who is constantly questioning the categories of good and bad, moral and immoral while progressing in the story. This is also very different from the forced meditations on morality imposed on Pinocchio by the Blue Fairy and Jiminy Cricket, for example. What emerges in *Certi bambini* is Rosario’s incapacity of assessing the morality of his actions, as clearly stated by the author De Silva in an interview, when he declared that “per Rosario l’agire non ha nessuna etica che lo

¹⁷⁶ The emphasis on Rosario’s gazing at life is witnessed by the repetition of this same statement twice in the novel (13, 48). The first time it serves to shift the perspective from the narrator to the adoption of Rosario’s gaze, to show the world through the child’s focalization. In the second occurrence, interestingly, it is the extradiegetic narrator who addresses the readers directly, establishing a dialogue that primes a moral appraisal of the story: “Rosario ha undici anni. Rosario, Venturino, Matteo, Brasile, Aniello, Nicola, Carmelo sono manovalanza impunita. Rosario guarda succedere le cose fino alla fine. Rosario si prende quello che può finché qualcuno non glielo toglie. Rosario non vi riguarda. Rosario vi piace.” (48)

¹⁷⁷ First published as *Infanzia e Storia* by Einaudi in 1978, it has been translated by Liz Heron in 1993.

¹⁷⁸ Agamben also observes that “there has never been a more revolting sight than that of a generation of adults which, having destroyed all remaining possibilities of authentic experience, lays its own impoverishment at the door of a younger generation bereft of the capacity for experience.” Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 14.

sovrastrutture e gli consenta di elaborare le istruzioni ricevute, per lui le categorie del male e del bene non esistono”.¹⁷⁹

In this respect, Rosario is one of those individuals who have lost the ability to judge the morality of their actions because of a general tendency towards adiabatic processes, as phrased by Bauman.¹⁸⁰ The sociologist is indeed very critical of the actual potentialities of self-realisation and agency in contemporary societies, and even before theorising liquidity, in an essay on the Holocaust he spoke of *adiaphora*, referring to a condition when social organizations neutralise the impact of moral behaviours. This is the result of a dissection of responsibility which sets actions free from moral evaluation, for example by stretching the distance between actions and consequences beyond moral reach, or by excluding some “others” from moral behaviors. The result is not to promote necessarily immoral behaviours nor to “sponsor evil, yet it does not promote good either. [...] It simply renders social action adiabatic – neither good nor evil, measurable against technical (purpose-oriented or procedural) but not moral values”.¹⁸¹

By locating any action’s effects beyond the reach of moral limits, social actors hardly face a moment of choice, gazing at the consequences and apprehending from those. In this way, consequences are seen as unintended, fruit of a lack of reasoning rather than of ethics.¹⁸² Similarly, the sensation is that Rosario is constantly reacting to what is happening around him, rather than consciously acting upon his life: he takes almost only instinctive decisions, lost in an inescapable vortex of events,¹⁸³ unable to critically interrogate both his interior world and the external one.

¹⁷⁹ Cervasio interviews De Silva, *Quanto mai attuale l'opera dello scrittore salernitano sul caso di un baby assassino*, *Repubblica* online Archive, March 2001 [consulted on April 2020].

¹⁸⁰ In “Modernity and the Holocaust” Bauman started by discussing the position of social sciences after the Holocaust, then moving into a wider meditation on human agency which became a key theme in his liquid turn. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

¹⁸¹ Ibid. (Bauman) p. 215.

¹⁸² According to Bauman, the Nazi state was the perfect example of an “exercise in social engineering on a grandiose scale” by focusing on “order building” disciplines, technologies and structures oriented towards efficiency, in true spirit of the industrial and bureaucratic modern societies. Ibid. p. 66.

¹⁸³ De Silva, in a recent interview (2019) is asked how the Camorra has changed since 2001, and in his answer he defines Rosario as a sort of ‘romantic hero’ incapable of escaping his fate: “Rosario era una specie di eroe romantico: si veniva a trovare in un vortice insuperabile che l'ha portato ad arruolarsi e a diventare un soldatino di camorra. Ora questi assassini sono diversi. Non solo sono ancora più giovani, ma molto più consapevoli.” Diego De Silva “Napoli tra bene e male rialza sempre la testa”, *Repubblica* online, 11 May 2019, [consulted April 2020] <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2019/05/11/diego-de-silva-napoli-tra-bene-e-male-rialza-sempre-la-testaNapoli02.html>.

Rosario di espressioni non ne ha quasi. Per la sua faccia è sempre tutto normale. Cose come la meraviglia, o lo smarrimento, o l'allegria o la pena o la ripugnanza non hanno presa su di lui. Rosario guarda succedere le cose fino alla fine. (18)

In this sense, Rosario is “emotionally and morally obtuse” to borrow a definition that Kirk Curnutt (2001) uses to describe many characters of the American coming-of-age stories post Holden Caulfield.¹⁸⁴ The implication of having an emotionally and morally obtuse character compromises the entire process of finding an agential identity, since according to Bauman, only when taking responsibility, the self turns moral.¹⁸⁵ This moral attention sustains the transition from a solipsistic individual experience to an intersubjective being, as I will discuss in chapter IV. Hence Rosario’s identity is in tension between the fragmented pieces of the past and a dissociating present that he is unable to coherently seize, while his understanding is compromised partially by the adiaphoric nature of contemporary society, and partially by his own denial.

In a traditional *Bildungsroman* we would expect that Rosario ultimately conceptualises the process of self-formation in a mature way by addressing his mistakes and subsequently adjusting his actions, so as to get socially empowered. Instead, the pact of affiliation with *la camorra* shapes his identity in a way that he cannot elaborate, mostly because he participates in life without questioning it.¹⁸⁶ This is a result of what Margherita Ganeri describes as “un disorientamento” typical of the postmodern age, one that reflects “una mutazione antropologica del sensorio umano”¹⁸⁷, so that “una conseguenza delle trasformazioni sensoriali è l’anestetizzazione delle emozioni”¹⁸⁸, one not dissimilar from what Rosario experiences.

The conclusion of the story follows Rosario as he leaves the underground to walk back home, when his attention is captured by a passer-by.

¹⁸⁴ “Instead of confronting adult hypocrisy with unfettered idealism, these adolescents are emotionally and morally obtuse. As Henry A. Giroux observes, they seem ‘uniquely alien, strange and disconnected’ defeated at a premature age by a ‘world in which chance and randomness rather than struggle, community and solidarity drive their fate.’” Kirk Curnutt, “Teenage wasteland: Coming-of-age Novels in the 1980s and 1990” in *Critique*, Fall 2001, p. 94.

¹⁸⁵ See Bauman, “Ethics of Individuals”, in *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter, 2000), pp. 83-96.

¹⁸⁶ De Silva himself recalls how Rosario was originally meant to be “un bambino programmabile come un elettrodomestico (pensavo infatti a una lavatrice), una sorta di piccolo automa a cui impostare il programma e ordinare l’esecuzione del compito. Un bambino, perciò, che non avesse alcun senso etico delle proprie azioni, che si limitasse a ricevere un addestramento e ubbidire a un comando.” Diego De Silva, *Certi bambini: Mai chiedere l’età a un romanzo*, published on Einaudi website as appendix to the 16th edition of the book.

¹⁸⁷ Margherita Ganeri, *Postmodernismo* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1998), p. 12.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem* (Ganeri) p. 14.

Fra gli ultimi scende un signore sui quarant'anni con la cartella di cuoio. È bello, si nota in mezzo agli altri, ha vestiti abbondanti su un corpo alto e asciutto, i capelli raccolti all'indietro in una piccola coda, la faccia magra da attore. Rosario si chiede se potrebbe somigliargli da grande. In fondo non è mica tanto diverso. Ha anche lui un naso, gli occhi, una bocca. Basterà ricordare i vestiti [...] Rosario cerca di odorarlo fintanto che è vicino, poi lo segue con gli occhi mentre lo allontana. (148)

Rosario's process of growth is far from being concluded at the end of the novel, and his unresolved identity is epitomised by his desire to resemble that man as an adult – “da grande” – someone he imagines being an actor, an embodiment of metamorphism, of multiple provisional identities and of constant transformation. The open-ended finale does not resolve's Rosario identity, nor does it show Rosario transitioning to adulthood, but as De Silva himself explains, “quella di bambino è una condizione culturale, non genetica, siamo noi a stabilire quando lo è e quando non lo è più”.¹⁸⁹ Thus Rosario is a “bambino-non bambino” who lives an unnatural infancy, not only because of the social environment in which he grows up, but also because of the premature adult-like behaviours that he adopts in his criminal life.

In conclusion, the possibility of representing Rosario's growth in the novel is provided through memory, in a narrative configuration in which flashbacks and fragments of memories are expanded to show the obtuseness of the character. By using these temporal arrangements and by adopting the child's focalization, the text deviates from an ordinary and chronological narration to demonstrate the lack of resources that Rosario has to overcome the trauma of Caterina's death and to reclaim his childhood back.¹⁹⁰

Interestingly, the adaptation of *Certi bambini*, made by the Frazzi brothers in 2004 reversed the temporal configuration of the story by showing the homicide at the end. As such, the structure of the movie presents Rosario's flashbacks right *before* committing the killing, building up the climax of the character's trajectory towards his initiation. Through the use of flashbacks, the directors still maintain a sense of temporal fragmentation and

¹⁸⁹ Stella Cervasio, “Quanto mai attuale l'opera dello scrittore salernitano sul caso di un baby assassino: pensando ad Erika”, *Repubblica* archivio online, Marzo 2001, [consulted on April 2021] <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/03/01/quanto-mai-attuale-opera-dello-scrittore.html?ref=search>

¹⁹⁰ “Per quella via, però – me ne sono accorto fin dalle prime pagine, – Rosario acquistava una tenerezza, un candore che non avevo sospettato, quasi che il bambino negato dalla narrazione asciutta che avevo scelto finisse per riemergere a ogni pagina, rivendicando sottovoce la sua innocenza” Diego De Silva, *Certi bambini: Mai chiedere l'età a un romanzo*, published on Einaudi website as appendix to the 16th edition. Available online. <https://www.einaudi.it/approfondimenti/diego-de-silva-2/>

filters the events through Rosario's confused memory, but the choice of postponing the homicide creates far more *suspense*, since the viewers are unaware of what Rosario will commit. As scholar Lara Santoro observes, by positioning the homicide at the end, the directors can create a linear learning curve for Rosario, showing the different stages of his apprenticeship as a *camorrista*, which culminate in its initiation not only into the *Camorra*, but also into adulthood.¹⁹¹ By setting the homicide as the conclusion the movie domesticates a story that was far from presenting a linear transition, establishing a major difference from the novel's epilogue.

1.2 Looping Back in Time: Circularity with No Escape

Another way in which authors manipulate time to mirror the characters' process of growth is through the use of a circular temporality, wherein the beginning and the end of the story are connected. Simona Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* is an example of this temporality as the story follows Martina's sexual awakening, beginning by presenting the 10-year-old character at the end of the summer in chapter one, soon moving backward to narrate the events that took place during those summer months. The plot revolves around the sexualised games of a group of children, the youngest is Greta who is 10 and the oldest is Mirko who is 15. Together, they spend an entire summer discovering their own bodies, starting with innocent curiosity to become later involved in far more extreme sexual practises supported by some porn magazines. At the end of the novel, during one particularly violent bondage-like game, they suffocate Greta and hide her body: this moment corresponds to both the finale and the beginning of the story.

The story is told by a third person extradiegetic narrator, defined by Cesare Garboli in his review for *Repubblica* (1997) as "una voce fuori campo, si direbbe, lirica ma impersonale, impassibile, distaccata [...] che non resiste all'anonimato, tende a identificarsi coi personaggi che le sono più affini."¹⁹² In fact, Vinci's narrator is detached

¹⁹¹ See Lara Santoro, *I bambini e la mafia: rappresentazioni letterarie e cinematografiche dell'infanzia nel genere mafia del XXI secolo*, Doctoral dissertation, State University of New Jersey, 2011.

¹⁹² "Una voce fuori campo, si direbbe, lirica ma impersonale, impassibile, distaccata, un po' *ecole du regard* e un po' risvolto editoriale, come annunciasse il romanzo di un altro. Questa voce è mista d'inflessioni che possono convivere solo con grande fatica. È flebile come un singhiozzo e impostata ad arte, è la voce anonima di uno speaker e il commosso lamento di un cantafavole. Vuole essere dolce e crudele insieme, ma i toni non si distinguono, perché il Narratore versa le tinte soavi con lo stesso compiacimento di quelle truci. Inoltre, non resiste all'anonimato. Tende a identificarsi coi personaggi che le sono più affini. Si direbbe che tutto il racconto sia farina di una delle bambine, quella che sopravvive - piccola figuretta che lascia trasparire qualcosa di autobiografico. Anche a un bambino di nome Matteo, forse per la sua natura fragile e quasi femminile, viene regalato il privilegio, a intervalli, di esprimere sentimenti e emozioni interiori, e quindi di godere del punto di vista del Narratore. Gli altri possono considerarsi letterariamente dannati, il loro destino

from the events, it reports them in almost journalistic terms, using a crude and precise language in contrast with the very real, human and emotional experience of the children, which is oftentimes narrated by the characters themselves.

This configuration of the narrative voice creates a certain detachment from the characters, to signify the inaccessibility of the children's intimate world. This can be traced back to the opening quote from Marguerite Duras' *La pluie d'été* (1990) that Simona Vinci uses in Italian translation: "Tutte le vite erano uguali, diceva la madre, tranne che per i bambini. Dei bambini non si sapeva niente. È vero, diceva il padre, dei bambini non sa niente" and that informs the title. While the sole characters that are to some extents explored psychologically are Martina and partially Matteo, as Garboli points out, the narrator never truly adheres to their child's perspective, leaving their world as a separate, puzzling and ambiguous space. Because of this incapacity not only to become part of the world of the children but even to know the underlying dynamics and rules that govern it, the narrative voice cannot be but a distant, detached, unjudging observer.

More than the narrative voice, which remains very neutral when it comes to defining the identity of the characters, the use of the narrative time becomes the primary means to show the growth trajectory. The characters in this novel undergo a coming of age that is not linear in its representation – from child's naivety to understanding, from detachment to the adult world to integration, from chaos to self-awareness – but instead spiralling, in the sense that it does not follow the "logical stage by stage progression"¹⁹³ but allows the subject to loop back into itself. Through the use of the narrative circularity the so-called natural order of time is reversed: the reader learns to experience time itself backwards, while the characters are also portrayed as looping back and forth between traditional stages of growth.

The choice of representing Martina engaged in the same action at the beginning and at the end – murmuring a song – models this circular treatment of time. Indeed, both the incipit and the finale presents Martina singing alone, in an attempt to cancel her painful thoughts.

è di essere visti e soltanto visti. Si facciano pure gli affari loro, il Narratore ha altro cui pensare." Cesare Garboli, *Ma che delusione questi bambinacci*, in *Repubblica*, 26/09/1997, available online. [consulted April 2021].

<https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1997/09/26/ma-che-delusione-questi-bambinacci.html>

¹⁹³ Steven Miles, *Youth Lifestyle in a Changing World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 11.

La voce intonata e bella, canta come se cantasse a qualcuno, con esattezza e pazienza, senza accelerazioni o ritardi. Fanno così i bambini quando sono tristi. Cantano per bene, come se fosse un compito, un mantra che se lo ripeti e lo ripeti e lo ripeti, perfetto e limpido, fa andare via tutto il male e i brutti pensieri. (4)

Martina aveva cominciato a cantare. La sua voce si era sollevata sottile e ferma, pulita, senza sbavature. Chissà che canzone era, forse nessuna, o una sigla di cartone animato storpiata, mescolata con qualcos'altro. Comunque era una canzone di sole note, senza parole. Una cosa tranquilla, con dentro il minimo di dolore possibile, con dentro il meno possibile di tutto. Una musica. E basta. (119)

In the first five chapters the narration is in fact managed retrospectively, so that some coming to terms with experience should have been already accomplished. Instead Martina's song returns like a repressed anxiety, to remind the reader of a trauma that has not yet been satisfactorily resolved: Greta's death. This is exposed by Martina's incapacity of uttering what has happened; whereas the process of identity formation is generally supplemented by a gradual acquisition of a functional linguistic discourse, Martina's collapsing subjectivity is instead mirrored by the impossibility of uttering her distress.

Overall, through this circular arrangement of time, Martina is presented as suspended in a web of confusion and distress, silenced by an impossible pain and unable to make sense of what has happened. As said, this temporal representation not only destabilises the narrative idea of moving forward in the events, but also negates the very idea of linearly *moving away* from something. The perception of being paralysed in a pointless experience, as much as in a stranded time, is also expressed by the other two characters in the first chapter, Luca and Matteo. Luca is shown in an almost narcoleptic state, unable to get out of bed, totally detached from what happens around him and incapable of any meaning-making: "potrebbe catturare il sapore che già sta svanendo e dirsi, ho mangiato del pesce, la pasta al sugo, e il mondo tornerebbe ad avere senso. Tornerebbero a esserci degli appigli. E invece no, niente" (13).

The biggest challenge the children are facing at the beginning of the novel is to somehow get their present back, to be able to move forward in their path of growth and to use the understanding of the world to construct their identity. Instead, they only have memories of a past that keeps coming back to paralyze them.¹⁹⁴ What is unspeakable

¹⁹⁴ Meaningfully, the great absent of the incipit is the 15-year-old Mirko. In contrast to the other children, this experience has set forth Mirko's definitive transition into adulthood. So, while the youngest members

remains unspoken, so that the novel also challenges the limitations of a simplistic developmental paradigm of growth (which sees traumatic events as a temporary stage to overcome) by withholding from the reader the subsequent stage of recovery and eventual maturation. The traditional narrative of formation indeed relies on the assumption that growth is driven by the emergence of understanding, so that it is implicit that the traumatic moments will be overcome at some stage.

Comparing for example *Dei bambini non si sa niente* with *The Boys of Via Pal* (1907), a traditional coming-of-age story by Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnar, it emerges how the tragic death of the youngest character is used as a formative experience to move past childhood illusions.¹⁹⁵ Despite the unhappy ending, the finale of *The Boys of Via Pal* presents a sentimental view of the children crying the death of their friend, in a moment of collective catharsis that allows them to move further on, and successfully, in their process of growth. In this respect, as Franco Moretti observes, agnition and understanding are implicated in one another,¹⁹⁶ so that there is a lesson for the young boys of the via Paal to learn through pain and tears, one that will prepare them for the world of adults.

Instead, in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* there is no agnition, mainly because of the absence of the fundamental narrative event, that is the *time* to gather and cry at the deathbed of the friend, which would allow the children to reconcile not only with Greta's death, but also with their own personal responsibility. In contrast to *The Via Pal Boys* where Nemecsek's death happens because of an illness, thus becoming a greater metaphor of life's uncontrollable forces, Greta's death is the result of the children's direct actions, as they (accidentally) murdered her. This is why Simona Vinci explicitly presents them as bewildered, stuck in a circular time that does not constitute growth but creates a loop of feelings, tears and remorse that such young characters are unable to manage. This seems to be the price to pay for having actively crossed the boundaries between childhood

of the group find themselves trapped in a status of in-betweenness, not yet ready to transition to adulthood but no longer feeling like children, Mirko has definitely moved on, as signalled in the course of the novel by both his clear and constant desire to be recognised as an adult and by his awareness of being "già andato oltre, che era troppo grande quelle cose." (62)

¹⁹⁵ "Si resero ben conto della morte del loro compagno, ma loro sfuggiva il senso della cosa. Si guardarono stupiti, come stupefatti davanti a questo mistero infinitamente strano che avevano incontrato per la prima volta nella loro vita." Ferenc Molnar, *I ragazzi della via paal* (Edizioni Crescere, 2014 [1907]), p. 182.

¹⁹⁶ Moretti discusses agnition in *The Via Pal Boys* in his essay "Kindergarten" part of *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (1983). He defines agnition as a neutral rhetorical device generally understood as the return to a preliminary truth which conciliates different viewpoints. In Moretti's view, when the reconciliation with the truth happens too late it generates the compassion that is central in pathetic narratives. In *The Via Pal Boys*, the moment of agnition corresponds to the death of Nemecsek, and it allows the children to celebrate the good-hearted nature of their friend, and to incorporate the knowledge of this experience in their understanding of the world.

and adulthood without achieving growth. Not dissimilarly from Rosario, acting like an adult at the *wrong time* not only leads to dramatic consequences, but it also jeopardizes the possibility of constructing a coherent and consistent identity along the way.

As seen, the atypical temporality of this novel is conveyed through the use of a narrative circularity, and its effect ripples onto the character by showing a disarranged internal time in Martina's perception. Despite the story covering only two months, Martina's experience of time seems to be expanded, creating a divergent temporality – "Sembra che sia passato un sacco di tempo. Quando pensa a quei giorni, Martina pensa: quando ero piccola, però era solo due mesi fa. Era l'inizio dell'estate" (4), which uncovers a gap between the "external" time of the calendar and Martina's "internal" time.¹⁹⁷ For these children, time is not flowing as it should be – it underwent an acceleration during that summer, just to leave them at the end of it without a proper sense of its unfolding: "Sembra che nessuno abbia mai molto tempo, neanche i bambini. Ma loro, lei e i suoi amici, il tempo lo hanno avuto" (14). In this way they experience first-hand the liquidity of modern time, for which "the overall result is the fragmentation of time into episodes, each one cut from its past and from its future, each one self-enclosed and self-contained. Time is no longer a river, but a collection of ponds and pools".¹⁹⁸

The confluence of the internal temporality with the circular structure of the narration underpins the consideration that Martina's childhood is not something left behind, but something that, despite her "mature" sexual experiences, still defines her status. She is called by the narrator "la bambina", and she sees that for herself when she explores her prepubescent body. In effect, in the wordless song murmured by Martina, which echoes in the beginning and the end of the story, there is the tender yet disturbing truth that the innocence of her infancy – if there ever was one – is somehow gone, slipping away as Greta's school notes does.

La sua bocca chiusa. La mano destra, affondata nella tasca del vestito, stringe un ritaglio di carta rimasto incastrato in un angolo, tra briciole e piccoli sassi. Forse uno scontrino della spesa. oppure un biglietto passato tra i banchi a scuola. Qualunque cosa sia, farà

¹⁹⁷ Ricoeur gives a comprehensive view of the problem of the ontology and phenomenology of time in his *Time Narrative* originally published as *Temps et Récit* (1985) where he discusses first the aporias of temporality and secondly the poetics of narrativity, exploring amongst other things, "the complicity as well as the contrast between internal time-consciousness and objective succession, making all the more urgent the search for narrative mediations between the discordant concordance of phenomenological time and the simple succession of physical time". See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, III, p. 22.

¹⁹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist" in *Questions of Cultural identity* (London: Sage 1996), p. 25.

male. Leva la mano dalla tasca, le dita ancora strette, poi le lascia andare, una alla volta.
Il foglietto, attaccato al palmo sudato, ci mette un po' a cadere. (5)

Although the narrative's beginning and end mirror each other, the narrative does not leave the characters unchanged, despite questioning the whole meaning of growth. Martina and her friends are trapped in a trauma: silenced at the end of the novel, apathic or hyperactive at the beginning, desperately trying to suppress their thoughts. They have grown without really understanding what they were losing, they have loved each other before realizing what love is, they have killed before knowing that death is real, and realized that growing up is a game¹⁹⁹ which cannot be undone.

Di notte, è come se tutte le cose le saltassero addosso, materializzandosi dal buio.
[...] Gli occhi di Matteo certe mattine a scuola quando guardava fuori dalla finestra invece di giocare coi compagni.
Le braccia piccole di Greta sul banco.
Gli occhi di Mirko che si chiudevano stretti stretti come se piangesse.
È come se tutto il male delle persone che le stanno intorno e che ama si avventasse su di lei, le passasse addosso con miliardi di piedi e mani. Un autocarro pesantissimo che la stritola sotto le sue ruote enormi. Come se fosse colpa sua, o come se lei potesse farci qualcosa, fallo passare, questo male, farlo volare via come polvere. Ma ha solo dieci anni, ed a dieci anni no si può fare quasi niente. (25)

Instead of a coherent sense of self, constructed through both self-awareness and an understanding of the limits of their actions, these children are left hopelessly in pieces.

Therefore, both *Certi bambini* and *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, present a divergent trajectory made either of a confusing overlapping of memories, or of a narrative loop whereby the story goes back at the originating moment of trauma, without generating any progression. The circular structure leaves a final impression of an endlessly repeated scene, played out in a temporal loop that keeps the past constantly coming back to challenge the children, with both a nostalgic hunger for those games and the destructive awareness of the hopelessness of their present situation. Because of the fallacy of the meaning-making process, in which memory does not serve self-understanding but rather keeps the characters bounded to their trauma, the identity of Rosario and Martina remains

¹⁹⁹ "A Game We Play" is the title chosen for the English translation of *Dei bambini non si sa niente*.

located in that space in between youth and adulthood, wherein the boundaries of growth are not only contested but unresolved.

2. Diaries and Letters: Grasping the Unfolding of Selfhood

The next novels which I will analyse, Scarpa's *Stabat Mater* and Santacroce's *Zoo*, also present a definite non-linear treatment of time, making it even more discontinuous by the use of a diary-epistolary narrative mode that dives deep into the layers of the characters' psyche.

Stabat Mater by Tiziano Scarpa (2008) is set in the Venice of the 18th century and is the story of Cecilia, a teenage orphan living in enclosure in a convent. She is obsessed by the thought of her unknown mother, to whom she writes long letters at night, while during the day she plays the violin under the guidance of a fictional version of the Italian composer Vivaldi. Conversely, *Zoo* (2006) by Isabella Santacroce is the claustrophobic story of an unnamed teenager that, after the death of her alcoholic father, gets trapped into an unhealthy and destructive relationship with her mother. During a disagreement, the protagonist is pushed off the stairs and remains paralyzed; this leads to a slow vengeance that is resolved with matricide.

Significantly for the development of these characters' identities, both girls are directly narrating themselves through a first-person narration, taking strong and direct control of the narrative voice. The act of speaking or narrating is always significant, but in the cases here mentioned the very act of narrating for oneself becomes the most powerful, and possibly only, declaration of selfhood. In discussing the "narratable self", philosopher Adriana Cavarero echoes Ricoeur, and explains that storytelling provides a way to design the unity of a life otherwise disjoined and fragmented; "not to say that it has at its center a compact and coherent identity" but that a certain "unstable and insubstantial unity can be provided by the tale of one's life-story"²⁰⁰. In these novels, the desire for unity manifests itself in terms of story-making, so that the act of storytelling functions on multiple levels for these characters to create identities, to make sense of the self, to understand the world and, both on a personal and public level, to support or disrupt the narratives in which the protagonists find themselves.

²⁰⁰ Adriana Cavarero shares with Ricoeur the understanding of a narrative component linked to the comprehension of the self, a sense of identity "taken back to the unity of an embodied narration in a single life", what she calls the "narratable self." See Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.xxii.

Indeed, in both *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater*, the articulation of the self through the act of writing allows the main characters to reflect on their position, and in the case of Cecilia who is writing in her present time, it equips her with a tool to explore and renegotiate her identity. For the anonymous character of *Zoo*, who is writing retrospectively, this becomes a final attempt to gain centrality in her own life narrative. As such, in both these novels there is an attempt at identity construction through the practices of self-constitution, reflection and recognition.

2.1 Building a Narrative of Identity

In Scarpa's *Stabat Mater* the linear causality of the events is fragmented by the homodiegetic narrator Cecilia, who tells her story through a confusing series of letters addressed to her unknown mother, letters that eventually become the reader's text. Cecilia's impulse is to remember, to record, to use these letters to find her selfhood, so that this peculiar storytelling serves as survival tool for the character, as explicitly said in the incipit.

Ci sono ancora, da qualche parte, sono qui, separata da questa devastazione, l'angoscia non mi ha ancora presa tutta, c'è ancora un angolo dove posso mettermi al riparo e dire: io.

Se riesco ancora a farlo, per questa notte sono salva, sono in grado di alzarmi e lasciarmi alle spalle il mio letto di affanni e venire qui a scrivervi. (5)

The use of the epistolary device is not just a means for the teenager to explore her own memories and to establish the illusion of a conversation with the mother, but formally speaking also serves to emphasise Cecilia's chaotic internal time. The deliberate use of Cecilia's focalization builds a narrative that is enrooted within her own fragmented consciousness, and for most of the story the reader experiences these unsettling fragments as the character does. By adopting a first-person narrator, Scarpa manages to superimpose a fragmented narrative that is rooted in the character's own narrative time on an otherwise linear development in terms of plot.

This is why it is impossible to speak of this novel as a *Bildungsroman*, because as Moretti expressed when discussing the advent of the modernist novel, the trauma of late modernity "introduced discontinuity within novelistic temporality, generating centrifugal tendencies toward the short story and the lyric; it disrupted the unity of the Ego, putting

the language of self-consciousness out of work.”²⁰¹ This has changed the humanistic paradigm of formation that produces conclusive, unitary and essential identities despite the formal arrangement of the plot.

In this coming-of-age novel Cecilia’s visionary and nightmarish perspective²⁰² dominates the story by filtering the events through her own subjectivity, as witnessed by the recurrent use of verbs such as *essere*, *vedere*, *sentire*, *pensare*, *immaginare* and by the vast employment of unsettling sensorial metaphors, which immerse the reader in a sophisticated exploration of death, trauma and alienated embodiment.

Una marea di pensieri amari sale e mi prende alla gola. L’importante è riconoscerla subito e reagire, senza lasciarle il tempo di impadronirsi di tutta la mia mente. L’onda cresce rapida e ricopre tutto quanto. È un liquido nero, velenoso. I pesci moribondi salgono in superficie, con le bocche spalancate, annaspando. Ecco un altro, viene su boccheggiando, muore. Quel pesce sono io. (4)

Cecilia’s imaginative capacity fills the gaps of her knowledge of the world – a world that is stranger to her, since she lives enclosed in a convent – with horrific images, so that *Stabat Mater* becomes a quintessential journey into her consciousness. Despite the story being set in the 18th century, Cecilia strongly echoes those Italian pulp heroines that, against any modesty and moderation, pushed the boundaries of their freedom to retain a subversive power, (even if) adjusted to a context that is the Venice of the 18th century. Overarching the story there is a constant need for freedom and rebellion that Cecilia expresses through both writing these letters and through music, the other element that the protagonist uses in the course of the novel to construct and assert her identity.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Franco Moretti, *The Ways of the World*, (London: Verso, 1987), p. 244.

²⁰² As Scarpa himself declared in an interview: “Fare presa sul lettore non è il mio assillo primario. Devo rispettare le ragioni dell’opera, e in questo caso, ancora di più, lo stato d’animo angosciato della protagonista, la giovane Cecilia ossessionata dall’essere stata abbandonata dalla madre. Il romanzo inizia al buio, in una tenebra dello spirito affollata da incubi di fallimento e di morte”. See Il Recensore, *Intervista a Tiziano Scarpa*, September 2009 [consulted on April 2020] <https://www.ilrecensore.com/wp2/2009/09/stabat-mater-intervista-a-tiziano-scarpa/>.

²⁰³ In the end Cecilia foregoes the written word in favour of music, following her impulse to tell her story through a different medium, one more suited to express the contradictions of her emotions: “Signora Madre, da qualche settimana mi succede qualcosa di strano. Ve ne siete accorta? Mentre vi scrivo, quasi senza accorgermene le lettere si trasformano in note. Una frase diventa una melodia, una parola viene accompagnata dal suo contrappunto. Mi sorprende a comporre sulla carta, spontaneamente, trascrivendo un pensiero che era nato come un discorso e che si risolve in un suono.” (49) For a detailed analysis of the topic, see Martina Mendola, “Epistole Impossibili: il paradosso del medium nello ‘Stabat Mater’ di Tiziano Scarpa” in *Scritture nascoste, scritture invisibili: quando il medium non fa passare il messaggio*, edited by Campus, Marchesini and Poncetti (Roma: Alteritas, 2020), pp. 365-378.

Cecilia is in effect very talkative: her past, her traumas, her mother's absence, the suicidal thoughts, her own sexual phobia, her obsessions and nightmares; she speaks to the readers through the use of this diary-like narration, but she also speaks with *Medusa*, her own personification of death. The text is in essence a breaking of silence, is Cecilia's attempt to find a sign of her own presence in the world, to materialize her selfhood in something that leaves traces, to fight back her fear of disappearance: "Signora Madre, io non sono niente, io non esisto. [...] Com'è smisurato questo mio niente. Io mi sento dappertutto, sento che in questo dappertutto non ci sono e questo pensiero mi dà alla testa" (24).

In line with such a fear, the very beginning of *Stabat Mater* presents Cecilia dreaming to be drowning in the dark waters of Venice, lost in a state of fluidity that soon sets the tone for the entire story. With Cecilia being an orphan, the primordial loss of the mother is what denies her the safety of a familial and psychological space where she can locate herself. This is because biographical continuity is understood to be at the roots of self-awareness but also of permanence in time, as argued by Ricoeur.²⁰⁴ In other words, every life story has a point of origin that works as the enduring anchor, needed to locate the existence of the individual in time and space. Such necessary awareness of one's "beginning" that underpins the ability to define one's identity goes far back to Rousseau's myth of origins²⁰⁵, who located in memories of infancy the foundational moment of selfhood. Without such awareness the individual is nothing but lost in flux; with no origins there is no possibility to establish a coherent sense of self, able to overarch the narrative of a lifetime; and Cecilia lives such an alienated state of the self "questo mi è stato dato in sorte, essere figlia del niente" (81).

The *topos* of material absence as the reason for an anxiety of origins has been vastly employed in literature, both in autobiographies and in fictions. An example is Caribbean American writer Jamaica Kincaid's "Autobiography of my mother" (1996), whose

²⁰⁴ This is why Ricoeur argues that: "the threat it represents for identity is not entirely dissipated unless we can posit, at the base of similitude and of the uninterrupted continuity, a principle of permanence in time. This will be, for example, the invariable structure of a tool, all of whose parts will gradually have been replaced. This is also the case, of supreme interest to us, of the permanence of the genetic code of a biologic individual. [...] The entire problematic of personal identity will revolve around this search for a relational invariant, giving it the strong signification of permanence in time." Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 117.

²⁰⁵ Rousseau, according to Brugnolo "porta un'attenzione appassionata a tutti i comincianti, a tutte le fonti del suo essere, rovesciando il ruolo dell'infanzia dentro lo sviluppo della personalità col saldare in uno stretto rapporto le nozioni di origine e verità. A partire da Rousseau, l'infanzia va a costituire la scena fondatrice di ogni conoscenza di sé." Stefano Brugnolo (Ed.), *Il ricordo d'infanzia nelle letterature del '900* (Pisa: Pacini, 2012).

opening with “my mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind”²⁰⁶ highlights maternal uncertainty as the problematic nucleus for the construction of the character’s identity. Similarly, in *Stabat Mater* the mother is the symbolic site of identity generation, it enables the synthesis of questions of belonging, origin and consistence of the self through time, as I will explore in detail in chapter IV. The loss of the mother is also, according to Claudia Romanelli, one of the reasons for the fragmented nature of Cecilia’s narrative, since *Stabat Mater* “elege la frammentarietà, la ripetizione lessicale e tematica a principi strutturali, ma più che altro per rappresentare la polverizzazione della psiche della protagonista, la perdita di un’unità organica verificatasi quando madre e figlia si sono separate”.²⁰⁷

Scarpa’s narrative has been praised for the sophisticated contamination of different genres and means of expression, so much that *Stabat Mater* has been awarded the prestigious *Premio Strega* in 2009. Because the novel is structured as a hybridization between a diary and an epistolary novel, with musical, pictorial and religious interferences, it highlights isolated episodes rather than a coherent narration, so as to emphasise the character’s sense of alienation and fragmentation.²⁰⁸ In effect, the accumulation of events, images, stories and sensations from the past are blended together with present moments, and serve to reflect the challenging growth of the protagonist, lost in the attempt to make sense of the events happening in her life and to trace back her origins: “Il primo ricordo che ho di me, il ricordo più lontano nel tempo è il buio” (8).

According to Bauman, the more the environment is uncertain, unsafe and insecure²⁰⁹ the more the individual is longing for identity as “the weaker our sense of belonging becomes, the stronger our inclination grows towards identity building, identity shifting or identity forging”²¹⁰ and Cecilia finds all possible ways to fight back her own disappearance. Because of this lack of origins, Cecilia’s existence is perceived and represented as nothing but a meaningless sequence of segments: past and present are only pieced together by Cecilia’s thoughts as she constantly interrogates herself and the world

²⁰⁶ Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, [1996] reprint 2013), p. 3.

²⁰⁷ Claudia Romanelli, “Quel che resta di pulp in *Stabat Mater* di Tiziano Scarpa” in *Forum Italicum*, 2018, vol. 52 (3), p. 772.

²⁰⁸ For a detailed analysis of the pulp legacy in *Stabat Mater*, see Romanelli Claudia, “Quel che resta di pulp in *Stabat Mater* di Tiziano Scarpa” in *Forum Italicum*, 2018, vol. 52 (3), pp. 763-787.

²⁰⁹ Uncertainty, unsafety and unsecurity are defined by Bauman the “unholy trinity” of modernity, first in *In Search of Politics* (1998) and later also in *Liquid Modernity* (1999).

²¹⁰ See Leonidas Donskis, *Troubled Identity in the modern world* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 5.

around to construct her subjectivity. Therefore, for a great part of Cecilia's development her biographical coming of age have not corresponded to an equal growth, because of her obsession with the past which has prevented her from projecting into the future.

It is the act of writing which allows Cecilia to connect at least her past and present, providing her identity some degree of temporal coherence, unity and purpose; in this sense, Cecilia might perceive her identity as chaotic and incoherent, but she nonetheless tries to take the agency in shaping it. Differently from the passivity of Rosario, Cecilia's process of identity construction is an assertive one; the resources she uses are the act of writing, the creation of her own music²¹¹ and ultimately the decision to dress up as a boy to run away from the convent. This escape corresponds with the emotional reconciliation with the idea of the mother, so that Cecilia can continue her growth with the fundamental issue of origin if not resolved, at least decentered in her personal narrative.

The epilogue is left open, but as Cecilia produced her own narrative, it reveals a strong awareness of the different path that she needs to follow to construct her identity. According to Ricoeur, establishing a narrative identity is not equal to absolute stability, as "narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity. Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same, so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed plots, about our lives"²¹² and therefore is more of a liberating act than a normative one.²¹³ In effect, the reader is left with a sense of potential, of a new journey, not with a resolution of the protagonist's struggles with her identity. Therefore, Cecilia's choice to adopt a camouflage is not only a mechanism of survival that enables her to escape the convent, but it also become a metaphor for a process of radical change.

At the end of the story Cecilia has achieved a degree of growth, yet she is just starting her process of self-discovery under a new light, one that aims to solidify her experience: "sono io in carne e ossa, tutta intera, che mi sono riconsegnata a me stessa".²¹⁴

²¹¹ "Se riuscissimo a suonare esattamente quello che pensiamo, se la nostra mente avesse una voce installata nella sorgente dei nostri suoni pensati, noi potremmo distruggere la terra dalle fondamenta ed edificare nuove montagne e nuove stelle." (36)

²¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, III*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 248.

²¹³ Ricoeur's cycle of mimesis, together with the concept of narrative identity, consider the nature of narrative as inextricably linked to the human processes of identity, consciousness and knowledge. Ricoeur suggests we think of an "examined life as a narrated life, characterized by a struggle between concordance and discordance, the aim of which is to discover, not to impose on oneself, a narrative identity. This process allows one to develop a sense of oneself as a subject, not as a narcissistic ego but as a self 'instructed by cultural symbols'". See David Wood, (ed). *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, (Routledge: London and New York, 1991), p. 11.

²¹⁴ "Nel registro ho sostituito il mio segnale con un'immagine della Madre di Dio. Non è tagliata né strappata. L' altra metà del segnale non esiste, perché non è un segnale di carta, sono io in carne e ossa, tutta interna, che mi sono riconsegnata a me stessa, sono io che adesso vado incontro al mio destino." (71)

This idea resonates with Bauman's challenge of identity as the "ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless"²¹⁵ that is never fully realized, but yet always needed. Hence *Stabat Mater* provides a textual demonstration of the fragmentation experienced by Cecilia, also reprising the sensorial and visual choices typical of the late 1990s which we can trace back to Scarpa's "cannibal" production. The narrative thread follows Cecilia's memories around to eventually lead to a fuller construction of Cecilia's identity at the end of the story, when she is finally able to piece the different fragments of herself together to *start* her new journey.

2.2 Diving into Consciousness

Another novel that explores the act of writing is Isabella Santacroce's *Zoo* (2006), a story inspired by real events according to the author.²¹⁶ This novel presents the reader with an anonymous female narrator of undefined age, who narrates her childhood and teenage years, with a strong focus on events that happened when she was 18 years old. The narrator is presumably adult, and so has achieved growth; however, as Barbara Kornacka explains, in line with many novels of Isabella Santacroce her characters "seem to be eternally at the age of transition between the childhood and adulthood".²¹⁷ In this case, the temporal arrangement of the novel sustains Santacroce's poetics of fragmentation and signals the absence of a totalising narrative voice able to uphold the character's identity.

From the incipit the story unfolds as a diary-type narration always adherent to the first-person narrator, whose point of view is the sole perspective and that often adopts the teenage viewpoint to filter the events. In fact, the narrative is structured as a series of memories and temporal shifts that go back to when the character was about seven, and then guide the reader in discovering her teenagers years until the "present". Talking about a present time of the narration is particularly interesting, because the entire story is told almost exclusively in the past. The present is constantly framed as a memory exercise, recurrently expressed through the formula "ricordo" which allows the character to show different images of herself in different moments of her infancy and adolescence.

²¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 82.

²¹⁶ Barbara Kornacka, "Annullamento della maternità nella narrativa di Simona Vinci, Isabella Santacroce e Melania G. Mazzucco" In *Femminismo e femminismi nella letteratura italiana dall'Ottocento al XXI secolo*, edited by Parmegiani and Prevedello, (Firenze: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2019), p. 128.

²¹⁷ Barbara Kornacka, "Sovversive, distruttive, demoniache, matricide. Le fanciulle fatali di Isabella Santacroce" in *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, XLI-4, 2014, pp. 113-126.

Right from the very first page the narrator provides a very clear reference to this atypical temporality, expressed by an impossible linear growth from childhood to adulthood.

Ho poche immagini della mia adolescenza, lei esiste solo se la si vive, altrimenti è una linea che si allunga, portandoti dove non eri. Sono passata dall'infanzia a qualcos'altro, ho seguito l'esempio di mia madre, ho conosciuto solo gli opposti e confondendoli li ho dimenticati. Posso pensare di essere rimasta bambina come posso pensare di non esserlo mai stata. Posso pensare di essere nata adulta o di non sapere ancora cosa voglia dire. Se penso alla mia vita, vedo un movimento senza passi, uno scivolare verso dove mi hanno spinto.

È primavera, passeggiò con mio padre in un parco vicino a casa. Nessuno mi ha mai visto con qualcun altro in giro per la città, e nemmeno mi vedrà. [...] Sono una quindicenne magra, l'età ha reso sottile il mio corpo non mi sento bella... (5)

The importance of visualization appears cinematographic in its use of the present tense, and it reprises the “cannibal” attitude to use the language of cinema, television (and comics to certain extent) to “combattere sullo stesso terreno delle narrazioni audiovisive, simulare gli stessi gradi di impatto, coinvolgimento” to quote Barilli,²¹⁸ but it also anticipates the idea of a “movement with no steps” that ruptures the linear model of growth.

The fragmentation of the character's identity is clearly stated from the beginning of the novel, and it constitutes both the premise and consequence of a story paralyzed in an irresolvable dissolution of both identity and temporality. For this reason, it is impossible to know the exact age of the character at the time of the storytelling: this is voiced by the character herself, who finds it hard to define whether she has truly grown past adolescence. The unnamed character of this story is the oldest among the others in the works hereby considered: she is 18 at the end of the story, thus in that liminal stage of transition to full adulthood. Still her incapacity of self-definition exposes a broader concern about increasingly problematic routes to adulthood.

In 1997, sociologists Wyn and White were already challenging the idea of the transition to adulthood as a static, homogeneous pathway that reduced the complexity of subjective experiences, thus considering youth as a status related to age but not dependent

²¹⁸ Renato Barilli, *È arrivata la terza ondata* (Torino: Testo e Immagine, 2000), p. xvii.

solely on age.²¹⁹ Building on Wyn and White, Steven Miles argues that “youth is not simply another stage in a linear life-cycle through which each and every one of us passes in the same, predictable ways”²²⁰. When comparing the life experiences of characters as Rosario from *Certi bambini* with this unnamed one in *Zoo*, it emerges clearly the discrepancy between age and experience that these characters undergo. Rosario for example, despite being younger is much more engaged with adult-like activities if compared with the protagonist of *Zoo*, who seems to be stuck in an endless childhood, proving that young people identities need to be primarily understood as constructed through social processes more than age.

This discrepancy between the manifestation of internal temporality of the character and biographical age is typical of Santacroce’s production, who, according to Stefania Lucamante, recurrently portrays young girls never fully embracing adulthood, if not even rebelling against and refusing the adult world.²²¹ As such, the temporal organization of the novel mirrors a resistance against traditional experience of transition, prioritizing the depiction of the circumstances which makes the character achieving growth in the first place.

From a narrative perspective, the narrator manipulates the time of the narration by presenting an undefined present that slides back into a memory of the past, to move again towards the future, anticipating the – impossible – resolution of the story. This movement makes the reader totally embedded in the fabric of the memory, with all the chaos, distress and confusion that the character is experiencing, which gets translated in a constant entanglement of temporal planes. Therefore, the reader has to reconstruct the linear chain of events to understand the unfolding of the story, its causes and consequences, often without a defined clarity on temporal and causal relationship between the events narrated.²²²

²¹⁹ Wyn and White’s work *Rethinking Youth* focuses on how the transition to adult life is both an individual and a collective process that results in different levels of inequality and marginalization. See Wyn & White, *Rethinking Youth* (London: Sage, 1997).

²²⁰ Steven Miles, *Youth Lifestyle in a Changing World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 11.

²²¹ Lucamante gives the example of Starlet, protagonist of *Fluo* (1995), the “personaggio archetipale della scrittura di Santacroce” who, despite her being 18, refuses to conform to the adult world, acting hostile and rebelling against the generation of the parents, which she perceives as compromised and degraded. In general, Lucamante states that the heroines of Santacroce are caught in the transition from childhood to adulthood, without really achieving it. See Stefania Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce* (Firenze: Cadmo, 2002), p. 31.

²²² The complex layering of events and thoughts, often disembedded from a clear sequencing as they unfold in the plot (when a plot is at all present) is typical of Santacroce’s previous narratives. For example, *Fluo*, *Luminal* and *Destroy* were structured according to a poetic of fragmentation, as Simonetti explains: “*Fluo* obbedisce alla forma semplice del diario adolescenziale, privo di centro, di progressione, di profondità; *Destroy* dal canto suo incarna una interpretazione estremistica, sovraesposta, della frammentazione

Following the character's narration, it emerges that since childhood she has been trapped in a psychological "zoo", encaged by a dysfunctional relationship both with her obsessively jealous father and with her narcissistic mother. After the sudden death of her father, during a dispute with her mother she gets pushed from the stairs and remains paralyzed. The second half of the novel is a deep, cruel and brutal voyage in the psychology of a teenager aiming for revenge. The violent resolution of the story – the matricide – leaks throughout the novel and pervades the narration, sometimes in form of hints of the future, sometimes as concrete memories "Quella sera beve molto, lo faccio anche io, voglio annegare. [...] Brindiamo di continuo, a cosa non lo so, forse all'odio feroce che presto proverò per lei, alla rabbia che le sputerò addosso, all'ultimo atto della nostra storia balorda" (31).

Few sporadic calls for to the act of writing also appear, which significantly make a direct reference to the abnormal temporal dimension that the character is experiencing.

Mentre scrivo qualcuno ride fuori da qui. È in strada, non so chi sia, non riesco a vederlo. Vorrei essere lui in questo momento, io sempre vorrei essere un'altra persona, una qualsiasi, che rida forte per strada, con la gola felice. Se penso a me, al mio presente, vedo una riga nera tracciata sopra una parete bianca che nemmeno il buio può nascondere. (13)

Potrei impazzire, e invece scrivo guardando la notte riportarmi i miei giorni, mostrarmeli aperti come mani che si porgono verso di me per essere prese, fermate, raccolte. Potrei uccidermi, e invece rimango in questa tristezza feroce, imbattibile. Non ho un presente, vivo in ciò che è stato. [...] Io non guardo ciò che ho davanti, sono un viso girato, verso un tempo finito. (74)

Thanks to this narrative structure, the temporal dimension gets inextricably intertwined to an internal temporality which deconstructs the linear chain of events, trapping the character into an endless paralysed time, metaphorical echo of her own physical paralysis. The present is indeed for the anonymous character a black, flat line on a wall, is non-existent as much as the future, impossible even to imagine.

narrativa, aspirando a un racconto fatto di momenti simultanei. E i libri successivi della Santacroce, se hanno diminuito il quoziente di disarticolazione sintattica, sono rimasti però vicini agli schemi di una forma spezzata, paratattica, fedele a una idea lampeggiante del testo: quasi da prosa d'arte." Simonetti, Gianluigi, "I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana (1996- 2006)" in *Allegoria* 57, XX, 2008, pp. 95-136.

Therefore, the unnamed character is inclined to evade the real temporality; by removing herself from the future, as much as constraining her life in the past, she dips into a motionless present dimension. Thus, the growth trajectory first presents this unresolved development, to later elaborate a regression towards infancy – emphasised by the paralysis that forces her to depend totally on her mother. Ultimately the character rejects the idea of a stable self to move towards: “Non ho un presente, vivo in ciò che è stato” (74). This sentence not only justifies a story that is constantly told in the past, but it also very dramatically presents a pending fragmentation that does not resolve any conflict. Alongside this temporal blending, the protagonist’s ability to construct a stable, grounded identity is decisively removed, and the matricide as the annihilation of the point of origin is a further sign of an impossible growth.

Yet, the homicide is the way for the protagonist to remove her mother’s cumbersome presence from the story, and to find the time and space to establish her own narrative. As such, the process of writing more than working as a therapeutic act becomes a last attempt to acquire that centrality that she has longed for.²²³ The process of growth is completed in terms of coming of age since the character has reached legal age, yet the subjective development remains not only unresolved but neglected in its possibility.

Both in *Stabat mater* and in *Zoo* the story presents this complex articulation of temporal planes made of intersecting digressions, meditations, flashbacks and flashforwards, creating a discursive strategy to expose the fragmentation and neurosis of the characters. Both authors, Tiziano Scarpa and Isabella Santacroce, have been in the past connected indirectly with the group of the *gioventù cannibale*, and while their style – especially for Scarpa – has evolved since, these novels are still reminiscent of a postmodern attitude in their attempt to fragment temporality and penetrate the darkest layers of psyche.

It is indeed since the modernist novels that the plot gets totally overwhelmed by the expansion of the character, who is able to rearrange the spatial and temporal dimension according to his interior world, according to Ricoeur.²²⁴ The philosopher explains how

²²³ Also, as Zaccaria observes: “Attraverso le sue opere e la sua particolare struttura narrativa la Santacroce amplifica dunque la funzione autoriflessiva della scrittura, rende il flusso di coscienza sempre più simile ad un flusso emozionale, con i suoi balzi improvvisi e la sua prepotenza invasiva. Non si ha più solo una semplice confessione poiché il lettore viene messo davanti ad un sistema emotivo più che psichico, facendo sì che la poetica del personaggio venga non spiegata ma sentita dal lettore, al quale toccherà il compito di ricostruirla insieme alla mentalità e alla moralità delle giovani protagoniste” See. Flaviana Zaccaria, “Gli effetti della demodernizzazione e della perdita d’individuazione nell’opera di Isabella Santacroce” in *African Journals Online*, Vol. 22 No. 1 (2009), p. 68.

²²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

this impossibility of showing the end of a trajectory was inaugurated by modernism, when a sort of “rebound effect of the character on the plot”. As a result “to the loss of the identity of the character thus corresponds the loss of the configuration of the narrative and, in particular, a crisis of the closure of the narrative”.²²⁵

In this respect, these novels go even further in reverting the traditionally resolved finale of the *Bildungsroman*, to show a pathway of growth that is more open, in which identities cannot be binarily understood as fixed in a point of time – whether childhood or adulthood – but in which childlike and adultlike experience constantly merge one into the other, constructing a pattern of growth that is overall postmodern in its multiplicity and fluidity. In this sense, the absence of the characters’ transition to adulthood is not only a formal choice useful to leave the identity problem unresolved, but it is also a way to focus on adolescent years as a dynamic space with inherent significance.

The provocative question that Ricoeur rhetorically asks in his *Time and Narrative* is whether is still possible to use the notion of emplotment when the narrative seems a senseless journey in the abysses of consciousness, in which the individual seems to get completely lost, as a result of a life experience that appears more and more fragmented and inconsistent. What emerges is that both characters are able, at the end of their trajectory, to de-center their mothers and to gain centrality in their own narrative of growth, but while Cecilia is able to piece together her fragmented identity into something new, more mature and yet unexplored, the unnamed character of *Zoo* refuses the transition to adulthood in the first place, radically erasing all past, present and future trajectories of growth and all possibilities of social integration.

3. Interrogating Sequential Time: Growth and Knowledge

As anticipated, identity in early modernity had, according to Bauman, “the ontological status of a project and a postulate”.²²⁶ In effect, the essentialist and humanist model of formation was quite prescriptive in what an individual could become, and identity was strongly informed by societal and religious norms – as represented by the *Bildungsroman* – even when framed as an individual task of self-discovery. Identity entered modernity as a project so that it was, in Bauman’s metaphor, like the pathway of a pilgrim whereby

²²⁵ Ibidem (Ricoeur) p. 149. Ricoeur discusses extensively the problem of closure also in *Time and Narrative II*, where he defines the lack of the closure as “the one where crisis replaces the end, where crisis becomes an endless transition”. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I-III*, (Chicago and London, The university of Chicago Press, 1984-1988), II, p. 24.

²²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist” (eds. Hall & Du Gay) in *Questions of Cultural identity* (London: Sage 1996), p. 19.

“one can *reflect* on the road past and see it as a progress *towards*, an advance, a coming *closer to*; one can make a distinction between ‘behind and ahead’, and plot the ‘road ahead’ as a succession of footprints”.²²⁷

As such, identity was “giving continuity to the episodic”, becoming a project to move towards, in the case of the *Bildungsroman*, the successful integration with society. To achieve this, time has to be as “rulers are – straight, in one piece, with equidistant marking, made of tough and solid material”, so to allow individuals to move further in the pilgrimage that is life. Even though this consideration of identity is challenged by the fluidity of modern times, so much that Bauman considers the postmodern search for identity as the travel of a tourist rather than a pilgrimage,²²⁸ still the legacy of the *Bildungsroman* (with its confidence in the straight line of both time and life) still informs many contemporaries coming-of-age stories.

The following novels, Ammaniti’s *Io non ho paura* (2001) and Melliti’s *I bambini delle rose* (1995) instead present mostly a linear treatment of time which mirrors a directional and continuous path of growth, despite the absence of the happy ending. From a formal point of view, these two novels can be defined as “fiabe noir” in which the children’s formation is never denied, but it is challenged by abusive adult characters and ambiguous moral situations. In these novels, the linear temporal structure is combined with two microstructures, a detective story in the case of *Io non ho paura*, where the process of self-awareness goes in parallel with a mystery to solve in true videogame-like manner, and an episodic fable in the case of *I bambini delle rose*, where every day presents a new lesson to learn for the child protagonist. These different narrative structures encompass and incorporates many of the traditional steps of formation of coming-of-age stories; but while the overall trajectory is quite normative, the subjective perspective of the child characters – primary focalisers – force the reader to experience the cruelty, brutality and violence of the world first-hand and therefore to meditate on the darkest aspect of growth in contemporary society.

²²⁷ Ibid. (Bauman) p. 22.

²²⁸ As Bauman explains, in contemporary times – that he defines postmodern – “it soon transpired that the real problem is not how to build identity, but how to preserve it; whatever you may build in the sand is unluckily to be a castle. [...] It becomes virtually impossible to patch the trodden stretches of sand into an itinerary - let alone into a plan for a lifelong journey.” In this context, the metaphor of the pilgrim is replaced by the stroller, the vagabond and the tourist, those who do not plan long trips, but short, confined and *in the present experiences*.” Ibidem. p. 19.

3.1 The Gradual Uncovering of the Self

Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura* (2001) is set in the summer of 1978, in an imaginary small village in the south of Italy called *Acque Traverse*. As declared by Ammaniti himself, this is “una sporchissima vicenda di cronaca nera, tutto qui”²²⁹ set during *gli anni di piombo*, an historical moment known for terrorism, urban massacres and kidnappings of both adults and children. The incipit presents Michele, the main child character and focaliser, narrating *in media res* while engaged in a bicycle race, in an unknown situation that immediately accelerates the narration.²³⁰ In this way Ammaniti creates right from the start a face paced narrative – and it is no coincidence that *Io non ho paura* is rich in bicycle chases – while also setting a tone of suspense.

According to Gianluigi Simonetti, speed and suspense are formal devices typical of videogames, which have been very influential in modelling the “cannibal” narrative in Italy,²³¹ and according to writer Aldo Nove, Ammaniti admittedly “avesse mutuato dai videogiochi il percorso fatto dal protagonista per scovare il nascondiglio”.²³² In the novel Michele discovers a hole in the garden of an abandoned house, where another child named Filippo is held hostage. Struggling with both fear and curiosity, Michele starts visiting him while discovering that the kidnappers are the adults of the village, including his own father. Tormented by the dilemma of helping Filippo or obeying to adults, Michele ends up being mistakenly shot by his father while he was freeing his friend.

What emerges as a more traditional narrative in terms of themes and structures, if compared for example to *Certi bambini*, still makes an interesting use of temporal variations in order to show the identity development of the main character. As said, the opening presents the 9-year-old Michele in action – “Stavo per superare Salvatore quando ho sentito mia sorella che urlava” (4) – in a present temporality, with an internal focalization, aligned with the child's gaze. Yet, the second paragraph already shifts to “quell'anno il grano era alto”, setting a distancing effect from the perceived present time

²²⁹ Luciana Sica, *Intervista ad Ammaniti* in “Repubblica” online, Agosto 2001, [consulted April 2021] <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2001/08/28/ammaniti.html>.

²³⁰ Ammaniti reveals in an interview in 2015 how his writing process rests on the necessity of a narrative primer: “Dall'azione emerge la psicologia dei personaggi. [...] Ho sempre bisogno del meccanismo narrativo. [In *Io non ho paura*] L'azione c'è, e molta. Soprattutto l'innescio narrativo di cui io ho sempre bisogno.” Niccolò Ammaniti: *Ho creato Anna, e poi... me ne sono innamorato* by Teresa Ciabati, 2015 available online [consulted April 2021] <https://www.iodonna.it/personaggi/interviste-gallery/2015/10/18/niccolo-ammaniti-ho-creato-anna-e-poi-me-ne-sono-innamorato/>.

²³¹ Gianluigi Simonetti, “I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana” (1996 – 2006)” in *Allegoria*, XX, 2008, n. 57, p. 103.

²³² Eleonora Pinzuti refers to Ammaniti in a conversation with Aldo nove. See Eleonora Pinzuti, *Dal romanzo di formazione al romanzo di formattazione* (Nuovo Rinascimento, [online] 2007), p. 4.

of the narration. Michele's adult voice follows, commenting: "Non avevo idea di quanto faceva caldo, uno a nove anni di gradi centigradi se ne intende poco" (5).²³³ This sentence introduces to the reader the presence of an adult, heterodiegetic narrator that, as pointed out by Giuliana Adamo, somehow justifies the adoption of a register that would sound not totally believable if the primary narrator was truly a child.²³⁴

Thanks to this structure, the novel sets up an interesting temporality in which the actions of the child are filtered through the adult consciousness, making the story existing simultaneously in two temporal planes – the past and the present – so that the novel can present an open ending, while at the same time giving reassurance on the fate of the hero right from the beginning. Also, by having the events narrated at a much later time by an adult narrator, who adopted the viewpoint of his child self, the novel establishes internally a dialogic position of the subject. As Robyn McCallum theorizes, this retrospective type of narration which constantly shifts between childhood experience and adulthood present, creates the polyphonic effect of an implicit double-voicing, one that highlights the limits of the child's knowledge of both the world and his own identity.²³⁵

Even if the adult narrator still comments on the story,²³⁶ from the second chapter onwards the telling of this adventure is made almost exclusively by the child narrator. Interestingly, the movie adaptation made by Gabriele Salvatores in 2003²³⁷ eliminates the presence of the adult narrator, thereby enhancing the suspense connected to the fate of the character: *Will Michele die or not?*²³⁸. While the movie leaves both possibilities open, in the novel the author uses the adult perspective to subtly reassures the reader that Michele will reach adulthood, even if that moment is left out from the story. In this instance, the

²³³ The revelation of the adult narrator happens undoubtedly later, when he comments "a distanza di ventidue anni non ho ancora capito come faceva a sopportarci." (24)

²³⁴ For an analysis of the narrator in *Io non ho paura*, see Giuliana Adamo, "Riflessioni sulle opere di due scrittori italiani contemporanei: Niccolò Ammaniti e Diego De Silva", in *the Italianist*, 27:1, Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2007, pp.166-184.

²³⁵ See Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 33.

²³⁶ A second reference can be found on page 30, when the adult narrator Michele refers to a future episode: "Circa dieci anni dopo mi è successo di andare a sciare al Gran Sasso. [...] Avevo diciannove anni ed a sciare c'ero andato una volta sola." Later, the adult Michele presents the future of Acqua Traverse: "Oggi, Acqua Traverse è una frazione di Lucignano. A metà degli anni Ottanta un geometra ha costruito due lunghe schiere di villette di cemento armato. [...] Nel 1978 Acqua Traverse era così piccola che non era niente." (37)

²³⁷ Gabriele Salvatores, *Io non ho paura*, 2003 adapted the movie together with Ammaniti who worked on the screenplay. The movie won two *David di Donatello* in 2004 and earned 1,6 million dollars in Box Office USA.

²³⁸ For a detailed analysis of the narrative perspective in the adaptation of *Io non ho paura*, see Guido Bonsaver, "Raccontare 'all'americana': *Io non ho paura* tra autodiegesi letteraria e soggettiva cinematografica" in *Narrativa italiana recente/Recent Italian Fiction* (Torino: Trauben, 2005), pp. 53-73.

novel normalizes the ambiguity of the finale, making *Io non ho paura* a narrative appreciated by both adults and children, in opposition to the transgressive horror-splatter narrative of Ammaniti's cannibal production. While maintaining a level of playfulness in mixing elements of different genres (detective story, thriller, fairy tale, comics, cinema, videogames) and of high and low culture, as typical of his pulp production,²³⁹ this novel presents a more cohesive portrayal of both the child character and of the story.²⁴⁰

The incipit of this novel also employs the device of the false start, an *esordio rimandato*²⁴¹ which offers in the first two pages the justification for the subsequent narrative account. This serves to anticipate, even if elliptically, a few themes and motifs characteristic of the coming-of-age story: the group of peers, the adventure, the liminality and the exceptionality of this memory of infancy. It also presents very vividly the time and space of the story, and it introduces the characterization of the protagonists as a good-hearted boy²⁴² right from the beginning.

Despite the intersection of temporal planes in the incipit, the story is normalized once Michele begins the initiatic adventure that leads to finding Filippo. In spite of the presence of a few flashbacks and dreams, which serve to immerse the reader in the child's consciousness to strengthen the focalization effect, the story proceeds quite linearly both in terms of plot and in terms of Michele's gradually enhanced self-awareness. For many aspects this story emerges as a typical *romanzo di formazione*, as Michele undergoes a series of adventures that compel him to transition from the innocence of childhood to a status of enhanced and matured understanding of the dynamics of the world. He goes

²³⁹ As Marino Sinibaldi noted, "la peculiarità di Ammaniti è anzitutto l'inesauribile rimescolamento di generi, registri e figure, con una predilezione, oltre che per i canonici immissari del pulp (la tradizione del noir, la fantascienza, il cinema di serie B) per la commedia italiana." See Marino Sinibaldi, *Pulp: la letteratura nell'età della simultaneità* (Roma: Donzelli editore, 1997) p. 63.

²⁴⁰ Here I refer in particular to *Branchie* (Ediesse, 1994) *Fango*, (Mondadori, 1996) and *Seratina*, the short story in the Anthology *Gioventù Cannibale* (Einaudi, 1996) where psychedelic and extreme horrors are experienced by a series of protagonists lacking any moral or psychological depths, which makes these stories far from being appropriate for a child readership. For a comparison between Ammaniti's previous production and *Io non ho paura*, see Giuliana Adamo, "Riflessioni sulle opere di due scrittori italiani contemporanei: Niccolò Ammaniti e Diego De Silva" in *The Italianist*, Vol.27, n.1, 2007, pp. 166-184.

²⁴¹ I use this word to indicate the use of a slow – or false – start, which postpones the start of the real initiatic adventure by preceding it with a prelude which configures the climate of the story to set the readers' expectations.

²⁴² As said, the *topos* of the good-hearted boy is recurrent in coming-of-age stories, especially those which assumes innocence as a constitutive trait of children. As Spinazzola observes, characters such as *Pinocchio* (1881-83) or the boys from *Cuore* (1886) are often misbehaving, and for this reason they are severely punished, to reassert the right discipline. However, the happy ending is possible specifically because, no matter the behaviors, these children possess a "good hearted nature" of Rousseauian echo. See Vittorio Spinazzola, *Pinocchio & co.* pp. 15-16.

through direct confrontation with other characters, and finds his own space for reflection to evaluate the different options and to question his moral self.

Sono scappato al torrente e mi sono arrampicato sul carrubo. Io con quel Vecchio non ci avrei dormito mai. Aveva preso Filippo. E appena mi addormentavo prendeva pure me. [...] Dovevo andare. E dovevo raccontagli di sua madre, che gli voleva ancora bene e che lo aveva detto alla televisione, così tutti sapevano.

Ma avevo paura, se alla casa ci trovavo papà e il vecchio?

Ho guardato l'orizzonte. Il cielo era piatto, grigio e pesava sui campi di grano. La collina era laggiù, gigante, velata dal calore.

Se sto attento non mi vedono, mi sono detto.

- O partigiano, portami via, che mi devon seppellir, O partigiano, portami via, O bella ciao ciao ciao – Ho sentito una voce che cantava. (104)

Either at night or during the day – by climbing up a carob tree in a clear homage to Cosimo from Calvino's *Il barone rampante* – Michele always finds that space for meditation that underpins his emotional and moral growth. This passage's reference to the partisan song "*Bella Ciao*" also clearly recalls the idea of self-sacrifice that, together with the *topos* of the good-hearted boy, characterize Michele as possessing an intrinsically good nature. Together with his innate moral compass, this makes his growth more a path of self-discovery of innate qualities rather than a disruptive narrative of a multiple, problematic and fluid identity that needs to be disentangled.

In contrast to *Certi bambini*, in which the temporal fragmentation mirrored the incapacity of the character to consciously capture the unfolding of the events, in *Io non ho paura* the presence of these different temporal planes serves to create suspense and dilute the knowledge that Michele has of the different characters, to gradually complete the puzzle that is unfolding in front of him. When it comes to Michele's development, the movement of self-awareness indeed responds to a gradual logic of accumulation of details as in a detective story, details that allow him to push his understanding further towards a greater discernment. This allows him to take what would be considered "the right decision", one that is aligned with the values of friendship, self-sacrifice and maturity.

In fact, *Io non ho paura* presents a gradual pathway of formation for a character able to mature and to take morally weighted decisions in order to build his agency, by looking clearly and candidly inside himself. This is why Michele is also assisted by the adult narrator; to show a character that is already formed in his identity, developed in his

psychology, with a clear and enhanced understanding of his place in the world, even if legitimately constrained by his child's perspective. As such, in this novel the use of time is a clear narrative device to sustain the growth-oriented trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*. Right before the rite of passage, which is final the moment of self-sacrifice, Michele asks himself explicitly: "E qual era la mia natura?" (188), signalling the readiness of the character to uncover his most profound and permanent selfhood. This gradual pathway of growth prepares Michele to become in the future a successfully integrated member of society.

Also, the paradigm of the good-hearted boy reinforces a traditional view of identity in the Ricoeurian term of sameness, as an enduring and reidentifiable substratum or nature. I have discussed that for Ricoeur the concept of idem-identity relates to the stable core of the self, the one unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of the personal history but rooted in its *permanence* in time. As Calvin Shrag clarifies: "entities retain their identity precisely because they remain external to this succession of instants, exhibiting a permanence through time, fixed, continuous and immutable".²⁴³ In this sense, this coming-of-age story revolves around a search for invariants that define Michele in his unsubstitutable singularity.

The outcome is a sort of essentialism of the self that, in the case of Michele, constructs him as a Christ-like figure²⁴⁴ who takes explicitly the place of "l'agnello che toglie i peccati" (24) willing to sacrifice himself to be faithful to his principles, as I will discuss in chapter 4. Michele's path of growth is therefore quite linear and assertive of the normative identity to assume, that is, being faithful to his good-hearted nature and compliant with the ethics of society, despite the negative examples provided by adults around him. When challenged by the circumstances, Michele's actions are guided by reflection and by a gradually enhanced knowledge of both himself and the rules of the world. As such, growth is sustained by the tendency to build for both the present and for the future; a future that is supported by the role of the adult narrator.

Although Michele's quest does not subvert the tradition of the linear pathway of growth, the use of the child's focalization, the treatment of the theme of child abduction

²⁴³ Calvin Shrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (Yale University press, 1997), p. 36

²⁴⁴ Michele, despite his first instinctive reaction, always ends up sacrificing himself for those ones perceived as more vulnerable; it happens at the beginning of the story when he loses a race to help his little sister (8), later on once he decides to take the place of "Barbara Mura, la ciccione, era lei l'agnello che toglie i peccati" in a penance (24), trying to save his mother from an aggression by fighting back an adult (164) and lastly in his final attempt to save Filippo. (228).

and the absence of the happy ending contest many simplistic portrayals of growth, unveiling the obstacles posed to children along the way.

3.2 Episodic Knowledge: The Casualty of Life

The last novel, *I bambini delle rose* (1995) by Tunisian-Italian writer Mohsen Melliti, is the story of Nico, a 11-year-old Serbian gypsy living in Rome who illegally works as a rose seller. Nico's life is destabilized by the encounter with Ly, a Chinese girl; what starts as the conflictual claim for a selling spot rapidly turns into a relationship that makes Nico question his place in the world and rebel against his family. Despite the empowering friendship between the two characters, at the end of the novel Nico is forced by his father to leave Rome, and Ly, behind.

Structured in seven small chapters which linearly cover one week, each chapter works almost as an enclosed adventure, made of several encounters that rarely constitute a *kernel*²⁴⁵. This means that the many episodes are rarely able to modify the unfolding of the story; rather they position Nico in many different situations that allow him to learn along the way.

Formally, Nico's story is framed within another narration, one that presents an anonymous adult character storytelling Nico's adventure. A short prologue in fact presents an anonymous couple of lovers, possibly but not certainly the adult versions of Nico and Ly, engaged in a storytelling exercise.²⁴⁶ The transition from the prologue to the story is assigned to the traditional formula "Una volta..." (once upon a time), thus shifting the narrative voice from a diegetic to an extradiegetic narrator. The use of the typical fairy-tale opening formula sets the tone for a fantastic, timeless narration composed by several episodes. This structure could be assimilated to the ones of *Pinocchio* or *Gian Burrasca*, that according to Spinazzola are constituted by "una catena di episodi e episodietti disposti per lo più in successione lineare"²⁴⁷ which served well the form of the instalment, but also

²⁴⁵ In *The Way of the World* following Barthes and Chatman's narratological theory, Moretti claims that the modernists abandoned the structuring of the plot around "kernels", highly significant and abrupt moments of irreversible actions, in favor of narrative "satellites", inherently meaningless episodes left to the hero's agency to be turned into meaningful opportunities. See Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The "Bildungsroman" in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 233

²⁴⁶ It is left unclear if this anonymous couple of lovers are the adult versions of Nico and Ly; while there are no direct recalls to the space and time of this prologue, nor to any of the features of the two child protagonists, the ending presents the woman as "la grande bambina" (112), hinting that this goodnight story could be actually their own story.

²⁴⁷ "L'intreccio si struttura come una catena di episodi e episodietti disposti per lo più in successione lineare: l'uno inizia dopo il termine dell'altro. Varie volte però la tecnica combinatoria si fa un po' più elaborata, con

responded to a precise narrative aim. Indeed, in both *Pinocchio* and *Gian Burrasca* the episodic structure allows the characters to fail and learn, to be punished and revise their behaviours, so that it was functional for a certain type of linearity.

As in those novels, in *I bambini delle rose* the plot is constructed through a combination of different episodes that, while apparently mirroring the casualty of life encounters, narratively allow Nico to rapidly learn from his mistakes and to readjust his behaviours along the way. For example, he learns that he cannot trust Giulia, the fortune teller, to hide his money in her neckline: “Il colore della sua faccia cambia. Si chiude la porta dietro, deluso. C’è qualcuno che può mettere le mani nel petto di Giulia. [...] Nico, quando è in mezzo a piazza Navona, arriva alla conclusione che i suoi soldini non sono più al sicuro” (55). As discussed for *Io non ho paura*, this narrative strategy of accumulating knowledge is quite traditional: in this case it is not revolving around a mystery to solve, but around a sequence of various adventures and misfortunes.

Although the opening formula refers to the universal temporality of the fable²⁴⁸, the narrative time is destabilized by altering the formula into “Una volta, nel tempo reale” (19). This reference to a realistic time shifts the plane from the fantastic, generic setting of the folktale, to ground the characters and the events in the specific Italian milieu, making this story engrained in the contemporary liquid society. Through the use of this formula, Melliti creates a dialogue (more than a conflict) between two different temporalities: the mythical time of the universal experience of growth and the historical time of a specific socialized experience. Also, by anchoring the story “in real time”, the narrator anticipates that despite its fictionality, this short novel has to be considered a realistic artefact. Through the use of such a composite time, Melliti manages to maintain a certain narrative levity, while exercising the right of a critique of contemporary society. In this respect, he creates a time-less – always relevant – but not a-temporal narrative dimension that speaks of today.

l’inserimento di un aneddoto nuovo prima che quello già avviato arrivi a conclusione.” See Spinazzola Vittorio, *Pinocchio& co* (Milano: Il saggiatore, 1997), p. 128.

²⁴⁸ As Borruso explains, the generic time of the fairy tale destructures the real temporality to give access to the symbolic realm of the possibility: “La fiaba è situata in un tempo che sta ‘oltre’, al di là del tempo storico e in *topoi* generici (un castello, una città, un villaggio, un regno) che servono ad ambientare la storia” which aim to create “spazi esperienziali che consentono di agire il mito per elaborarlo, interpretarlo, coniugarlo anche se solo in parte, con la coscienza di sé e del mondo.” Yet, when it comes to Melliti’s novel, the mythical time and space of the fable are subverted by a well-defined spatio-temporal setting. The story is indeed told across a week, each day titles one of the seven chapters, in contemporary Rome. See Francesca Borruso, *Fiaba e identità* (Roma: Armando Editore, 2005), pp. 12-15.

This temporality, universal and at the same time embedded in the social fabric of Italy, is strengthened by the adoption of multiple focalizations. There is a privileged and clear sight on Nico's thoughts either through the direct speech, or free indirect speech, which oftentimes blur the boundaries between focaliser and narrator:

Una rosa. Solo una. Venderne una è l'inizio, basta iniziare, poi la gente compra. Sempre così. La prima porta la seconda. La seconda porta la terza. [...] Arriva a Campo de' Fiori, neanche li riesce a vendere, nessuno vuole rose. Quelli che le volevano le hanno comprate da un altro. C'è qualcuno che conosce i suoi posti, un ladro; chi può essere? Siede in piazza Campo de' Fiori, sotto la statua di Giordano Bruno e pensa: «È un ladro, un grande figlio di puttana, chi può essere Dio mio! È un indiano, 'sti cazzi dell'India, maledette tutte le Indie del mondo. Madonna mia, che faccio? Mi ammazza questa sera! Mi fa a pezzi, non è mio zio? Sì!No!...». (24)

The striking contrast between Nico's age and the language that he uses (full of swearing, cursing and racial offences) instantly locates Nico into a liminal dimension, pointing out a lag between his biological and social age that is reinforced by being a child worker, similarly to what we have seen with Rosario. In fact, Nico's language presents a very distinct socio-ideological base, what Bakhtin refers to as heteroglossia²⁴⁹, because it shows "specific points of view on the world"²⁵⁰ in which contradictory multiple discourses and ideologies co-exist. The referential and expressive reach of Nico's language is even more powerful considering that he is a migrant child, therefore already embedded in another particular social heteroglossia.

As Bakhtin explains, all utterances are heteroglot, but what makes Nico's utterance particularly interesting is the dialectic between different forces: the child's concerns expressed through an 'adult-like' language, the references to the Christian religion in forms of swearing, the racist biases, all always concentrated in a few, concise lines. This is important because the formation of subjectivity in Bakhtin is inextricable from language;²⁵¹ so that those tensions emerging from Nico's utterance are mirroring the

²⁴⁹ Heteroglossia according to Bakhtin is what "ensures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions-social, historical, meteorological, physiological that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions". Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 428.

²⁵⁰ Bakhtin, *ibid.* p. 292.

²⁵¹ Bakhtin claims that "for any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms, but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world" *ibid.* p. 293.

intersectional discourses that are enforced on Nico, which he gradually contests in the story.

Within the realistic, socially-embedded temporality of Nico's experience the character is presented very much involved in the ongoing process of growth, torn between a world of childhood that he longs for, and the necessity of acting like a grown-up. Yet, his trajectory passes through experiencing a gradual diversion from an individualist view thanks to his relationship with Ly, as I will discuss further. The presence of the young girl embodies one more physical, social and cultural world which challenges Nico's knowledge, and establishes that explicit polyphony given by a second child-focalizer.

Ly's perspective complements Nico's one, providing another socially stratified language from within the heteroglossia,²⁵² and another set of viewpoints. Ultimately she becomes the "other than self" needed to substantiate the process of identity formation. The relationship between Nico and Ly will be analysed in detail in the last chapter, however with regard to the temporal organization of the story, it is important to note that a certain liquidity of the world solidifies itself around this friendship.

Despite a clear movement towards identity formation, there is no happy ending for Nico, who is ultimately dragged away by his ex-convict father and forced to leave Rome overnight. While trapped in the family's roulette, speeding on the highway towards an unknown destination, Nico voices his identity: "Papà ti prego! Io non voglio partire! Io sono romano! Io sono romano!" (110), rejecting both his nomadic and familial roots. Nico attempts to challenge the patriarchal normativity, first by voicing his identity, and secondly by escaping from the car. Despite Nico's growing agency, the novel's closure reasserts the inescapability of his disempowerment, highlighting the impossibility for these children to harmonize their internal world with the demands of the social one.

Even if Nico learns through the accumulation of adventures and gradually discovers the importance of otherness, his growth does not correspond to an actual agentic outcome. In this sense, Nico and Ly end up being Ricoeur's sufferers: "those affected by processes of modification or conservation" rather than agents. Nico as a sufferer shows the "essential dissymmetry between the one who acts and the one who undergoes, culminating in the

²⁵²"Ly aveva i capelli 'alla porco Dio' come dice la signora Teresa, quella che ha il negozio di alimentari sotto casa, quando vede qualcuno coi capelli spettinati. Disperata, fredda, i piccoli piedi quasi senza sangue, con i denti che battono, Ly dice alla madre "Mamma il preside mi ha chiesto il pelmesso di soggiolno" Quanto è strana la pronuncia di Ly! (nella parola preside c'è 'erre' ma Ly dice pelmesso e soggiolno.) Ly è tornata dalla madre con la sua 'elle' al posto della 'erre'. Ly ha perso la sua 'erre'." (52) This concept of sounds that are lost and found substantiate Ly's language into a narrative identity which represents Ly's location in the world and her struggles to assert her Italian identity over her Chinese one.

violence of the powerful agent”²⁵³, which is Nico’s father. So that a narrative that presented both a linear treatment of time and a trajectory of experience, ultimately deprives Nico of the happy ending that would determine the actual agency of the child, leaving an unresolved finale as testament of the uncompleted growth.

Conclusions

1. Questioning Linearity

Several considerations arise from the analysis of these novels when it comes to permanence and change, unity and fragmentation, authenticity and multiplicity. The first insight is that linear narrations are getting increasingly rare. The lack of linearity is not a new narrative feature; as the modernist novels extensively proved, by altering the perception of temporality it was possible to incorporate in the plot the notion of individuality, the psychology of the character and its identity development.²⁵⁴ At the same time, postmodernism has proved to be “suspicious of continuity”²⁵⁵, leading the way to shape narratives with discontinuous and fragmented structures.

These tendencies have been explored in the late 1990s either according to the rhetoric of new media, as the cannibal writers did, or simply by experimenting by freeing up the text from the limits of a linear plot. According to Gianluigi Simonetti, in between the two millennia many novels have refused the linear exposition of events to get closer to the way other media – television, comics – tell stories. Speed in particular has become a way to subvert the equation between literature and slowness in a decade that is dominated by the rise of mass media. Simonetti discusses the different ways in which authors employ speed, but he overall indicates this tendency of using a fast-paced narrative rhythm and an immediate style that is closer to performativity.

In postmodernity, the increased narrative speed also corresponds to a general lack of reflection: once the interior world of the character gets overwhelmed by actions, the

²⁵³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.145.

²⁵⁴ The modernist novel, in contrast to other genres, moves away from the consideration of Aristotle’s *mimesis* as pure imitation of action. Instead, it presented a plot centred on the character and its subjectivity, as emblemized by the stream of consciousness. According to Ricoeur, the stream of consciousness allowed to incorporate the interiority of the individual within the realistic dimension of life, because it operated a synthesis between actions and subjectivity: “È ancora azione, in senso allargato, la trasformazione morale di un personaggio, la sua crescita, la sua formazione, la sua iniziazione alla complessità della vita morale e affettiva.” See Roberto Talamo, “Il romanzo moderno nella poetica del sé di Paul Ricoeur” in *Enthymema*, IX, 2013, pp. 56-65.

²⁵⁵ Lodge cited in Gianluigi Simonetti, “I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana (1995-2006)” in *Allegoria* 57, p. 109.

psychology of the character remains unexplored or superficially looked at, as it has been alleged to pulp narratives. According to Donnarumma, we can consider this absence of reflection as symptomatic of the absence of the *Bildung* itself,²⁵⁶ so that the use of traditional structures parodically provides a compensatory image in a life that appears senseless.

The generation of “cannibal” writers such as Isabella Santacroce, Simona Vinci, Niccolò Ammaniti and Tiziano Scarpa are among the first ones to embrace this postmodern trend. This was partially due to their young age so that they have been exposed first-hand to the speed of information consumption typical of the audio-visual culture in the late 20th century, with its surrealist logic, violent analogies and an unbridled montage.²⁵⁷ From movies, especially blockbusters, they also derived the spectacular plot twist that we find, for example, in *Io non ho paura*. Indeed, this novel cannibalizes the structure of videogames to create a new form of thriller, and draws from serial television its emotionally captivating scheme. Also, to the incremental speed corresponds a synchronous escalation of violence, as in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, in line with the tendency of cannibal narratives of spectacularizing traumatic experiences.

Other writers, like De Silva and Melliti, derive the immediacy of their style from the thriller, but also from the journalistic form of the “romanzo inchiesta” with its fascination for dynamics of criminal worlds, so that traditional moments of introspection are set aside to move the emphasis on events that often “accadono e basta”.²⁵⁸ For example, Saviano’s first fictional work, *La paranza dei bambini* (2016), explores the controversial rise of a criminal group of teenagers in Naples, almost continuing the investigation started with *Gomorra* (2006). In this respect, *Certi bambini* and *I bambini delle rose* express an attitude that has survived the cannibals and that dominates the narrative production today.

What started with the cannibals as an evasive and anti-realistic use of speed, in the novels hereby considered mirrors a more realistic and mimetic use of time:

²⁵⁶ Donnarumma cited in Simonetti, “I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana (1995-2006)” in *Allegoria* 57, p. 105.

²⁵⁷ Simonetti goes on to say that “Il loro sforzo di accelerazione, pur tenendo conto di alcuni importanti precursori italiani – Arbasino e Tondelli soprattutto – dipende soprattutto da modelli non nazionali e non letterari, ma come si sa eminentemente cinematografici, televisivi, giornalistici, fumettistici, canzonettistici, o persino videoludici.” See Gianluigi Simonetti, “I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana (1995-2006)” in *Allegoria* 57, p. 98.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. (Simonetti) p. 101.

la velocità si mette a servizio del realismo, diventando componente essenziale di una resa fedele della febbrile esperienza contemporanea. Accanto all'ideale della rapidità troviamo, sempre più spesso, la riproduzione esatta di frammenti di realtà grossolana, da collocare all'interno di strutture ibride, solo in parte finzionali.²⁵⁹

Faced by the complexity of a society that is increasingly liquified, these novels respond by adopting the speed of mass media society, while also maintaining a close eye on the reality by using the resources of reportage, journalism and autobiographical experiences.

A postmodern attitude is therefore expressed by the use of these three elements: a tendency to mixing genres together, a drive towards speed and actions, and the use of non-linear narratives (for example looking backward in order to move forward, or crumbling in the interiority of the character to unveil a subjective temporality). These features allow the authors to show young characters in transition, in a state of flux that rarely is resolved at the end of the narration. Even when the story seems to follow a traditional linear structure made of accumulation of episodes, as in the case of Melliti's *I bambini delle rose*, still the open-ended structure contests the whole idea of closing the growth trajectory.

This leads to a second consideration; non-linear narratives are not a novelty per se, but looking at the coming-of-age story today, the novelty is that these non-linear narratives no longer correspond to linear formations. The suggestion here is not that the traditional notion of linear formation is entirely to be dismissed, but that the static conception of growth adopted by most critics is only useful as long as it conceptualises the genre of the *romanzo di formazione*, but it fails when applied closely to the actualities and complexity of growing up in the liquid society. By embracing discontinuity and by speeding up the narrative rhythm these novels not only embrace the postmodernist attitude, but they also challenge the completeness of growth, grasping the liquidity associated with modern society.

When looking at the formal organization of the novels hereby examined, rather than moving from crisis to resolution, the writers complicate the temporal pattern by using narrative incipits *In Medias Res* and widely employing formal devices such as flashbacks, narrative circularity, epistolary and diary-like narrations. In some cases, as for *Certi bambini* and *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, the plot gets reshaped by the interiority of a character who allows memory to intrude in the narration, resulting in a generalized

²⁵⁹ Ibid. (Simonetti) p. 116.

incapacity of sense-making and moral unawareness. In *Stabat Mater* and *Zoo*, the act of writing gives central perspective to the heroine, turning into a desperate attempt to crystallize a selfhood afflicted by unresolved losses and deep-seated traumas. In the last case, which is the one of *Io non ho paura* and *I bambini delle rose*, a linear trajectory of growth and a more traditional treatment of time show nevertheless a process of identity formation that is contradictory, unsettling and fluctuating, depriving the characters of a happy ending, despite their best efforts.

Growing-up means being equipped with the tools to decipher the self and the world, and the coming-of-age story traditionally presents a pathway for formation together with all the conditions to succeed: the passage from individualism to solidarity, from naivety of infancy to awareness of the world, from a status of confusion to a unified and coherent self. However, the process of identity formation appears to be a much more variegated, disordered, less coherent and more contingent to the liquid aspects of life than traditional linear models of growth suggested.

Also, previous conceptions of identity emphasised the idea that people are consistent and coherent beings, privileging the discourse of continuity. Instead, these novels provide evidence for identities in stasis and flux, showing for example that temporal stability might represent continuity or it might as much suggest stasis. Similarly, change might not necessarily mean linear growth, but it can signal flux. In effect, as Bauman observes, the modern world contains the determination to “defy its *mêmeté*, its sameness” so that identity is today about “make *itself* different, to remake itself and to go on in remaking it. The modern condition is to be on the move”.²⁶⁰

2. Milestones of Growth

Another point worthy of discussion is the interplay between the biological and the social aspects of growth. In terms of biological processes, adolescence is a time of specific physical and psychological transformations. From a social standpoint, growth is instead elaborated by every society considering its norms and values, so that for example in Italy the age of legal maturity and independence is 18. At this age, individuals get full access to adulthood with all its rights and duties, such as voting, possessing a driver licence, getting access to financial resources and so on. Growth is therefore partially culturally

²⁶⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 23.

dependent, and does not necessarily go in parallel with the physical, emotional and psychological development of the character.

Rosario in *Certi bambini* is probably the most emblematic character of the shift towards a precocious “adultization”²⁶¹; despite being only 11, he actively refuses the category of child and his resistance is manifested through his adultlike actions. According to sociologists Hockey and James, there are children who anticipate their “numerical growth” through their actions in order to get access to the more powerful social category of adults.²⁶² By ‘acting up’, Rosario places himself within what he perceives to be a doubly dominant group, the one of adults and the one of *camorra*, disrupting the ordinary cadence of growth. Coming of age in legal terms signals eligibility to perform activities that were prohibited to children, and by revolting against the cultural ordering of time which disciplines how children should behave, Rosario wishes to remove himself from his position of marginality, as I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

Both Rosario and Nico mirror adult-like behaviours and language, for example by using swear words, making explicit references to sexuality, trying to smoke and drinking alcohol. The appropriation of this specific adult knowledge is a recurrent topic also in other coming-of-age stories set in marginal settings, or entangled with criminality and poverty, where certain behaviours are normalised within a specific set of social, structural and cultural characteristics of the environment.²⁶³ Martina is another character that anticipates the milestones of growth by engaging in sexual actions, blurring the boundaries between natural self-discovery of the body and pornographic sexual practices. These examples show how infancy tends to become more “adult-like”, debunking the myth of childhood’s innocence and purity, up to the point of having child characters committing homicides, as in the case of Rosario and Martina.

The opposite movement is towards a prolonged youth or infantilization, as portrayed by the unnamed character of *Zoo*, whose impossibility and refusal to achieve independence from the mother mirrors a wider refusal for adulthood, a key theme in Santacroce’s production. Interestingly, this second movement is far more present in narratives featuring older characters, whose concerns are projected in the future, towards

²⁶¹ As a term, “adultization” is related to Neil Postman’s (1985) book *The Disappearance of Childhood*. In this book, the sociologist questions contemporary childhood, especially looking at practices of child consumerism and exploitation. See Turkan Firinci Orman, “Adultization and blurring the boundaries of childhood in the late modern era” in *Global Studies of Childhood* 2020, Vol. 10(2), pp. 106-119.

²⁶² Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependence in the Life Course* (London, Sage: 1993), p. 161.

²⁶³ This is also the case of Evelina Santangelo’s *Cose da pazzi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2012).

adulthood. As explained by Franco Moretti, youth is always and necessarily a time of 'being and becoming' concerned with both the present and future, as shown by the heroes of the *Bildungsroman*. Yet, being and becoming in these novels is not about pursuing an empty mirage of continuous progress along a linear time, but to being ready at any moment to alter the narrative temporality to show a process that is far more fluid, often oriented towards the past or stuck in an endless present. Therefore, the critical challenge here is to interrogate this fluidity, to show its characteristics, transformations and contradictions as they surface from the novels, and youth studies provide a way to understand this changing nature of youth experiences by looking at milestones of growth and temporal developments.

Sociologist Maurizio Merico explains how between the Second World War and the 1980s, the transition to adulthood happened according to a synchronic model which saw individuals completing education, entering the job market and achieving marriage almost simultaneously.²⁶⁴ Institutions such as the labour market, families, and welfare states provided a form of social stability, along with a clear set of norms and developmental trajectories for young people as they transitioned into adulthood. According to Luigia Sica, in this context the

future was somewhat predictable, programmable, and certain, thus the process of identity construction experienced by young people may have felt more stable or certain as it was controlled to some degree by societal expectations and support in conjunction with developmental trajectories: move through adolescence, build autonomy, and transition to adulthood.²⁶⁵

This has changed because of the transformations of western economies and societies, so that the time needed to transition from one stage to another has been oftentimes prolonged. Also, there is a general appeal for the possibilities of experimenting new identities within the liquid society, so that is not uncommon even for adults to experiment with different partners and careers. This is an argument I will explore more in detail in the next chapters, but for the moment it is relevant to note how the synchronous model has been substituted

²⁶⁴ Merico refers to this transition as pertains to men; when it came to women in many countries, marriage was still the most significant transition. See Maurizio Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 86.

²⁶⁵ Luigia Sica et al., "Future-oriented or present-focused? The role of social support and identity styles on 'futuring' in Italian late adolescents and emerging adults" in *Journal of Youth Studies*, 2016 Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 183-203.

by an asynchronous one, so that different aspects of adulthood are achieved in different times and not necessarily in the prescribed order, as we have seen by opposing Rosario to the unnamed teenager of *Zoo*.

This interpretative model challenges the linear temporality, in particular as related to the key narrative concept of the rite of passage.²⁶⁶ Giorgio Agamben, citing Lévi-Strauss, talks of the importance of rituals as they “fix the stages of the calendar” providing a sense of duration, so that “the real function of ritual is to preserve the continuity of lived experience”.²⁶⁷ Once freed from traditional milestones and rituals thereby connected, the entire experience of growth also changes. Showing the completion of the process of growth becomes increasingly more meaningless, and the characters are captured on a threshold and left in a similar indefinite status, like Martina for example in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, whose sexual initiation is not connected to enhanced self-awareness nor to a meaning-making process.

Thus, when milestones have become meaningless for the process of identity formation and adulthood is perceived as a removed status in the future, instead of focusing on what the hero learns and gains, these coming-of-age stories decide to show what is lost in the process of growing up. After all, as Van Gennep (1960) reminds us, a rite of passage involves always a separation as a first step, before an eventual transition and incorporation,²⁶⁸ and the tendency here seems to elicit the incorporation phase from the narrative. This contemporary aversion to the idea of closure is expressed by another character from Ammaniti’s production, the 14-year-old protagonist of *Io e te* (2010), Lorenzo – “E poi, io odiavo le fini. Nelle fini le cose si devono sempre, nel bene o nel male, mettere a posto [...] Mi faceva impazzire, quando vedevo un film, che papà e mamma stessero sempre a discutere della fine, come se la storia fosse tutta lì e il resto non contasse nulla.”²⁶⁹

Traditionally, rites of passage have signalled the transition from one phase into another but also the social recognition connected to this new phase of life. But as Merico observes, in contemporary Italy some traditional rites of passage have lost their significance while new ones have emerged; nevertheless, their symbolic scope has

²⁶⁶ Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris: Éditions A. et J. Picard, 1981 [1909]).

²⁶⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 69.

²⁶⁸ See Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris: Éditions A. et J. Picard, 1981 [1909]).

²⁶⁹ Niccolò Ammaniti, *Io e te*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2010). This short novel presents in the incipit the 24-year-old Lorenzo remembering an adventure with his step-sister Olivia, now dead by overdose. He remembers when he was only 14 and he got to spend a week together with her, hiding together in the basement while she was struggling with her addiction.

lessened because they no longer signal an irreversible transition.²⁷⁰ This is the result of much more fluid social processes, so much that today we need to substitute to “una concezione rigida dell’attraversamento delle fasi un’immagine più duttile, che consente di individuare itinerari di vita differenti e sequenze irregolari”.²⁷¹

These premises align with the suggestion made by sociologist Steven Miles, of moving away from the logical stage-by-stage process of growth – what he defines as a “linear life-cycle” – to become “more flexible in taking account of the multiple, spiralling nature of youth transitions, leading toward a plethora of *transitional transitions*”.²⁷² By borrowing this idea of spiralling and applying it to the coming-of-age story, I advocate for a more complex understanding of growth that moves away from the linear and chronological.

I have analysed how, when it comes to emplotment, the authors of these six novels play with temporalities to different extents to construct growth as not necessarily a rectilinear process, but instead spiralling inside and outside, whirling in some moments backwards and in others forward toward adulthood. Even if to different extents, they present a subversive potential that interrogates the prescriptive boundaries of growth, showing a distorted or even reversed process that takes the place of established modes of experience, and of the traditional, cohesive model of formation. Whether using more complex chronology or using an apparent structurally linearity, these novels alter the linearity of the coming-of-age narrative exposing a shared sense of suspension, leaving the young characters with an identity *in progress*. As such, they challenge the logical stage-by-stage process of growth that provided the young characters all the tools – the understanding of the world, the knowledge of its rules and the self-awareness to adapt – to construct their identities.

²⁷⁰ Merico talks for example of the changing nature of marriage. The rituals of engagement and honeymoon have partially lost their symbolic role of initiation into both autonomy and marital life because most couples now cohabit before marriage. Also, the increased rates of divorce imply the reversibility of the condition of marriage and the unprecedented possibility to return to single-life at many different ages. See Maurizio Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 16.

²⁷¹ De Sandre cited in Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 16.

²⁷² Steven Miles, *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 11.

CHAPTER III: CHRONOTOPES OF THE SELF

In the previous chapter I have explored how the temporal configuration of the story concurs in determining the characters' trajectory of growth. Space and time also disclose how identity is constructed in relation to specific socio-historical circumstances: this consideration aligns with the perspective provided by social constructionism, for which identity has moved from an "essential" to an "existential" space of the self,²⁷³ not given by nature but dependent upon and constructed within specific sociocultural structures. Considering these dimensions together allows us to disclose how, far from being unchanging over time and abstracted from space, growth needs to be constantly contextualized within a specific conjunction of forces. These define the identities that the characters feel obliged to assume, the ways they feel about themselves and the actions they commit. As Gill Valentine explains:

while studies of childhood have highlighted children's agency, we need to acknowledge the social structures and agencies that also shape children's and young people's lives, and the way that other social identities such as gender, class, race, sexuality and so on intersect with the identity of the child.²⁷⁴

In this chapter I investigate the situatedness of the characters in the physical and metaphorical spaces where they find themselves. Thus, I highlight what type of metaphors emerge from the spatial arrangement of the story, and what economic and cultural resources they provide to the characters. The overarching aim is to understand what coming-of-age looks like in the contemporary liquid society, and how the genre is representing it.

Within these spatial contexts, it is important to understand what sort of agency can be exercised when it comes to constructing identities, and how growth is inscribed within certain ideological and behavioral frameworks. To unveil the interplay of forces which act upon the characters in the six novels, I have organised the body according to three main conditions: marginalization, displacement and alienation. These three notions have both physical and symbolic characteristics that affect the patterns of growth and formation of

²⁷³ See Berger and Luckmann's major sociological study *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) in which the two sociologists assume an anti-essentialist account of social life arguing, among the many other things, that individuals construct their own as much as other's identities through everyday social interactions. From here, the idea of "identity construction" was developed in the American and British strand of sociology that, from the 1960s onwards, permeated the languages of social, cultural and political practises.

²⁷⁴ Gill Valentine, "Boundary crossings: Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood" in *Children's Geographies*, 1 (1), 2003, pp. 37–52.

the characters: for example, in *I bambini delle rose* and *Certi bambini* the children are marginalized in the peripheries of the cities and treated as ‘wasted lives’. In *Io non ho paura* and *Dei bambini non si sa niente* the protagonists are instead displaced from society in the remote countryside, or alienated from their own social and familiar context as in the cases of in *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater*.

This decentralization of identities brings into life considerations on the dominant social paradigms which defines today’s growth in Italy, questioning the interplay between selfhood and agency especially when the characters come from less privileged socio-economic positions. While social determinants remain critical to understanding the location of the characters within the socio-economic order, at the same time the liquefaction of society has created a lack of that ontological security previously connected to those determinants. As Furlong and Cartmel explain, modernity has created new processes of exclusion and marginalization because the traditional links between family, school, and work have weakened, so that routes to adulthood appear to have uncertain outcomes, meaning that young people “must find their way of managing or rationalizing fragmented and incongruent identities”.²⁷⁵

In addition, I will use Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope to generate new insights on some specific choices in relation to the spatial setting. When I refer to the chronotope I allude to a motif that shows “the artistic imaging of human life as always concretely embodied within a specific temporal-geographical location”.²⁷⁶ Since Bakhtin’s theorization, some key chronotopic motifs²⁷⁷ (the city, the road, the prison) have become recurrent lenses to discuss the characters’ situatedness in the world, in order to disclose how characters are located in relation to a specific history and society. Therefore, for each novel I will also discuss what kind of chronotropic image is portrayed and what significance it has for the depiction of the character’s growth.

²⁷⁵ Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives*, (McGraw-Hill: Open University Press, 2007 [1997]), p. 60.

²⁷⁶ Bakhtin, “The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism (Towards a Historical Typology of the Novel)” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), pp. 27-35.

²⁷⁷ Because Bakhtin never provided a systematic definition nor a rigid protocol to identify and analyze the chronotope, critics have used a plethora of different terms to designate chronotopes on different levels of abstraction. Thus, we find “minor” and “major” chronotopes, “chronotopic motifs” and “chronotopes of whole genres”, “motivic” and “generic” chronotopes, “basic” and “adjacent” chronotopes (Vlasov 1995), “micro-”, “incidental”, “local” and “major” chronotopes (Ladin 1999), and so on.” See Bemon et Borghart (eds), *Bakhtin’s Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives* (Gent: Academia Press, 2010), p. 6.

1. Marginalization and Cityscapes

Acknowledging that growth revolves around the issue of being and becoming, a first spatial motif that frames the situatedness of the characters in their fictional worlds is “cultural marginalization”. Nico and Rosario, the characters of *I bambini delle rose* and *Certi bambini*, both belong to a marginalized part of the community because of their race or class, which already positions them as outsiders. In their case, the adventure space is outside the peripheries where they live with their families, and requires them to move closer to the city centre. This secondary space offers them a whole array of new challenges, according to a well-known pattern of movement across different symbolic spaces that is characteristic of many coming-of-age stories and classic fairy-tales.²⁷⁸

Because of their status as marginalized subjects, this motif enables an exploration of linguistic and sociocultural influences on the formation of subjectivity, especially when the characters are depicted as learning, decoding and interpreting alien social codes and discourses. Also, I will show how this motif of marginalisation finds its locus in the narratives by articulating the liquidity of contemporary urban spaces, bringing back Bauman’s idea of a collapse of communal life in favour of a substantial isolation in the urban sprawl.

1.1 Wasted Lives

The incipit of *I bambini delle rose* presents Nico in his familial context, introducing the degraded nomad camp where gypsies live at the peripheries of Rome. In this way, Melliti gives a first insight on what David Forgacs defines as “naturally demarcated zones of social exclusion” which were the camps created in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s to host migrants coming from ex-Yugoslavia, up to the 1990s.²⁷⁹ Historian John Foot described how industrial cities set a clear division between the historic centre, occupied by the bourgeoisie, and the peripheries where marginalised strata (such as working classes) were located. City walls were erected to set the physical and symbolic division between insiders and outsiders. This changed in post-industrial cities as the old boundary

²⁷⁸ In *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), Vladimir Propp’s structural analysis of Russian folktales, Propp discusses the hero’s movement between spaces. He claims that the hero is either forced to leave a space or willing to do it, before being able to return to the primary space. Propp also covers the possibility of an absent spatial transference.

²⁷⁹ For a detailed account of gypsy camps and social exclusion in Italy, see David Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins: Social exclusions and Nation formation since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 271-273.

between centre and periphery gets increasingly blurred, replaced by a continuous movement of people, often belonging to different ethnicities and social groups, across spaces.²⁸⁰

In Nico's case, his adventure starts in the periphery, within a typically Italian suburban ghetto-like space.

Roulotte parcheggiate in mezzo ad un prato, abbandonate. Macchine parcheggiate accanto, macchine vecchie e nuove, qualcuna rotta, ne è rimasto solo il ferro. Qualche roulotte è ancora illuminata, anche se è passata mezzanotte. L'immondizia intorno alle macchine, una montagna di ferro e plastica, rifiuti vari...Nico attraversa il campo fino alla sua roulotte. (29)

This space emerges as a nowhere land, used as a dumping site for old cars, plastic waste and garbage and deprived of any access to proper facilities and infrastructures. This description frames the main character as growing up in an environment where waste overarches its descriptive status, becoming a metaphor of the degradation of children's lives. In effect, groups of children are caught collecting toys from the piles of dump.

Il cielo è nuvoloso, un gruppo di bambini gioca davanti alla roulotte. Ogni bambina ha la sua bambola. E ogni bambola è stracciata e rotta; a una manca un braccio, all'altra un piede, una è senza testa, e ad un'altra mancano gli occhi. Tutte sono state raccolte dai cassoni dell'immondizia. Le bambine vestono le loro bambole e giocano felici. (11)

According to Susan Morrison's theory of waste, there is a convergence between waste and waste collectors, as the act of "material garbage collection intimately mingles with the stockpiling of human existence", so that those who collect refuses, by extension of the metaphor, are often considered by society as refuses themselves.²⁸¹ Susan Morrison's analysis of the materiality of waste helps sediment the character's identity around some toxic metaphors that society often imposes onto individuals. Similarly, in this novel the physical environment sets the tone not only to understand the degraded

²⁸⁰ See John Foot, *Milan since the Miracle: City, Culture and Identity* (Oxford: Berger Publishers, 2001).

²⁸¹ Susan Morrison, *The Literature of Waste* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 97.

space where Nico's stories begins, but it also evokes Zygmunt Bauman's provocative theory of "human waste"²⁸² as the metaphor for society's outcasts.

In his critique of inequality in the liquid society, Bauman provocatively defines "wasted humans" – or *flawed consumers* – unproductive individuals within the consumer cycle. These are primarily people deprived of the financial resources to partake in that game of consumption which constitutes the backbone of liquid modernity. Bauman lists refugees, migrants and the poorest communities as belonging to this category of "the wasted lives" of modernity. Very briefly, at the top of the ladder the sociologist positions the refugees, those who are deprived of identification documents and therefore enclosed in special "nowhere places" such as refugee camps.²⁸³ Up in the ladder, Bauman positions the asylum seekers and illegal migrants, those forced to move primarily towards Europe and the US by the unstable flows of modernity.²⁸⁴ In the last strata, "redundant" humans can be found: the unemployable, the poor and generally those perceived as "useless" in society. Since these people are already "inside" the society – Bauman calls them "domestic waste" – the only way to remove them from sight is to confine them in ghettos or peripheries.

This is the result of politics of globalization that "dump" those unprivileged subjects who ran away from situations of economic disadvantage to seek fortune in the "promised land of modernity". Playing with metaphors of purity and cleanness, Bauman also argues that these "wasted lives" are rarely welcomed where they arrive. In the perception of postmodern wealthy societies, they are considered outside the "proper" social order, threatening the benefits, cultures and livelihoods of other societies, and "polluting" the purity of a system that is not theirs.

In respect to Bauman's theory of wasted lives, because Nico is a nomad gipsy and Ly a Chinese migrant, they can be considered as part of that "surplus" of the population. In the eyes of the "legitimate" inhabitants of the city they are not needed, both because they do not possess the means to contribute to the consumer economy, and because they

²⁸² Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, Cambridge (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004). Here, Bauman aims to produce a social theory by using the idea of human waste as a metaphor to discuss the paradigms of inclusion and exclusion in the contemporary consumer society.

²⁸³ Bauman positions the refugees "at the very bottom of the heap, 'outsiders incarnate' – those most stuck in the mud of the deltas and those most like mud: faceless, stripped of their identity. Refugees are human waste with no useful function to play on the country of their (temporary, indefinite) internment. The refugee camp is a dumping site offering no return and no way forward for those hapless souls behind the fences; they are caught in a condition of movement and non-movement, speed set in a state of limbo in the nowhere land of non-humanity." Mark Davis, *Bauman's Challenge: Sociological Issues for the 21st Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 20.

²⁸⁴ *Ibidem* (Davis).

represent what is out of place, especially as they move away from the peripheries to merge with the residents. Same as Nico and Ly, also Rosario from *Certi bambini* can be assimilated to the category of the “domestic waste”, mainly because of his uniquely marginalized status within the city. While being two very different novels, *I bambini delle rose* and *Certi bambini* both provide a keen focus and deep attention to children that belong to marginal communities, due to ethnicity as in the case of Nico, or because of the social stigma that accompanies them, in Rosario’s case. In this sense, Nico is the cultural other within an alien society, while Rosario is the socially marginal other in relation to his own society.

De Silva in *Certi bambini* presents a penetrating insight in the social relations and practises of Italian organized crime by locating Rosario at the frontier-land between the law and those who consider themselves beyond the law. Rosario is growing up in an unidentified city,²⁸⁵ in a neighbourhood presented to the uninitiated eye of the reader as a place of misery and inequalities, with very few opportunities for social and human recognition. Even if clearly recognisable as Naples, the choice of leaving unnamed the city according to Giuliana Adamo creates a “dimensione più vasta, eternamente vera in tutti i luoghi difficili del mondo” where the most vulnerable people get wedged.²⁸⁶

The merciless geographical and social setting of the novel is shown to the reader both through the eyes of the extradiegetic narrator and through Rosario’s gaze which gives a perspective from within the story. This emphasis on peripherality locates *Certi bambini* as an example of many contemporary novels in which peripheries become the new centres of experience, as portrayed by the current literary phenomenon of Elena Ferrante’s *L’amica geniale* (2011).²⁸⁷ This tendency goes against the traditional *Bildungsroman* that had its adventures taking places either in the core spaces of the city (in boulevards,

²⁸⁵ De Silva was asked about the places in which he located *Certi bambini* in an interview with Marina Giardina: “I tuoi luoghi, i luoghi in cui ambienti le storie nascono da questa sensazione di desolazione quotidiana come indifferenza e quindi come potenziale violenza?” to which he replied: “Non so bene cosa sia un luogo, quando scrivo. Tant’è che per esempio non nomino mai le città in cui ambiente le mie storie, anche e soprattutto quando quelle città sono facilmente identificabili.” See *Intervista a Diego De Silva*, italialibri.net, Milano, 2004. Available online. <http://www.italialibri.net/interviste/0403-1.html>

²⁸⁶ Giuliana Adamo, “Riflessioni sulle opere di due scrittori italiani contemporanei: Niccolò Ammaniti e Diego De Silva” in *the Italianist*, 27:1, 2007, Routledge, Taylor and Francis, p. 176.

²⁸⁷ Another example of a coming-of-age story set in the peripheries is the popular quadrilogy *L’amica geniale* by Elena Ferrante published between 2011 and 2014. Internationally acclaimed for the portrayal of the peripheries of Naples, this is the story of two friends, Elena and Lila, as they grow from childhood to middle age.

theatres, mansions, cafés and salons), in Dickensian industrial settings, or in estates and in countryside villages, as explained by Bakhtin.²⁸⁸

Instead, the form and structure of the district in which Rosario lives is strongly expressive of a micro-society that echoes the “ghetto-like” space described by Bauman, where all the ‘domestic waste’ produced inside the society is confined. This category of outcasts, in opposition to refugees and migrants, cannot be “disposed of” elsewhere because they belong to that same society that had produced them in the first place. Therefore, the only possibility is to neutralize their presence by placing them away and casting them aside, with the result of excluding entire segments of society and entire groups of children, especially those belonging to the most vulnerable groups.

The people inhabiting this disordered and ruinous periphery end up as suffering from the stigma of social inferiority and rejection, so much so that their outsidership becomes a constitutive part of their social identity. It is not by coincidence that Rosario is haunted by this sensation of being out of place, sensation that is verbalised twice as the sentiment of being “*estraneo*” (93, 141), enhancing this sense of marginalization, as he perceives himself in the position of an outsider.²⁸⁹ This feeling becomes a significant part of the protagonist’s growth, and this sense of displacement is in turn echoed by Da Silva’s declaration that his narrative is generally connected to a sense of “*sentire la quotidianità come reclusione, e dunque dall’esigenza di raccontare mancanze*”.²⁹⁰

Following sociologist Ulrich Beck’s theory, Rosario can be said to typify that youth at “risk”²⁹¹, meaning that he runs a greater risk of becoming socially excluded as an adult, if compared to children growing up in socially and economically privileged environments. Indeed, even before his criminal activities Rosario is criminalized, as evidenced by the policemen’s statement: “*tu tieni una brutta fine preparata, spera che ti arrestiamo prima (19)*”, that already labels him as a *camorrista*. As Thomson et al. explain in a study on

²⁸⁸ For the traditional chronotopes of the *Bildungsroman*, see Bakhtin’s “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981).

²⁸⁹ The theme of being displaced is also alluded to in the prologue of *Certi bambini*, where an extract from Peter Weiss’ *Die Ermittlung. Oratorium in 11 Gesängen*, 1965 (transl. *L’istruttoria. Oratorio in undici canti*, 1967) also anticipates the question of individual responsibility: «E vidi che qualcosa si muoveva tra i morti /Era una bimba/ la portai fuori sulla strada e chiesi/ Chi sei/ Da quando sei qui/ Non lo so disse / Come mai sei qui in mezzo ai morti chiesi / e quella disse /Tra i vivi non posso più stare.»

²⁹⁰ See *Intervista a Diego De Silva*, italialibri.net, Milano, 2004. Available online. <http://www.italialibri.net/interviste/0403-1.html>

²⁹¹ The works of sociologists Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) depict postmodernity as moving towards being a “risk society” meaning that society is lately pervaded by danger and uncertainty at a global scale. Within this theory Beck (1992) explains that “like wealth, risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom. [...] Poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk.” See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 35.

youth transitions, while most young people speak the language of individual choice really “it is only for some that the rhetoric is accompanied by the requisite resources and opportunities.”²⁹²

Despite the opportunities provided by liquid modernity in terms of an unprecedented freedom in building personal biographies, this diversification of experiences and trajectories does not correspond to a process of equalization, nor does it result in a dilution of class-based inequalities, which in this case are tightly connected to the spatial setting of the story. In fact, Rosario’s circumstances in *Certi bambini* are not so different from the one experienced by Nico, since the neighbourhood where Rosario lives is governed by its own rules and its own economy, where criminal activities generate wealth.²⁹³ In such circumstances, the value of the individual has to be framed within this social context made of degraded spaces, obscure figures such as sexual abusers²⁹⁴ and exploiters of children’s labour. So Rosario’s growth is tied to being exposed to extreme events turned into ordinary affairs of smuggling, prostitution and robbery.

Within this social context, criminal adults are free to wander around this “human dump” searching for the right kid to use, to exploit, and eventually to incorporate in the local army of child criminals. This depiction is true of what happens in some Neapolitan districts, where according to journalist Giorgio Bocca, there is a higher possibility of becoming associated with criminal organizations, even from a young age. Usually, the children get recruited when they are 7-year-old to smuggle drugs, becoming “gnats” – in Italian “muschilli”. Once part of the network, the children undergo a fast career progression: they use weapons and lead robberies by 14, and before reaching legal adulthood they become local leaders (*capizona*) taking under their control a wide range of small criminal activities.²⁹⁵ The commodification of these adolescents is very productive for the criminal organization, since they do not cost much and they are unpunishable by law,²⁹⁶ therefore very useful in conducting risky tasks. This is exactly what happens to

²⁹² Thomson et al. “Critical Moments: Choice, Chance and Opportunity in Young People’s Narratives of Transition” in *Sociology*, 36(2): 335–54. (2002), p. 351.

²⁹³ In the first chapter Rosario prepares himself for the homicide, and to cover the few hours preceding that moment he wanders around his neighbour. We follow him surpassing Iole, the local smuggler of cigarettes (13), a “vucumprà” (term used to describe usually African migrants selling illegally in the streets) selling fake CDs (15), before joining his friends in the Burger King, where they waiting to receive orders from the local boss, *Casaluze*, regarding a robbery later that day. (24)

²⁹⁴ In the third chapter, Rosario suddenly remembers one time that he saw the local boss, *Casaluze* sexually abusing one of his friends, *Venturino*. (23)

²⁹⁵ Giorgio Bocca, *Napoli siamo noi: il dramma di una città nell'indifferenza dell'Italia* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2006), pp. 81-82.

²⁹⁶ The practise of recruiting children began in the mid 1990s as bosses realized that the legally protected status of minors provided impunity from prosecution both for the children and for the criminal organization.

Rosario as inspired by De Silva's own professional experience as a lawyer active in the Naples area.

From the beginning of the story, the lure of criminality is hard to resist for Rosario because it offers him a short-cut to become part of the consumer society, to earn money and to find a community that protects him and that makes him feel valued. For this reason Rosario, who is uneducated, orphan and unconstrained – and therefore deprived of any moral point of reference – becomes an easy target for the local bosses. As such, this novel enlightens one of the most dramatic and dark aspects of contemporary society: child exploitation in the context of a criminal world ruled by laws of violence and profitability, which are in turn attuned with the values of the contemporary economic system: ownership, control, and commodification.

As anticipated, in this social context children are required to become productive but also to adopt adult-like behaviours, first of all by working. While Nico in *I bambini delle rose* is forced by his mother to abandon the space of childhood games to start working “figliolo, adesso sei grande, guarda i tuoi coetanei, vanno a lavorare senza piangere” (12), Rosario is instead portrayed from the first page as already shaped by adult discourses: “Immediatamente pensa: mò vado a casa sua, busso, quella apre e me la fotto.” (6).

Although Rosario's gaze on the world belongs to a child, the social predicament in which he finds himself gives to his growth an urgent adult dimension that goes at the heart of the structures of poverty and marginality where he is located. In this sense, *Certi bambini* portrays a story of individual and social dreariness, where the cultural and moral vacuum results in a cruel loneliness that sees children as primary victims. The marginalisation of Rosario is complementary to his longing for recognition, for visibility – “Però Santino di Rosario si accorgeva. Lo salutava per primo quando lo incontrava al portone” (45) – and for agency. Rosario wants to show – primarily to himself – that he is capable of acting like a grown up, to prove that he lives up to the standards of virility required by society, and ultimately that he is worthy of being noticed and considered by adults. As such, setting the novel at the margins expands the geography of place to the symbolism of what this space represents: one where Rosario yearns to be included and recognised.

As Allison Cooper explains: “Between 1990 and 1992 Campania saw a 93% increase in the number of children under the age of fourteen who were charged with crimes.” See Cooper Allison, “Growing up Camorrista: Antonio and Andrea Frazzi's *Certi Bambini*” in *Mafia Movies: A Reader*, edited by Dana Renga (University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 347.

1.2 Growing up on the Road

Both in *Certi bambini* and *I bambini delle rose* the development of the child character takes place primarily in the streets of the city. Whether they are marginalised within a district as in the case of Rosario, or coming from a peripheral gipsy camp as for Nico, still their adventures unfold on the road. This choice reprises one of Bakhtin's main chronotopes of experience, one central not only to the *Bildungsroman* but also to other genres such as the picaresque novel. The road, indeed, allowed to fuse the itinerary with the course of an individual's life, so that "road markers are indicators of [the hero's] fate" as "he sets out as a youth and returns a man".²⁹⁷

As said, in *I bambini delle rose* Nico's marginalisation affects the spatial organization of the story, but it also sets a constant symbolical and physical movement between the ruinous peripheries – [Nico] "torna a casa, alla roulotte. Lontano da Dio e da Roma" (29) – and the centre of the city where the adventure takes place. From a spatial dimension, this movement responds to a traditional adventurous motif, which requires the character to abandon the familiar space to explore a secondary, unknown and somehow exotic place where he/she has enough freedom to face new challenges.

While in adventure novels the character usually goes somewhere far away, in the "adventure of everyday life" such as *I bambini delle rose*, the road becomes the spatio-temporal locus for different experiences. According to Bakhtin, in everyday adventures there is no need to travel far away, because the "social exotic" can be found in the world of thieves, in slums and dregs, all unfamiliar and dangerous spaces for the hero. In the case of *I bambini delle rose* and *Certi bambini*, since they already come from peripheral spaces, the bourgeois world is the unfamiliar one for Nico and Rosario.

On the road growth happens because characters move from a status of unawareness towards an enhanced understanding of the world, its dangers and opportunities. As such, it is a chronotope tightly connected with the themes of identity as part of the development of the character.²⁹⁸ In these novels, the chronotope is used for its potential to represent, within a limited space, all kind of opportunities and encounters that shape the development of the hero. At the same time, it casts light on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and trespassing, locating the hero's adventure within a much bigger context. In effect, on the road the character's formation depends not only on his/her individual actions

²⁹⁷ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), p. 120

²⁹⁸ See Bakhtin, *ibid.* p. 115.

but also on external conditions (social, geographical, cultural) and agents directing the character's path. For these reasons, the road becomes a point of intersection defined by socio-historical heterogeneity, where the rigid boundaries of social distances can collapse to show the multifaceted reality of the world.²⁹⁹

According to Bakhtin, the chronotope of the road is also the privileged space of the encounter,³⁰⁰ allowing the character to move from solipsism to intersubjectivity. In *I bambini delle rose* it is indeed the unpredictability of human encounters that underpins Nico's process of growth and that moves the story forward, similarly to what happens in some *Bildungsromane*, which presents pages and pages populated by apparently meaningless encounters.

Similarly to the picaresque novel, the countless streets are not only neutral physical settings, but spaces that open up the possibility of encountering all the different types of people. It is indeed in the streets that, as in the picaresque tradition, play, fights, frauds, love affairs and sexual encounters happen, enabling this chronotope to dramatize a chaotic, lively and morally ambiguous social environment. In this respect, more than serving to the psychological development of a hero that is cultivating his interior world (as it was in the *Bildungsroman*), the road serves the function of dramatizing the different and often equivocal relationships that the character establishes with an external world portrayed with all its strata.³⁰¹

In *I bambini delle rose* for example, as for real life, people meet and events happen without an overarching narrative meaning, but simply responding to the randomness of the everyday. In doing so, the chronotope portrays a contextual life-world that does not mirror reality, but rather dialogically represents and models it, while combining the socio-

²⁹⁹ According to Bakhtin, the fertility of this chronotope rests in the opportunity given to the unfolding of the plot, since on the road all those people who are usually separated can randomly meet, the most different fates can collide and all types of encounters can take place, episodically and accidentally. All these aspects have made this chronotope a foundational one for the novelistic production, repeatedly employed in the history of literature, from the ancient novel of wandering, passing through chivalric and picaresque novels, from the *Bildungsroman* to modernism". See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 243.

³⁰⁰ Bakhtin distinguishes five key recurrent chronotopes in novelistic production: the *Agorà*, a place where the public and the private dimensions of life are inextricable, the *Road*, a place for encounters governed by chance (Don Quixote); the *Castle*, a place saturated with historical time (the Gothic novel); the *Salon*, a place for dialogues and the barometer of political and business life (Balzac); the *Provincial Town*, a place for the cyclical every-day life (Flaubert); and lastly the *Threshold*, a place for crisis connected to life passages (Dostoevsky).

³⁰¹ In the span of 7 days on the street Nico encounters countless homeless people, visits the street painters and magicians in piazza Navona, is helped by an apparent honest bourgeois who sexually abuses him (35), gets into a strip club (44), causally meets his sister (48), negotiates with a Bengalese rose vendor (52, 64), interacts twice with an English woman (54, 84) and an old French friend (61, 87) both living in the city centre, meets a group of college students (72), a Chinese street seller (79), a young *gauchiste* (89), and of course, Ly.

historical context with the dynamics of human encounters. Also, the movement from peripheries to centre allows Melliti to use the road as the chronotope where the knots of narrative are tied and untied: a plot-generator that allows Nico to encounter a great variety of characters, some of them good and others malevolent, according to an episodic structure I have already referred to. The reader is guided by Nico and thus obtains a vivid image of Rome where “the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representative of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect”.³⁰²

A piazza Venezia Nico scende dal furgone, finalmente è libero dallo «zio». [...] Corre, corre Nico corre e abbraccia il vento; attraversa la strada senza guardare, oramai è libero, arriva a via del Corso. Con una mano porta la busta con le rose e con l'altra sfiora le vetrine. Sul marciapiede pochi passanti [...] Sotto i muri della Banca di Roma, la coppia di barboni che da anni abita lì; forse ci sono nati, nessuno lo sa. Da quando vende rose li ha sempre visti nello stesso posto, sempre in via del Corso, sotto i muri della banca, vicino al governo, vicino al Parlamento del popolo. (19)

This is also the space in which both Nico and Ly constantly have to deal with sexual abusers and offenders; as such, the chronotope catches the two-facedness of the Italian metropolises both as spaces of empowerment and danger.

In this sense, within the spatiality of streets Nico is that marginalised subject, who trespasses spaces that he simultaneously belongs to and is rejected from, materialising the visible politics of inclusion and exclusion within the city. Together with the road, the “City” is the secondary chronotope of encounter. The centrality of the city as a microworld is expressed by Nico – “Roma è Roma e basta. Non c'entra l'Italia”³⁰³ – and is punctuated by this constant set of precise references to its streets, monuments and buildings, which define the cityscape in its distinctive features. Stefania Lucamante, in her analysis of Rome in contemporary literature, explains how “nell'alterazione del tessuto sociale subita da diversi quartieri, nel coacervo multiculturale che più che mai connota Roma all'inizio

³⁰² Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), p. 243.

³⁰³ “Non devi dire così del mio paese! È meglio del tuo! E qual è il tuo? Non me l'hai detto” “Roma, il mio.” “Ma tu non sei italiano!” “Sì, ti ho detto che sono di Roma.” “E Roma è Italia, capisci?” “No, Roma è Roma e basta, non c'entra l'Italia” (105) This consideration of Rome as a specific spatial chronotope with its own unique connotations is reinforced at the end of the story, when Nico confronts his father by asserting “Io sono romano!” (110).

del terzo millennio, la rete interattiva dei rapporti umani [...] riveste uno straordinario rilievo”.³⁰⁴

Bauman also connects the city with social change, by stating that “change is the quality of the city and the mode of urban existence”³⁰⁵, as literature has extensively shown. Because of the sheer density of human connections in the city, problems arise that people might not have faced elsewhere, so that the city at its best, presents new opportunities. But Rome, at its worst, it becomes a locus of uncertainty, of accumulated anxieties, excluding of those considered strangers. As two contemporary young *flâneurs*, Nico and Ly encounter many different people, being exposed to that physical and social network that is the city with all its positive and negative facets. This is why Nico’s forced removal from Rome by his ex-convict father is experienced as an irreconcilable separation from his space of belonging. Significantly, in the final page, Nico is once again on the road, running back to Ly in the city.

The detailed spatial characterization in *I bambini delle rose* contrasts with the location of the story in *Certi bambini*, as the urban setting is here mostly presented through Rosario’s memories. In this novel the city has an impact on identity as, according to Bauman, urban spaces in liquid modernity are constituted by a new combination of globalising forces and territorial identities. Divided in two tiers, the richer segments of the population shape their identities in a much more globalised, virtual and expanded world; it is the “global and globetrotting elite”³⁰⁶ that is able to live up to the mobility promised by the city. On the contrary, the lower tier experiences a much more territorially-oriented identity search, being unable to access the worldwide network of experience. These are people “doomed to stay local. [...] For them, it is inside the city they inhabit that the battle for survival and a decent place in the world is launched, waged, won or lost.”³⁰⁷

In *Certi bambini*, we witness both these pressures but with different emphasis – on one hand, there is the attempted “MacDonaldization”³⁰⁸ of the urban environment, that in the case of the novel is the decadent “Burger King” representative of a failed venture to bring a modern, global image of wealth in the district.

³⁰⁴ Stefania Lucamante, “Un difficile consenso: Roma al termine della notte? Alcune considerazioni sulla narrativa d’ambiente romano negli anni zero” in *Rivista di Letteratura italiana*, XXXI, 1 (2013), pp. 193-210.

³⁰⁵ Bauman Zygmunt, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity press, 2003), p. 104.

³⁰⁶ Bauman Zygmunt, *City of Fear, City of Hopes* (Goldsmiths College: University of London, 2003).

³⁰⁷ Ibid. (Bauman) p. 17.

³⁰⁸ Ibid. (Bauman) p. 24.

Il Burger King, visto da fuori, è un pugno nell'occhio della strada in cui l'hanno messo. Un'insegna coloratissima che si accende a intermittenza come un vero locale americano.[...] Poi dentro, una signora stanca con gli zoccoli toglie i vassoi dai tavoli, e la porta della cucina è sempre aperta, e la similpelle degli sgabelli girevoli è consumata sui bordi e nel centro, e sul pavimento certe mattonelle ballano, e sul telefono a parete c'è mezzo foglio a quadretti attaccato con lo scotch che dice è guasto, e nel gabinetto il ventilatore per le mani non funziona, e i panini, però, costano. (18)

Simultaneously, it emerges the impact that the local community has on Rosario's identity; it is indeed within the microworld that is the district, with its own local bosses, usual policemen and youth gangs, that Rosario's growth takes place. As Giuliana Adamo discusses in an interview, when it comes to the children living in these contexts, it is the criminal *forma mentis* that orients their development.

Se sei nato in una famiglia di 'ndrangheta e in un contesto familiare, sociale e subculturale mafioso, cresci assimilando acriticamente tutti i disvalori e i codici degli adulti che ti circondano e, da grande, farai il mafioso anche tu. Perché è quello che ci si aspetta da te. Perché non hai scelta. [...] Altre possibilità non ne esistono. E tutti coloro che ne stanno fuori o contro sono *infami* che vanno ridimensionati o eliminati.³⁰⁹

The location of the story clarifies the role of social structures in shaping the conditions under which Rosario creates his sense of self. In this particular social setting, Rosario is well-aware that the dominating force is criminality, and that other life possibilities are almost inexistent.

Significantly, the only place where Rosario can detach himself from such dynamics of power is the wagon of the underground. For this reason, contrary to Nico who explores both his internal and the external world in the streets, Rosario can interrogate himself only in a nowhere sub-urban space. In fact, although Rosario travels throughout the city to commit the killing, the majority of the novel takes place as a long flashback experienced in the wagon of the underground that takes him home. While presenting a similar setting

³⁰⁹ In *Save the Mafia Children. Liberi di scegliere. Un modello italiano nella lotta contro la criminalità organizzata* (Castelvecchi, 2019), Adamo discusses the actions of the Court of Reggio Calabria and its president Roberto di Bella, and their attempt to create a new model to support children belonging to criminal families in Italy. See her interview for Letture.org [<https://www.letture.org/save-the-mafia-children-liberi-di-scegliere-un-modello-italiano-nella-lotta-contro-la-criminalita-organizzata-giuliana-adamo>]

as *I bambini delle rose*, in this novel the chronotope of the city and the lively spaces of the streets are incapable of providing Rosario with the right space for growth.

This is partially because of the criminal context, but it is also because Rosario is morally and emotionally obtuse; so that, despite the many people populating the city, the narrative presents him in a state of loneliness. Margherita Ganeri argues that the subject has lost its orientation in relation to both time and space in postmodern times, as “la trasformazione del sensorio percettivo, il disorientamento spazio-temporale e l’anestetizzazione emotive sono gli aspetti fondativi della sensibilità postmoderna”.³¹⁰ Indeed, experiential spaces are becoming increasingly flatter, anonymous, and virtual, and in Rosario’s case, the promenade of the *flâneur* is substituted by the passive ride in a wagon. In contrast with the saturation of encounters that Nico undergoes in the streets of Rome, Rosario is constrained by the apparent immobility and isolation of the underground. Not only does this reinforce the idea of Rosario as embodying a particular postmodern condition, but it locates the character in a liminal space that he is forced to occupy.

The character’s suspension in the liminal space can be found in many novels of initiation as a necessary locus for the rite of passage;³¹¹ this is the case of “*la buca*” in Ammaniti’s *Io non ho paura*, a transitional space of symbolic death I will discuss later. At the same time, the spatial suspension of the character has been also used to neglect growth and transformation, highlighting the existential isolation of individuals who remain outsiders. Veronesi’s *Caos Calmo* (2005)³¹², for example, offers an interesting portrayal of a 40-year-old who ponders the loss of his wife by spending entire days, in the course of many months, sitting in his car. According to Simonetti, this immobility allows the character not to change; the world around him does, but as a character he remains static, disengaged and alienated, despite the final reintegration with society.³¹³

³¹⁰ Margherita Ganeri, *Postmoderno* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1998), p. 12.

³¹¹ The concept of “liminality” was coined by anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), drawing from Arnold Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* (1909) to designate the middle, transitional stage of a three-stage paradigmatic rite of passage.

³¹² *Caos calmo*, written by Sandro Veronesi, was published in 2005 by Bompiani and awarded the Strega Prize in 2006. In 2008 it was adapted by Antonello Grimaldi with Nanni Moretti in the role Pietro Paladini, the middle-aged protagonist who is left as the primary carer of his young daughter and forced to look for his life purpose after the sudden death of his wife.

³¹³ “*Caos calmo* rallenta bruscamente e prende una piega opposta, soffermandosi sulla storia di una immobilità accuratamente ritagliata – quella di Pietro – che è, in fondo, una ricerca di isolamento nello spazio. Nonostante molti traumi, incontri ed esperienze destabilizzanti, [...] Pietro Paladini nel corso del libro *non si trasforma* (semmai sono gli altri che gli crollano accanto); la sua caratura di personaggio si esprime appunto nella staticità, nel distacco esibito dal mondo: segno di elezione, ma anche di disadattamento.” See Simonetti Gianluigi, “I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana (1996 – 2006)” in *Allegoria*, XX, 2008, p. 132.

However, being in such a suspended stillness triggers Rosario's memories, so that, according to Carmosino, it is "solo *dentro* il non-luogo del vagone ferroviario che si realizza, senza emozione, il *bain de multitude* di questa sorta di sprovveduto (di strumenti critici) *flâneur* post-moderno"³¹⁴. Rather than a saturation of encounters, the location causes a saturation of thoughts, coinciding with the agitated functioning of Rosario's consciousness. Instead of using this opportunity for enabling Rosario's self-awareness, the narrative shows how defenceless the character is, lonely and disoriented into his own story, in contrast to what happens to Nico who finds in the streets a certain degree of agency.

In conclusion, the space of the city in both *Certi bambini* and *I bambini delle rose* in theory retains the potentialities for growth that are typical of coming-of-age stories, but as the narratives prove, the opportunity remains unrealised. Nico is eventually removed from the city centre, forced by his father to leave Rome, and Rosario is imprisoned into a situation with no escape, so that when he exits the underground, he goes back into a criminal life trajectory.

Big cities such as Rome and Naples, appropriately considered *città mondo* in liquid societies, become the centres of experiences and encounters. They could either subvert the worldview of the character, as in the case of Nico, or constrain into a typified identity, as in the case of Rosario. However, social forces seem too strong for these children to attain real freedom, constantly bringing them back to their marginal status. The narratives problematise the process of identity formation for Nico and Rosario, who have to fight against the identity that society wants to impose on them, that is, the one of marginalized people, of wasted, useless, unproductive lives, despite all their attempts for recognition.

2. Displacement and Landscapes

The second spatial motif I am going to explore is that of social displacement. Differently from marginalization, that turned characters into refuses within the city, in the case of *Dei bambini non si sa niente* and *Io non ho paura* the setting is the Italian countryside respectively of Emilia Romagna and Puglia. As said, in traditional *Bildungsroman* cities, if anything country estates were privileged locations for growth experiences. Instead, these novels set the focus on small villages "dimenticati da Dio" (*Io non ho paura*, 38)

³¹⁴ Daniela Carmosino, "Lo scrittore 'flâneur' ribalta centro e periferia negli spazi geopoetici del sud" in Sgavicchia and Tortora (eds) *Geografie della modernità letteraria*, Atti del XVII Convegno Internazionale della MOD, 10-13 giugno 2015, Edizioni ETS, 2017, pp. 115-126.

and isolated from wider society. Mainly, this choice provides the characters with the opportunity to distance themselves from the influence of adults, exactly what usually happens in the secondary space of adventure. This is reinforced by the fact that both novels take place in the summertime, giving the children the occasion to wander around the desolate countryside, playing more or less innocent games and exploring abandoned places in total freedom.

The characters' displacement happens on a double level; first, they are in an original condition of distance from the big cities, so that their location signals a limitation in making new experiences. Also, in these novels the relationship between periphery and centre is reversed, as the characters move from a central village dominated by adults, to peripheral and enclosed spaces of initiation. In this case, their displacement also becomes functional to their rites of passage.

As anticipated, according to Joseph Campbell, a key formal component of initiation stories is the change of location;³¹⁵ whether a pilgrimage, a quest or a grand tour, forced by external circumstances or because of their own desires, heroes must abandon the familial space. This is because the journey aims to enhance the understanding of both the world and the hero's own self, so that the physical movement of the hero corresponds to an equal interior trajectory of growth.³¹⁶ The young character can eventually successfully overcome the initiation and exit the liminal space, as Michele does in *Io non ho paura*, or he/she can get trapped in an inescapable status of in-betweenness, as with Martina in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*.

Knowing that the notion of selfhood is dependent upon and constructed within specific social, linguistic and historical spaces, the displacement of these characters is not only required by the rituality of transformation, but it also acts as a narrative tool to challenge the unity of the self and show different outcomes.

2.1 Liminal Spaces

³¹⁵ According to Fasano, the journey (one of the major themes of the novel of formation) is structured on two principles; *estraniazione* from the familial world, that he defines as *spaesamento*, and *l'altrove*, the new, unknown world in which the formation takes place. See Pino Fasano, *Letteratura e viaggio* (Roma, Bari: Laterza 2009).

³¹⁶ Campbell's seminal work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* constitutes my primary source for the understanding of hero's adventure through rites of passage. The standard path, according to Campbell, responds to the formula of *separation – initiation – return*, which constituted the basic structure of the monomyth and that has been since modelled through different themes and forms to create different stories of formation. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton University Press, 1949).

In Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura*, 10-year-old Michele grows up in a small village in the south of Italy called Acqua Traverse. The events take place in the summer of 1978, among endless hills covered by corn fields. The adults in this small village are soon presented by the narrative as the defeated ones, those left out of the economic boom that happened until the late 1960s in Italy. As such, the story clearly articulates how the wave of wealth and industrialization was mostly limited to the big cities in the north of Italy, as expressed by the choice of having Filippo, the kidnapped boy, coming from a rich family in Pavia. Michele's own words – "Non riuscivo tanto bene a immaginarmi questo Nord. Sapevo che il Nord era ricco e il Sud era povero. E noi eravamo poveri" (38) – presents the North of Italy almost as an alien, exotic, unknown world for a child in the Italian countryside.

In contrast, there is the poor countryside of the South of Italy, untouched by such wealth and inhabited by people with no opportunities for the present and for the future, as voiced by Michele's mother, who makes him promise that "Quando diventi grande te ne devi andare da qui e non ci devi tornare mai più" (166). For these reasons altogether, and in a desperate attempt to get a slice of that wealth, the adults of the village decide to kidnap Filippo and request a ransom. These adults respond to Bauman's idea of the *flawed consumers*: even more in a moment of economic growth, the people living in Acqua Traverse are those left out the game of consumerism. They become those "collateral casualties of the economic process"³¹⁷ that reprise the well-known Italian *topos* of "*la fiumana del progresso*".

To enhance this condition of poverty, the narrator populates the story with an abundance of miserable, ruinous spaces and obsolete objects, both in Melichetti's farm and in the abandoned house where Filippo is imprisoned:

Ero in una stanza grande. Molte tegole erano cadute e una trave penzolava al centro.
In un angolo c'era un camino, con una cappa a forma di piramide annerita dal fumo.
In un altro angolo erano ammassati dei mobili. Una vecchia cucina rovesciata e arrugginita. Bottiglie. Cocci. Tegole. Una rete sfondata. Tutto era coperto di merda di piccioni. (28)

The abandoned house is a central place in the novel, since it is the hiding place for the ground-hole³¹⁸ where Filippo is imprisoned. Michele casually finds this place and, moved

³¹⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 39.

³¹⁸ Ammaniti has a predilection for this symbolic space, as he declared during an interview when discussing another novel, *Io e Te* (2010): "Mi piace mettere i miei personaggi in una buca, è una mia passione. La reclusione, infatti, fa fare più cose ad un personaggio: più cose dal punto di vista 'sentimentale' poiché lo

by curiosity, he goes down the hole a first time only to discover that there is a child encaged there. After a first moment of fear, he returns to the hole several times and further descends into it to clean, feed and care for Filippo.³¹⁹

Michele starts travelling from the village to the hole, putting together the pieces along the way: he reconstructs the unfolding of events while testing his understanding of both worlds, the one of adults that he experiences at home, and the one of children that is embodied by Filippo. At the end of the story, Michele understands that his friend is in real danger to be killed and decides to descend one more time into the hole to help him escape. As dramatized by the narration, this decision will be an ultimate act of heroism, as Michele sacrifices himself to free the other children. “Mi sono inginocchiato e con le mani l’ho spinto in avanti, tra i rami, fregandomene del male. Mio, suo. Dovevo portarlo fuori da quel buco” (227).

As Leonardo Trella has analysed, Ammaniti uses the “hole” as the structural and symbolic artifice that allows the character to grow. In the hole Michele shows his courage, and from this space he emerges as a different person at each time, increasingly more mature and with an enhanced understanding of the world.³²⁰ As such, together with the physical movement of emerging from the underground, symbolising the symbolic death and rebirth of both children, the hole is also a metaphor for bringing out from interiority Michele’s good qualities. This adheres to a traditional model of coming of age which sees the character as inherently possessing the core features of his identity. In this novel, growing up is indeed a matter of transparency, it is about making the social world able to see the good-hearted and brave nature of the hero, in contrast, for example, with *Certi bambini*.

This connects to that enduring and stable core of the self (what Ricoeur defines as “sameness”) that is, in this novel, brought into the world gradually, as gradual is Michele’s process of self-discovery, as discussed in the previous chapter. In this sense, this novel blends elements which are typical of the novel of formation, such as the accumulation of knowledge through sequential learning opportunities, with the structure of initiation. As

lega infatti più a questa sua fase che a quella delle azioni”. See Fabio Fazio, “Intervista a Niccolò Ammaniti” in *Che tempo che fa?* 31/10/2010.

³¹⁹ “I capelli biondi e sottili si erano impastati con la terra formando un groviglio nero e secco. Il sangue rappreso gli aveva sigillato le palpebre. Le labbra erano nere e spaccate. Le narici otturate dal moccio e dalle croste. – Posso lavarti la faccia? – gli ho domandato. Ha allungato il collo, ha sollevato la testa e un sorriso si è aperto sulle labbra martoriate.” (123)

³²⁰ See Leonardo Trella, “Niccolò Ammaniti e la tematica della buca” in *Quaderni di filologia e lingue romanze*, Aracne, 30, 2015, pp. 63-92.

seen, the temporal arrangement of the novel creates endurance and stability, and the spatial arrangement reinforces the pattern of growth by presenting an empowering initiatic space.

These elements together concur in equipping Michele with the knowledge and moments he need to be able to direct his growth. The finale of the novel – which significantly ends with the word “io” – presents Michele’s transition to a different stage of his life, towards that adulthood already manifested by the adult narrator. As such, the ritual of initiation that culminates in the hole is effective in closing the trajectory of growth of the hero, presenting him with a fully, stable and coherent identity.

In *Io non ho paura* Michele’s adventure is centred on the discovery of Filippo in the abandoned country house, whilst in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* Martina’s summer of sexual experimentations takes place in another abandoned space, the warehouse. This story is set in the countryside of Emilia Romagna, in a small village where Martina and her friends live. Surrounded by corn fields, this space is familiar, small, and reassuring, with families knowing each other and children growing together, playing in the square, in nearby fields and in abandoned buildings.

In particular, an abandoned warehouse is elected by teenagers as their secret refuge and decorated with objects recovered from a nearby dump.

Il capannone sta al centro di uno spiazzo in mezzo ai campi di erba medica, abbastanza lontano dal paese, verso Vigorso. Cinque minuti in motorino, quindici o venti in bicicletta. Fuori per terra, i segni di molte ruote diverse, un falò improvvisato con sterpaglie e rami secchi, delimitato da pietre annerite. Bottiglie rotte, immondizia. Dentro cuscini, tappeti stesi [...] un tavolaccio sbrecciato e traballante, un registratore portatile, delle candele mezzo consumate dentro un piattino di ceramica. Un letto enorme fatto con tre materassi di misure diverse [...] Lì vicino c’è uno spiazzo dove la gente va a scaricare i materassi vecchi, le poltrone, la roba che butta via. (37-38)

This description presents the space that these children inhabit as dangerous and inconvenient, but also removed from the adult’s authority, enclosed and mantled by a superior status in the child’s perception. Similarly to the secrecy of Michele’s hole “Non era del Teschio. E neanche di Barbara. Non era di Salvatore. Era mio. Era la mia scoperta segreta” (Ammaniti, 36), Martina’s warehouse is a place where older teenagers gathered – “andavano al rifugio segreto, un capannone abbandonato a pochi chilometri da lì, dove i piccoli e le femmine non sono mai stati. Da quel pomeriggio in avanti era diventato una

specie di rito misterioso” (30), until Mirko decides to extend the invitation to Martina and her friends.

The warehouse is a place of exclusivity; only few people can be admitted, and those entering it have to obey a set of different rules from the ones established in the adult world. Because of this exceptionality, this space assumes a high symbolic value for the children’s experience:

Questo era un posto a parte, diverso, con leggi proprie. Un posto dove lo sguardo dei padri e delle madri, la loro autorità e anche il loro amore, non entravano. Dal momento in cui salivano sullo scooter e attraversavano i campi, tutto il resto delle loro vite era cancellato. [...] Spariva anche l’età, erano bambini molto piccoli e grandi nello stesso tempo (Vinci, 55)

Within this space of freedom, Martina and her friends go through an initiation that passes through the discovery of sexuality. As I will discuss in the fourth chapter, the prohibition of sex that happens in the ordinary world of adults is nullified in the warehouse: in this liminal space time disappears, making these child characters almost ageless, suspended in that atypical temporality that I explored in chapter two. The atypical flowing of time was already inscribed within the circularity of the narrative, but is spatially reinforced by the use of the warehouse as this exceptional space of experience.

What happens in the warehouse changes the children, disrupts their worlds and projects them in the realm of adulthood but, in opposition to what happens for Michele, this movement does not correspond to an enhanced sense of identity for Martina. The peculiarity of this novel is that the protagonist is unable, at the end of the adventure, to overcome this suspension between innocence and awareness, unable to be reintegrated in the world of children as much as in adult society. Moving from the village to the isolated warehouse allows them to transform the usual childhood games into secret sexual games, trespassing a threshold that will change their status forever, despite their lack of awareness of what is happening to them.

Il viaggio di ritorno: Martina aggrappata a Mirko sullo scooter, con la sensazione sgradevole di aver perso qualcosa, di aver dimenticato qualcosa e di non poterci fare assolutamente niente. [...] Questa è stata la prima volta. La prima volta dentro al capannone. La prima volta che ha cominciato a esistere questa cosa diversa, questa cosa che erano loro insieme, senza sguardi esterni (44)

Vinci offers no redemption, no rescue, making the narrative reject the legacy of the humanistic model of formation with its idea of linear growth, given that the world remains nothing but a hopeless, confusing and cruel place: “Se oggi non fosse stato oggi, ma diverso, se non ci fossero stati altri momenti in mezzo, altre cose, altre immagini ferme negli occhi. Piantate, solide come le radici di una quercia, come chiodi in un muro” (142). In this sense, the collective ritual of initiation that these characters undergo is reduced to a perpetration of violence with no further significance.

The usual division of the rite of passage described by Van Gennep requires three stages, concluded by a post-liminal phase transitioning to a renewed, enhanced status of being. This is necessary for the reintegration of the character within society and for achieving self-awareness. Yet, Martina has not been equipped by the rite of passage of any hermeneutic tool to make sense of reality. Similarly to what happens to Rosario in *Certi bambini*, the time in the liminal space does not offer a way for the character to resolve the crisis. Worst, it leads to an increased sense solitude and bewilderment. Also, as much as Rosario, Martina is physically and biologically still a child, reinforcing the misalignment between her biological development and her adult-like experiences.

While Michele acts in accordance with moral boundaries, setting himself as the moral agent within a corrupted adult society, Martina and Rosario actively transgress the established moral boundaries, and this determines the failure of the initiation and the suspension of the character's identity. As Bauman has observed, in liquid modernity, together with the dissolution of a solid society, there is also a dissolution of ethics and morality, which are no longer bounded between them, nor to individuals.³²¹ This unresolved misalignment between ethics and morality becomes a burden on the shoulder of these characters and it jeopardizes the result of the rite of passage, so that Martina and Rosario experience a separation from their previous world but are not incorporated into a new status.

2.2 The Landscape through the Gaze

According to Bakhtin, chronotopes can be defined in opposition one to the other, and the chronotope of the *provincial town* acts as the counterpart of the chronotope of the encounter in the form of the city or the road. The main difference resides not only in the

³²¹ For the relationship between ethics, morality and identity in liquid society, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1995).

physical setting, but also in a different treatment of time; what on the road happens fast and casually, sparking new unexpected occasions, in the provincial town is frozen by a cyclicity that makes all days similar, as “it is a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space”.³²² Novels set in provincial towns generally require their characters to create their own adventures, to avoid the risk of being stuck in a motionless time-space. This theme has been powerfully portrayed by Tondelli, who has mastered a generational representation of the Emilian province in *Un weekend postmoderno: cronache dagli anni Ottanta* (1990) by describing provincial life made of “attesa e sogno”.³²³ Even if not provincial towns, the small villages in the novels of Vinci (Granarolo dell’Emilia) and Ammaniti (Acqua Traversa) locate their characters in a space that is described as suspended, in which time seems to never flow.

Both villages are surrounded by endless fields until the horizon line – “un mare giallo di grano” (Vinci, 104), “fino in fondo all’orizzonte grano, cielo, grilli, sole e caldo” (Ammaniti, 6), that are simultaneously spaces of freedom and danger. As reportedly said by Ammaniti himself, the genesis of the book was connected to the image of corn fields as a place where evil can hide:

Io non ho paura è nato durante un viaggio nel Sud Italia, sulla strada verso la Puglia, a giugno, quando il grano è alto. Passavo lungo una strada interminabile, fiancheggiata da colline di grano. Mi sono fermato a guardare e ho capito che volevo descriverlo. Mi piaceva l’idea. Il grano si usa per fare le cose buone, ma sotto è pieno di cose cattive che ti pungono, ti mordono, ti possono fare del male.³²⁴

Rather than being just a background, the landscape changes as the story unfolds, assuming symbolic significance to mimic the dramatic nature of the incoming events. In *Dei bambini non si sa niente* for example, the yellow fields undergo both a natural and a metaphorical change during the summer months. The beautiful fields of sunflowers

³²² “Such towns are the locus for cyclical everyday time. Here there are no events, only ‘doings’ that constantly repeat themselves. [...] The markers of this time are simple, crude, material, fused with the everyday details of specific locales, with the quaint, little houses and rooms of the town, with the sleepy streets, the dust and flies, the clubs and so on and on. Time here is without event and therefore almost seems to stand still.” See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), p. 245.

³²³ “C’è una sorta di attaccamento buio alla propria terra, e poi ci sono le nebbie che rendono le vie e le piazze della città quinte metafisiche di un palcoscenico in cui si recita il copione tipico di ogni provincia: quello dell’attesa e del sogno.” Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Un weekend postmoderno: Cronache dagli anni ottanta*, (Milano, Bompiani, 1990).

³²⁴ La Mendola and Villano (eds) *Film da sfogliare: Dalla pagina allo schermo* (Milano: Educatt, 2013), p. 125.

become “Campi funerei stesi sotto un cielo pallido” (79) at the end of the summer, the vibrating corn fields are turned into “un sacco di terra vuota. Terra grigia e nuda, tanto spazio tutt’intorno” (17), full of “ortiche e fango [...] lucciole, ancora spente. O andate, chissà” (109), “Campi stesi, neri e zitti” (116), “un oceano fermo e silenzioso. Senza pesci, senza voci né mani che ti chiamino e cerchino di toccarti” (117), presenting the landscape as the metaphysical and metaphorical space for the character’s growth.

In this novel, the cyclical time of nature mirrors the same circularity of the temporal experience of the characters, but it never truly participates of it: nature is utterly indifferent, it changes without directly interfering with the plot. On the contrary, Ammaniti presents a natural setting that is responsive to the character’s development but also participates. Michele’s final task, that is, to save Filippo, is anticipated by a change in the weather, that symbolically makes the end of the summer corresponding to the end of the adventure:

Nella notte delle nuvole grosse e nervose si erano accumulate sull’orizzonte e avevano cominciato ad avanzare su Acqua Traverse. Siamo rimasti incantati a guardarle. Ci eravamo dimenticati che dal cielo potesse scendere acqua. (187)

The participation of nature in the final turn of the storyline has more than a descriptive function, because it acts like a supernatural character that helps the hero achieve his destiny. In fact, the landscape acts as a motivating force, preparing Michele for his final “battle” – “C’era un’atmosfera pesante e il cielo aveva un colore innaturale, scarlatto. Le nuvole, prima ammassate sull’orizzonte, ora si accalcavano sopra di noi e si spingevano una contro l’altra come orde di Unni prima della battaglia” (190) – and providing him the time he needs to both reflect and act:

Ha cominciato a piovere fitto e teso. [...] Filippo doveva morirsi di paura. Tutta quell’acqua si infilava dentro il buco e se non smetteva presto poteva annegarlo. Il rumore della pioggia sulla lastra lo stava assordando.
Dovevo andare da lui. (193)

In this sense, the entire natural environment participates of and acts upon Michele’s development, influencing his actions and decisions, as in the tradition of many novels of formation. Once again, all elements – the presence of the adult narrator, the narrative structure and the temporal and spatial decisions – concur in making Michele able to act

rightfully, to embrace his best nature and to restore that order of solidarity and morality that adults have strained.

Differently from *Io non ho paura*, in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* the landscape is not an ally of the character, but becomes an extension of Martina's displacement. This is achieved by substantiating the connection between space and identity through Martina's gaze, which gives both material and spatial consistence to the landscape, while cloaking it with psychological connotations. As noted by Irene Palladini, in this novel there is already a sense of "estraneità di un mondo alla deriva".³²⁵ The displacement of the children from wider society is symbolised by the presence of gigantic and faded maps in the school's classrooms, and by the fact that Matteo brings in the warehouse a globe, that "pur dischiudendo l'illusione del viaggio, inchioda alla realtà dell'orrore"³²⁶. According to Palladini, the presence of the map serves to highlight a sense of displacement, because of the children being restricted into a marginal village where there are no opportunities for self-development.

Here, I argue, more than these objects, it is the landscape that truly echoes Martina's impossibility to map her growth, as it is the gaze which connects the spatial setting with the psychology of the character. The gaze has a central space in Vinci's production, so much so that according to Irene Palladini we can talk of an 'anthropology of the gaze'³²⁷ in her narratives. In this novel, the gaze belongs to Martina and it is signalled in the text as a stand-alone paragraph that recurs three times with minor variations. Significantly, these paragraphs are presented in the first 3 chapters of the story, those dealing with the trauma of Greta's death:

Dritto per cinque minuti dentro i campi, poi ancora dritto, seguendo il fosso, tra le ortiche, i fiori gialli e viola, gli insetti. Dentro il fosso con le rane, sempre dritto, fino in fondo. Col granturco che si muove appena sotto il vento, altissimo. Ancora qualche settimana, forse qualche giorno, poi lo taglieranno tutto. (11)

These paragraphs hint at a mysterious yet specific space, which is first alluded to by Matteo who goes back home "senza passare di là". (10) The same unnamed space draws Martina's eye constantly to the window: "lo sguardo si alza in continuazione, esce dalla

³²⁵ Irene Palladini, "Il paesaggio segreto nella narrativa di Simona Vinci" in *Rhesis International Journal of Linguistics, Philology, and Literature*, <https://rhesis.it> Literature, 10.2, 2019, pp. 56-67.

³²⁶ Ibidem. (Palladini) p. 58.

³²⁷ Ibidem. (Palladini).

finestra, cercando di attraversare nel buio il campo immenso e arrivare in fondo”. (19)
This space is later revealed to be the field where Greta has been buried. The use of this repetitive, uncontrollable gaze emphasises Martina’s stasis and introduces the spatial dimension as inextricable from the experience of memory: “Sta ferma davanti alla porta, con lo zaino sulle spalle, e cerca di ricordarsi cosa deve fare, ma i pensieri si incastrano, vanno via. Tornano là. Adesso, alle volte, vorrebbe scappare in mezzo al campo, dentro, e sparire.” (27).

The memory of the field is pervasive, and it is presented through Martina’s gaze which impress a specific, interiorized and psychological connotation to it. The cornfield is sky high in the child’s perspective, the greenhouses look like huge caterpillars with swollen bellies, reprising a deadly imaginary, while the gaze goes all the way – *fino in fondo* – into the deepest part of the countryside. This aerial view gradually pushes the gaze further up to the locus of the unspeakable, up to “il fosso” – the trench which hides Greta’s body.³²⁸

This same structure of a standalone paragraph is reprised significantly in the last two chapters of the novel, reiterating that circularity that I have already discussed as the spatio-temporal arrangement of the story:

Camminare dritto dentro i campi per cinque minuti, dritto fino al fosso e poi ancora dentro, tra le ortiche e il fango. Con la luna sbiadita in mezzo al cielo nero e nessuna voce. (140)

Sempre dritto per cinque minuti, dentro i capi e poi ancora dritto, seguendo il fosso per altri cinque minuti, seguendo il fosso per altri cinque minuti, tra il fango e le ortiche, le rane e i grilli. Le lucciole, ancora spente. O andate, chissà. Cielo nero adesso, e una luna lontanissima, pallida. Non la luna tonda con la faccia materna e triste, una luna smangiata, col profilo feroce, appuntito. (148)

The recurrence of this image works through repetition and small significant variations; the colourful flowers are substituted by the mud, the fastidious nettle remains and the fireflies are silent. A faded moon appears in a dark sky, to become later corroded, with a ferocious

³²⁸ “Attraversare il campo, ancora, nel buio, gli occhi allenati a distinguere le strisce più chiare di terreno, tra una coltura e l’altra. I fossi, i canali artificiali. I teloni bianchi che proteggono qualche pianta delicata: bruchi enormi, lattiginosi, con la pancia gonfia.” (20) “Dritto per cinque minuti dentro il campo. Sempre dritto, seguendo la linea lontana sulla destra che disegna il recinto della fabbrica. Ancora dritto, dentro il fosso, tra le rane e i grilli. In mezzo alle ortiche e ai fiori gialli e viola. Fino alla fine.” (28)

and pointed profile. In addition, the obsessive repetition of the five minutes acts as the desperate attempt to articulate time, to punctuate the reality into some form of measure that can provide a sense of progression that is never really achieved.

It is the landscape that occupies the last pages of the novel, saturated by “il silenzio della campagna e nessuna lucciola” (152), consciously or not recalling the bitter prophecy made by Pier Paolo Pasolini of a modern capitalist world that lets fireflies die.³²⁹ By emphasising the desolation of the final setting, Simona Vinci leaves the child-characters lightless, as the repetition of the image of the disappearance of the firefly suggests. Thus, Martina’s gaze reads the environment around her and charges it with symbolic depth, substantiating Vinci’s narrative around the inescapability of the memory of Greta’s death. Martina’s growth is shattered by trauma and it is filtered through the gaze of unconsciousness, which recalls the incapacity of making sense of her own growth.

3. Alienation and the Mindscape

According to Robyn McCallum, in general terms “alienation in its various aspects – powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, self-estrangement and cultural estrangement – denotes the radical, perceived or actual, separation of the self from the social world”.³³⁰ In contrast to the other protagonists, who were either marginalised in the city or displaced in the isolated Italian countryside, the characters in Santacroce’s *Zoo* and Scarpa’s *Stabat Mater* find themselves in an alienated position because they are imprisoned in an enclosed space, with few opportunities for establishing any relationship with society.

Both *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater* significantly present a first-person narrator, piling up in one single character and in one single space (the *Ospitale* for Cecilia and the house for the unnamed teenager of *Zoo*) all the horrors which can happen while growing up. Knowing that identity is dependent upon and constructed in relation to the social context, this complete isolation can destabilize the characters’ idea of selfhood: because these

³²⁹ “Quel ‘qualcosa’ che è accaduto una decina di anni fa lo chiamerò dunque ‘scomparsa delle lucciole’ [...] Dopo la scomparsa delle lucciole i ‘valori’ nazionalizzati e quindi falsificati del vecchio universo agricolo e paleocapitalistico, di colpo non contano più. Chiesa, patria, famiglia, obbedienza, ordine, risparmio, moralità non contano più. A sostituirli sono i ‘valori’ di un nuovo tipo di civiltà, totalmente ‘altra’ rispetto alla civiltà contadina e paleoindustriale. [...] Non siamo più di fronte, come tutti ormai sanno, a ‘tempi nuovi’, ma a una nuova epoca della storia umana, di quella storia umana le cui scadenze sono millenaristiche.” Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Il vuoto di potere in Italia” in “*Corriere della Sera*”, Febbraio 1975, available online.

³³⁰ Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* (New York and London: Garland, 1999), p. 9.

characters are represented as radically separated from society, they miss those intersubjective experiences constitutive of the process of identity formation. Being deprived of the possibility of confronting any social, structural and human otherness, they undergo a process of psychological alienation from themselves and from society. In fact, in these two novels there is not a physical journey in the streets of the city or an exploration of liminal spaces in the countryside, rather the ground to negotiate growth constantly folds back on the psychology of the character.

For this reason, the spatial setting I am going to discuss assumes a double connotation; a physical one, which is the space in which the characters are located, and a symbolic one, which is their own mindscapes – how the protagonists think of themselves.

3.1 Encaged Selves

The family in *Zoo* is narrated by the anonymous teenager protagonist as constituted by sick and claustrophobic relationships: embittered and imprisoned by their own familiar ties, the mother, father, and daughter desperately try to escape from the “zoo” they erected.³³¹ Subverting the representation of home as the space of love and safety, *Zoo* presents the familial space as the site of the uncanny, of horror and terror, the battlefield for a “guerra continua, una tensione interminabile, assurda” (15).

The teenage protagonist feels trapped in different metaphorical cages; one erected by her possessive father and the other by her narcissistic mother, so that her parental figures are the only ones she can rely upon to construct her identity. In this sense, against the empowering ideology of youth which sees individuals free to make their own choices, the reality for this character is that she is tangled in a web of dysfunctionality that precludes her from the opportunity to confront any other alterity.

È mio padre l'uomo della mia vita.

Sono cresciuta con un anello al dito, frequentare gli altri era tradire quel padre che mi amava tanto, che faceva di tutto per me. Non avevo amici, rimanevo da sola, con lui. (14)

Father and daughter have an unhealthy relationship that suggests sexual abuse, in which the daughter assumes the substitutive role of lover: “Ho appena nove anni, sembro sua

³³¹ “Io e mio padre ci proteggevamo a vicenda vivendo in una trappola in cui lei ci aveva costretto. Lo zoo è stato costruito in suo onore, come monumento alla sua violenza”. (12)

moglie” (18), becoming the main recipient of both her father’s tenderness and violence. The more the protagonist grows, the more this relationship becomes obsessive on the father’s part,³³² so that his sudden death leaves the character completely isolated within the “zoo”.

After the death of the father, the story centres on the conflict between the mother and the daughter, making it explicit that both characters experience home not as an idyllic space, but rather as a nightmarish one. While the chronotope of the home has been explored by feminist critics as the locus of a patriarchal domain,³³³ in *Zoo* it is the mother who defines the structure of power. Chapter IV will discuss the relationship between mother and daughter, however it is worth noting that home is a space of repulsion, disease, lack of privacy and of agency in this novel, especially after the main character gets paralysed.

This representation goes against the traditional solidity of this space, which was theorized by Bachelard as a happy and safe space³³⁴ able to provide an anchor to people’s identity, acting as “warm islands of intimacy” in the everchanging world according to Bauman. Instead, in liquid modernity, “homes have turned from shared playgrounds of love and friendship into the sites of territorial skirmishes, and from building sites of togetherness into the assemblies of fortified bunkers”³³⁵ where people increasingly isolate themselves, especially in a time when technology allows new forms of connections.

The idea of homes as spaces of imprisonment is not a novelty and it reprises a pattern of inclusion and exclusion which is definitely gendered. There is indeed a particular discourse of confinement restricting the spaces that, according to patriarchal norms, women were allowed to inhabit. Adalgisa Giorgio, for example, looks at Italian narratives produced by female writers from the 1970s, focusing on their willingness to explore the spaces of women’s marginality, specifically looking at girlhood as the crucial time to rebel against gender roles.³³⁶ She therefore maps a tradition of narratives where female

³³² “Ricordo la violenza delle sue mani, mi ha picchiato con così tanta forza che ho creduto di morire. [...] Mi domandava con chi ero stata, ripeteva che gli stavo mentendo, urlava. Mi ha chiamato puttana, lui mi ha chiamato puttana. Aveva paura lo avessi abbandonato, tradito. Si comportava con un amante, non ero sua figlia.” (56)

³³³ See Adalgisa Giorgio, “‘Bad Girls’ in the 1970s and 1990s: Female Desire and Experimentalism in Italian Women’s Writing” in *Italianistica Ultraiectina*, I, 2006, pp. 729-745.

³³⁴ Gustave Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (New York: Orion, 1964) [1958]

³³⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity press, 2003), p. 64.

³³⁶ In her study Adalgisa Giorgio focuses on the analysis of Alice Ceresa’s *La figlia prodiga* (1967), Leila Baiardo’s *L’inseguimento* (1976), Silvana Castelli’s *Pitonessa* (1978) and Isabella Santacroce’s *Luminal* (1998), focusing on childhood and youth as spaces of freedom and resistance. See Adalgisa Giorgio, “‘Bad Girls’ in the 1970s and 1990s: Female Desire and Experimentalism in Italian Women’s Writing” in *Italianistica Ultraiectina*, I, 2006, pp. 729-745.

characters deal with issues of integration and marginalization, battling to retain their freedom in a world that constantly attempts to control and repress their individuality.

While many coming-of-age stories today depict female characters having much more mobile and public lives, for example Isabella Santacroce's *Trilogia dello spavento*,³³⁷ when it comes to *Zoo* the interesting shift we see is from home as an imposed prison, to home as a chosen space of imprisonment. In fact, it is the anonymous character of *Zoo* who decides to remove herself from society because of her inability to establish relationships. Exemplary is her memory of going to a party once, only to run back home to her father as soon as possible:

Un ragazzo che non conosco si siede vicino, lui vorrebbe parlarmi, non riesco neppure a rispondergli. Il cuore mi batte veloce, ho paura di lui, ho paura di tutto. Sono fuori dallo zoo, senza sbarre, non so muovermi, non sono capace di essere libera, non volo. [...] Maledico la mia decisione, mi punisco perché ho sbagliato, sono uscita dalla mia gabbia, ho disertato. (88)

This ambiguity can be linked back to Michel Foucault's discussion of spaces of confinement and power. Foucault's mechanisms of punishment and confinement are particularly relevant when it comes to understanding the mechanism of enclosure and control especially over female subjects, because they highlight how certain social roles are created. His idea of the *panopticon* in *Discipline and Punish* explains how a permanent state of visibility assures an automatic functioning of power, so that the individual "becomes the principle of his own subjection".³³⁸ In this sense, the protagonist of *Zoo* is under a constant visibility and surveillance both from her mother and father, so that she is codified to obey, to never leave the familial space and to feel guilty – "ho disertato"(88) – when she does.

³³⁷ The trilogy is composed by *Fluo. Storie di giovani a Riccione* (Castelvecchi, 1995), *Destroy* (Feltrinelli, 1996) and *Luminal* (Feltrinelli, 1998).

³³⁸ "A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So it is not necessary to use force to constrain the convict to good behaviour, the madman to calm, the worker to work, the schoolboy to application, the patient to the observation of the regulation. [...] The heaviness of the old 'houses of security', with their fortress like architecture, could be replaced by the simple, economic geometry of a 'house of certainty'. The efficiency of power, its constraining force have, in a sense, passed over to the other side, to the side of its surface of application. He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection". Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, English translation by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), pp. 202-203.

As a result, the protagonist remains trapped in a liminal status where she is a victim as much as her own executioner. Because of her long-lasting fear and ineptitude, she has willingly removed herself from wider society, setting herself as an alienated subject that actively refuses the normative, linear pattern of growth to embrace self-destruction. While there are external forces acting on her, she chooses to remain there. This moves past the oversimplified view of female protagonists encaged in patriarchal domestic spaces, and it unveils deep dynamics of psychological dependence and alienation that problematize the entire process of growth. Paradoxically, the protagonist of *Zoo* is the older one among the characters examined in this study as she is the closest to adulthood; yet, despite her biological age, she has metaphorically never left the maternal uterus, her “womb-tomb”. Unable to overcome her solipsism, instead of moving towards rebirth, her trajectory becomes the negation of coming-of-age itself, so that the novel not only contests the idea of linear growth in the first place, but it does not provide any constructive view of an alternative pathway.

The other example of an imprisoning space is given by Scarpa’s *Stabat Mater*, since the main character Cecilia is an orphan, raised by nuns in the *Ospitale della Pietà* in 17th-century Venice. As discussed, Cecilia is obsessed by her mother’s absence, and this contributes to her sense of being deprived of an originating point in which to anchor her identity. In this sense, the spatial organization of this novel reprises the gothic chronotope of the castle as a place saturated by the memory of the past,³³⁹ and later read by feminist studies as the domestic space of the woman’s entrapment. Because of its strong connection with the past time, this chronotope generates a narrative saturated by terror and grotesque, allowing the female character to interrogate her past and to face her deepest fears and desires, before finding liberation.

Indeed, when it comes to *Stabat Mater*, instead of progressing towards a specific goal or moment, the narration is constructed around this uncanny cycle of memories of events which are situated all within the *Ospitale*. In this sense the protagonist’s identity is tied to the physical environment through a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings and experiences:

Nascere senza venire alla luce. Restare nel buio della mamma per finire direttamente in quello della morte, passare dal tepore del suo sangue oscuro all’acqua nera e gelida.

³³⁹ Mikail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), p. 246.

Non conoscere niente al mondo, soltanto il calore delle viscere e il freddo della città.
(58)

As I will discuss further in the next chapter, in *Stabat Mater* the corporeal and material dimension is inextricable from the wider problem of identity formation, and a crucial aspect for the character is to shape a narrative of birth which would make sense of not only her being in the world, but of the events occurring around her. Because she was abandoned as an infant, she is incapable of imagining herself in any other place than the convent:

Il giorno del mio parto vero, in questo mondo, è avvenuto verso l'interno, quando sono stata introdotta nell'Ospitale. Voi non mi avete partorita facendomi uscire dal vostro corpo, ma infilandomi dentro questo edificio. (31)

Also, because of her lack of socialised experiences, Cecilia misinterprets most aspects of the biological and social life of individuals, using the inappropriate interpretative code of religion to make sense of what happens around her. For example, she recalls spying a girl giving birth to a child in the convent, mistaking the new-born for an excrement and the umbilical cord for a snake. Traumatized by the discovery, only years later she is able to understand what she saw by looking at the nativity on the altarpiece in the convent,³⁴⁰ concluding that “avevo quattro anni quando ho assistito a quella scena, e non sapevo nulla della vita. Ora ne ho quasi sedici, ne so ancora meno” (27). Because of her isolation, Cecilia is cut off from alternative narratives that can help her grow, as much as detached from the learning opportunities provided by usual interpersonal relationships.

In effect, Cecilia has no understanding of the wider world, as much as she is unable to establish relations with others because of her confinement, and for this reason she is also trapped in an endless and repetitive routine³⁴¹ that highly contrasts with the dynamism provided by the flow of the letters: “Signora Madre, dovete avere pazienza con me, mi vengono in mente cose senza senso, ma qui dentro è così, le cose si ripetono e noi entriamo in confidenza con un gran numero di dettagli” (12). This unnatural and dehumanised

³⁴⁰ “Guardando la pala d’altare in Chiesa l’ho vista, la donna che ha schiacciato il serpente sotto al suo piede. Ma ancora più coraggiosamente la Madre di Dio ha vinto il mostro orribile che è uscito dal suo corpo. Lo tiene in braccio, ormai inerme, un bambino roseo e sorridente, piccolino, innocuo.” (27)

³⁴¹ “Sentire tra le dita sempre la stessa forma della stessa fogliolina di metallo attaccata alla ringhiera delle scale. Incontrare sempre la stessa piastrella rotta del pavimento, ogni mattina, andando dalla chiesa al refettorio, la terza piastrella del primo corridoio al secondo piano. Riconoscere una tacca sulla maniglia di ottone della sala.” (12)

organization of the external time is augmented by the fact that the girls in the convent are forced to dress alike (30), so that being anonymous and indistinguishable acts as a sort of interiorised gaze:

Esiste una persona al mondo più sola di me? Io mi confondo fra le altre ragazze.
Siamo centinaia, sono sicura che a un occhio estraneo sembriamo tutte uguali. E io
in mezzo a loro sono indistinguibile, assolutamente ordinaria. (17)

The lack of personal markers of identification threatens that sense of uniqueness that upholds not only Cecilia's personal identity, but overall the existence of all women inside the convent. According to Williams, "a house is built to protect human beings, but also to *keep* certain things out of sight" and in the case of the *Ospitale*, the girls are those mysterious figures that need to be separated from the world.³⁴² In the convent, all women are indeed prisoners: "Qual è la differenza fra le suore più anziane e noi? Siamo sempre chiuse qui dentro, tutte quante, giovani e vecchie, ragazze e suore." (46)

The isolation and separateness of the protagonist is thus embedded in a spatial setting constructed according to notions of exclusion, removal and anonymity, which in turn have a great impact on Cecilia's capacity to build a full, coherent and articulated identity. In the convent she is precluded from the possibility to acquire agency or to undergo a proper subjective development as she emphasises: "Signora Madre, io non sono niente, io non esisto [...] Com'è smisurato questo mio niente." (24). As the narrative will prove, for Cecilia it is necessary to exit the convent, even if for brief moments, to be able to undergo her rite of passage and to move towards independence.

3.2 The threshold

Up to this point I have discussed liminal spaces in terms of actual physical places that acquire a symbolic value because either they host a rite of passage, as for *Io non ho paura*, or they provide the character a moment of abeyance, as in *Certi bambini*. But when discussing *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater* the physical elements are inextricable from the psychological ones, so that I will discuss this idea of liminality both as a space and as a condition linked to the idea of growth.

³⁴² Williams cited in Bemon et Borghart (eds), *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives* (Gent: Academia Press, 2010), p. 53.

As said, the coming-of-age story deals inherently with liminality, since adolescents are by definition in a temporary status of in-betweenness, aiming to outgrow fears and illusions and conform to the social expectations of adulthood.³⁴³ Especially when dealing with older characters (Cecilia and the unnamed one in *Zoo*) the transition to adulthood requires greater consideration, as the protagonists are biologically and legally on the threshold.

The threshold is the defining chronotope of liminal spaces; described by Bakhtin as an indicator of “*crisis and break in a life*”³⁴⁴, crossing a threshold often marks a decisive turning point, one that allows the character to move further in the process of growth. Rooted in the initiation structure, this chronotope locates the character in a situation that presents a literal or metaphorical transition between two worlds, within a temporality that is detached from the normal biographical time, in order to sustain a moment of crisis or change.

Cecilia is a liminal persona because of her status of teenager, since adolescence is defined as the quintessential liminal state of being, at the intersection between childhood and adulthood. But her liminality is enhanced by her unique position of isolation in the convent, so that she is also inhabiting a liminal physical space. As Michael Joseph defines it, “liminality described the quality of being socially segregated, set apart and divested of status, and relates to associated characteristics and qualities: indeterminacy, ambiguity, selflessness and becomingness”.³⁴⁵

In contrast to *Zoo*, where the protagonist actively avoids the social world, Cecilia has few but key opportunities to step outside the convent. For Cecilia, the movement towards an increased self-awareness and agency is gradual: the crossing of the threshold of the convent happens a first time when a small group of violinists is requested to play music at the deathbed of a donor. The dichotomy between inside and outside is crucial, because while Cecilia inside the convent is defined by the projection of her mother, outside she is instead defined by men’s gazes which she interiorizes with distress: “abbiamo

³⁴³ Conventionally, this happens through the challenges that the hero has to face; in the *Bildungsroman* it was a matter of making the interior world and the exterior world harmoniously integrated, while in modernist narratives it was more of an instable and uncertain path towards a coherent identity. To overcome liminality, characters have to develop an identity capable of coming to terms with the ways of the world and, after the advent of modernism, also to reveal the shadows of an inner journey made of traumas and the unconscious.

³⁴⁴ For Bakhtin the threshold is “connected with a 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).” Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), p. 248.

³⁴⁵ Michael Joseph, *Keywords for Children’s Literature* (New York University Press, 2001), p. 138.

suonato a volto scoperto [...] avrei volute sprofondare, mi sentivo così inerme, alla mercé degli sguardi di quei vecchi” (70).

It is the arrival of the composer Vivaldi that disrupts the premediated course of events by bringing inside the convent two novelties; the presence of a young man like him, and his music: “È una musica scritta per chi non ha più la forza di fare nulla. Forse per questo la dà da suonare a noi, che siamo prigioniere dell'Ospitale.” (46) Vivaldi helps Cecilia cross the threshold of the convent physically and symbolically, paving the way for her to move beyond her liminal position. This is not without trauma: outside the convent Cecilia undergoes a ritual of initiation when Vivaldi decides to bring out a few girls to visit a slaughterhouse. There, she is forced to kill a lamb in order to get new strings for her violin. Guided by Vivaldi’s hand, Cecilia has her horrific initiation, one filled with blood and anguish, symbolically representing the end of her innocence. But because of the nature of her status of orphan, instead of being incorporated into a new social order she is forced back into the convent.

In effect, after the rite of initiation there is no sudden revelation, no greater understanding. Similar to what I have discussed with regard to both *Dei bambini non si sa niente* and *Certi bambini*, the characters are unable to come to terms with what they have been through to construct a higher meaning. As seen with Rosario and Martina, the rite of passage per se is not enough; the characters need to have the resources to make sense of their experience, and the agency to transition to a new status or identity. Same as Rosario and Martina, Cecilia is still haunted by unresolved trauma, so that the rite of passage, instead of becoming a moment of rebirth, results in an even deeper psychological alienation: “Vi prego, estirpatemi da me stessa. Io non ne voglio più sapere di me” (133).

However, Cecilia turns to music as a way to reconnect with herself. In a mystical and mysterious way – “mi è stato detto che ho continuato a suonare, fino a notte fonda, fino a quando sono stramazzata al suolo dalla fatica [...]. Almeno così mi è stato riferito, perché io non mi sono accorta di nulla” (134) – the music played with the new chords provides Cecilia a way to find herself. While it is unclear what really happens, since Cecilia is the sole narrator and is unable to express it herself, the outcome is clearly an enhanced capacity of coming to terms with a developmental experience that remains frightening and tortuous. Cecilia has experienced liminality as a state of alienation able to fragment her subjectivity, but she is able to saturate her existence with a renewed significance once she has stepped outside the threshold.

Cecilia therefore stops being an anonymous ghostly presence in the convent and actively refuses the imprisonment in which she was constrained as she runs away from the convent. In contrast to the enclosed world of the convent, her initiation happens outside in a slaughterhouse, and, even more significantly, the finale happens in the vast space of the sea, where the openness of the water symbolises her increased freedom. The act of leaving, in this case, is just another part of the process of growth – it is a move past the threshold, not an ending.

In contrast to Cecilia, the anonymous protagonist of *Zoo* remains metaphorically trapped in her status of liminality, suspended between the worlds of childhood and adulthood. But she also remains trapped in the liminality of the house, as the physical space of suspension from social life, and this two-sided liminality is the result of her failure of passing the threshold.

In fact, a turning point in the narration happens once, during a fight, the mother orders the protagonist to leave the familial house. The daughter finds herself literally on the threshold, with the door open behind her. Instead of using this occasion to set herself free, she attempts a last, desperate request of affection:

Ho le spalle contro la porta di ingresso, lei la apre con furia, grida fuori di qui.
Sul pianerottolo piango, la supplico di smetterla di urlare, mi sta facendo a pezzi con
la sua rabbia, non ce la faccio più. Cerco di abbracciarla e allora lei mi spinge con
potenza, mi disprezza, mi butta via così. Ricordo quel volo breve, storto, cado giù e
il cielo non mi accoglie. (65)

After the mother pushes her outside the house, she falls and injures her back to the point of paralysis. This status defines not only the character's disability, but it also denies her that agentic development that is necessary to grow. From this moment onward, the character is forced inside the house, totally dependent on her mother, trapped in a moment of chronic suspension: "Rimango in quello stato emotivo senza nome, in quel porto di nessuno, dimenticato da Dio" (68). By removing the possibility of movement, physically as she is paralysed but also symbolically as she is constrained in the house, she dips into feelings of anger, pain and hopelessness.

Unable to have her initiation outside the house, she articulates a plan to have it inside that same space, aiming to achieve independence and agency by killing her mother. According to Barbara Kornacka, the unnamed character of *Zoo* is part of those *filles fatales*

created by Isabella Santacroce who are both objects and perpetrators of violence. In *Zoo*, the character turns into “una larva insospettabilmente feroce, soprattutto nei confronti della madre, da quando il padre è scomparso”, establishing a liminality that is “neither ritual nor transitional, but an open-ended way of life”³⁴⁶. This ambiguity is a reflection of her age; the character is indeed in a “larval” state: “lo stadio che precede imago, forma compiuta, perfetta, adulta, quindi quell’attimo tra l’adolescenza – tappa ancora fanciullesca, ma con la sessualità già marcata – e la donna adulta” to quote Katarzyna Przyłuska-Urbanowicz.³⁴⁷

This reinforces what Stefania Lucamante has extensively discussed, that Santacroce’s heroines rarely complete the transition to the adult age. In *Zoo* for example, despite the character turning 18, her attitudes and behaviours are far from presenting a mature self-understanding.³⁴⁸ This contrasts with the traditional model of the “female Bildungsroman” that usually connects successful growth with the acquisition of the right female knowledge as instructed by the mother or grandmother. Unlike Cecilia’s journey towards the attainment of female agency, *Zoo* ends with a total disintegration of identity, in line with Santacroce’s tendency of refusing traditional images of self-realization.³⁴⁹ And indeed, the character’s namelessness signifies the contested status of a teenagers that is located both outside childhood and adulthood, against any overdetermined identity, amplifying the refusal to adhere to social norms. The absence of any definition that could permanently locate the identity of the character implies even more a subjectivity that is more than unfinished, that is in *stasis*.

Despite the protagonist recreating her own surrogate version of the rite of passage, after the homicide there is no relocation of the hero in a new universe of significance, but rather a desertification of emotional and moral experience that constitutes no growth. Her narrative journey is not oriented towards that heightened awareness associated with the *Bildungsroman*, instead it is characterized by sliding into complete fragmentation.

³⁴⁶ Michael Joseph, *Keywords for Children’s Literature* (New York University Press, 2001), p. 138.

³⁴⁷ Cited in Barbara Kornacka, “Sovversive, distruttive, demoniache, matricide. Le fanciulle fatali di Isabella Santacroce” in *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, XLI-4, 2014, p. 116.

³⁴⁸ See Lucamante Stefania, *Isabella Santacroce* (Firenze: Cadmo, 2002).

³⁴⁹ As Flaviana Zaccaria observes, the characters of Santacroce are usually “donne che reagiscono, in modo fallimentare, alla perdita del Sé, di modelli e valori comuni, con il rifiuto della società contemporanea portatrice di valori nuovi e ritenuti inaccettabili dai personaggi/dissidenti della scrittrice. La realtà che circonda queste donne diventa così un Mondo delle Meraviglie alla rovescia, un luogo orripilante in cui, peggio che in un incubo, è impossibile non solo trovare scappatoie, ma anche svegliarsi in un’esistenza ‘migliore’.” See Flaviana Zaccaria, “Gli effetti della demodernizzazione e della perdita d’individuazione nell’opera di Isabella Santacroce” in *African Journals Online*, Vol. 22 No. 1 (2009), pp. 55-87.

In *Zoo* the psychological alienation of the character is not only manifested through a profound sense of solitude – amplified by the spatial entrapment – but it corresponds to a sense of anguish and disempowerment. The experience of the character is therefore used by Santacroce to portray the degradation of social ties also within the nuclear family. It is not that familiar spaces were necessarily edenic ones in the other novels, for example in *Io non ho paura* or *I bambini delle rose*, but in those novels the children could escape the bittersweet space of home to wander around streets or fields. In general, “the boys” (Rosario, Nico and Michele) despite being dislocated and marginal in respect of a society that is imposing some forms of normative identity, are still allowed to move around, experiment and choose, often reaffirming conservative values even when they transgress the rules. Instead, *Zoo* turns fragmentation into *stasis* when experience is both rejected and denied.

These two novels involve two very different reactions to the process of growth. In the case of *Stabat mater*, growth inclines towards recognising Cecilia’s own difference from the world and autonomy from the maternal presence. Even if her story starts in the enclosed space of the convent, her trajectory assumes an acceleration when she meets Vivaldi, to culminate in her right of passage and in the subsequent decision of running away. In this case, the chronotope of the gothic castle is rectified by the threshold, and the liminality of the character is finally resolved.

Instead, in the unnamed character of *Zoo*, we can observe that “generazione [...] spaesata e straniata in quel dolorosissimo processo che è l’esistere, un vivere alla ricerca di valori alternativi che non costituiscono un’etica ma la richiesta di un’inafferrabile ‘essenza’”³⁵⁰, as Lucamante explains. This signals a sense of fragmentation of both the interior world of the character, but also of the connection between the protagonist and the wider social world.

Conclusions

As discussed in this chapter, the situatedness of the character is more than a simple narrative settings. According to Zygmunt Bauman, people are inscribed in a physical space in which they act, but where they also find anchors for their identities as “human experience is formed and gleaned, life-sharing managed, its meaning conceived, absorbed and negotiated around places”.³⁵¹ By locating the characters in a specific time and space

³⁵⁰ Stefania Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce* (Firenze: Cadmo, 2002), p. 13.

³⁵¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: on the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity press, 2003), p. 102.

we are able to understand what conditions influence their formation, forcing them to adopt different strategies to construct their identities. Also, discussing the position of the characters within both physical and metaphorical locations casts light on wider social challenges that constitute the fabric of contemporary society's growth.

When relevant, I have also used the concept of the chronotope, seen as spatiotemporal structures of personhood, because they are able to articulate the relationship between space, social context and individual's identity. In this sense, this chapter has also tried to answer questions such as what stories are these chronotopes telling us, what are their symbolic functions and what types of formation they concur to represent.

In this chapter, I selected three main motifs that are of interest and that title the main sections. The first one is the 'marginalization', which I discussed mainly in relation to *I bambini delle rose* and *Certi bambini* in an urban context. Bauman's theory of wasted lives has been useful to discuss the physical and metaphorical location of marginality in respect to a normative centre, because of the intersectionality of class, ethnicity or age. Also, the chronotope of the road offers a way to explore linguistic and sociocultural influences on the formation of subjectivity, especially when setting the character in the wider urban context with all its diverse forces and agents.

Then, I discussed 'displacement' with regard to *Dei bambini non si sa niente* and *Io non ho paura*, as it portrays children in the Italian countryside, therefore confined in a space that presents limited social interactions and an insufficient wealth of knowledge if compared to the dynamism of the city. For these reasons, the characters of Martina and Michele voluntary displace themselves in secondary, liminal spaces that are spatially and temporally suspended, having successful or failing rites of passages. In these novels the landscape participates in the adventure, either actively acting in favor of the character or by amplifying the inescapability of trauma.

Third, 'alienation' as represented in *Stabat Mater* and *Zoo*, focuses on the experience of female characters growing up in enclosed spaces, the familial home and the convent, which prevent them to undergo a proper socialized development. This results in an alienation from both selfhood and otherness that has a great impact on their process of identity formation. These female characters experience a journey inward rather than outward, following the tradition of certain female coming-of-age stories which depict growth as a "voyage inward towards a more mystical resolution of women's alienation"

as a result of oppressive gender norms.³⁵² Such an internalized journey destabilizes their sense of identity and rejects essentialist notions of selfhood, showing how a lack of socialized experience hinders the movement from dependence to independence, which is a key milestone of adulthood.

On the same trajectory, these texts all present spaces that are marginal, isolated, peripheral and limiting more than limited. The big cities of Rome and Naples described in *I bambini delle rose* and *Certi bambini* have lost the premises that made them the centres of immense possibilities of self-realization as they would have been in a *Bildungsroman*. Despite blurred boundaries typical of postmodern urban spaces, these cities remain polarized between a centre and a periphery in which the main characters constantly move, struggling to achieve any significant empowerment.

The Italian villages in the countryside in *Io non ho paura* and *Dei bambini non si sa niente* instead, are motionless spaces that respond to a cyclical time of nature that is too slow to keep pace with contemporary life experiences. Because these spaces offer no opportunities for social mobility and nothing unexpected seems to happen, the children are forced to move to a secondary, extraordinary space where they can undo the rules of adult society to become “innocenti carnefici dei propri destini”.³⁵³ Familiar spaces are also revealed in all the contradictions and anguishes that they can represent, especially in *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater*, showing the outcomes of a neglected socialization. Far from being nests of comfort and safety, homes turn into cages that alienate the characters, forcing them to fold back onto their own psychological distress.

Going back to a metaphorical use of space, these novels entail an interesting relationship with the image of the “Eden of infancy” as a spatiotemporal status made of innocence and happiness, often experienced retrospectively with nostalgia. Generally speaking, childhood can be narratively presented as either a memory of happiness to be retrieved, an age of innocence or a time already haunted by traumatic experiences. The novels in this study reflect the third circumstance: the “eden” of childhood is rarely present, instead the characters are caught into social and familial circumstances that keep them at the margins of society.

In these settings, occasions for an abrupt confrontation with reality emerge, often culminating in dark, complicated, and even failing rites of passage. As such, together with

³⁵² Felski cited in Lazzaro-Weis Carol, *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women Writing 1968-1990* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 94.

³⁵³ Simona Vinci, *In tutti i sensi come l'amore* (Torino: Einaudi, 1999), Bookcover.

an Edenic infancy never represented, the idea of a moment of true innocence and purity gets lost. These considerations question power structures and their impact on the child's growth, as I have discussed for example when considering Bauman's theory of "wasted lives" as an outcome of a contemporary liquid society where unproductive individuals are set aside. In effect, when dealing with non-normative experiences of growth, McCallum explains, "texts which situate characters on the margins of a culture or society can offer positions from which to interrogate the social and cultural boundaries which limit subjectivity, and hence question dominant social and cultural paradigms of identity formation".³⁵⁴

In addition, the situatedness of characters in these novels sustain the argument that contemporary narratives tend to challenge the reassuring stability of conventional maturation. In this sense, they critique a trajectory of growth that is linear, stable and normative, to present instead liminal, abject, and transgressive forms of growth that are in flux or frozen in stasis. For instance, moving away from the gender of the characters to focus on the gender of the authors, in different ways Tizano Scarpa, Niccolò Ammaniti, Mohsen Melliti and Diego De Silva, with varying degrees of agency and greater or lesser linear pathways, present a movement forward for the character's identity. Despite a flux that is often instable and stretched towards liquidity, there is a certain degree of progress. Instead, Isabella Santacroce and Simona Vinci tell gut-wrenching and grotesque stories, denying their female characters any possibility for advancement. Martina and the unnamed character of *Zoo* are presented in a stasis that resonates with fears and traumas and enhances the liquefaction of contemporary growth.

As these novels testify, the spatio-temporal arrangement becomes a way to stretch outside the boundaries of who the character is today, to portray an identity *in progress* and to cast light on the complexity of growth. In particular, by looking at the situatedness of the characters this chapter calls attention to two features of coming of age today: a deep existential solitude rooted in the erosion of collective life, and the problem of developing agency within society.

1. The Dawn of Collective Life

As seen, growth does not happen in a vacuum but it happens within society, so that the becoming of the character is a product of the individual's agency and of the

³⁵⁴ Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* (Garland: New York and London, 1999), p. 118.

expectations and constraints of the societies portrayed in the novels. At the roots of the understanding of the situatedness of the characters is the consideration that liquid society is increasingly more individualistic, even when it comes to human relationships. According to Bauman, relationships in the liquid society are founded on the idea of the network. As he states, it is important not to confuse the network with a net: one is “a swirl of roads to glide over”,³⁵⁵ the other is a cage – in the network everybody follows their own trajectories, in the net you are locked in one place.

In such a world made of loose and ever-changing connections children can only function as private individuals, deprived of any organic connection with their country, city, social group, even families. So that, what emerges from the novels when evaluating the characters within their socio-economic context, is the lack of a collective dimension to sustain or direct growth. As voiced by Simona Vinci in an interview, the greatest problem of our society is:

La paura. L'individualismo. Sarà banale dirlo, ma è così. Aver distrutto il senso della 'comunità' e la cosa più terribile che ci sia stata fatta in questi ultimi decenni. E ammiro tutte le persone (e sono comunque tante) che questo spirito cercano di tenerlo vivo come possono, anche nei posti più difficili e 'degradati'.³⁵⁶

Bauman sees this increasing individualism as a result of becoming *homo oeconomicus*, - “that lonely, self-concerned and self-centred economic actor”³⁵⁷ that is the other side of the *homo consumens*, the consumer. These new individuals privilege immediate pleasure, personal gain and rationality over social bonds and collective justice. Also, they live isolated in their homes or within dispersed urban spaces, what Bauman calls the “mass industry of strangers”³⁵⁸ which we have observed in *Certi bambini* and *I bambini delle rose*. The understanding of the city as a gathering of strangers is the result of a capitalist pattern that refuses to absorb and assimilate those who are not perceived as belonging to that place, promoting mutual estrangements and disconnection.

This individualisation takes the shape of a particular “mixophobia”, especially when it comes to urban environments. This is a reaction to the heterogeneity of people and

³⁵⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: on the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity press, 2003), p. 59.

³⁵⁶ *Intervista a Simona Vinci* by Mirko Roglia, for *Mumble*, 21 May 2011, available online <http://www.mumbleduepunti.it/site/index.php/2011/05/05-2011-intervista-a-simona-vinci/>.

³⁵⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: on the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity press, 2003), p. 69.

³⁵⁸ Bauman also explains that “strangers are not a modern invention, but strangers who remain strangers for a long time to come, even in perpetuity, are”.

lifestyles now inhabiting globalised cities, so that mixophobia manifests itself in the drive towards establishing “islands of sameness amidst the sea of variety and difference”³⁵⁹ that overall results in a disintegration of shared communal living. These different groups are uninterested in translating different universes of meaning and in negotiating shared spaces, preferring to arrest the fluidity of the environment into silos of sameness, establishing small units of “we” that in turn create homogeneous and isolated communities. But because these aggregations are based on the fear for otherness and not on true solidarity, even within their boundaries they are constituted by individualistic drives. Bauman explains that the roots of mixophobia “are sunk deep into the existential condition of contemporary men and women born and bred in the deregulated, individualised fluid world of accelerated and diffuse change”.³⁶⁰ Therefore, there is neither internally nor externally that fusion of horizons that is necessary to establish a collective life that can sustain the development of children.

When looked through the lenses of a world ruled by economy, elements such as solidarity, compassion, mutual help and sympathy are suspended in the pursuit of self-interest both in cities, in the countryside and in enclosed settings. There are few physical and metaphorical spaces where residents are neither strangers nor objects of use and consumption, but rather fellows. According to Bauman, these spaces become places of *anarchy*, because an alternative type of social order is established, where new forms of *communitas* (as sites of human togetherness) see people living with mutual care, establishing human bonds and sharing responsibility, even in “degraded places”. This is for example what the characters in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* or in *Io non ho paura* try to establish, in order to go back to that collective dimension that is inexistent outside their circle of peers, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Yet, these attempts to establish a sense of community are nullified by the dominant tendency within the liquid society to treat other humans as objects, to use them and judge them according to a notion of individualistic value. This is what happens to Rosario and Nico, who are both exploited, but also to Michele and Martina, because of the interference of the external world in their adventures. While the array of possibilities has widened in the liquid society, the collective support for identity formation has decreased. If we go back in assessing the support that the characters in these novels receive by social models

³⁵⁹ Ibid. (Bauman) p. 111.

³⁶⁰ Ibid. (Bauman) p. 115.

and predicaments, it emerges clearly that these children all face fates of isolation and individualisation.

German theorist Ulrich Beck's concept of individualisation (1992) remains one of the most influential within youth studies; sharing the same premises as Zygmunt Bauman of a modernity made of much more diversified life-patterns, he specifically focuses on young people's situation within this new social asset. He argues that traditional institutions such as the nuclear family, school, religion and so on are no longer key agents of social reproduction:

The individual is indeed removed from traditional commitments and support relationships, but exchanges them for the constraints of existence in the labor market and as a consumer, with the standardization and control they contain. The place of *traditional ties* and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by *secondary* agencies and institutions which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashion, social policy, economic cycles and markets, contrary to the image of individual control which establishes itself in consciousness.³⁶¹

This means that young people no longer see possible futures ahead of them, and are left in a state of ambivalence; they have more choices, but they are also blamed directly if they do not succeed. In this context of individualisation, any decision has to be taken with lightness and agility, to be able to quickly adapt to the changing circumstances, but simultaneously the responsibility of the decision often paralyses action. Once individuals are estranged from traditional commitments, supports and relationships, they start revolving around their own egos, reproducing this isolation both in their personal and communal lives. As explained by sociologists Furlong and Cartmel:

Individuals are forced to negotiate a set of risks which impinge on all aspects of their daily lives, yet the intensification of individualism means that crises are perceived as individual shortcomings rather than the outcome of processes which are largely outside the control of individuals...Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems

³⁶¹ Beck cited in Steven Miles, *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 58.

through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure.³⁶²

As a result, what Beck calls the “risk” society is a far more pessimistic society, because it shifts the focus on preventing the negative aspects of modernisation rather than on pursuing personal success, as in industrial societies. This is especially true when young people are not supported because they are structurally separated, culturally distinct or spatially segregated in risk environments, so that it is not rare to succumb to disenchantment and refusal as seen in these novels. How to develop a consciousness of oneself within a society that is increasingly more individualised demands a further discussion of the topic of agency.

2. Structure and Agency

Underpinning questions of the relationship between characters and society are issues related to agency and structure. Up until the 1990s, youth studies emphasised the role of structural barriers and enablers in youth transitions to adulthood, and only with the rise of postmodern perspectives individual agency was given much greater prominence. Today many researchers lean towards a hybrid model that recognises that young people “make key decisions within contexts that constrain choices” so that “agency is bounded”.³⁶³ Social structures are still decisive for the nature of opportunities available to the individual at a given time, so that “the assumptions embedded in cultures can provide agency or reinforce barriers”.³⁶⁴

Coming of age involves pursuing opportunities leading to self-improvement in a variety of areas, so that young people need to be considered active social agents, who participate in processes of constructing knowledge and identity, but also agency for their present and future. As such, it implies the development and exercise of agentic capabilities, to shape one’s life course but also to transition to adulthood as the age of independence. Agency is indeed the capacity to choose and determine one’s own pathway, within the limits of a given context. In this respect, there is a collective dimension in how social structures direct young people’s experiences, but also an individual dimension linked to personal choices, attitudes and desires. For example, the inequality that Nico and

³⁶² Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives* (McGraw Hill, Open University Press, [1997] 2007), p. 114.

³⁶³ Andy Furlong, *Youth Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 33.

³⁶⁴ *Ibidem* (Furlong).

Rosario experience when it comes to social determinants of class and ethnicity is a crucial factor when it comes to achieving agency.

Therefore, a first consideration when it comes to empowerment pertains to literary spaces, seen as representations of specific social settings. As seen, the spaces presented in these novels are far from being the empowering ones of the *Bildungsroman*, fertile of opportunities generated by the dynamic, if challenging society of the late 19th century. The space is not even the typical setting of adventurous coming of age: exotic islands, secret gardens, immense rivers with their promises of freedom; nor it is the safe haven of home or school, which are either absent or unreliable institutions.

The spaces portrayed in these six novels instead echo the New York experienced by Holden Caulfield, a place paralysed and senseless, filled with meaningless wonderings and awful discoveries, with potential trauma nestled in every corner for a hero unable to make sense of himself, of the world. For example, the space of the city, for both Rosario and Nico, casts lights on an urban sprawl in which the characters are usually deeply isolated, despite the number of encounters and adventures that the chronotope of the road naturally encourages. The implicit concern is that the characters in these novels reflect how growth is constrained and formed by their location, but also how young people try to actively make sense of their own space.

The second consideration is that the quest for identity also passes through the possibility and capacity of affirming oneself through personal choices. Within the liquid society, structure and agency are tied to the dichotomy of freedom and support. According to Bauman, freedom derives from the ability to balance wishes, imagination and the ability to act.³⁶⁵ The stories of the *Bildungsroman* were empowering because the characters learned exactly how to achieve this balance. Those young adults considered their vocations and desires in the light of the possibilities unlocked by a social dynamism. The overall setting enabled them to exercise a new form of social imagination, and provided them with the ability to negotiate what they wanted.

When it comes to the characters of contemporary coming-of-age stories, this balance is much more precarious; wishes are often unrealisable, social imagination is constrained by an environment that is perceived to be hostile (when not barren of opportunities) and the ability to act is hindered by the ineptitude or isolation of the individual. While recognising the agency these characters have when it comes to constructing their

³⁶⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 17.

identities, the possibilities are bounded by their physical and metaphorical location. So that the divisions of class, gender and race continue to have a significant impact in imposing constraints which are themselves often reinforced by individual limitations.

In *I bambini delle rose* for example, Nico's intentions are cut down by his agency to realise them because of his multiple marginal positions within both his family and society. In *Certi bambini* Rosario's search for identity is tied to amorality and to the influence of the criminal organization he is affiliated with. In *Dei bambini non si sa niente* Martina's actions result in the premature death of her friend, which suspends her growth in a limbo of incapacity for further action. A unique place in this context is provided by Michele of *Io non ho paura*, which presents a character that grows morally and emotionally, achieving a good degree of autonomy and self-fulfilment despite the constraints imposed on him by the adult society.

The more the environment is liquid, the more being deprived of agency affects the character when dealing with his/her coming of age, so that for example the alienation that the protagonist of *Zoo* suffers is connected to her lack of agency, which in turn results in the struggle to realise maturity despite her age. For these characters, overcoming subjective fragmentation and attaining agency is a key, and to different extents, unresolved element of growth.

This goes back to Bauman's concept of *Homo Eligens* that the sociologist uses to further discuss identity in postmodernity. According to Bauman, *Homo Eligens* is destined to never find answers, lost in a liquefied society that creates ephemeral desires and opportunities, thus generating a "stably unstable 'I'", complete incomplete, definitively indefinite and authentically unauthentic".³⁶⁶ This is very different from the *Bildungsroman*, which gave the protagonists an active involvement in their own growth when conjoined with self-reflection, all in order to reach full integration with adult society. Also, the society of the classic *Bildung* was deeply entangled with religious values that provided a specific view of the world, addressing the intrinsic tension towards an absolute which transcends limited everyday existence. Today's liquid society has lost such grounding on religious values that this tension towards spirituality often slides into interior chaos, especially in western societies that have also lost the connection to other sources of spirituality, such as nature.

³⁶⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 33.

Regardless of the narratorial choice, and however stylized the tone, what emerges from these novels is a general “fragilità del soggetto narrante”³⁶⁷ stuck in an irreconcilable tension between childhood and adulthood and torn between the different forces of being and becoming. By portraying unattainable or limited agency, these novels contest the humanist model of agency which sees human action as able to transcend its material context, and hence people as individuals with a capacity to act reflective and purposively for self-alteration or remaking the world.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Raffaele Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità: Dove va la narrativa italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), pp. 87-88.

³⁶⁸ See Stevens cited in Ebony Daley-Carey, “Testing the Limits: Postmodern Adolescent Identities in Contemporary Coming of Age stories” in *Children’s Literature in Education* (2018) 49, pp. 467-488.

CHAPTER IV: THE MIRROR OF OTHERNESS

As previously seen, the changes brought about by liquid society have determined profound transformations that impacted not only economic and cultural processes of growth, but also strongly influenced the structuring of social relationships. In particular, both the collective and familial life progressively eroded, moving from wider sets of relationship in communities and patriarchal families towards disrupted nuclear families, and turning communities into masses of strangers. Yet, the establishment of a relationship with otherness is a necessary milestone to become an integrated part of the social world, because it entails the recognition that it is only through otherness that individuals are able to overcome their solipsism and make sense of their selfhood.

For adolescents, part of the coming of age is to interiorize social norms, to define their position and form their affiliations. This is why this chapter investigates primarily the role of wider society, role models, adults and peers in both the construction of the character's identity and for their impact on the process of growth. Otherness is also a necessary requisite to develop a moral self, as for Ricoeur it is about understanding that

the other is not condemned to remain a stranger but can become my counterpart, that is, someone who, like me, says "I." The resemblance based on the pairing of flesh with flesh works to reduce a distance, to bridge a gap, in the very place where it creates a dissymmetry. That is what is signified by the adverb "like": like me, the other thinks, desires, enjoys, suffers.³⁶⁹

According to the foundational work of Stanley Hall (1904), during adolescence individuals undergo two different processes: on one hand they grow up socially by discovering the rules of society, but on the other they also grow up biologically, so that identity formation also depends on the transformations of the body.³⁷⁰ As philosopher Adriana Cavarero says, "uniqueness is an embodied uniqueness - this and not another"³⁷¹ and is about acknowledging that the "who" has a face, a gaze, a voice, a sex.³⁷² So that we

³⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 338.

³⁷⁰ Maurizio Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 47.

³⁷¹ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 21.

³⁷² From the 1980s, Adriana Cavarero became part of *Diotima*, the women's philosophical community at the University of Verona, engaged in "thinking the sexual difference" by exploring themes as the symbolic order of the mother, women's authority, politics and power, thus making an important contribution to Italian feminist studies. From the end of the 1990s, Cavarero has devoted her attention to the philosophical problem of identity, building on the theory of sexual difference and drawing from Hannah Arendt's political theory.

are not speaking of the growth of a subject in general, abstract terms, but rather of a particular man or woman. This is why this chapter secondarily looks at the body, especially when it becomes the site of cultural norms and expectations connected to age, gender or race, as it is through the encounter with otherness that key tensions of belonging, conformation and difference arise. To be gendered for example is to be already imbued in a number of societal expectations that clearly impacts the sense of self these protagonists create, as I will discuss in regards of *Certi bambini*.

By focusing on the impact of otherness on the process of growth, the first section will discuss the ambivalent belonging of some characters to different statuses and groups. It is a given that adolescent years are already a liminal state of life, made of multiple sites of belonging in between childhood and adulthood. In this ambivalent state, what Victor Turner calls the state of being ‘betwixt and between’,³⁷³ young people face anxiety, loss, despair, fears and a changing self-image, before getting to an understanding of what is needed to control or neutralise these feelings. In the case of Rosario in *Certi bambini*, the character finds himself in an ambiguous position between different gender stereotypes represented by two social groups. So that both adults and peers challenge the child character, who is called upon to decide between a sort of contemporary fluidity and the fixity of traditional gender roles.

This section also discusses Postman’s idea of “adultization” of children, especially with regard to *Dei bambini non si sa niente*. By looking at the use of pornography and its impact on the sexual development of the children, I discuss how “the body itself is also an effect of cultural historical activity, a site for the construction of meaning”³⁷⁴ and what happens when adult practises invade the space of childhood games. In this novel indeed, the ambivalence is between the sexualisation of children and their prepubescent bodies. This ambivalence is also translated in blurred boundaries between violence and sex both in *Certi bambini* and *Dei bambini non si sa niente*.

The second section looks more closely to otherness as a set of different relationships with peers and adults. Even if in different ways, *I bambini delle rose* and *Io non ho paura*

Differently from Ricoeur, she considers the embodied identity as sexed, starting from name giving at birth and proceeding to explore the crucial intersections between gender, politics and narration.

³⁷³ Turner talks of a “state of transition” regarded as “a process, a becoming and in the case of rites de passage, even a transformation – here an apt analogy would be water in process of being heated to boiling point, or a pupa changing from grub to moth”. See Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967, pp. 93-111.

³⁷⁴ Jenny Hockey and Allison James, *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependence in the Life Course* (London, Sage: 1993), p. 83.

present a strong sense of peer solidarity. This solidarity is expressed as a tentative escape from the commodification that Nico and Ly undergo in *I bambini delle rose*, so that the two children try to rewrite the symbolic exchanges they have amongst themselves and with adults. Instead, in *Io non ho paura*, the friendship between the protagonist Michele and the kidnapped boy Filippo passes through the establishment of the other as an alter ego; physically and metaphorically a mirrored image of the protagonists, under the sign of a shared victimization that forces the child into action.

Lastly, the adult world is discussed in the form of the emblematic relationship between mothers and daughters in *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater*. In these two novels the theme of otherness is strongly connected to the idea of embodiment, as it links ideas of abjection, of birth giving and death with the concept of motherhood. In this sense, not only does it present an interesting female perspective on coming of age, but it also challenges the formative role of mothers when it comes to establishing one's autonomous and coherent identity.

1. Ambivalent belongings

As discussed in the first chapter, the process of identity formation can be understood as an effort of self-unification,³⁷⁵ that passes through the integration of composite aspects of one's selfhood. This frames identity as never conducive only to a single quality but to a multitude of aspects that are coexistent, but also plural over time as the individual grows. Especially during coming-of-age years, the struggle is to reconcile such multiplicity into a coherent sense of self.

According to Turner, the liminality of being betwixt and between is inherently a condition of "ambiguity and paradox", and the communal aspect of rites of passage should help individuals navigate these paradoxes by building strong relationships and learning from role models. De Silva's *Certi bambini* presents two different aspects of Rosario's identity that are perceived as impossible to be taken on simultaneously, that is the dichotomy between feminine and masculine. This dichotomy is embodied at different levels of otherness; it is connected to specific characters but it also represents the norms defining the world of Casa Letizia and the one of Camorra. So that, adhering to one or another has a great impact on Rosario's identity and opportunities for growth.

³⁷⁵ Vincent Descombes, *Puzzling Identity* (Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 24.

Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* also presents a status of ambiguity, that in this case is connected to a precocious sexual adultization of children. The entire novel plays with the ambiguity of children whose bodies are prepuberal, yet engaged in sexual practices that are not considered acceptable for children. Against the natural corporeal development and sexual exploration typical of childhood years, the use of pornographic magazines as an inspiration for the children's games bring into the narration an adult dimension that connects sexuality with violence. *Dei bambini non si sa niente* presents this ambiguity within the space of peer relationships, bringing to the forefront gender roles, especially when it comes to understanding the interaction between boys and girls.

1.1 Growing up between masculine and feminine worlds

As sociologist Seidler explains, masculinity provides a form of identification based on understanding that being a man is opposite to being a woman, therefore traditionally defined against the threat of the feminine.³⁷⁶ As seen in the previous chapter, Rosario is growing up in a district with a high level of criminality, and his position is criminalised by social stigma but also by his affiliation. In this sense, male identity is bound up with larger social narratives and expectations, and to grow up as a "man" requires a strong rejection of the feminine element that is constitutive of the self. *Certi bambini* provides an interesting insight on how Rosario's perception of these two aspects are informed by society, in terms of peers and adult expectations.

Lara Santoro argues that this novel presents Rosario torn between two worlds, the one of femininity embodied by *Casa Letizia* (the parochial community for teenage single mothers where he meets Caterina) and the discourse of extreme, toxic masculinity embodied by the *camorra*. According to Santoro, two different masculine models are presented to Rosario: Santino, a young adult volunteering in *Casa Letizia*, and Damiano, a *camorrista*, and they are the primary means to influence the growth of Rosario.

While the importance of these two characters is undeniable (as I will discuss at some length by building on Lara Santoro's work), by placing the protagonists' growth within a more complex framework (encompassing Casa Letizia and the Camorra but also peer relationships and social expectations) the narrative shows a coming of age which is dependent on wider external influences, allowing to expand the discussion from solely

³⁷⁶ Victor Seidler, *Embodying identities: Culture, Difference and Social Theory* (Policy press, 2010), p. 21.

gender stereotypes towards agency in life choices. For example, around Rosario there is a narrow group of children who also spend their days in the streets, involved in small crimes and supporting the criminal organisation in exchange for a bit of money and protection. Despite all these characters around Rosario, his transition from childhood to adulthood happens primarily in isolation; he does not have a family, his peers are guided by survival rather than solidarity and the only role model he has is Damiano, his criminal mentor.

The first clear opposition between masculine and femininity starts by showing Rosario's relationship with the two male characters who are representative of the two worlds. Rosario is drawn by Santino into doing some voluntary work at *Casa Letizia*, a place that is portrayed as a maternal and domestic community for young single mothers. In this place Rosario is engaged in activities that are considered typically womanly, such as helping cooking and cleaning, not dissimilarly to what Rosario already does at home, where he is the sole and primary carer for his old grandmother.

The 25-year-old Santino is described as very attuned to his feminine side, being the example of a healthy, vulnerable masculinity that is inspirational yet confusing for Rosario, who gets star struck every time he meets him, trembling "come una femmina innamorata" (45). Santino, whose name is chosen to be representative of his good nature, embodies all that is pure, uncorrupted and radically different from the inhabitant of the district where Rosario lives.

Tutte le volte che lo vedeva passare, bello, alto sempre di corsa, Rosario perdeva la pace. [...] Santino, così profumato di doccia, Santino sempre così indaffarato. Santino che sapeva di femmine, lui chissà dove andava, quanti posti belli conosceva dove sì che ci si divertiva. Lui non aveva niente da spartire con quel condominio a quattro scale. Lui usciva dal portone e subito poteva scegliere.

Lui, quando sorrideva, sorrideva proprio. (45)

Santino represents not only an alternative model of masculinity but even the possibility of a different life, so much so that Rosario himself starts feeling "protetto, garantito. Come se, dal momento in cui Santino era andato a bussare a casa sua, gli fosse stato promesso un altro futuro, e con un posto riservato" (59). Being together with the girls at *Casa Letizia* and even more with Caterina, Rosario gets attuned to his vulnerabilities as he recognises when, during his long flashback, the sole memory of Caterina makes him "sente tutto il suo essere che si indebolisce, che diventa generoso e gentile, che dice sì e sì" (40).

This ambiguity is also expressed in terms of an impasse between two social and emotional poles, one of care and vulnerability and one of violence and abuse. The clash emerges when he discovers that Santino and Caterina are lovers; because they both belong to the sphere of care and vulnerability, Rosario is unable to cope with the fact that they have a sexual relationship. This is what shatters the idealised image that Rosario has of Santino, who suddenly becomes a betrayer and antagonist. After the discovery, Santino's caring, good-hearted attitude is no longer charged with a positive emotional element, instead it becomes something to be mocked for; significantly Rosario calls Santino "girlish" – "femmenè" – in front of Caterina once he refuses to engage in a fight.³⁷⁷

Rosario's ambivalent belonging reaches a definitive crisis once Caterina dies. This is a crucial moment in Rosario's growth, because it brings into direct conflict the two symbolic worlds to reveal sharply the inadequacy of both: one too weak, and the other too cruel. Moving past the mere feminine versus masculine perspective, it emerges that, being deprived of coordinates for moral action, Rosario turns instinctively to the code that dominates the society in which he lives, that is the one of violence and vengeance. So that, when he tries to kill the doctor he believes is responsible for Caterina's death, not only does he reject the transformative potential of *Casa Letizia*, but he embraces the values of that social group he believes can provide him agency within this society. This is because, as De Silva himself explains, "qualsiasi bambino è banderuola, nel senso che il bambino è il prodotto di una cultura che indirizza la sua crescita in una direzione o in un'altra. Rosario è il prodotto della sua terra, della vita che lo circonda, dove le categorie etiche non hanno alcun senso".³⁷⁸

Indeed, in the streets Rosario is part of a gang of children that are embedded in the fabric of a criminal mindset, which includes an aggressive masculinity nurtured by misogyny and homophobia. In the streets the children often use "ricchione" as an offensive slur³⁷⁹, engage in random acts of dominance and show a general disdain for

³⁷⁷ According to Allison Cooper's analysis of *Certi Bambini*, "Rosario's decision to affiliate himself with the Camorra is conditioned by an Oedipal logic" where Rosario is a wayward filial figure who wishes to sleep with Caterina, the mother, casting Santino in a fatherly role." (349). See Allison Cooper, "Growing up Camorrista: Antonio and Andrea Frazzi's 'Certi Bambini'" in *Mafia Movies: A Reader* (ed) Dana Renga, (University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 346-353.

³⁷⁸ Interview to Diego De Silva by Donata Ferraro for fucinemute.it (2004). Online at <https://www.fucinemute.it/2004/08/certi-bambini/>.

³⁷⁹ "Dietro il guardrail della tangenziale. Tirata la conta, il primo era Brasile, subito dopo Rosario. Venturino e Matteo potevano scegliere l'ordine. Alla cieca, uno scatto fino all'altra parte. Se si muore si muore, e chi non si butta è ricchione." (79) Interestingly enough, the trespassing of the highway represents the need to overcome condition of liminality for these children; in this sense, moving to the other side of the road is a ritual of initiation for the group, to prove the readiness to be considered men.

feminine traits. According to Lara Santoro, who reads the novel according to the Freudian-Jungian myth of masculinity,³⁸⁰ the type of initiation Rosario undergoes in this specific society requests him to reject the sphere of femininity to become “uomo d’onore” – a man of honour. She argues that Rosario has to move away from the attributes embodied by *Casa Letizia* in order to develop the qualities requested by a criminal society that has a very clear, intoxicating and normative idea of manliness.

For this reason, in line with the genre of mafia narratives of other works such as the popular *Gomorra* (2006) by Saviano, *Certi bambini* emphasises the idea of an initiation to masculinity that is evident when analysing the type of education that Damiano provides the child. The *camorrista* has indeed the task of modelling Rosario’s selfhood in compliance with the rules of the criminal world, so that he could be accepted as part of their community. Damiano, who according to Lara Santoro is the “phallic” man opposed to the “feminine” Santino, reveals an obsessive concern for being “n’ommo”. Teachings as “se ti fai mettere sotto da una femmina, nun si’ n’ ommo. Si’ ricchione” (17) go in parallel with lessons on how to use a gun or cover the traces of a crime.

In this respect, Damiano is not simply a mentor to Rosario, but he also represents a system of values that the protagonist is in search of, providing a model of masculinity that lacks in Rosario’s life. *The camorrista* teaches the moral code and the specific pattern of behaviours that is expected not only of an apprentice, but also of any young man worthy of respect in the criminal world: “Rosario aveva fatto un bel sorriso convinto. E aveva provato tutto un orgoglio nel vedere che Damiano con lui non si limitava a insegnargli come si tiene la pistola” (17). In this sense, he becomes “the arbiter of identity”³⁸¹ and a substitutive father figure bearer of a specific gendered knowledge to be passed onto Rosario.

Damiano’s discourse on masculinity passes through violence, by explicitly linking male attributes with a gun: “Ricordati. Insieme alla pistola si cacciano pure le palle. E se

³⁸⁰ In her doctoral dissertation, Lara Santoro discusses how the act of separation from the mother is necessary to establish a male identity in *Certi bambini*. In reference to *The Cultural Myth of Masculinity* (2003), she quotes that “Traditional psychoanalytical theory addresses masculine identity development, that is, how boys become men, by positing a process of disidentification. [...] Disidentification is described as a two-pronged process whereby (1) a boy must renounce emotional ties to his primary caregiver (traditionally held to be his mother), and (2) he must counter identify with his father or another male role model. These developmental tasks are held as necessary steps toward emotional and physical autonomy as well as being necessary for proper gender identity development”. See Lara Santoro, *I bambini e la Mafia: rappresentazioni letterarie e cinematografiche dell’infanzia nel genere-mafia del XXI secolo*, Doctoral dissertation (University of New Brunswick Rutgers, 2011), p. 27.

³⁸¹ Lara Santoro, *I bambini e la Mafia: rappresentazioni letterarie e cinematografiche dell’infanzia nel genere-mafia del XXI secolo*, Doctoral dissertation (University of New Brunswick Rutgers, 2011).

non cogli al primo colpo, è meglio che te ne vai” (131). This image reinforces the stereotype that communicating feelings and emotions is, especially for young men, a sign of weakness and a threat to their gendered identity. According to sociologist Seidler, this leads children to suppress an important part of their emotional development in order to conform to a fixed model.³⁸²

Through this educational praxis, which aims to shape Rosario’s identity into the one of a ruthless baby-killer, Damiano conveys the stereotypes of a culture of masculinity characterized by audacity in exceeding limits, refusal of femininity and a propensity to violence. But as said, Damiano not only plays on Rosario’s search for an identity, but he also provides him with a larger, almost mythological belonging rooted in the Camorra, with its emphasis on strength, courage and despise for vulnerability.

Even recognising that in the last decades the concept of masculinity has suffered a crisis that has lead towards a less monolithic and totalising idea of masculine identity³⁸³, as Anna Antoniazzi has highlighted, if compared to the complex transformations that female identities have undergone in the last century, literature has very much portrayed male identities as limited to the specular paradigms of the winner/loser. As the coming-of-age story is traditionally rooted in the masculine model of heroism, identity formation is generally depicted in terms of a young protagonist’s ability to confront personal challenges and, ultimately, to successfully overcome them. Male heroes are expected to be “always up to the situation, able to face trials, overcome obstacles, constantly keep the attention and control over everything, even at the risk of legitimizing actions that are not entirely appropriate”.³⁸⁴

Certi bambini presents a masculinity that is adherent to a rigid patriarchal model, but at the same time the novel problematizes the winner/loser dichotomy by challenging the very idea of victory itself. Rosario is able to overcome the challenge that the story presents him; he is mentored to grow up as a killer, he successfully completes his rite of passage by committing his first homicide, living up to the masculine model of identity

³⁸² The culture of individualism that permeates society, “not only does it make children feel unease with themselves but it produces a competitive culture with an intense fear of failure. Often this will play out differently with boys who feel that they have much to lose if their masculine identities are threatened”. See Seidler, *Embodying identities: Culture, Difference and Social Theory* (Policy Press, 2010), p. 125.

³⁸³ In the last decades cultural, queer and feminist studies have confirmed the wide impression that masculinity is suffering a crisis in contemporary western society; while there is no agreement on the nature of this crisis, there is a shared understanding of the inadequacy of masculine cultural models, with scholars advocating for an understanding of masculinity and male identity as plural and nuanced. In this respect, see Elisabeth Badinter, *XY: On Masculine Identity*, Columbia University Press, 1995.

³⁸⁴ Anna Antoniazzi, “Born to win: Children’s literature and male models” in *Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, 14, 1, 2019, p. 14.

imposed on him. Yet, the story nullifies the most significant aspect of identity formation by showing that Rosario has remained disconnected from other people and from himself. Despite facing challenges that require a mature understanding of the world, he remains obtuse, unable to emotionally participate in the world and to establish healthy relationships with others.

In conclusion, Rosario is trapped in between opposing narratives of gender and gendered expectations, embodied by Santino and Damiano. He oscillates between the desire for self-determination, that is provided by the criminal world, and the need for socialisation provided by *Casa Letizia*. He explores both sets of narratives, lastly privileging the stereotypically hypermasculine environment of *la camorra*; as a result, he adheres to a biography which denies his emotional and social needs.

However, Rosario's choice is not ideological in motivation but personal, emotional and opportunistic – it underlines the realistic absence of alternatives, responding to what Curnutt describes as a dramatic depiction of teen amorality that

enhances the supposition that modern youths are so unfeeling that they can indulge in random acts of violence, without registering the consequences. Lacking ethical discrimination, contemporary teens find little purpose in antisocial behaviour beyond fleeting titillation: previous generations of teens envisioned sex and drugs as forms of gnosis that transcended the sterile dictates of adult culture, whereas these young people desire only a reprieve from boredom.³⁸⁵

As said, Rosario's identity is emblematically unfinished, despite the presence of a conclusive rite of passage: he remains unable to achieve self-determination, nor he is able to free himself from the model of criminal life. In this sense, at the end of the novel Rosario assumes a criminal role that is normalised within a society dominated by the law of the strongest. This representation makes Rosario the antithesis of Rousseau's child, showing a character that is a victim of a merciless society, but who also enjoys the power and the prestige of the camorra, resulting in a candid portray of a layered character in his failed effort of self-unification. By exploring this ambiguous belonging, *Certi bambini* not only presents a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, but also explores the idea of being suspended between states, portraying a character that grows but remains unchanged.

³⁸⁵ Kirk Curnutt, "Teenage wasteland: Coming-of-age novels in the 1980s and 1990" in *Critique*, Fall 2001, p. 98.

Instead of reaffirming growth as an empowering process that resolves ambiguities, this novel actively undermines any sentimental view of formation.

1.2 Sexual Adultism: Violence and Bodies

Another type of ambiguous belonging is presented by *Dei bambini non si sa niente* by Simona Vinci, articulated around the perception of children's body and sexuality. Representations of child sexuality and violence have been rare within coming-of-age stories, where the desire to dictate certain models of childhood sexual innocence has been a defining feature of the genre. According to Jenny Hockley and Allison James, this is rooted in a cult of childhood innocence that has for long refused children's sexuality.³⁸⁶ The literature of the last century has slowly subverted the status quo, by presenting increasing more complex, disruptive and provocative images of children and youth's sexuality in several novels across different geographies, such as Cocteau's *Les enfants terribles* (1929), Morante's *L'isola di Arturo* (1957) and McEwan's *Cement Garden* (1978). Almost all these novels had a focus on sexual awakening and on the depiction of sexual relationships often mantled with violence, even before the wide catalogue of promiscuous protagonists belonging to the Italian "gioventù cannibale".

Similarly to *Certi bambini*, Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente* presents a status of ambiguity, that in this case is connected to a precocious sexual adultization of children. In the novel Martina and her friends engage in games with increasingly extreme sexual connotations, undisturbed and uncontrolled by adults. The leader is the older Mirko, who is willing to use his influence on the younger kids to express his frustrated teenage sexuality. Morena Marsilio analyses how Martina is described as going through a process of prepubescent metamorphosis, that is both physical and psychical, as exemplified in the ritual of the bath:

Fino all'anno scorso il bagno a Martina lo faceva sua madre. [...] Del suo corpo non si chiedeva niente, non si guardava mai. [...] Adesso è diverso. Il bagno lo fa da sola, con la porta chiusa a chiave nonostante gli urli del padre e le insistenze della madre.

³⁸⁶ They discuss that, as Foucault (1979) noted, this repression dates back to the 18th century, when children's bodies underwent the disciplining power of surveillance, which created distinctions between what adult bodies could do and children couldn't. The sentimental view of the children connected to innocence and purity was already challenged by psychoanalysis, once Freud in 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905) defined children as sexual beings. See Hockey and James, *Growing Up and Growing Old: Ageing and Dependence in the Life Course* (London, Sage: 1993), p. 69

[...] Il suo corpo magro esplorato con sospetto davanti allo specchio. La pelle trasparente, le ossa sporgenti, il ventre appena rotondo, le gambe magre, il triangolo morbido di carne liscia, senza peli, tra le cosce, quel triangolo tagliato che ha ossessivamente riprodotto, disegnandolo con un pennarello pentel a punta grossa, sotto la gonna di tutte le bambole. (23-24)

Both girls and boys are not yet sexually mature, yet moved by that natural, instinctual curiosity that is constitutive of the process of growth. Aside from parental figures and adults' surveillance in general,³⁸⁷ the children discover their own bodies as sexualized entities, through self-exploration (42), roleplaying and even by spying on adults' magazines (39). The ambivalence is therefore firstly played on the level of physiological development and it is connected to the liminal, prepubescent age of the characters, who are all in between 10 and 15 years of age.

In addition, following Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body,³⁸⁸ this ambivalence is characterised by bodies which are incomplete and imperfect, defined by a constitutive inter-corporeal dialogism. What Bakhtin defines as the grotesque body is indeed the body realistically portrayed in its relationship with the world and with other bodies. Therefore, instead of representing the individual body as self-sufficient and totally realised, the body is explored in its precarity, in its dependence on the world, in a historical dimension that links life and death, past, present and future. Against the dominant ideology of a unique, complete body, this novel presents ambivalent bodies which are simultaneously new and familiar, active and passive, which are connotated by being not individual bodies, but bodies amongst other bodies. In this sense, otherness is embodied by peers, metaphorically and physically, so that the boundaries between selfhood and otherness become almost meaningless.

Quello che rendeva le cose meno nette era che nel momento preciso in cui erano nudi gli uni di fronte agli altri diventavano uguali. I corpi si assomigliavano, femmine e

³⁸⁷ Cfr. Dagradi, cited in Morena Marsilio, "Immaginari infantili negli anni Zero" in *Richard&Piggle* n. 24/2016, pp. 158-167.

³⁸⁸ Bakhtin observed how ancient motifs of identity formation was connected to a spiritualised and sublimated idea of the body. This was in contrast with folklore narratives which emphasised the sphere of the sexual and vital body functions (copulation, eating, drinking, defecating), often using humour, parody or grotesque representations. According to Bakhtin, it was Rabelais, drawing from his experience as a physician, who brought back the centrality of the human corporeality with all its depth and complexity, establishing a new materiality in which the human being is "no longer symbolic but material". See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), pp. 170-171.

maschi erano diversi, sì, ma per un unico dettaglio. Tutti avevano il torace piatto e liscio e i fianchi stretti. Avevano la pelle liscia e tesa, senza ombre, grinze o peli. (56)

The body is grotesque in the children's perception, it is an ambiguous yet familiar entity. It can be understood by looking at it and touching it, as expressed by the 10-year-old Matteo, when he explores for the first time the girls' genitalia: "da vicino quell'architettura misteriosa di carne che si chiudeva e apriva con fessure e buchini nascosti e avvallamenti e curve e rigonfiamenti, a strati, gli era sembrata mostruosa [...] Aveva pensato che era strano, e poi che assomigliava a qualcosa che sapeva già" (60).

The central part of the novel is dominated by these sexual experiences, described vividly by Simona Vinci with evocative, sensorial and metaphorical images. I have already highlighted the importance of Martina's gaze on the landscape, but when it comes to the narration of sexuality all senses are actively involved; smell, taste and touch participate to this bodily form of knowledge. Matteo compares female masturbation with "la stessa sensazione di quando si mette un dito in bocca per leccare qualcosa, ad esempio l'impasto crudo delle torte" (60), while Martina describes the smell of her friends' bodies as "succo di limone salato, oppure di sugo di prugne maturo, appiccicoso [...] di animaletto, come il pelo dei cani bagnati o dei gatti a pelo lungo. Diverso da quello delle madri, dei grandi in genere" (61), "un odore selvatico, mescolato a quello dolce dello shampoo e dei saponi" (62). The skin has a different texture: "tenera e asciutta come la carta in certi punti, in altri ruvida, in altri ancora scivolosa e sguazzante" (62), making the body the key element of this coming of age.

As Bakhtin has observed, the grotesque body is characterized by being incomplete – it is portrayed as shredded, fragmented in pieces and in disproportioned parts; it is a body deformed, malleable, deprived of composure and modesty. The numerous descriptions of the children's bodies indeed proceed per segments, rarely providing an overall image but instead focusing on different details, as if zooming on different parts: "Il corpo sottile era abbronzato a metà: la parte superiore, corpo e braccia, color miele, le coscie, invece, bianco gesso, e i capezzoli due macchie piccole, come baci stampati col rossetto" (57). This fragmentation of the bodies also recalls a pornographic imaginary, which is all about parts rather than wholes.

In effect, these physical connotations are rarely assigned to one child's body in particular, but rather they are treated in general terms. This strategy allows Simona Vinci to soften the tones of an already overexplicit depiction of children's sexuality, by treating

their bodies as a unified, collective body to be gamified: “ridendo come pazzi di quel gioco cretino e bellissimo” (62). Significantly, the only character who is not participating in “questi giochi da bestioline” that is the smelling, licking and touching each other is Mirko, the 15-year-old, whose body is far too recognisable to be included into this idea of a multifaceted, shared and grotesque body: “Il suo corpo era troppo riconoscibile, lui aveva già ciuffi di pelo setoso sotto le ascelle e una linea lunga e stretta di peli castani che gli scendeva sulla pancia fino in fondo. Aveva un odore acido certe volte, già da adulto, troppo riconoscibile.” (62)

The ambivalent belonging of the characters results in a general confusion that is expressed by sensorial metaphors that foreground the body as the site of experience, so much that according to Argentieri, these children are “rappresentanti fedeli delle giovani generazioni il cui mondo interno si articola secondo un registro più di sensazioni che di emozioni”:³⁸⁹

C’era anche confusione, come quando si sta da soli nella propria stanza dopo che qualcuno è venuto a trovarti e ha toccato tutte le tue cose [...] Nella stanza resta l’odore di altri corpi, l’aria pesante dei respiri mescolati, le tracce di altre mani.

I corpi non sono come le stanze, non restano quasi mai tracce evidenti del passaggio di qualcuno, per la stessa cosa, anche senza lividi, o ferite, resta l’odore attaccato, il sudore mescolato, i segni dei baci, il sesso che si gonfia. E anche quando non resta niente di visibile, comunque c’è confusione. Dentro.

In quei pomeriggi al capannone, sentivano queste cose tutte insieme e non si facevano domande: stranezza, novità, familiarità e confusione, erano tutti frammenti della stessa materia. Una materia morbida e gommosa che si scioglieva dentro e li faceva sentire molli e assonnati. (60)

This sense of confusion and malleability entails a relationship with the uncomfortable collisions between abuse and consent, and between self-assertion and self-destruction – “Martina aggrappata a Mirko sullo scooter, con la sensazione sgradevole di aver perso qualcosa, di aver dimenticato qualcosa e di non poterci fare assolutamente niente” (44) – showing characters who are coming into a new understanding of their bodies without any idealization of sex, and without possessing any awareness of the consequences of their actions.

³⁸⁹ Argentieri, “Voci della Critica” for *L’indice*, 1997, n.11. Available online at <https://www.ibs.it/dei-bambini-non-si-sa-libro-simona-vinci/e/9788806146344>

While Martina is somehow more willing to experiment with these sexual games, echoing dreams and desires she already feels especially for Mirko, Greta instead is mostly silent, she participates almost passively in the games, in a way that makes her silence construed as consent in the eyes of the group. Despite their mature sexual experiences, Martina and Greta are still children, as expressed by the numerous descriptions of their body, therefore they have no mature understanding of the events and are often forced by Mirko to act without the capability of giving proper consent. For this reason, what could look like innocent games of children often feels like a violation for both boys and, even more, for girls.

In fact, these games are informed by Mirko, who imposes a constant exchange of partners which aims to prevent the forming of couples, and therefore the creation of exclusive emotional bonds among the children. However, as Ellen Berenberg observes, this apparent relational fluidity is confined within a “heteronormative context in which women are shared in a group context and male-on-male sex is absent”.³⁹⁰ The body is often in Vinci’s narratives “un territorio di guerra sul quale si combattono battaglie religiose, politiche, economiche”,³⁹¹ and in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* bodies are marked by scars, abrasions and wounds, what Grazia Menechella calls “corpi dissezionati”.³⁹²

Violence is indeed inextricably linked with sex in this novel, a violence that is self-inflicted, inflicted to others and by others, almost in an uncontrollable way. Exemplary is when Martina loses her virginity to Mirko, who abuses her in front of everybody despite her request to stop, with the justification that is just another game – “È un gioco” (78) – leaving Martina’s mind filled with images of death and scare: “Questo era l’amore allora. Pesci morti e uno strappo doloroso. E quattro facce sopra di lei che ridevano e la prendevano in giro” (78), soon dismissed by considering them childish thoughts.³⁹³ The

³⁹⁰ Ellen Neremberg, *Murder Made in Italy: Homicide, Media, and Contemporary Italian Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 220.

³⁹¹ As Simona Vinci declared in an interview: “Il corpo in effetti è il filo rosso che lega in certo modo tutte le cose che ho scritto. [...] Ci sono infiniti esempi di come oggi il corpo sia un territorio di guerra sul quale si combattono battaglie religiose, politiche, economiche.” See Elvira Grassi, *Simona Vinci: Dell’anima non si sa niente*, 2009, online at oblique.it. http://www.oblique.it/images/interviste/intervista_vinci.pdf

³⁹² In her analysis of Vinci’s collection of short stories *In tutti i sensi come l’amore* (1999), Grazia Menechella observes that “I corpi descritti da Vinci sono motivati e ossessionati da pulsioni fisiologiche (sesso e amore sono le più frequenti) anche se non manca la riflessione sulla sfera psicologica. Nella sfera affettiva e sessuale è il corpo a mandare segnali e a prendere decisioni.” See Grazia Menechella, “I corpi ‘a pezzi’ di Simona Vinci, Rocco Fortunato e Sandra Petrigiani” in *Italian Culture*, 20:1-2, 2002, pp. 135-147.

³⁹³ “Martina non capiva. Ma cosa c’era da capire. Erano corpi che giocavano insieme e lo strappo, i pesci morti, erano soltanto cose che doveva dimenticare. Cose che non c’entravano niente con lei, con Mirko, con le riviste, con questo posto. Cose da bambina” (79).

escalation of violence is directed by Mirko, who brings increasingly more extreme porn magazines to inspire their games, up to the point of discovering bondage and sadomasochistic practices. Mirko's character is "disturbed" as declared by Simona Vinci, so that "per lui più che una esperienza di erotismo, è di potere". Mirko cannot exercise this power in school, nor in family or with older girls, so that he turns to children to enforce a power that is legitimised by being the oldest peer.

This means that even if children are not immune from actions that are violent and sexual, sex and violence have specific adult-like connotations in this novel. Indeed, what starts as a "scoperta, che poi tutti fanno, dell'erotismo tra bambini" becomes a story of violence once "entra lo sguardo degli adulti attraverso queste riviste pornografiche".³⁹⁴ The game changes once Mirko allows the adult gaze to penetrate in the childhood space in two different ways; first by bringing in some porn magazines filled with child protagonists who look uncomfortably similar to the protagonists. Secondly, Mirko uses a photo camera to take pictures of his friends as part of an agreement he has made with some paedophiles, thus directly allowing the adult gaze into the protected space of the warehouse.³⁹⁵

The pornographic material becomes a source of curiosity and imitation, it is embedded in the game but at the same time it trespasses the space of the game, as there's this passage of pornographic material from inside the children's space to the outside world. In this way, Mirko brings into the children's sphere not only the adult gaze, but also an underworld made of traffic of children, pedophiles and violence that the characters perceive as almost fictional. That is why the children have a sudden and discomforted realization the first time they see pedo-pornography: at this point "la visione, e l'imitazione, di immagini non solo pornografiche ma anche sadiche e pedofile trasformano i giochi di riconoscimento dell'identità sessuale in un 'compito, faticoso e sgradevole' indotto da Mirko".³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ Interview to Simona Vinci by Andrea Grilli, February 2015, available online <https://www.dibbuk.it/intervista-simona-vinci/>.

³⁹⁵ Today, pedo-pornography is a growing phenomenon because of the potentialities of getting access and share contents via social media. The decline in parental supervision when it comes to the digital world and the increased participation in online platforms by underage users has led to critical numbers. As reported by INHOPE Annual report 2018, in the international network of 46 platforms, 226,999 images and videos were assessed as illegal, an increase of 51% on 2017. 91% involved children under 13 years of age and 80% of victims were girls." See INHOPE 2018 Report, [online <https://www.inhope.org/EN/articles/annual-reports>].

³⁹⁶ Morena Marsilio, "Immaginari infantili negli anni Zero" in *Richard&Piggle* n. 24/2016, pp. 158-167.

Suddenly, the children realise this is no longer a game, so much so that “non riuscivano più a ridere. Né a divertirsi. Era come un compito, faticoso e sgradevole. Vita falsa, cose che non sentivano da nessuna parte, dentro” (133). In this way, the game gets trapped in between the world of carelessness infancy and the pornography of the adult world. With all its negativity, this dimension creeps into the relationships between children and creates a strong emotive tension for the reader, as it unveils the contradictions of contemporary Italian society, a world “ipersessualizzato ma bigotto”.³⁹⁷ This is in line with what Stefania Lucamante discusses in relation to Vinci’s presumed *cattivismo*, so that “evil emerges constantly from the world of adults; it appears to be the inevitable cancer that will inevitably disturb and pollute the world of childhood. In turn, childhood and adolescence are forever marred by sin”.³⁹⁸

Interestingly, Simona Vinci does not condemn the children’s sexual curiosity but at the same time she does not discharge them from the consequences of their actions.³⁹⁹ The death of Greta constitutes the moment of extreme conjunction between sexuality and violence, when reality disruptively affirms itself: “Stavamo tutti in silenzio. Nessuno di loro aveva mai visto un morto dal vero. I nonni che erano morti non li avevano visti. Ai bambini non si fanno mai vedere i morti [...] Però il corpo di Greta ce l’avevano davanti gli occhi.” (135) As a result, the adherence to corporeal pleasure only turns the children into pure bodies, making them losing empathy to become creatures of pure sensations,⁴⁰⁰ emotionally detached from the puzzling reality.

Practicing violence and sexuality alienates the children, up to the point that when they kill Greta, the gaze upon her body is described with indifference: her body is still perceived as fragmented in its parts, instead that being recognised as a whole belonging

³⁹⁷ As reported, Simona Vinci has declared that: “Con quel libro ho toccato un tabù che in un paese cattolico e buonista come il nostro è inaccettabile. Non a caso, è stato quasi messo al bando in Irlanda, con minacce all'editore inglese che lo ha pubblicato e invece assolutamente capito e sostenuto in Inghilterra. Certo i bambini non sono così. Almeno non tutti i bambini, ma qualcuno sì. È certo è che il clima in cui viviamo non fa ben sperare. Ma io ho scritto il mio libro. Ho parlato di questo mondo ossessionato da un'estetica di morte e terrorizzato dalla morte vera. Ipersessualizzato ma bigotto. Pedofilo nel cuore. Innamorato dell'eccesso. Disattento e falso. Dove i bambini o sono angioletti paffuti oppure piccoli uomini.” See *Chi le ha viste le bambine?* Online in “SpiWeb”, Società Psicoanalitica italiana, 10 Marzo 2011, <https://www.spiweb.it/cultura/chi-le-ha-viste-le-bambine-2/>.

³⁹⁸ In reference to Vinci’s stories, according to Lucamante, a “dark, gloomy quality of the word childhood emerges from her stories”. This, makes Vinci’s view of evil the “most profound than any other interpretation we see in today’s Italian literature”. See Stefania Lucamante, *A Multitude of Women: The Challenges of the Contemporary Italian Novel* (Toronto University Press, 2008), pp. 234-236.

³⁹⁹ See Ellen Neremberg, *Murder Made in Italy: Homicide, Media, and Contemporary Italian Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 215.

⁴⁰⁰ See Kirk Curnutt, “Teenage wasteland: Coming-of-age novels in the 1980s and 1990” in *Critique*; Fall 2001, p. 99.

to their friend. Despite Vinci's suggestion about a special connection between Martina and Greta, for example by showing them holding hands or exploring the similarities of their female bodies, the identification and empathy that Martina experiences is not translated into a salvific action.⁴⁰¹

Deprived of any correspondent emotional and moral development, this extremely embodied experience of growth has led to an emotional detachment that makes the children unable to articulate remorse, in a way that is very similar to what we saw with Rosario from *Certi bambini*. One could argue that this inability to articulate remorse and to engage with extremely violent acts is a consequence of a society obsessed with unfiltered images, in which contemporary childhood is immersed. Indeed, differently from the children portrayed by Dickens, Alcott, De Amicis or Collodi, the children of liquid society grow up surrounded by images and stories across multiple media, which often present explicit violent or sexualised contents. As a result, Martina is unable to accept Greta's death, even to voice what is happening when facing her dead body:

Non ci ho mai pensato, che i nostri corpi potessero farsi male. Non ho mai pensato se erano cose giuste o sbagliate, erano cose, erano i nostri giochi, era come essere fratelli e sorelle, era come essere grandi ma piccoli. Però non so spiegarlo bene. Ma tu non devi stare così male, respira forte, soffiati il naso, alzati, per favore, apri gli occhi. Le sembrava di parlare e invece non diceva niente, stava lì inginocchiata sul materasso, immobile [...] in silenzio, lei e tutti gli altri. (134)

As previously discussed, in the traditional coming-of-age story the body was a neutral or positive vehicle of knowledge, since self-consciousness was linked mostly to reflection. In *Dei bambini non si sa niente* the opposite happens; firstly, the body is far from providing only positive knowledge. Secondly, instead of reflecting upon their stories, the characters get overwhelmed by the corporeal experience, so much so that there is no thought left, no capability of critically evaluating what has happened. All Martina is left with are uncontrollable behaviours, mechanics that are body-driven and that keep on guiding her in the last pages, when she passively and lethargically hides Greta's cadaver. In this sense, the initiation to sexuality, instead of leading to the construction of enhanced subjectivity, leads to an extreme objectification of the body and to a nullification of self-

⁴⁰¹ See Ellen Neremberg, *Murder Made in Italy: Homicide, Media, and Contemporary Italian Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 220.

awareness. As seen in the previous chapters, both the opening and the closure of the novel show what happens when language fails to express the trauma of death and the discoveries made, and therefore when nothing is left but silence and repetition.

Lastly, even if this story presents the experiences of the entire group of children, with Martina as the filter to see and feel these experiences as mediated for the reader, she provides a female perspective to direct questions of sexual stereotypes, consent and violence in a precise gendered way. On one hand, against the moderation, modesty, cleanliness and beauty preached by the adults, these children keep pushing the boundaries of their freedom, revelling in the intense feelings of their bodies.

But on the other hand, the novel perpetuates a conventional model of sexuality for which, especially when it comes to females, the girl's sexual transgressions ultimately lead to trauma and death, rather than agency. The deeply tragic exploration of the impact of sexual curiosity is not translated into an exercise of sexual power by Martina, since the novel still portrays male dominance. Set by Mirko, the rules of the sexual games continue to allow and even facilitate the domination of males,⁴⁰² and even the ending appears to reinstate a conservative paradigm in which female promiscuity is not only granted by a male authority, but also punished by literal or figurative annihilation as exemplified in Greta's death.

A similar model of child's initiation is provided by Rosario's experience in *Certi bambini*, a novel where sexuality and violence are also almost inextricable. While in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* violence is somehow a consequence of sexual games amongst peers, in the case of Rosario it is both an individual and a collective experience. Individually, Rosario is oftentimes portrayed as being aroused by his violent actions, especially when framed as bodily violation of others. This is presented in the very first pages of the novel, when Rosario directs an uncomfortable and violent stare at his neighbour, Assuntina:

Con uno sguardo più grande di lui, come a volerle rinfacciare un conto in sospeso, comincia la punta. [...] Rosario tiene con rabbia, il suo disinteresse verso la signora Assuntina monta quel bisogno di sopraffazione, invece di spingerlo ad abbandonare

⁴⁰² Mirko is indeed the leader of the group, and he set up the rules of the game, sometimes giving the girls the possibility to choose the games – “Questa volta il dominio toccava alle femmine. È Mirko a stabilire questa regola per il pomeriggio (56)” – mostly reinforcing masculine authority: “I maschi, tra loro, non facevano niente [...] Si spartivano le due bambine equamente, una volta per uno, scambiandosele. Alle volte ridevano, si prendevano in giro, erano battute brevissime da maschi, un codice da cui le femmine erano escluse.” (61)

quel desiderio di un male inutile. [...] Finalmente la Signora Assuntina si alza dalla sua sedia, con un gesto infelice si libera della bacinella e scappa dentro.

Rosario tira su col naso tutta l'aria che può. Quasi viene meno della soddisfazione. Immediatamente pensa: mò vado a casa sua, quella apre e me la fotto. Nessuna cosa al mondo gli è mai sembrata più possibile. Poi schiaccia l'erezione con la mano. [...] Di tutte le signore del cortile, forse è l'unica su cui non si è mai fatto una sega. Ma il diritto che ha appena acquisito su di lei, la sicurezza di poterne approfittare senza limite, così, subito, solo che lo voglia, gli porta un'eccitazione schifosamente piacevole. Non ha mai ridotto nessuno a quel modo. (6-7)

Despite Assuntina being an older, unattractive lady, Rosario is excited by the violent imposition of the gaze, which mirrors the idea of masculine domination learned from Damiano. In this case, the female body is a locus subject to male power and violence, is treated as an object for male pleasure and as a site of control, as later restated when Rosario and his friends go meet a child prostitute. During this ritual of sexual initiation, Rosario is repulsed by the child prostitute instead of being aroused. On the contrary, he gets excited when thinking of the violence he could direct at the girl's mother, guilty of exploiting the girl.⁴⁰³ This again reinforces the idea of Rosario been positioned in an ambiguous state of morality, feeling uneasiness when a peer is abused, while simultaneously feeling excited at the prospect of exercising violence onto an adult.

Rosario's violent attitude contrasts with what happens in the underground when he meets a girl that resembles Caterina. He wishes to caress her hair, but does not dare to "non oserebbe mai, e lo sa. Non si avvicinava mai a Caterina se lei non lo chiamava", up to the point that he pretends to sleep, so as to not bother the girl with his staring: "allora finge di dormire, così che la ragazza pensi che non ce l'aveva con lei" (41). This act of tenderness not only appears in stark contrast to what happens with Assuntina, but also goes back to that ambiguous belonging that Rosario experiences in respect to the world. As anticipated, it is not by chance that Rosario is both traumatised and aroused when seeing Santino and Caterina having sex.⁴⁰⁴ The image of the violent intercourse, where

⁴⁰³ "Di nuovo i pensieri alla ragazza. Alla faccia risentita che aveva fatto quando Brasile gliel'aveva presentata appena si era distesa. E poi alla madre in cucina che aspettava i soldi. Ecco, sì. Mò sì. La madre nella stanza accanto mentre la figlia fotte. Zoccola di merda. Più accoppiava la ragazza all'immagine della madre consapevole nella stanza a fianco, più gli veniva duro." (115)

⁴⁰⁴ "E Santino. Da dov'era, Rosario non poteva vedergli bene la faccia, ma il suo profilo diceva tutto. Aveva quella fissità inespressiva, impenetrabile, di uno che comanda. Si stava chiavando Caterina come fosse stato un suo dovere. E lei era là, sotto, che faceva quello che voleva lui. Rosario, insieme al dolore che gli rivoltava le viscere, si sentiva gonfiare i pantaloni. Puttana, zoccola. Avrebbe voluto andarsene, o

Santino is in a clear dominant position, shatters the chaste and pacific image of *Casa Letizia* by bringing in the elements of sexuality and violence that, up to that point, were exclusive of the criminal world.

Suspended between childhood and adulthood, the games played by the children in these two novels are defined in terms of uncontrolled and limitless experiences of violence and sexuality. It is specifically the misalignment between biological age and life experiences that turns their games into dangerous catalysts for individual and collective energies. By assuming models increasingly more extreme and derived from the adult world, the children of Simona Vinci for instance become “imitativi, subordinati rispetto al mondo adulto dal quale vorrebbero rivendicare separatezza”,⁴⁰⁵ providing an anti-model of child initiation into adult life, as observed by Stefania Lucamante.⁴⁰⁶

Similarly, by adopting adult-like behaviors in terms of sexuality and violence, Rosario aims to be incorporated in the world of criminal adults, which is the one he perceives having most agency and recognition, refusing his status of a child. In this sense, these novels show what happens to growth once the child's spirit of emulation is uncontrolled and unguided by an adult world that fails to guide the moral development of children. Moving from a liminal condition to a meaningless incorporation into a world that they are not ready to be a part of, in these coming-of-age stories we register a violent adultization which is uncontrolled as much as uncontrollable, that destroys the child's infancy but, at the same time, does not turn them into adults.

2. Growing up among Peers and Adults

This second section looks more closely to otherness as a set of different relationships with peers and adults. In the *Bildungsroman*, the exploration of one's interiority and of the external world were necessary to realise the passage from solipsism to socialisation, which in turn allowed the coming of age into society. In this sense, the centrality of peer-socialisation acquires a key role for the development of the individual and for the definition of youth, especially during modernity. Moving towards the late modernity, at the turn of the century youth has in effect emerged as a socio-cultural group with a good

bestemmiare Cristo, o tirare pietre, ma voleva guardare. Puttana, zoccola. Puttana, zoccola. E si stringeva il cazzo che tirava.” (97)

⁴⁰⁵ Morena Marsilio, “Immaginari infantili negli anni Zero” in *Richard&Piggle* n. 24/2016, pp. 158-167.

⁴⁰⁶ Stefania Lucamante, *A Multitude of Women: The Challenges of the Contemporary Italian Novel* (Toronto University Press, 2008), p. 69.

degree of independence from adults, with their own habits and norms, often in contrast with the ones of previous generations.

As Maurizio Merico explains, for young people the socialised experience within the group of peers serves to gradually integrate the individual in a more complex structure. Peers act as an intermediate sphere between primary and secondary relationships; they share some of the characteristics of primary groups (the family) such as love and solidarity, but they also introduce a series of shared norms and roles. Especially in times of social change, peer relationships assume a new value, since: “la socializzazione non si realizza più con la trasmissione di conoscenze, valori e atteggiamenti tra generazioni successive ma lungo traiettorie orizzontali e trova nel gruppo dei pari l’attore social che garantisce l’integrazione.”⁴⁰⁷ So that, as the contrast between the fluidity of youth experience with the normativity of institutions becomes more evident, individuals fold back on themselves and within their peer groups.⁴⁰⁸ In addition, the possibility of experiencing and making sense of life together in a defined group of peers allows the single members to start experiencing and performing their identity and, as a group, to elaborating autonomous cultural models.

The peer dimension was already key in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* to understand the discovery of the body and the dynamics of sexuality with little direct interreference of adults. Instead, *I bambini delle rose* and *Io non ho paura* present a story of formation revolving around the friendship between two children in the process of developing their social selves against specific social impositions. In these novels, peers assume a central role because they are the privileged alterity beside parental figures; these interactions help the characters explore human bonding, create connections, test their emotions and be held accountable for their actions. Fathers, specifically, are set in opposition to children; not only they do not provide guidance and support, but they even become the villains, so that defining oneself in opposition to the father becomes a key aspect of the process of growth.

In contrast, once peers are completely removed from the picture, as happens in *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater*, otherness is embodied by maternal figures. Unable to construct their identities because of the looming presence or absence of their mothers, through a sensorial, embodied journey in their selfhood the characters in these novels challenge the biography imposed on them. Hence, these novels present two opposite perspectives, one

⁴⁰⁷ Merico Maurizio, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 56.

⁴⁰⁸ See John Neubauer, *Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence* (Yale University Press, 1992).

focused on the absence of the mother and the necessity of refiguring her presence, and the other emphasising the destructive presence of a mother that is the sole embodiment of otherness. Specifically, *Stabat Mater* recalls Kristeva's theory of abjection by linking back the relationship between the absent mother and the daughter to the impossibility of realising one's existence. Cecilia is indeed obsessed by images of birth and death and by the idea of being a refuse, up to the point that she is unable to imagine herself apart from her unknown mother.

Zoo, on the other hand, explores the dysfunctional relationship between a mother that is threatening in her highly sexualised beauty, and a daughter that is incapable to construct an image of herself that is not in total opposition with the mother. Again, violence and sexuality collide when the daughter assumes a vampiric role, longing for maternal love and desiring simultaneously her death, so much so that the final image of the incest corresponds also to the moment of matricide.

2.1 Symbolic Exchanges in the Liquid Society

In the previous chapter I have discussed *I bambini delle rose* according to Bauman's theory of wasted lives, as it records the dominant economic paradigm that pursues economic value over humans, and this same theory constitutes the departure point to understanding how recognition is established between Nico and Ly. The first consideration is that Nico has a disrupted familiar nucleus; since his father is a convict, he is compelled by his mother to provide for the family. Nico's consciousness emerges as suspended between the desires of a child – which are attuned to his inner world – and the duties of an adult, as imposed by an external world. Nico is trapped into this profound interior discomfort as he is forced constantly prove his utility, trying to balance his desire for play and peer relations with the value-led imperative of selling roses. He is forced by his own family into a system of psychological and physical terror, aimed at guaranteeing as much domination as possible and immediate earnings, which is a typical pattern of child exploitation.⁴⁰⁹

Within the consumer society traced by Bauman, Nico is compelled to become a “productive” agent by being forced into the task of earning money. In addition, the discovery of the mother's sexual relationship with another man forces Nico to question

⁴⁰⁹ The problem of child exploitation in Italy is explored by a report of Save the Children (2018) entitled “Piccoli schiavi invisibili” which mainly focuses on sexual exploitation.

not only his previous understanding of the world, but also his attitudes towards his mother, desecrated from her maternal role, “Tu non sei più mia mamma! Sei una puttana!” (34). This becomes a clear point of no return for Nico; by running away from the nomad camp he begins to part from the logic connected to the familial space.

In the city, Nico meets Ly. Interestingly, the first meeting between the two characters is nothing exceptional and, at this stage of the story, is far from being a kernel. The reader is made aware in the previous chapter that there is presumably another antagonist of Nico, since someone has “stolen” his selling spot. It is almost by chance that Nico, the day after, discovers the young Chinese seller and confronts her aggressively “A faccia di patata giapponese! E con gli occhi chiusi! Che ci fai qui? Puttana, sei arrivata fino a qui?” (38), stumping on her roses, and threatening to kill her.

A useful perspective on this is provided by Bakhtin’s definition of the “double discourse”.⁴¹⁰ In this passage, the reference to her being a Japanese and the appellation “puttana” aim to set Ly as both the racial and gendered other. References to race and gender are invoked by Nico to mark his identity in terms of nationality and masculinity and to set himself in a dominant position. In this sense, Nico’s utterance becomes a strategy to affirm his identity against Ly’s.

As Bauman argues, the idea of otherness is central to social categories of identities because it creates a series of dichotomies that allow the individual to position itself:

In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite side of the first and its creation. Thus [...] animal the other of the human, women the other of man, stranger the other of the native, enemy the other of friend, “them” the other of “us”. [...] The first depends on the second for its self-assertion.⁴¹¹

During this first encounter, Nico is performing the identity of rose-seller that adults have imposed on him, and therefore his mindset is aligned with the logic of the market, so that Ly is nothing but a competitor in the rose business.⁴¹² Same as Nico, Ly is sent by her mother to sell roses around the city, and the two children end up in opposition when vying

⁴¹⁰ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), pp. 324-325.

⁴¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 14.

⁴¹² The relationship between Nico and Ly is further explored in Karp, “Un’immagine trasgressiva dell’infanzia nell’opera ‘I bambini delle rose’ di Mohsen Melliti” in *Studia Romanistica* – 18.1 (2018), pp. 77-89.

for the same zones, making their first meeting far from being pacific. As Bauman reminds us, the liquid society is a globalized, individualistic and capitalistic society that promotes self-interest and individuality over cooperation and shared rewards, with no room for self-sacrifice.⁴¹³

Therefore, the first encounter between Nico and Ly acts as a false start and it is necessary to provide, within the limited space of the short story, an account of Nico's own self-development. At the same time, this clash with otherness creates a realistic portrayal of the dynamics happening in the streets. Yet, the key moment for identity formation lies in the second encounter between Nico and Ly.

Il sangue che esce dalle ginocchia gli fa paura e non sa se piangere per il dolore o per le rose schiacciate sotto le ruote della macchina, e dice: «I miei fiori, sono l'unico capitale che possiedo». Ly era davanti e si è girata a vedere se lui la stesse seguendo o no. Ha visto tutto, si è fermata dall'altra parte della strada: vorrebbe tornare indietro ad aiutarlo e nello stesso tempo ne ha paura. Quando le macchine si sono fermate al semaforo ha attraversato la strada ed è andata da lui. Nico è a terra, piange ancora, e quando la vede venire verso di lui esplode: «Schifosa Giapponese! Schifosa tu e tutto il Giappone del mondo, è tutta colpa tua! Adesso che faccio? Ho perso tutto, tutto capito? Te la farò pagare, stronza!» Ly, dispiaciuta dalle parole e dalla reazione di Nico prende il suo mazzo e glielo da. Stupefatto dalla generosità della bambina, lui nasconde il viso con le mani e scoppia a piangere. (56)

The interest in this passage lies with the moral choice that involves both Ly, as the agent of the action, and Nico as the recipient. By gifting her roses to Nico, Ly's action subverts the logic of the individualistic society, bringing back the two children in the human space of social interactions. In addition to changing Nico's sentiments, this act of generosity also acts upon the readers' own feelings and disposition towards the two child characters. Ultimately, for Nico and Ly to establish a friendship and to overcome the capitalist logic that dominates society, they have to bring back the aspect of "human generosity that escapes the objective of calculated self-interests"⁴¹⁴, and that is necessary to establish recognition.

⁴¹³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁴¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Asserting Personal Capacities and Pleading for Mutual Recognition" (the Kluge Prize acceptance speech) in B. Treanor & H. I. Venema (Eds.), *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 22-26.

To evaluate the impact of this peer friendship on Nico's growth it is necessary to take a step back and briefly frame the different types of exchanges that Nico has. Generally, exchanges between Nico and the adults can be defined as transactional – once the payment has happened, the obligation between the two parts ends: as Ricoeur says, the exchange within the marketplace “is reciprocity without mutuality”.⁴¹⁵ Nico's first exchange is particularly significant as it happens at the beginning of the story, when his mother tries to convince him to work in the streets of Rome together with “lo zio”.

[Nico] «Se vado cosa mi dai?»

Lei mette la mano nel petto. Tira fuori un biglietto. «Ecco, tieni mille lire.»

«No, non voglio mille lire.»

«Cosa vuoi figlio mio?»

«Voglio che mi racconti una favola.»

«Ancora? Te le ho raccontate tutte.»

«Ti prego, mamma, se me ne racconti un'altra vado a lavorare». (12)

This first passage highlights this recurrent dynamic: an emotional request from the child is answered by going back to a material, monetary dimension. This makes sense within the market economy for an adult such as Nico's mother – yet, it makes no sense in Nico's world of childhood, where money is *worthless*. Despite Nico being well aware of the necessity of having and making money to survive, as a child the exchange of his infancy with money is unreasonable. This is why he asks for a story, for a fairy tale, reasserting in front of his mother his child-like position and his needs; the mother will satisfy Nico's need without relinquishing him from her request.

This is the first of a long series of unbalanced exchanges between Nico and other characters, in a constant carousel of unequal and unfair exchanges. The entire idea of what is “equal” gets totally subverted by the interactions with adults, as Nico always offers something that has to do with a spiritual, emotional or metaphorical value, getting in return mostly money that is meaningless to him. The second exchange with an adult is even

⁴¹⁵ Ricoeur indeed takes from Aristotle “the ethics of reciprocity, of sharing, of living together” in which self-esteem – and therefore a recognition of identity from the subject – becomes the reflexive moment derived from the relationship between the self and the other. See Ricoeur, *Course of Recognition*, p. 231.

worse, as Nico is sexually abused in exchange for his roses by Enzo, who later uses this same strategy to abuse Ly.⁴¹⁶

Enzo, in contrast to Nico's mother, understands that money is no worth in the eyes of these children. Instead, he plays on their vulnerabilities, providing comfort and support in moments of distress only to get their trust. In this sense, Enzo abuses of his power as an adult to objectify the children, reducing them to mere commodities to satisfy his needs, and the children are powerless, they have no choice but to accept these unfair exchanges that commodify their own infancy.

The theme of children's commodification is quite widespread in contemporary literature; one thinks not only of the baby killers in *Certi bambini* and the pedo-pornography of *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, but also for example of *Supernova* (2015) by Isabella Santacroce, a novel that explores the theme of underage prostitution, portraying a set of adolescent characters torn between an interior universe of dreams and absolute love, and the monstrosity of ruthless and lascivious adults. This constitutes another way to criticise the individualisation of a society that consumes everything, including children's bodies, dreams and actions.

In terms of construction of literary tropes, the acknowledgement of the value of money is totally subverted from what can be observed in more traditional narratives of formation such as the *Bildungsroman*. In the *Bildungsroman* one of the milestones of the linear process of growth was to understand the value of money and the importance of economic status to access social mobility. But, as already stated, these contemporary coming-of-age stories present a different pattern of growth, less linear and more fluid in the different achievements, so that the importance of money is not something these children need to learn in order to become adults. Instead, it is something they have already dramatically explored given the context in which they are located. Therefore, for Nico the opportunity is connected to the discovery of *other things* that are more important than money; specifically, those primordial social habits that are more deeply embedded into the human being such as social relations, love, playfulness and freedom. For Nico, such a reverse movement of awareness passes through friendship and exchanges with Ly.

Up to this point, we have seen how the relationship between Nico and the others have developed under the sign of an unfair exchange, in which adults are always referring

⁴¹⁶ “«Tornano indietro, verso il centro, e a via dei Cappellari, sotto l’arco dove non c’è luce, la Renault targata Roma si ferma. Al buio di quella strada deserta il signor Enzo chiede a Ly: «Davvero vuoi che ti porto da Nico?» «Sì» «Allora devi...ti do...poi ti porto.» (83)”

to the realm of money to commodify the child's labour or body. Instead, Ly becomes the catalyst for change in Nico's perception of himself and of the world around him. The first spontaneous act of generosity that Ly performs sets the path to defy Bauman's consideration of the impossibility of escaping the logic of consumerism, moving the children towards different symbolic exchanges. Therefore, Ly unlocks a circle of generosity, exchange and solidarity that starts with offering Nico her roses, and turns into a collaboration between the two children to work together and split their incomes. Yet, since they are not even the owners of these profits, they gradually care less and less for the money,⁴¹⁷ and drift apart from the transactional logic that adults have imposed on them, to take back first the dimension of the mutual exchange, and later of the gift.

Ly arriva puntuale, neanche un minuto di ritardo. Sotto il braccio porta uno skateboard. [...]

«Tu sai andare sullo skateboard?»

«Sì, mi piace; dammelo, lo porto io.»

«Tieni, io l'ho portato per te.»

«Anch'io ti ho fatto un regalo.»

«Dammelo.»

«Tieni»



«E chi è questa?»

«Sei tu!» (102)

This enables a circle of reciprocity that according to Ricoeur is the foundation of friendship, because it departs from the value-exchange of commodities, towards a “mutual gift giving as a process of symbolic recognition”. The exchange of gifts establishes a relationship with otherness that goes back to the symbolic mutual recognition as the

⁴¹⁷ “[Nico] «Facciamo una corsa, chi arriva prima al parlamento vince diecimila lire.» «Aspetta tu corri di più, dammi un po' di vantaggio.» «Dai, vai, corri, corri!» Ly si mette a correre e lui subito dietro. Il suo cuore batte forte. Ly arriva prima a piazza Montecitorio gridando di gioia. «Ho vinto, ho vinto io! Tu hai perso, dammi diecimila lire.» «Tieni, eccole, sono un regalo.» «Ma quale regalo? Tu hai perso.» «Sì, ho perso.» (69)”

prerequisite to achieve self-understanding. Significantly, at the end of the story the children decide to bury – symbolically and literally – the money earned, in exchange for a “promise”. For Ricoeur, promises are also foundational of *ipseity*, because they substantiate the identity over time, making the individual accountable for keeping their word, allowing a permanence of consciousness.⁴¹⁸

A particularly significant last exchange happens between Aldo, the street painter and Nico. At the beginning of the story, Nico dreams of affording a painting and, once he has enough money to get one, Aldo himself offers to do one free. Because Nico is eager to meet with Ly, he refuses by replying: “So farlo da solo” (100) ⁴¹⁹. At this point Nico has achieved a new, more mature and clear view of his abilities, needs and desires. He has developed self-awareness and has understood how to manage the conflict between materialism and his emotional health.

From here, the narrative moves from a spiral of exploitation to hope for an improvement of life, so that *I bambini delle rose* becomes a narrative of redemption, and the devastation produced by poverty and marginality is counterbalanced by the bonding among peers. In this case, the mutual racial and gendered otherness established between Ly and Nico acts as the catalyst for both protagonists’ development, who are able to achieve autonomy and to construct their individual identities together. Moreover, Nico’s increasing maturity is seen in his acknowledgement of the value of reciprocity in relationships: by negotiating a relationship based on mutual exchange, Nico and Ly get access to a different understanding of the world that goes beyond the law of the consumer and producer culture that sees them as commodities. Yet, this friendship might have only limited efficacy because of the deep social inequality in which Nico is living. The imposition of the father to leave Rome, not taking in account Nico’s desires, demonstrates the subordination of Nico not only to the paternal authority, but to the entire system represented by a society that keeps neglecting children’s needs. In this sense, the adult world, more than providing the youngest ones the means to develop autonomy and identity, restricts them into the logic of productivity.

⁴¹⁸ Keeping one’s word is considered by Ricoeur the most notable example of ipse identity, since keeping a promise is not only dealing with a subject intended as an essential self; instead it considers that despite the changes that might happen, even to selfhood, there is a connection to self-constancy in its moral tenor. See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 124.

⁴¹⁹ “«Ciao Zingarello, non mi saluti più?» Nico non si gira e non risponde. «Vieni, oggi ti faccio un ritratto, forse mi porterai fortuna.» «No grazie, oggi non ho tempo, ho un appuntamento tra poco.» [...] «Facciamo domani, oggi sono tutto sporco.» «No, domani no.» «Come vuoi. Se vuoi te lo pago anche.» «Io te lo voglio fare gratis oggi. Se non vuoi non te lo faccio più.» «So farlo da solo.» Nico si allontana.” (100)

The indifference of Nico's parents is symptomatic of their own entrapment in a peripheral position that offers little prospect of a different future. Coming of age for Nico and Ly has a strongly ethical dimension, especially concerning the history and culture of migrants in Italy, the idea of people as wasted lives, and the commodification of children. Despite the ending, Nico's process of formation can be considered successful, because it is possible to trace back the acquisition of a solid individuality. Nico has indeed developed an understanding of freedom and responsibility, power and choice mainly thanks to the friendship with Ly. At the same time, this novel problematizes the idea of formation in itself by portraying adults, including the parental figures, as incapable to assume their social role and support the development of the youngest.

2.2 The Other as the Double

Widely employed in coming-of-age narratives, another way to investigate the relationship between the contemporary subject and his/her identity is to look at recognition through the literary trope of the double or alter ego. As seen in relation to Nico and Ly, by facing someone that feels complementary or opposite, the characters are forced to discover their own identity, and attain a higher level of personal significance.

Generally, the protagonist and the double can confront one another as rivals, or the presence of an alter ego can enable the confrontation between the hero and his own nature. In *Io non ho paura*, another novel that explores peer relationships, the presence of Filippo allows Michele not only to develop an heightened sense of empathy, but also to develop self-awareness and self-constancy. These considerations introduce the two main tasks that define Michele's path of growth in *Io non ho paura*: to be able to verbalize evil and to recognise himself as a moral agent. These two aspects go together: the more Michele develops self-awareness, the more he is able to retrieve from the world of infancy and understand the dynamics of the world of adults. This is impossible to do without considering the *other*, emblemized by two characters: Filippo and Michele's own father.

The presence of Filippo is key in the process of recognition. In fact, he represents *the other than self* that is opposed to Michele, involved in a game of constant exchange and inquiry between the identities of the two characters, as amplified by the employment of the motif of the double.⁴²⁰ In Michele's case, the role of Filippo as the alter ego is

⁴²⁰ According to Remo Ceserani, the motif of the double has been represented through the employment of a vast array of images (such as the alter-ego, the alias, the mirror, the portrait, the masque, the shadow and

framed as an embodied experience: the correspondence between the two characters does not operate only on a symbolic level, as it was between Nico and Ly, but also on a physical one, making the body a primary means for developing knowledge.

In fact, Michele's development retains a consistent focus on moral issues, experienced not much as ethical concerns but rather as physical experiences of distress. Exemplary is when his friend Barbara is forced to pay a penance by lowering her panties; Michele is physically disturbed by the exaggeration of the punishment – "Lo stomaco mi si è stretto. C'era qualcosa di sporco, di...non lo so. Di brutto, ecco" (25) – so that he stops her: "Aspetta! Io sono arrivato ultimo, - ho sentito che diceva la mia voce." (26). Ammaniti shows how Michele is not consciously performing the act of speech; at this stage Michele's decisions are driven by a corporeal instinct that tells him when something *feels* wrong.⁴²¹

In effect, Michele's first instinctive concern after the discovery of the body is to see Filippo's face: "Non aveva più niente di umano. Dovevo vedergli la faccia. La faccia è la cosa più importante. Dalla faccia si capisce tutto" (52), to recognise him as being a real individual and not a product of fantasy. Also, recognising Filippo's face is necessary to develop that connection between the two characters under the sign of duality, because "we indeed understand that only an embodied ego, that is, an ego that is its own body, can be paired with the flesh of another ego".⁴²²

This is because for Ricoeur, physical characteristics give consistence to another individual and enable the understanding of that shared humanity that is at the basis of compassion. The realisation that the mysterious child is alive evokes explicitly the image of Filippo as Lazarus⁴²³ coming back from a seeming death, and this image parallels

the twins) to assail the unity of the self, threatening the stability of idem identity. See Remo Ceserani, *Il fantastico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

⁴²¹ The unawareness of Michele of his moral self is confirmed by the dialogue that he has later with his sister: "Perché hai fatto la penitenza al posto di Barbara? Non lo so..." (47)

⁴²² Quoting from Ricoeur: "In this dimension, the analogical transfer indicated by Husserl is an authentically productive operation in transgressing the experience of one's own flesh. If it does not create otherness, which is always presupposed, it confers upon it a specific meaning, namely the admission that the other is not condemned to remain a stranger but can become my counterpart, that is, someone who, like me, says 'I'. The resemblance based on the pairing of flesh with flesh works to reduce a distance, to bridge a gap, in the very place where it creates a dissymmetry. That is what is signified by the adverb "like": like me, the other thinks, desires, enjoys, suffers [...] Ultimately, this transfer of sense can receive the form of a citation, by virtue of which 'he thinks', 'she thinks' signifies 'he/she says in his/her heart: I think.' This is the marvel of analogical transfer." Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 334-335.

⁴²³ "Alla fine, tentennando, ho allungato un braccio e ho afferrato con due dita un lembo della coperta e stavo cercando di levargliela dal viso quando il morto ha piegato la gamba. Ho stretto i pugni e ho spalancato la bocca e il terrore mi ha afferrato le palle con una mano gelata. Poi il morto ha sollevato il busto come se

Michele's motif of Christ. In the course of the novel, numerous references to the theme of self-sacrifice turn Michele into a salvific and compassionate figure, always stepping up to protect the most vulnerable at his own expenses, such as his own younger sister, the bullied Barbara and the kidnapped Filippo.

Michele's growth starts by unveiling the presence of evil in his close environment. He intuitively understands that somebody must be involved in the kidnapping, but at first he retrieves in the world of fantasy: in this way, he can justify what he is unable to consciously face, namely that someone in the village is involved. For example, he finds in Filippo's prison a familiar pot and this is a first clue that gets crystallized in his unconscious without being fully elaborated, at least until he notices that food leftovers are disappearing from his home:

- Mamma, dov'è la fettina? [...]

- Non c'è più. Se l'è mangiata tuo padre.

Non era vero. L'aveva presa per il bambino.

Perché il bambino era mio fratello. [...]

Poteva essere che il bambino nel buco era mio fratello, ed era nato pazzo come Nunzio e papà lo aveva nascosto lì, per non farci spaventare me e mia sorella. Per non spaventare i bambini di Acqua Traverse.

Forse io e lui eravamo gemelli. Eravamo alti uguale e sembrava che avevamo la stessa età. (75)

Secondly, this image of the double is also played on the level of being peers as having the same age, which creates the premise for the subsequent identification. This sparks the fantasy of the secret twin that initiates a process of identification that, from this moment onwards, will take place between Michele and Filippo. This fantasy gets crystallized in Michele's imaginary so much so that he goes straight back into the hole to prove his theory – “se trovavo nel buco anche solo un pezzettino della fettina voleva dire che quel bambino è mio fratello” (77) – in the attempt to delay the acceptance of reality. To justify the involvement of his father, he imagines that Filippo is his lost twin brother, and this identification lays the foundation for Michele's empathic behaviour. As already seen, the character has been presented from the beginning with a caring and loving nature

fosse vivo e a occhi chiusi ha allungato le braccia verso di me. I capelli mi si sono rizzati in testa, ho cacciato un urlo [...] Anche il morto ha cominciato a urlare.” (54)

– and this fantasy of being the *same* as Filippo strengthens the underling relationship between peers.

After a brief attempt to use a fantastic explanation, invoking zombies, monsters and witches,⁴²⁴ Michele recognises a picture of Filippo on the news (95). This event provides that mysterious and faceless child with a name and a personal history that embodies him in the time of historical reality. Coupling that with the clues that connect his family to the kidnapping, childhood fantasies are no longer able to counter reality. This is confirmed by the subsequent moment of identification between Michele and Filippo, which is no longer located in the realm of fantasies and nightmares, but rooted in a mutual identification that moves Michele towards action: “Aveva preso Filippo. E appena mi addormentavo, prendeva pure me. Mi infilava in un sacco e via. E poi mi tagliava le orecchie. [...] Dovevo andare. E dovevo raccontagli di sua madre, che gli voleva ancora bene” (105). As observed in the volume edited by La Mendola and Villano, “quando Pino, il padre di Michele, cessa di essere il padre e si trasforma nell’uomo nero, Michele cessa di essere il figlio e si trasforma nella vittima, nel suo alter ego, Filippo.”⁴²⁵

Despite the father’s role in the kidnapping, or perhaps because of it, Michele feels a duty of care towards the other child. From here the bond between the two children and the subsequent image of the alter-ego become even more explicit, reflecting otherness as a constitutive part of selfhood:

- Ha cominciato a toccarmi – Quanti anni hai?
Mi passava le dita sul naso, sulla bocca, sugli occhi.
Ero paralizzato. – Nove e tu?
- Nove. [...]
 - Come ti chiami?
 - Michele, Michele Amitrano. Tu che classe fai?
 - La quarta. E tu?
 - La quarta.
 - Uguale.
 - Uguale. (122)

⁴²⁴ In an interview Ammaniti declared that his childhood was a season populated by fantastic inventions which led him to project this fantastic material into the story of Michele: “Paure diffuse, che fanno parte del DNA dell’infanzia. Chi non ha mai scambiato il vestito gettato sulla sedia, rischiarato da un raggio di luna, con il profilo arcigno di una Strega? È da quel materiale fantastico che nascono le mie storie”. See Simonetti Fiori Venezia, “Lo scrittore bambino che gioca col bestseller”, in “*Repubblica*”, 23 Novembre 2003 [available online].

⁴²⁵ La Mendola and Villano, *Film da sfogliare: Dalla pagina allo schermo* (Milano: Educatt, 2013), p. 125.

Even if Michele's process of self-recognition is driven by the fantasy of the double, instead of becoming a threat for the stability of the self, such identification allows Michele to interrogate his nature and his agency. Once he has accepted reality and voiced the presence of evil in the world – "Papà era l'uomo nero" (97) – Michele is ready to act not because of a childish curiosity but because of a spontaneous sense of responsibility towards his friend. This last part of the process of identity formation is even more connected to the sphere of ipseity, so that the final challenge for Michele is to recognise himself as a moral being by keeping the promise made to Filippo.

As seen with *I bambini delle rose*, according to Ricoeur ipse-identity sees the subject as an agent that utters and promises, so that "keeping one's promise does indeed appear to stand as a challenge to time, a denial of change: even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or my inclination, 'I will hold firm'".⁴²⁶ As mentioned earlier in this study, Paul Ricoeur attempted to define the problem of identity by discerning between an *idem* identity (*mêmeté*) which is the one that persists, what in traditional philosophical models has been understood as the essential or substantial identity, and an *ipse* identity (*ipséité*). Ipse identity does not imply immutability and permanence; on the contrary is defined by change, embracing shifts in appearance, feelings, inclinations and desires. In this case, the assurance of persistence through and despite change is connected to the willingness of the individual to step up and keep his/her promises *to someone else*.

Promises constitute a key part of the process of growth because they require the ability to stand strong against difficulties and dilemmas, and as expressed by Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), they are also a functional unit of the plot. The idea of keeping one's promise is particularly central to coming-of-age stories as they introduce the idea of moral obligations, testing the values held by the characters.

Therefore, the promise is an example of the unity and permanence of the self beyond any substantialism, and keeping a promise means to become accountable for the maintenance of the self despite changes in time and circumstances.⁴²⁷ References to the

⁴²⁶ According to Ricoeur, the mediation between ipse and idem "is opened by the polarity, in temporal terms, between two models of permanence in time: the perseverance of the character and the constancy of the self in promising" ref. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 124.

⁴²⁷ "There is, in fact, another model of permanence in time besides that of character. It is that of keeping one's word in faithfulness to the word that has been given. I see in this keeping the emblematic figure of an identity which is the polar opposite of that depicted by the emblematic figure of character. Keeping one's word expresses a self-constancy which cannot be inscribed, as character was, within the dimension of something in general but solely within the dimension of 'who?'" *Ibid.* (Ricoeur), p. 123.

promise are recurrent in the meetings between the two children, with Michele always promising something to reassure Filippo that he will not be left alone: “Ora però devo andare. Domani torno. - Con la testa sotto la coperta ha detto: Promesso? - Promesso.” (124); “Sono venuto, hai visto? Hai visto che sono venuto? - Lo sapevo [...] Lo avevi promesso.” (148); “Ascoltami bene. Ieri ti ho giurato che tornavo e sono tornato. Ora ti giuro che se vieni fuori non ti succede niente. Mi devi credere.” (152). Every time Michele keeps his promises, he sets the foundation for their friendship, as it creates a relationship founded on the constancy of mutual recognition.⁴²⁸

The importance of keeping a promise also becomes the central dilemma of the story, once the adults discover that Michele is aware of the presence of Filippo. Michele’s father asks him to swear – “giura sulla testa di tuo padre” (169) – to never go back to the hole and to forget everything.⁴²⁹ Michele finds himself trapped between two promises, one based on the bond of friendship and the other one bounded by the paternal law of obligation. However, it is meaningful to remember that the promises made to Filippo have always been spontaneous and gratuitous from Michele’s part; instead, the promise given to his father is demanded (if not imposed), and comes in exchange for a gift: a new bicycle.

While the exchange between Filippo and Michele is based on empathy, the one with the father is based on a moral obligation towards the parent, and is sealed with a useless gift: a new bicycle that is worse than the old one.⁴³⁰ Even if strongly desired by Michele, he realizes soon that it is not as good as his old “Scassona”, the bicycle he has used during the adventure. Therefore, the exchange – the promise for the bicycle – is revealed in all its uselessness and falsity. Significantly, when Michele decides to break the paternal promise and go free Filippo, he abandons the new bicycle to get back the old one, which is symbolically detached from the paternal promise. Again, this establishes symbolic exchanges on a totally different level, in contrast to what I have discussed in relation to *I bambini delle rose*, so that both novels share this very strong sense of peer solidarity across social and geographical divides.

⁴²⁸ “The perseverance of character is one thing, the perseverance of faithfulness to a word that has been given is something else again. The continuity of character is one thing, the constancy of friendship is quite another.” *Ibid.*

⁴²⁹ “Ascoltami bene. Non sto scherzando. Se ci torni io ti ammazzo di botte. Se torni un’altra volta lì, quelli gli sparano in testa. – Mi ha dato uno strattone violento – Per colpa tua. – Ho balbettato: – Non ci torno più, te lo giuro. – Giuralo sulla mia testa. – Te lo giuro. – Di: giuro sulla tua testa che non ci torno più. Ho detto: – Giuro sulla tua testa che non ci torno più. – Hai giurato sulla testa di tuo padre.” (169)

⁴³⁰ Michele’s father brings two gifts to Michele in the course of the novel. When he appears at the beginning of the story he brings Michele a “gondola” souvenir as a gift, a useless collectible instead of a toy. The father later buys him a new bicycle in exchange for his promise.

Thus Michele finds himself in an ethical impasse that he is unable to resolve, and this state of suspension involves not only Michele's own conscience, but get also extended to the entire setting: the city is described as asleep under the charm of a fairy, with adults totally absent from the frame, reprising the spatiotemporal suspension typical of the initiation.⁴³¹ Michele experiences a very tormented status of conscience, constantly thinking of his promise to Filippo and fearing his friend could think of him wrong:

Filippo mi aspettava. Era lì, nel buco, e si chiedeva quando tornavo, quando gli portavo le polpette. [...] L'ultima volta che ero andato da lui gli avevo detto: "Hai visto che sono venuto?" E lui mi aveva risposto che lo sapeva. Non erano stati gli orsetti lavatori a dirglielo. "Me lo avevi promesso". Mi bastava parlarci cinque minuti. "Filippo, non posso più tornare. Se torno ti uccidono. Scusami, non è colpa mia". Invece così pensava che non lo volevo più vedere e che non mantenevo le promesse. Ma non era vero. Questa cosa mi tormentava. (174)

Michele here is not really questioning his moral position, he is concerned that his friend would not recognize him for what he truly is, therefore threatening his sense of identity. In addition, the accusation of being a liar, someone who does not keep his promises, is felt to be the greatest and most shameful accusation among peers, according to Kelly Mallan.⁴³²

Michele's coming of age is structured around these critical moments of ethical choice, when his subjectivity is increasingly defined by a natural sense of justice, and his early expressions of guilt are symptomatic of a moral sense that will increasingly shape his actions. Torn between the two promises, the denouement happens once the entire group of friends decides to go back to the abandoned house: by outvoting Michele, his peers relieve him from breaking the promise to his father, thus maintaining his ethics intact. Only when Michele discovers that Filippo has been moved to some other place, he deliberately decides to save him, so that he is finally ready to verbalize the evilness of the world of adults, and to make his own moral choice independently of them:

⁴³¹ "E tutto si è fermato. Una fata aveva addormentato Acqua Traverse. I giorni seguivano uno dopo l'altro, bollenti, uguali e senza fine. I grandi non uscivano più nemmeno la sera." (181)

⁴³² Michele has been presented having another best friend – Salvatore – up until he betrays Michele by revealing the existence of Filippo to the adults. The capacity of keeping secrets from adults is a constant in coming-of-age narratives and children's fiction, as both keeping secrets and lying occupies an important part the code of conduct established among children. Secrecy in particular falls between truth and lies, occupying a kind of limbo often linked to a moral choice. See Kerry Mallan, *Secrets, Lies and Children's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Filippo era finito da Melichetti coi Maiali perché lo scambio non era riuscito e perché il buco non era più sicuro. Così avevano detto. E non c'entravano niente i signori della collina ed i mostri che mi inventavo io. "Piantala con questi mostri, Michele. I mostri non esistono. Devi avere paura degli uomini, non dei mostri." Così aveva detto papà. Era colpa sua. (192)

Michele's last concern before meeting Filippo is, significantly, about recognition, aiming to take back full possession of his identity by being faithful to his promise: "E se non mi riconosceva?" (192) soon followed by reassuring Filippo "Hai visto? Sono venuto. Ho mantenuto la promessa" (223).

The last moment of identification takes place following Michele's attempt to free Filippo, when both children get trapped in the hole. Almost naked and in the darkness, they embrace each other (226), presenting a very powerful last image of twins enclosed in the belly of the earth, which works as a prelude for the rebirth of both children. One of the most basic archetypes is indeed the Jungian one of symbolic death and rebirth.⁴³³ This is usually articulated by presenting a struggle that leads to a new realization of self, so that the character is 'reborn' as a result of the trials endured or after a rite of passage. As Jung defines it: "rebirth may be a renewal without any change of being, inasmuch as the personality which is renewed is not changed in its essential nature, but only its functions, or parts of the personality, are subjected to healing, strengthening, or improvement".⁴³⁴ Interestingly enough, Jung refers to Christ as the example of rebirth, intended as a transformational enlargement of one's personality and being, so that the definition of Michele as a Christ-like figure is fully realised.

Both Michele and Filippo emerge transformed from the hole, having learned about the way adults treat children. Michele also realises the true nature of adults, and faces his own father, so that at the end both Michele and Filippo have just begun to find themselves, after having experienced tragedy, horror but also true friendship. The resolution of the story is again bounded to the image of the double: Michele's father has been sent to kill Filippo, but he shot his son instead. "nel rombo Papà ha detto: - Non l'ho riconosciuto. Aiutatemi vi prego, è mio figlio" (230).

⁴³³ Carl Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*, Translated by R.F.C. Hull (Routledge: London and New York, [1972] 2001).

⁴³⁴ Ibidem, p. 55.

Through the interaction with Filippo, Michele is able to combine his sensitivity to moral issues with a performance of honesty and fidelity that entails keeping his promises, thus showing both his good-hearted nature and his accountability. For this reason, Michele emerges as one of the few characters that, despite the unfortunate ending, is able to make sense of his process of growth. He emerges from the story with a complete, unified and manifested identity that integrates *idem* and *ipse*, significantly through the act of storytelling that the adult character performs. Michele's rebellion against his father also allows for a symbolic resurrection in the fullness of his identity: by eventually embracing his destiny and choosing to save Filippo, he goes against the law of the father, that is, also against the corruption of the adult world.

2.3 Mothers and Daughters

As briefly seen in relation to Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura* or Melliti's *I bambini delle rose*, in male coming-of-age novels it is usually the father figure who occupies centre stage, either as the antagonist or mentor of the protagonist, whilst the mother is often a shadowy figure in charge of the domestic space or mediating the protagonist's relationship with the father. In contrast to the primacy of male relationships in male narratives, in *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater* the mother represents the otherness that female characters have to face, often through an uneasy relationship.⁴³⁵ Thus, in this section I will discuss the relationship between the unnamed protagonist of *Zoo* and Cecilia with their mothers, by focusing in particular on the role of the body since both *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater* embed the inner concentration of thoughts of the heroines within a bodily experience with extreme connotations.

The mother emerges as a central figure in these two novels also because of a lack of peer relationships, so that the maternal figure provides the characters with something to work against or grow from, often both at once. Whether present or absent, whether ally or enemy, the mother is the first identity against which these girls negotiate their own complex selves. According to Ronnie Scharfman, the complex process of individualisation always begins with the mother, who represents for the child the first

⁴³⁵ "Così come nel grande romanzo realista della tradizione occidentale è cruciale il posto del padre la costellazione edipica classica – con ciò che ne consegue tematicamente: il conflitto generazione, la rivolta sociale e politica, l'adulterio – altrettanto cruciale nella nuova narrativa post-femminista è il posto della madre: una costellazione pre-edipica in cui si alternano identificazione e distacco, desiderio di continuità e necessità di disaffiliazione." (12) Elisabetta Rasy, *Le donne e la letteratura* (Roma: Editori Uniti, 2000) [1984].

encounter with sameness and difference, according to traditional Lacanian stages. Even more when it comes with female characters, it is this conflation of identity and the simultaneous recognition of otherness that makes this bond so complex.⁴³⁶ In his study of motherhood and mirroring Scharfman declares that “the mother figure represents the first external mirror, eventually internalized, into which a girl-child looks to discover her identity”⁴³⁷. Especially during adolescence, that shady ground between being a child and woman is a period intensely fraught with psychological and physical change, becoming a time of a great tension between mothers and daughters.

Philosopher Adriana Cavarero sees in procreation the way to understand how identity cannot be solipsistic nor autoreferential, since everyone is born from a mother. This first, close relationship is the necessary condition to come into being, to become physically part of the world in the first place:

Besides being she from whom the existent comes, the mother is also the *other* to whom the existent first appears. [...] The primacy of appearance constitutes, through the others' gaze, the fundamental corporal aspect of identity. In other words, already on the corporeal level, in so far as a unique being is concerned, identity depends upon the presence of others.⁴³⁸

According to Cavarero, the moment of birth-giving is particularly crucial because it becomes simultaneously the origin of the child's existence, but also the immediate loss of one's origin, once the mother becomes otherness.⁴³⁹ In *Stabat Mater* the concept of childbirth is experienced by Cecilia as a traumatic experience once she snoops on a girl giving birth in the convent, mistaking it for defecation:

Davanti a me vedevo una figura nera, una sagoma che si contorceva per un crampo all'intestino. Ero scesa fino a laggiù in fondo per stare a guardare una mia compagna che faceva i suoi bisogni! Che beffa. E che schifo. Dal fondo di quel corpo usciva una massa fetida, la ragazza annaspava, stringeva i denti, l'ho sentita invocare la

⁴³⁶ Other examples of female coming-of-age stories that in the last decades have explored the relationship between mother and daughter are Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto* (1992), Stancanelli *Benzina* (1998) and Vinci *Come prima delle madri* (2003).

⁴³⁷ Ronnie Scharfman, “Mirroring and Mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart's ‘Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle’ and Jean Rhy's ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’” in *Yale French Studies*, n.62, 1981, p. 89.

⁴³⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 21.

⁴³⁹ “The mother, who embodies the *ex-* of existent, despite having been there at the origin of the child's existence, is now no longer there. Existence as exposure becomes, in this case, the perceptible truth of every existent, made more acute by the immediate loss of one's own origin.” *Ibid.* (Cavarero), p. 19.

Madre di Dio. Era disgustoso, stavo per andare via, ma quella cosa non finiva di uscire dalle sue viscere.

Non mi biasimate, Signora Madre, in vita mia non ero mai rimasta a spiare un essere umano mentre faceva i suoi bisogni, e di certo quella scena non mi attraeva, eppure sono rimasta lì ancora per un po', c'era qualcosa che mi tratteneva laggiù, non avevo mai visto un escremento simile in vita mia, né che si potesse soffrire così tanto per liberarsene.

Poi è successo qualcosa di assolutamente senza senso, qualcosa di mostruoso e comico allo stesso tempo. L'escremento ha iniziato a piangere. (23-24)

The chosen narrative imaginary is of a biological kind; Cecilia observes the girls evacuating a fetid mass, something described as disgusting and horrific. Yet, the young protagonist is both attracted and curious, and despite her discomfort she indulges in the viewing experience up to the point of hearing the cry of the presumed excrement. She then mistakes the umbilical cord for a snake coming out the girl's viscera and biting the baby's body.⁴⁴⁰ Clearly, the association of the infant with an excrement evokes the concept of being a refusal, something to be disposed with shame, and it is not by chance that the day of Cecilia's first menstruation she dreams of defecating not just a child, but herself: "fra i miei escrementi c'erano un paio di occhi, un volto tutto imbrattato, due manine. La neonata ero io" (32).⁴⁴¹

Since maternal and family stories are traditionally a strong component of a daughter's sense of self, by being absent the mother becomes this necessary space to be filled, so that Cecilia is unable to come to terms with herself unless she imagines her mother, making her search for identity not a singular one. This discursive tension is presented at the beginning of the novel when Cecilia is oscillating between different states of consciousness: she is both drowning in her thoughts – "Vengo tirata giù. Mi sento

⁴⁴⁰ "La coda del serpente era ancora intrappolata nelle viscere della ragazza, mentre la testa azzannava sulla pancia il corpicino appena nato. La ragazza ha sollevato il piccolo corpo e gli ha strappato il serpente dalla pancia con un morso. Il serpente giaceva arrotolato a terra, floscio e senza forze, spenzolando ancora dalle viscere della ragazza." (26)

⁴⁴¹ The idea of babies as refuses returns multiple times especially in Cecilia's dreams, as when she imagines the waters of Venice being a giant burial site for unwanted babies: "Ogni mese ci portano in gita in barca per farci galleggiare sull'acqua dei canali, dove sono seppelliti i corpicini degli orfani affogati nei secoli prima che venisse fondato l'Ospitale. I nostri gemelli antenati. I vicoli ciechi della vita. La barca scorre sopra quel cimitero d'acqua e di fango. I corpicini si sono sciolti, non c'è nessun segnale di riconoscimento che tenga, niente medagliette tagliate a metà, niente immagini sante. E non ci sono croci né pietre, nessuna lapide, nessun nome, la parola che noi siamo e che suona a vuoto. La nostra vita galleggia sopra l'acqua morta." (58)

sprofondare. È tutto buio” (4) – and wide awake, – “anche questa notte mi sono ritrovata con gli occhi spalancati a osservare il soffitto” (5) – anticipating an inner conflict that defines her liminality.

This tension also foreshadows a dissociated embodiment – “Com'è smisurato, questo mio niente. Io mi sento dappertutto, sento che in questo dappertutto non ci sono, e questo pensiero mi dà alla testa” (24) –, intertwining psychological and bodily experiences. As such, the general idea of birth-giving is then transported into Cecilia's own story in terms of absence of origins: the idea of being abandoned and refused by her mother turns into an obsessive association of the moment of birth with different images of death.

Death is projected by Cecilia as an imaginary twin sister (34) recalling the figure of Medusa. In one of these conversations, she reveals her idea that mothers give children life but, by delivering them into the world, are simultaneously and ultimately responsible of their death. This concept of motherhood as foreshadowing both life and death is recurrent:

I bambini saltano fuori dalla pancia delle madri e scoppiano a piangere, ancora terrorizzati da quello che hanno abbandonato, dalla morte che hanno scampato. Sono pezzi di corpo della madre in fuga da lei.

Le madri cercano di tenerli legati a sé, li trattengono quando nascono, ma i bambini fuggono ugualmente, e allora le madri deluse si vendicano, aizzano contro di loro la morte, la corda che li trattiene diventa il serpente che morde il loro piccolo ventre, e gli inietta il veleno mortale. Anche loro sono segnati, il loro destino gli è stato inoculato nella pancia. Il serpente viene strappato via, ma i bambini portano al centro del loro corpo una cicatrice di madre, una cicatrice di morte, per sempre. (47)

These powerful images recall Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection as it accompanies the maternal trope, one that defines the mother – as familiar as it might have been once – as radically alien. Using Lacan, Kristeva locates the first experience of abjection in the moment of physical separation from the mother, followed by a revolt against her once the law of the father is adopted. Kristeva goes on to associate the trope of the mother with abjection especially through the moment of childbirth, when the mother herself assumes this status of in-betweenness that both guarantees and threatens the idea of a unity of the self.

Because of this precondition of unity, individuals are both drawn to and repelled by the abject; nausea, for example, is a biological reaction to bodily substances like urine,

feces, or blood, those usually benign elements that challenge the alleged borders of selfhood by crossing the line between internal and external. Once separated from their natural location, Kristeva argues that these substances become reminders of death: “such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver”.⁴⁴² For Cecilia, the horror of procreation is not only connected to the presence of excrements, albeit she declares being constipated for months following that night, but it also reveals the radical connection of life and death, of mothers and children: “Si nasce per scappare via da un corpo destinato a morire” (46).

In *Stabat Mater*, the mother is perhaps more powerful in her absence rather than in her presence for the ways in which she defines Cecilia’s identity. As I have discussed at some length elsewhere,⁴⁴³ the mother’s disappearance from Cecilia’s life story creates a discursive and thematic absence: the girl displays a nearly metafictional awareness when she writes her letters, thus creating a false intersubjective dialogue that gradually shapes the presence of the mother within the narrative. Her powerlessness and solitude makes her orient herself towards the sole individual who can provide her existence with some sort of significance, so that she constitutes herself in relation to her mother. This intersubjective fusion is also expressed by Cecilia’s habit of seeing her mother’s face in her soup, superimposing her own reflection onto the image of her teenage mother, pregnant with her:

Signora Madre, cerco di immaginarvi meglio che posso, voglio sfondare questa cecità, questo posto vuoto, questa faccia che mi manca. Ce la metto tutta. Immagino il giorno in cui avete scoperto di essere ingombra di me. Tempo fa, in refettorio, ho abbassato la testa sul piatto che ci avevano appena servito le nostre compagne cuciniere. Sulla superficie della minestra si rifletteva vagamente la sagoma della mia testa, una faccia fatta di cipolle e cavoli. Vi ho immaginata, anche voi china sul vostro piatto di minestra, quasi diciassette anni fa, al tavolo con i vostri genitori, mentre

⁴⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Roudiez (New York; Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

⁴⁴³ In this contribution, I argue that Cecilia uses the epistolary form as a practise of consciousness-raising; by addressing the letters to the unknown mother, she manages to shape her narratable self, to satisfy her own desire for identity and to keep the fragmented parts of herself together. See Martina Mendola, “Epistole Impossibili: Il paradosso del medium nello *Stabat Mater* di Tiziano Scarpa” in *Scritture nascoste, scritture invisibili: quando il medium non fa passare il messaggio*, edited by Campus, Marchesini and Poncetti (Roma: Alteritas, 2020), pp. 365-378.

nascondevate in cuore la vostra vergogna, me. [...] Dal vostro riflesso saliva un vapore ripugnante.

Signora Madre, sempre più spesso mi apparite mentre sono seduta al tavolo del refettorio, vedo la vostra sagoma nella minestra, mi alzo e corro a vomitare nelle latrine. (31)

When Cecilia imagines her mother through her own self-image, she activates again that abjection that Kristeva explains as “a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence”.⁴⁴⁴ This explains the uncanny fascination for her mother that Cecilia has, up to the point of giving up her own reflection. In this sense, the alter ego represents an internalised aspect of otherness that is indicative of the internal fragmentation of the character, but also of how Cecilia perceives herself, that is, alienated and rejected.

Despite establishing her mother as the alter ego needed to substantiate her identity, the ambiguous status of the mother creates uncertainty and fear, leading Cecilia to experience physical discomfort, unease and dizziness – other attributes of abjection – up to the point of vomiting after staring at her reflection in the soup.⁴⁴⁵ The inability to see herself clearly, to recognize her body and inhabit it comfortably is shown in several parts, with assertions as

Quanto è vasta questa mia assenza! Quando ci penso mi viene il capogiro. Ma poi penso che è soltanto un'illusione anche quella di non esserci, e improvvisamente ritorno tutta qui, dentro la mia pelle, mi raggrumo, e infatti da qualche giorno mi si è incarnita un'unghia, mi fa male l'alluce del piede destro. Forse questo mi è successo proprio perché sono qui, sempre e soltanto qui, al mio posto, dentro di me, e la mia presenza non ne può più, preme e si fa sentire, mi punge. (25)

Yet, this continued conflation of identity is limiting, and must give way during the coming-of-age process. This fundamental struggle in imagining her own self changes once Cecilia starts interacting with other people and making new experiences. At first, she still

⁴⁴⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Roudiez (New York; Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 9.

⁴⁴⁵ This image is reprised later in the novel to signal that is a habit and not an exceptional event: “Signora Madre, ricevo il piatto sul tavolo del refettorio e vedo la vostra sagoma riflessa, inghiotto la minestra fino alla fine. Poi corro in latrina a vomitare tutto. Non riesco a tenervi dentro di me.” (54)

needs to rely on others to substantiate her identity (her mother, or the men coming to mass) as her identity needs to be externalised: “Per sentirmi dentro di me, per avere sentore concreto del mio corpo, sono ridotta a immaginare che gli altri mi immaginano. Riesco a prendere possesso di me soltanto se penso che qualcun altro mi pensa” (30). In this sense, it seems impossible for Cecilia to feel in control of her embodied identity; and while she is always investing in the corporeal, she also rejects it through a constant tendency of sublimation.

Gradually, she starts to come to terms with the fragments of her identity and to feel in possession of her body through the music that Vivaldi composes for the girls in the convent:

E io sono stata tutto questo, burrasca, tempesta, tuoni, lampi, ho pianto nel sentirmi diventare tanta furia, oltrepassando me stessa. Mi sono commossa di potermi trasformare in così tanto, e ho avuto pietà di me, senza compatimento. Ho pianto di non poter essere semplicemente io, quando posso diventare cose tanto diverse, tanto forti, io che non chiederei nient'altro che poter dire sono qui, sono Cecilia, sono tutta qui. (102)

Once language fails to act as a constructive elements for the character's narrative identity, because of the silence surrounding Cecilia's origins, music provides her a way to feel embodied despite the mother's absence.⁴⁴⁶ When Don Vivaldi requests Cecilia to undergo her rite of passage by slaughtering the lamb, he also gives Cecilia the opportunity to construct an identity that is distinct from the one imposed in the convent, divorced from being a disempowered child and projected towards the recognition of being a young woman. Killing the lamb is the ultimate sacrifice of Cecilia's innocence and passivity, who moving forward looks for a voice of her own, independent from both the mother and the convent.

Shifting to the second novel, in *Zoo* a typical oedipal scenario presents the daughter rejecting the mother for her father's affection. In this picture, the mother appears to be self-isolated within her own family, unloved and unloving of both her daughter and husband. Rivaling for the attentions of the father, a great part of the protagonist's identity comes from her conflict with her mother, in terms of both rejection and rebellion to all

⁴⁴⁶ Mendola Martina, “Epistole impossibili: Il paradosso del medium nello *Stabat Mater* di Tiziano Scarpa” in *Scritture nascoste, scritture invisibili: quando il medium non fa passare il messaggio*, edited by Campus, Marchesini and Poncetti (Roma: Alteritas, 2020), pp. 365-378.

that she represents. As the protagonist, the mother is also unnamed, and by being “the mother” she is treated as an archetype as much as a person, so that every statement can be viewed as a generalized model for the mother-daughter relationship in Santacroce’s texts.

As Stefania Lucamante has observed, in Santacroce there is a recurrent and visible generational discrimination that targets adult women, mothers specifically, establishing a “female model, or anti-model, the rivalry and the often refuted teaching that derives from the mothers’ life experiences”.⁴⁴⁷ Indeed, Isabella Santacroce recurrently explores the difficult tie between daughters and mothers, as the mother is “for a daughter the closest mirroring image of herself, a *mise en abyme*, to forget and disallow”.⁴⁴⁸ This archetypal conflict also evokes Kristeva’s idea of the symbolic matricide as a necessary step to achieve autonomy from the maternal image,⁴⁴⁹ matricide that in this novel moves beyond symbolic to become an actual homicide.

In *Zoo*, the relationship between the two female characters passes through the body, seen as the primary locus of difference and rivalry. Within the first ten pages, the memory of the protagonist has already presented the reader with the portrayal of the dissatisfaction about her own body, as increased by the image of herself that she receives from her mother.

Dice che la bambina è troppo magra, non lo vedi che è pelle e ossa, sei stato tu a ridurla così. Vuole che mi metta in piedi, deve rendersi conto di quanto sono denutrita [...] con le mani sul viso urla che si vergogna di me, che si vergogna di questa figlia scheletrica. [...] Vedevo le mie gambe riflesse nel vetro della finestra, la notte fuori era calma. Provavo qualcosa di indefinibile, mi sentivo una bambola comprata in un negozio per sbaglio. Mia madre avrebbe voluto quella perfetta, c’era stato un errore, gliene avevano data un’altra difettosa, col corpo pietoso. Proprio a lei doveva succedere. (22)

In this passage the daughter is presented in opposition to the mother, as her photographic negative, a faulted version of her attractive parent.⁴⁵⁰ Their different personalities are

⁴⁴⁷ Stefania Lucamante, “The Daughter’s Construction, or What Happens to Italian Novels When the Daughter Tells the Story” in *Forum Italicum*, Volume: 43 issue: 1, 2009, pp. 97-115.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid (Lucamante).

⁴⁴⁹ Summarised by Elisabetta Rasy as “pur postulando il primato del materno [Kristeva] afferma l’esigenza della parte femminile di un radicale distacco, di un matricidio simbolico per superare l’impasse dell’attaccamento alla madre che produce invidia e impotenza”. See Elisabetta Rasy, *Le donne e la letteratura* (Roma: Editori Uniti, 2000) [1984].

⁴⁵⁰ See Barbara Kornacka, “Sovversive, distruttive, demoniache, matricide. Le fanciulle fatali di Isabella Santacroce” in *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, XLI-4, 2014, pp. 113-126.

embedded in the strikingly difference between their bodies, especially when the protagonist perceives that this dissimilarity is a barrier to her mothers' attention. The dominance over the body is a constant battlefield, as shown when the mother forces the 11-year-old daughter to dress like an adult (22) but also later, when the teenage daughter takes control of her own appearance, deliberately infringing those canons of beauty and manners promoted by her mother, using her appearance to establish a further point of rupture.

The attractiveness of the mother is a source of great distress for the daughter, who not only feels insignificant compared to her, but who is also longing for a more traditional model of mothering, which is typically asexual and caring. The mother is not only the first locus of interaction with the world, but for female children also the first identifier of what it means to be female, the marker against which the daughter measures herself. For this reason, the protagonist feels under constant scrutiny as much as she scrutinizes the provocative body of her mother, who is the incarnation of an excess of stereotypical femininity.

La ricordo mentre si trucca, vedo la scollatura del suo abito, le curve morbide del seno, quelle labbra sempre rosse, i suoi capelli biondi sciolti sulle spalle, quel corpo procace di cui si faceva vanto e che usava per divertirsi seducendo mio padre [...] Un giorno mi dirà 'Tu non sarai mai bella come me' poi si girerà perché io ammiri la madre stronza che è. (23)

The mother's body is always described in highly sexualised terms; she uses it as a weapon "sbatte il suo corpo in faccia al marito, fa la puttana, lo eccita" (28), "una inopportabile bellezza che ti puntava addosso come un mitra" (106), she dresses up "come una troia" (22) stealing attentions in the eyes of a daughter who sees her as a "fiore con dentro il veleno" (55). The mother is also described as highly concerned with her appearance, in contrast with the unease that the daughter feels about her puberal body.

After the death of the husband, the mother ultimately breaks free from social constrictions of marital life, and focuses on herself by taking even more care of her body and by starting to date. As such, she incarnates in the daughter's perception all that is hypocritical, degraded and compromised: "La sera dopo esce, si agghinda come una troia e mi sfilava davanti. Vuole sapere se le dona l'abito che ha scelto, se il trucco è eccessivo, se mi piace come si è conciata per farsi scopare da quell'uomo" (91). This hostility

underlies an unresolved need of affection; starting from the daughter's birth, described as the first moment of abandon: "Lei, figura insostituibile, madre e mostro, violenta presenza, mancanza continua. Forse per colpa di quell'abbandono che è il parto in cui esci dalla sua carne, ti espelle. Forse per questo strappo che non hai chiesto ti mancherà per sempre" (39). This recalls the act of childbirth as the moment of convergence between life and I have already discussed in relation to *Stabat Mater*.

The ambivalence between closeness and separation, between hate and desire for maternal love is pushed to extreme consequences in this novel after the main character gets paralysed. At this point the daughter is unable to be self-sufficient and has to rely on her mother's assistance, progressively regressing towards childhood as the dependency on the mother becomes physical. In the meantime, to counterbalance the excess of maternal power, she starts enacting a series of tortures against the mother. In an escalation of violence, she locks her up in the toilet, forces her to sleep on the floor of her bedroom, to skip meals and even to cut her beautiful hair. All these actions aim to deprive the mother of both her strength and beauty,⁴⁵¹ to achieve some kind of control over her.

In addition, possession drives the character to be jealous of her mother's new lover; she sabotages her dates and engages in an imaginative moment about her mother's sexual life. This is the beginning of a gradual regression towards infancy, where birth and death conflate – "Mentre me ne stavo immobile su quel letto come un fossile spogliavo completamente quella sua stupida bugia, e osservandola nuda godere dell'amante, la volevo morta" (92). Sexuality and violence become intertwined in the narrative, reprising the highly symbolical image of the vampirization, when the protagonist has to stop herself from biting her mother's neck:

Mi aggrappavo al suo collo, profumava delle mani dell'amante il suo petto, dovevo trattenere il respiro per resistere, per non azzannarla. Quella sua carne morbida, massaggiata dalla passione appena vissuta era per me irresistibile, la tentazione di affondarvi i denti mi costringeva a serrare le labbra, a stringere i pugni (92)

Even if resentful towards the mother, she is still longing for her love, and this obsessive desire ultimately turns her into a vampiric figure, a monstrous alter ego looking for

⁴⁵¹ "Desideravo toglierne carne, potere. Dovevano perdere rotondità le sue curve, sfiorire. La volevo dimagrita, sciupata, con i segni neri sotto gli occhi, la pelle spenta. Volevo vederla come mai mi era successo, senza splendore, senza un corpo voluttuoso, senza arroganza." (108)

vengeance.⁴⁵² Also, the image of the vampiric daughter hints towards her abnormal sexual desire, anticipating the idea of incest. As Adalgisa Giorgio has discussed, Isabella Santacroce breaks the taboo of showing the daughter's sexual desire for the mother's body, following a tradition of women's writing which emphasised "a deep passion between women which is now sexual besides being symbolic, placing the source of female subjectivity in the (highly sexual) body – one's own, one's mother's and other women's".⁴⁵³

The vision of her mother's naked nipple becomes for the protagonist the element that triggers her desire, experienced both in terms of a symbolic cannibalistic attitude – "Sento il suo cuore battere veloce, vorrei prenderlo in bocca, masticare la carne fino a raggiungerlo" (111) – but also culminating the trajectory of her emotional regression to childhood: "Lo guardo vedendo il mio inizio, l'esordio della mia vita [...] in quel momento divento la bambina che non ricordo più" (111-112). The desire of being breastfed by her mother turns into a first sexual aggression that the mother accepts with horror, humiliation and passivity. Later, the daughter also forces her into a sexual intercourse aimed to reverse the act of childbirth – "la prego di non muoversi, di farmi stare dove sono nata" (124).

Through these last acts of violence, the daughter affirms herself as being her mother's child, reconnecting the concepts birth and death with the subsequent matricide. The tragic and monstrous ending underlies the impossibility for the character to define herself if the mother is part of her story, so that the only opportunity for freedom rests in mutual annihilation; a matricide but also a lucid, intended descend into the abyss of self-destruction from the daughter's part. As said, while the rite of passage traditionally implies a symbolic transformational rebirth, in *Zoo* the matricide corresponds to a symbolic death of the nameless character with no growth nor rebirth.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist struggles to achieve autonomy; the pain and disdain that she constantly feels depends on her debilitating relationship with her mother but also on her isolation, as discussed in the previous chapter. The complete withdrawal

⁴⁵² "Ho dovuto cancellarmi, inventarmi un'identità, dimenticarmi di me, diventare una sconosciuta, una persona presa in prestito. Mi aveva sostituito una ragazza che non conoscevo, una a cui avevo raccontato la mia storia, chiedendole di vendicarsi al mio posto. [...] Mentre stavo sveglia, con mia madre accanto a letto, a terra come un cane, io lottavo contro la voglia che avevo di perdonarla, d'amore. Potevo lasciare quel momento, chiederle di stendersi accanto a me, baciarle il viso, piangere. Non lo facevo." (110)

⁴⁵³ See Adalgisa Giorgio, "Mothers and Daughters in Italian Feminism: An Overview" in *Feminisms and Women's Movements in Contemporary Europe*, edited by Cento Bull, Diamond, and Marsh, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

from the world acts as a barrier to the character's growth, not only prohibiting relationships with peers, but also making the character regress back towards a monstrously idealised childhood. The failure to establish a connection with otherness is enhanced by the incapacity of both mother and daughter to resolve their conflict. Mothers usually help their daughters in understanding their origins, but unlike this idealised view of the family romance, in *Zoo* identity is disentangled from any familial system of significance. There is no understanding between mother and daughter, no redemption in the memory of previous female generations, no lesson to be learned. Neither of them assumes responsibilities for the failure of their relationship and keep blaming the other in a destructive way, so that both their identities are expressed through abuse and violence, both self-inflicted and inflicted upon others.

Conclusions

As seen, adolescence is a liminal phase where growth is characterised by three key elements: psychological turmoil, what was called *Sturm und drang* by Stanley Hall (1904) in the first work on adolescent psychology, physical change connected to new awareness of the body, and social development through encountering otherness. To these elements, the conflict or relationship with peers and adult figures and the values expressed by them is a corollary. In this chapter I discussed what role otherness, framed as the relationship between characters, peers and adults, plays when it comes to identity development and growth.

Firstly, I discussed the ambivalent belonging of characters such as Rosario and Martina, whose relationship with otherness entail contradictory drives coming from different worlds; the ones of childhood and adulthood, but also those of femininity and masculinity in *Certi bambini* where Rosario is torn between the two symbolic worlds represented by Casa Letizia and Camorra. His final adhesion to the latter requires him to reject the feminine world and to conform to a toxic masculinity that recalls the laws of the criminal world, as taught by his mentor Damiano. Rosario's experience also anticipates the convergence between violence and sexuality, since the child is often aroused by performing or imagining violent actions.

This same convergence is explored in detail in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, analysing the unfiltered sexual initiation of Martina and her friends, one that blurs the boundaries between games and reality. The body is in this novel experienced by the children as a collective body, following Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque body, to be

explored through all senses and without any kind of moral concern. The dramatic ending, which results in the involuntary homicide of the youngest girl, reaffirms not only the thematic connection between sexuality and violence but also a symbolic denial of female pleasure and agency.

Secondly, I have discussed otherness in terms of peers. From a social perspective, peers act as a buffer between primary and secondary socialisation; the group becomes a safe space for growth, for creating bonds and exploring social norms, to prepare the individual for the integration in a much bigger world. But, as much as relationships with peers concur to integration, behaviours that are deviant, rebellious or transgressive can emerge within the group to contest the adult world's authority and knowledge. This is the case of Martina, Michele, but also Nico and Ly, whose strong relationship with peers others openly challenge the norms of the adult world.

Interestingly, family and school, the two main sources of cultural and social capital are rarely providers of a baggage of adequate social norms to face the external world. This leads to a rising integration in the culture of peers, as it has been extensively studied by sociologists of youth in terms, for example, of youth subcultures. As expressed by Maurizio Merico,

Nella rapidità del mutamento sociale gli schemi culturali trasmessi dai genitori non possono più essere utilizzati dai figli in quanto fanno riferimento a valori, competenze e modelli di relazione obsoleti e non più spendibili nella concentra realtà sociale. Quando ciò si verifica, viene meno il ruolo principale dei genitori e la funzione di socializzazione si sposta su altri attori. [...] ritengono il gruppo dei pari più competente e adatto dei genitori a fornire consigli e modelli di comportamento⁴⁵⁴.

This occurs even more when adults are abdicating their responsibilities, compelling the children to grow despite their age, so that other children take on the responsibility for educating their peers. In fact, in many novels grown-ups are not the adults, but those four or five years older, who know “stuff” and therefore become the bearers of knowledge and secrets about adulthood. This is the case of Mirko in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, who guides the group of children in an exploration of violence and sexuality as a collective gamified experience, rather than an individual moment of growth. In this sense, the group of peers becomes the most important if not sole agent of socialization, yet “incapace

⁴⁵⁴ Maurizio Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 57.

tuttavia di fornire una percezione adeguata della diversità in quanto ambito di socializzazione prevalentemente orizzontale e paritaria”.⁴⁵⁵

Peers can be also friends or lovers, as in the case of Melliti’s *I bambini delle rose* and Ammaniti’s *Io non ho paura*, whence a recognition based on solidarity, shared humanness and accountability that unlocks the possibility of reimagining one’s self. For example, in *I bambini delle rose*, the friendship between Nico and Ly is a way to establish not only self-significance through mutual recognition. By performing acts of generosity, they go against the economic environment framed by Bauman as one where ‘wasted lives’ are trapped, thus reclaiming their childhood needs.

The friendship between Michele and Filippo in *Io non ho paura* is also investigated in its significance for the formation of identity through recognition, in this case by using the theme of the double. Through a constant series of parallelism between Michele and Filippo’s bodies and emotions, the story challenges Michele’s understanding of the world and its own ethical stance, resulting in an enhanced self-awareness that allows him to verbalise the evilness of the world and to acquire agency. In this sense, childhood, innocence, violence, sexuality – these become key themes that writers can use to give a particular urgency to representations of subjectivity and socialisation, to highlight the challenges of growth in the context of contemporary Italy.

A last consideration that emerges when looking at the growth of these characters, is that the authors tackle the coming-of-age journey differently if dealing with male characters and female characters, although the process of identity formation is equally challenging. *Certi bambini* shows a prototypical, even if distorted transformation into a man, not unlike *Io non ho paura* and *I bambini delle rose*, whereby the representation of the children responds to what Anna Antoniazzi defines as the “winner or loser” paradigm, by challenging notions of ethics and morality. When it comes to representing the coming of age of boys, there is greater emphasis on choices, on the right and wrong actions to take, and how these define the identity of the character, both for himself and in the face of wider society.

When it comes to the girls, more than actions projected on the external world, the young characters experience their sexual awakening and their embodied presence in the world beyond particular concerns for morality. These coming-of-age stories with female child protagonists (*Dei bambini non si sa niente*, *Zoo*, *Stabat Mater*) challenge the

⁴⁵⁵ Elisa Bellotti, “I segni dell'appartenenza. La gioventù postmoderna tra sperimentazione e frammentazione” in *Studi di Sociologia*, Anno 41, Fasc. 2 (Aprile-Giugno 2003), pp. 205-223.

conventional representation of female's sexual innocence through the use of the body as the main vehicle of knowledge, in a much stronger way if compared with their male counterparts. Marianne Hirsch referred to female coming-of-age stories as typically leaning towards "intense inwardness" so that, in contrast to male narratives (whose primary concern was the integration of the self in the collective), female coming of age emerges as a private journey.⁴⁵⁶ Despite numerous novels challenging this paradigm in Italian literature and beyond, when it comes to those analysed in this study this tendency seems to be confirmed, especially when considering the alienation from society that the protagonists of both *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater* experience.

The girls portrayed in these novels are far from being stereotypical "good girls", exposing instead their physical anger, disgust, desire and excitement. Isabella Santacroce in particular continues to reject cultural expectations of femininity by consistently showing in her production female characters with extreme sexual impulses, far from being compliant with any kind of cultural expectation. In this way, both the embodied experience and the psychological connotations of the characters directly recall the interconnections between sexuality and violence, between life and death, between pleasure and guilt – so that in *Zoo* and in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, when the author is also a female, these tensions remain unresolved.

1.The Failure of Adult Models

The importance of peers is especially obvious when considering how, on the other side, adults and wider social expectations act as barriers to growth. Formally, the perspectives used to describe the coming of age can either see children as victims of the adult world, or as belonging to a completely separate world. In the first case, the emphasis is on the traumatic collision between the two symbolic orders. This happens in *Certi bambini*, *I bambini delle rose*, and *Io non ho paura*, where growth happens under the direction of adults who are criminal or malevolent. In these cases, the protagonists are soon forced to abandon the innocence of childhood years and confront the violence of reality, so that these novels explicitly lay blame for the children's conditions on the shoulders of adults. According to Spinazzola, the negative influence of adult models is evident once the protagonist "si lascia sedurre dalle voci degli adulti che lo incitano a contravvenire le leggi

⁴⁵⁶ See Abel, Hirsch and Langland, *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development* (Dartmouth College, 1983).

primarie della convivenza civile: a delinquere insomma. Dal romanzo di formazione passiamo a quello di emarginazione: il ragazzo si colloca nei territori dell'asocialità e si conforma ai criteri comportamentali del disordine costituito".⁴⁵⁷

On the contrary, narrations that explore the coming of age from within are more attuned to represent the group dynamics of children, as in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, or the lack of socialization, as in *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater*. In these novels, adults can be condemned for being self-centred, weak and uncertain, far too removed from the experiences of the children rather than for being intrusive or over present. Even in *Zoo*, where the story revolves around the relationship between mother and daughter, the greatest accusation from the teenager's part is a lack of love and care: "Se fosse stata una madre amorevole almeno cinque volte nella sua vita prima di farmi del male forse l'avrei perdonata." (76)

Unlike the *Bildungsroman*, these coming-of-age stories do not contest the adult's authority and their worldview, as it happens emblematically in Balzac's *Papa Goriot* (1834), but rather express a nostalgia for a constructive confrontation with adulthood. Simona Vinci herself articulates this absence of the adult world when discussing *Dei bambini non si sa niente*:

Fin dall'inizio avevo in mente una storia nella quale gli adulti non comparissero mai 'a figura intera'. Se ne avverte la presenza, ma non sono mai messi a fuoco. Eppure, in fondo, questo romanzo parla soprattutto di loro. Della loro assenza, appunto, della loro mediocrità, della loro incapacità di ascoltare e di vedere. Di essere ciò che dovrebbero essere: 'i grandi', quelli che sanno e insegnano le cose, quelli che ti proteggono quando viene buio, ma sanno lasciarti libero quando sei pronto a camminare senza tenere nessuno per mano.⁴⁵⁸

Informed by the Rousseauian conception of childhood as an idealized state of original innocence and disempowerment, coming-of-age stories have typically endorsed hierarchical power relationships between children and adults, as I discussed with regard to Risorgimental literature. Instead, these novels show a disconcerting tendency for young people to feel the absence of authorial figures they could safely rely upon, especially when

⁴⁵⁷ Vittorio Spinazzola, *L'egemonia del romanzo: La narrativa italiana nel secondo Novecento* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2007), p. 21.

⁴⁵⁸ *Intervista a Simona Vinci* by Mirko Roglia, for *Mumble*, 21 May 2011, available online <http://www.mumbleduepunti.it/site/index.php/2011/05/05-2011-intervista-a-simona-vinci/>.

guidance is particularly needed. This is evident in *Io non ho paura*, as every time Michele is in need of support instead of relying on the adults of the village, he turns to “Tex”, the famous cowboy of a popular comics series.⁴⁵⁹

Instead, a failing model of adult guidance impacts Rosario, who ends up being alienated and disconnected from his identity, embodying a generation of “aimless, amoral kids crying out for adult interventions as they beg entry in the shelters of home”,⁴⁶⁰ exactly as Rosario does in his yearning for a father figure, later assumed by the *camorrista* Damiano. In contrast to the archetypal male characters of Huckleberry Finn or Holden Caulfield, Rosario is not conducting a rebellion towards society nor he is confronting adult hypocrisy with idealism, irony or morality.

As said with regard to *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, these children act without awareness, without innocence, but also without “il presupposto essenziale dell’assunzione di colpa”.⁴⁶¹ This means that there is no idealised childhood to counterbalance the lack of positive adult guidance, overall affecting the position of the child as a moral subject. Even when dealing with characters like Nico or Michele who develop a moral compass, because of the unethical context in which they find themselves, their actions lead to severe punishments by the hands of their fathers. Citing again Spinazzola:

Al paradosso dell’educazione diseducativa viene conferito maggior risalto abbassando il livello d’età dei soggetti in causa: il gruppo di ragazzini e ragazzine depravati di Simona Vinci di *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (1997) o il piccolo camorrista killer di *Certi bambini* (2001) di Diego De Silva sono coetanei di Pinocchio o della piccola vedetta lombarda, ma i destinatari delle loro fosche imprese sono lettori adulti.⁴⁶²

Here, we witness a paradox of the educative action that enhances the fracture between adults and children.

⁴⁵⁹ “Cos'avrebbe fatto Tiger Jack al mio posto? Non tornava indietro neanche se glielo ordinava Manità in persona. Tiger Jack. Quella era una persona seria. Tiger Jack, l'amico indiano di Tex Willer. E Tiger Jack su quella collina ci saliva pure se c'era il convegno internazionale di tutte le streghe, i banditi e gli orchi del pianeta [...]. Io sono Tiger, anche meglio, io sono il figlio italiano di Tiger, mi sono detto” (51)

⁴⁶⁰ Kirk Curnutt, “Teenage wasteland: Coming-of-age novels in the 1980s and 1990” in *Critique*, Fall 2001, p. 95.

⁴⁶¹ Simona Argentieri, *Recensione di 'Dei bambini non si sa niente'* per “L'Indice”, 1997, n.11, available online <https://www.ibs.it/dei-bambini-non-si-sa-libro-simona-vinci/e/9788806146344>.

⁴⁶² Vittorio Spinazzola, *L'egemonia del romanzo: La narrativa italiana nel secondo Novecento* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2007), p. 44.

This is even more the case when considering the commodification of children in *I bambini delle rose* but also of pornography and adultization in *Dei bambini non si sa niente*. Instead of setting up an ideal vision of adolescent growth, it deconstructs and demythologizes the process, moving towards a heightened realism in the portrayal of children. The commodification of children, and the representation of them as an object of adult desire integrally part of consumer society, represent a merciless segment of contemporary Italian society.

Lastly, I have focused on the daughter-mother relationship in *Stabat Mater* and *Zoo*, going back to that primary relationship that constitutes the first incarnation of otherness. Mothers are a key incarnation of adult figures, as the complex process of individualization begins with the mother as the first intersubjective experience for the child, representing both alterity and sameness. In this sense, both *Zoo* and *Stabat Mater* reveal the inadequacy of the maternal. Absent in one case and narcissistic in the other, they cannot act as role models for the daughters nor become the bearer of female knowledge to share.

Growth implies a movement towards maturity, which is traditionally embodied by adults. Yet, these novels challenge the idea of adulthood itself, by providing images of adulthood far from mature or comforting, as I will discuss further in the conclusions. Too concerned with their own world, adult figures are either indifferent to the fate of their children, as in Vinci's *Dei bambini non si sa niente*, totally absent from the picture, as in Scarpa's *Stabat Mater*, or desperately trying to escape their parental role, as in Santacroce's *Zoo*. By challenging adults as role models, these novels deconstruct the same model of adulthood in which the characters are expected to integrate, showing the inadequacy of it.

Overall, by looking collectively at these novels, it is possible to frame the importance of otherness as constitutive of that "dramatic process of becoming oneself through experience and through exposure to otherness" in two different ways.⁴⁶³ Nico, Michele and Cecilia experience multiple encounters with peers or adults that have an active role in helping them consolidate an identity towards self-awareness, following Lawler's understanding that to achieve subjectivity is needed the understanding that "our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience"⁴⁶⁴. By contrast, for Rosario,

⁴⁶³ Ricoeur cited in Mirosław Zarowski, "My own body as a form of otherness in Paul Ricoeur's philosophy" in *Human Movement*, 2012, vol. 13 (1), pp. 70-77.

⁴⁶⁴ Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 3.

Martina and the unnamed teen in *Zoo*, the relationship with otherness is perceived as oppressing or incomprehensible, and it deprives the character of agency and intentionality.

Conclusions: Towards a new model of coming of age

*Abbiamo dato al movimento la precedenza su tutto. Se fai del movimento un obbligo esteso a tutto l'esistente, te lo ritroverai a segnare ogni strato dell'esperienza, da quelli più semplici a quelli più complessi. Inutile pretendere poi che tuo figlio faccia una cosa per volta, che il lavoro fisso rimanga una priorità e che la verità si lasci ritrovare dove l'hai lasciata.*⁴⁶⁵

In the introduction to this work I framed my research question in terms of what growth looks like in contemporary coming-of-age stories, and I challenged whether the parameters in use to discuss growth are still relevant today for the genre, and to what extent. After all, the novel has always portrayed individuals and individualities, to reflect on how experience is made in society, in a precise time and space. The interest for child characters has a long legacy, as explored in Chapter One, as growth adventures constitute an ur-structure traceable back to fairy-tales, together with its metaphors (the journey, the symbolic death) and semiotic oppositions (inside/outside, here/there, ego/other). This remains true for contemporary writers, once narratives of growth have adapted to reflect the challenges of contemporary times.

The first chapter sketched the location of debates about growth and identity today, and provided an overview of coming-of-age stories in Italy by focusing specifically on the representation of children and teenager characters. Over the last three chapters I have analysed six contemporary Italian novels to answers the research questions by looking at the temporal arrangement of the story, at the spatial setting and social determinants, and lastly at the role of otherness when it comes to identity formation.

I have therefore explored similarities and differences among the treatment of the character's process of growth, identifying some overarching patterns which, regardless of their variations, are representative of these contemporaries coming-of-age stories. Specifically, growth for these characters appears to be *spiraling* when looking at the temporal unfolding of the path of formation, *solitary* when locating the characters in their social and spatial setting, and *senseless* when it comes to navigating the complex relationship with otherness.

But mostly, what has emerged is that these novels, with their plural and disruptive narratives, display key differences from traditional narratives of formation. As discussed, the model of reference for formation, the *Bildungsroman* of the late 18th century presented a linear and coherent approach to the process of growth. Progression was chronologically

⁴⁶⁵ Alessandro Baricco, *The Game* (Torino: Einaudi, 2018).

determined and there was a definitive end as the character became a fully realized individual within the wider society. Even when tackling similar challenges, such as understanding the rules governing the adult world, the novels considered in this study emphasize liquidity and multiplicity over the linearity of traditional patterns of growth. In this sense, a normative idea of growth is supplanted by ideas of ambiguity, fluidity and continuous change, turning growth into a process always in process, never reaching a sort of fixity. In this conclusion I intend to explore more the premises and consequences of such a change, setting the way forward for discussing the genre today as embedded in and representative of social change.

Here, I want to indicate a new idea of growth that transcends the traditional view of the linear, humanistic model associated with the *Bildung*, that is no longer respondent to the contemporary social, cultural and economic life. I argue that we need to move past the traditional view of coming-of-age stories as bounded to linear trajectories, with a precise set of milestones to achieve, because this paradigm no longer corresponds to the lived experiences of coming of age in Italian society. If formation remains the model of reference, then the contemporary coming-of-age stories analysed in this study need to be read in terms of ineptitude, inconclusiveness and loss, and this fails to account for the liquid nature of society.

Growth was traditionally connected to institutions and firm categories: school, family, religion, truth, unity, authenticity. But, as Margherita Ganeri explains, in post-industrial societies the dominant categories became ones of instability, precarity, flexibility, acceleration and globalization.⁴⁶⁶ This creates a *zeitgeist* that cannot generate solidity, so that growth becomes a sum of multiple and changing experiences that are rarely fixed themselves. If formation previously aimed to order the process of growth, today it has resigned to the idea of adding a complexity that often generates dismay, bewilderment and fright. This change of paradigm has huge implications, and it explains why if we look for the meaning of growth in a linear trajectory (where we used to find it) we have the impression that, simply, meaning is no longer there. Formation ceases to be found, as it has happened frequently when discussing contemporary coming-of-age narratives.

Because of the difficulty of reimagining such a deep-seated paradigm, criticism keeps going back to the traditional idea of formation, longing for its loss and invoking

⁴⁶⁶ See Margherita Ganeri, *Postmodernismo* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1998), p. 10.

ideas of ‘de’ – ‘deformation’, ‘degrowth’, ‘devolution’, ‘delayed’ when interrogating contemporary narratives of growth. Even worse, the result is to theorize a “*letteratura dell’inesperienza*”,⁴⁶⁷ mourning the loss of the humanistic paradigm, and failing to investigate the new modalities in which literature captures experience.

If social expectations are still tied to the old idea of growth, with its milestones and normative models of identity, it makes sense that stories such as the one of Nico, Cecilia, Rosario or Michele appear senseless, incomplete journeys. Rather, as critics we should dedicate time to interrogate what we do not know and understand of today’s stories of formation, as I attempted to do with this study.

Here, I am going to discuss three constitutive traits of this new model: that growth is a fluid matter, that communities are dispersed, and that adults are becoming useless, opening up the debate for further studies.

1. Growth is a Fluid Matter

Engaging in a discussion of growth today means to approach a fluid matter. Firstly, because growth is a process, therefore in itself dynamic and everchanging, always *in progress*. Arresting it is impossible, so that the best we can do is to provide a snapshot of one moment in time and space, and even that would be a partial view of the process. Indeed, everyone ‘grows up’ but the modalities in which people construct their identities are tied to specific cultural, social and historical circumstances beyond biological growth.

As said, within the wider genre of the novel of formation the coming-of-age story is optimally placed to interrogate society, as young people’s experiences of growth reflect both individual and collective processes of social change.⁴⁶⁸ A constitutive dynamism is inscribed in the word youth itself, as the Italian “*giovane*” comes from the latin *iuvenis*, which indicates vivacity, continuous movements and renewal.⁴⁶⁹ This is the reason why the work has assumed coming-of-age stories as the primary object of investigation, and growth as the primary subject of reflection.

Traditional novels of formation used to present a self-conscious and coherent human being, navigating the challenges of growth according to a precise social and economic structure, one that granted the opportunity of a successful integration in a rationalized world. The contemporary coming-of-age stories analysed in this study, on the contrary,

⁴⁶⁷ See Antonio Scurati, *La letteratura dell’inesperienza* (Milano: Bompiani, 2006).

⁴⁶⁸ Joanna Wyn and Rob White, *Rethinking Youth* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 5.

⁴⁶⁹ Maurizio Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 7.

present a plural approach to the characters' identity and much more resistance against linearity in the growth process. This is why a main difference is in the contrast between linear and spiraling experiences, as explored by studies in sociology of youth on transitions to adulthood.

But even more importantly, these stories challenge how formation was conceived from the *Bildungsroman* onwards, as unity, coherence, conclusiveness and realization to enhance plurality, exploration, liquidity and dynamism. If formation was the conclusion of a trajectory of growth, the reassuring result of a complex pathway, here we witness movement, an unfinished process whose boundaries are blurred and often arbitrary, as discussed in relation to thresholds of adulthood. If traditional views of growth had a solid quality, a sense of permanence of selfhood, growth in these novels gives a sense of impermanence, formlessness and liquidity.

In fact, growth is a fluid matter also because it happens within a liquid society that requires a constant strategy of adaptability through identity malleability. Reimagining oneself and reinventing life-trajectories has become a defining feature of postmodern times, as extensively discussed by Zygmunt Bauman. When trying to categorize the novels in this study by mapping the growth pattern in relation to what we consider normative, it emerges how growth experiences are messy, unpredictable and emotionally charged. Thus, these teenage characters rarely move straight from childhood to adulthood, from unconsciousness to self-actualization, from innocence to maturity in one movement; rather they navigate a series of steps in between that are different for all of them.

So that a character like Michele in *Io non ho paura* has overall a "smooth" growth without major disruptions, despite the cruelty of the world. For Nico of *I bambini delle rose* and Cecilia of *Stabat mater* growth has been partially "repaired"; it has seen interruptions which are partially overcome by a remedial interference of another character and a certain degree of agency. In the case of Rosario of *Certi bambini* an "alternative" pathway of growth is presented, moving away from an institutional logic in favor of an (atypical) form of initiation to criminal life. Martina in *Dei bambini non si sa niente* presents instead a "stagnant" growth, blocked by trauma, reinforcing the risk of a lack of future agency. Lastly, *Zoo* presents a growth that goes "downward", achieving an impossible transition to adulthood that is even more symptomatic when considering that this unnamed character is the oldest considered. The collective experience of these characters highlights how mechanistic prescriptions of growth provided by traditional

narratives could fit only a static world, or one with a different dynamism like the world portrayed in the *Bildungsroman*.

Yet, this renewed novelistic sensibility is still mainly understood by literary critics in terms of deviation from a norm, so that many narratives produced in the last decades are read in terms of dysfunctions and failures not only of individuals, but of entire generations of young people. Ideas of de-growth, delayed growth and de-formation are widely used to label strands of contemporary narratives by emphasising disempowerment and a lack of ability to overcome contextual challenges of growth.⁴⁷⁰

In my view, this perspective encourages the normalization of a model of growth which is unrealistic and often unattainable in contemporary Italian society. If we remain tied to a linear model with sequential steps and precise milestones, the outcome can only be a disempowering view of characters going in the opposite direction of what is required. As a result, this approach discourages us from interrogating the devastating effects of requiring young people to conform to an outdated, unfit model of growth. Instead, the novel of formation will continue to have central stage and to cast light on the current state of events only if we move past the traditional idea of formation, to explore the new models and current challenges for the genre, assuming liquidity as a premise of contemporary society and seeing growth as part of a system that has, more than ever, changed at its core.

It is enough to move into the realm of sociology of youth to see that the notion of a linear life-course⁴⁷¹ has been already deeply challenged, substituting the rigid transition between life-stages a more flexible approach which allows discussion of alternative and non-regular life-courses. According to Merico, from the 1980s onwards social sciences have started a journey to understand changes in youth experiences, “infrangendo l’uniformità di una fase di della vita e mettendone in mostra la pluralità di stati, percorsi, scelte e appartenenze”.⁴⁷²

Notwithstanding biological development and legal statuses, cultural experiences of growth are changing, as much as the boundaries between different life stages are getting increasingly blurred. As Gilles Valentine points out:

⁴⁷⁰ See for example Ilaria Masenga, *The ‘Delaying of Age’ Novel in Contemporary Italian Literature*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter, 2003.

⁴⁷¹ According to Merico, with the advent of social constructionism, life has been theorized as an uninterrupted succession of small transformations and accumulation of experience, against the prior idea of growth as a circular “life-cycle”. In this sense, it was a trajectory – a “lifecourse” – where every stage had distinct learnings and experiences. See Maurizio Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 14.

⁴⁷² This partially aimed at counterbalancing a progressive homologation and simplification of youth experiences, which in turn had created stereotypical images that failed to account for individual differences. Cristofori cited in Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 82.

After all, the distinction between the states of childhood and adulthood is not clear-cut, neither are transitions a one-off or one-way process. Changes associated with growing up such as leaving home, getting a job, becoming a parent may be or may not be connected and may occur simultaneously, serially or not at all. (48)

Traditional milestones no longer happen according to a precise and set order, instead steps are overlapping and delayed because of external events but also due to individual decisions. As I discussed in Chapter Two, within this debate Steven Miles affirms that patterns of growth have to become more flexible, made of multiple transitions which are not following a linear trajectory – from lack to enhancement – but a spiraling one, so that the subject can go back to a stage and confront it from a different perspective, always learning and always redefining itself.⁴⁷³

Building on Miles' theory, and in line with the postmodern sensibility that has definitely nurtured the authors, it is impossible today to rely onto the linear, humanist model of formation for which growth is an upward progression of sense-making when reading these novels. Instead, if interrogated in terms of a spiraling pathway, the false starts and new beginnings, the rocky progresses and scary leaps start to make sense. The conceptualization of a spiraling process of growth would explain, for example, the mismatch between emotional and biological, or between sexual and moral growth that we trace back in most of the characters. In effect, acting as grown-ups for Rosario or Nico becomes the result of a sum of mismatches that problematize the concept of normativity, showing really how growth is constructed across a long series of individual choices to be taken within an increasingly broader set of behavioral models. In this sense, a kind of reflexivity is established between childhood and adulthood, so that constitutive tensions of one age-stage are transported into another stage, as I will discuss later.

Simultaneously, postmodernity has determined a pluralization of roles, experiences and social assets available to young individuals. Instead of achieving a unified, fixed and completed identity, these characters portray different sets of unresolved negotiations, and display how identity can remain in that state of becoming. This is not to say that this plurality necessarily leads to a productive sense of growth; while it retains the power of new possibilities, it can also feel uncomfortable when not unmanageable.

As Merico explains, “più in generale, l'identità non si costruisce più attraverso un percorso di adesione simbolico, culturale, politico ed economico dato. Al contrario, essa

⁴⁷³ Steven Miles, *Youth Lifestyle in a Changing World* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).

diviene la risultante di un mix di elementi eterogenei, ridefinibile nel tempo”.⁴⁷⁴ Therefore, identity formation stops being an event but becomes a process, one that takes time, that cannot and does not seek to be comprised within the boundaries of one book, as the unresolved finale of these novels witness. Exemplary is the case of Rosario in *Certi bambini*, whose journey in the underground evokes a series of discontinued flashbacks that formally represent that same confusion and unawareness that is mirrored in his unfinished identity.

The novelistic attitude towards unresolvedness (and even the refusal of acknowledging the importance of transitioning to adulthood) can be traced back to notable examples such as Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951). This coming-of-age story indeed explores the distress and the contradictions of growing up, and it is more concerned with the present challenges faced by the character rather than with the adult horizon, which is totally cut off from the story, relegated to an unknown – and uninteresting – future. As Paola Carmagnani argues, the novel of initiation (more than the *Bildungsroman*) has responded to the need of portraying children and young people as liminal subjects, suspended in that status *just before* reaching an adulthood that is deprived of its core meaning.⁴⁷⁵ In effect, the process of identity formation in many coming-of-age stories negates adulthood as the linear end point, considering youth a moment worth investigating in itself; which is not surprising, considering the amount of scrutiny there is of contemporary adulthood today.

It is worth noticing that this trend is not equally distributed in literature; along with this tendency of focusing on open-ended coming-of-age stories, we are also seeing a constant and established production of novels of formation following the protagonists from childhood to full adulthood. The last decade has witnessed the success of Michela Murgia’s *Accabadora* (2009), Elena Ferrante’s quadrilogy of *L’amica geniale* (2011-2014), Alessandro Piperno’s *Gli Inseparabili* (2012), Paolo Cognetti’s *Le otto montagne* (2016), Donatella di Pietrantonio’s *L’Arminuta* (2017) and *Borgo sud* (2020). Interestingly, most of these stories are set in the 1950-70s, following the characters’ lives across a few decades to explore the social changes of the second half of the century. By going back a couple of decades to align with the youth years of the authors, these novels signal an interesting double-faced trend: the necessity to look for identity in the past, and

⁴⁷⁴ Maurizio Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 88.

⁴⁷⁵ Paola Carmagnani, “The Coming-of-age Story: narratives about growing up after the *Bildungsroman*” in *A Warm Mind-Shake* (Torino: Trauben, 2014), pp. 109-116.

not just in the past of an adult narrator, but also in a historical past that was not yet compromised by liquidity. In this way, they manage to manifest a certain resistance – when not avoidance – of liquidity, but also a difficulty in narrating a present that is increasingly virtual and digital. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the sole novel among the ones I have analysed that presents a character with self-awareness and a good degree of agency is Michele from Ammaniti's *Io non ho paura*, which is also constructed as a retrospective narrative set in the 1970s.

When comparing these two different sets of novels, the primary site of difference seems to lie in an established narratability of the *past* that enables to substantiate identity, versus a lack of ability to narrate the *future*. On one side, there are adult characters able to retell their story of formation (as in the case of Elena Ferrante's quadrilogy), and on the other, there are young characters stuck in their own present, portrayed within an existential structure where identity is presented as missing.

In the case of the *Bildungsroman*, the story ends because the characters have gradually achieved all they needed to become integrated members of society, so that the transition to adulthood is completed. In the novels hereby examined, the story ends because the coming of age is inescapable: and if they do not die (as in the case of Greta) they necessarily grow, yet their future is both ungiven and unnarratable, since it is excluded from the story. While these novels do represent a certain desire for a realistic portrayal of society, they deviate from traditional naturalistic representations by refusing to set an ordering principle that resolves the story.

The most evident result of contemporary liquidity can be traced back to the consideration that growth strategies no longer follow a pre-given, definite, and shared trajectory among all teenagers, and this creates “un senso di incertezza che domina sia il presente sia la capacità di progettare il futuro”.⁴⁷⁶ In this sense, and as part of all processes of transitions, these young characters portray a contemporary youth whose growth happens in the interstitial space between a recent traditional pattern that is no longer practicable, and a new spiraling growth which is still unexplored yet real.

2. Dispersed Communities

Once milestones of growth have lost their fixity and stopped being reliant on a quite stable social asset, fluid modalities of belonging and identification appear. While youth studies

⁴⁷⁶ Maurizio Merico, *Giovani e società* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), p. 90.

have argued that this fluidity enables experimentation with different identities, when it comes to these novels the absence of reference points does not correspond to a potential renewed agency. Instead, it leaves the young characters lost in movements of constant flux, marginalised, alienated and displaced as I have discussed in Chapter Three. This happens both because of characters' own incapacity, but when it comes to consider the young age of the protagonists, their ineptitude calls into question a wider society which fails to provide them with the right tools and resources.

When defining the social space (both physical and metaphorical) where these characters find themselves, it becomes clear that social forces, social determinants such as class, gender or race but also power structures remain key elements to understanding the growth equation. What emerges from the wider picture is an overall isolation, a deep existential solitude that these characters experience in respect of collective life, almost a prelude to life in the age of social media.

As Bauman has observed, communities (in the sociological sense) are now hard to find in real life. As a result, individuals find themselves trapped into a profound loneliness, and try to establish surrogate communities, so that “one can make company out of solitude” :⁴⁷⁷

The precariousness of the solitary identity-building prompts the identity-builders to seek pegs on which they can hang together their individually experienced fears and anxieties and perform the exorcism rites in the company of others, similarly afraid and anxious individuals. Whether such ‘peg communities’ provide what they are hoped to offer – a collective insurance against individually confronted risks – is a moot question; but mounting a barricade in the company of others does supply a momentary respite from loneliness. ⁴⁷⁸

This need for surrogate communities was born long before the digital age: for example, sociologist Elisa Bellotti argues that the rise of youth subcultures in 1960s was not only a collective symbolic rebellion against the dominant culture, but was dictated by the advancement of a consumer culture which tended to homologate different social groups. This resulted into the creation of strong and nuanced youth subcultures – exemplary in this regard, is punk culture – wherein the compactness of the social group provided a way to affirm diversity from adults but also from peers. Fashion, consumer trends and musical

⁴⁷⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, “Identity in the Globalising World” in *Social Anthropology*, Volume 9, (2), June 2001, pp. 121-129.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibidem* (Bauman).

culture, coupled with the amplifying power of mass media, became explicit and binding contracts of affiliation and identity markers.⁴⁷⁹

For example, in the narratives of *i nuovi narratori* of the 1980s, characters still defined themselves in opposition to school, family, or the bourgeois society by adhering to a social group or refusing the adherence to another one. As Cecilia Brioni has observed in her study of the construction of Italian youth, there were precise practices and rituals which sanctioned the belonging to the ‘youth’ community in general, and to subcultures more specifically. From the 1960s dancing “the shake”, wearing mini-skirts or long hair, the use of a particular jargon or the predilection for a music style, and an overall opposition to the adult world created a collective youth identity in Italy. Also, institutions were increasingly contested by youth cultures, as Brioni explains

già dal 1965 si vede come la critica nei confronti dell’istruzione pubblica si radicalizzi tramite la richiesta di insegnamenti alternativi quale l’educazione sessuale e le battaglie per la settimana corta nelle scuole. Anche il servizio militare obbligatorio è messo in discussione attraverso le prime esperienze di obiezione di coscienza; testimonianze di un’avversione alla leva si trovano anche nelle numerose lettere di giovani militari disperati perché costretti a tagliarsi i capelli per compiere il servizio. Inoltre, la critica alla famiglia come istituzione costituisce forse il più grande terreno di scontro nei giornali giovanili dell’epoca, come dimostrano le molteplici testimonianze di giovani uomini e donne scappati da casa in questi anni.⁴⁸⁰

Trends and choices born to challenge the dominant culture were overturned in the next decades by a postmodern attitude that, according to Bellotti, dissolved the strict boundaries of subcultures and their relative collective identities. Once people could easily access alien social codes and incorporate them into their personal biography (regardless of their adherence to the group), as much as decontextualize original meanings and scale them to a mass audience, the result was a “postmodern bricolage” of identities. In effect, today everything “può essere ricombinato con altri significanti in un codice personale che

⁴⁷⁹ Elisa Bellotti, “I segni dell’appartenenza. La gioventù postmoderna tra sperimentazione e frammentazione” in *Studi di Sociologia*, Anno 41, Fasc. 2 (Aprile-Giugno 2003), pp. 205-223.

⁴⁸⁰ Cecilia Brioni, ‘Rita e «La Zanzara»: la costruzione dell’identità giovanile italiana nei film Musicarelli (1958-1968)’ In *Cinema e identità italiana: Cultura visuale e immaginario nazionale fra tradizione e contemporaneità* (RomaTrE-Press, 2019), pp. 711-720.

non comunica più il riconoscersi in un'identità collettiva, ma manifesta passaggi simbolici di un'identità in perenne trasformazione.”⁴⁸¹

As already discussed, if this bricolage allows young people to experiment with different images of selfhood and social roles without having to adhere permanently to one, the important function provided by the group in terms of identification gets lost. The precarity of group affiliations today makes it harder for young people to construct their identities as they grow, since everything gets anchored in a present that has no linkage to a collective past, nor future. This is likely to continue if we consider the extreme use of social networks today, nowhere spaces where people often appear instead of being, where it is possible to co-exists even if isolated, and to establish new forms of transient affiliations.

In addition to losing this communal dimension of youth, institutions such as schools and churches have also lost their centrality as sources for economic and cultural capital, as witnessed by narratives at the end of the century. Therefore, young people found themselves in an environment unable to provide the right symbolic resources to become a part of it, as clearly demonstrated by Martino's suicidal words in Brizzi's *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* (1994):

Mi fa troppo schifo vivere così, e ci sono troppo dentro per cambiare.

[...]

Il gruppo è tutta la merda che ci danno da mangiare, giusto. Ecco, io credo che se ne esca o essendo intelligentissimi, spiritualmente liberi come i monaci buddhisti o i grandi filosofi, e allora ci si innalza; oppure prendendo il sacco a pelo e andando a vivere alla stazione o nei campi nomadi, e allora ci si abbassa. A me la prima soluzione non mi va. Troppo dura. E poi l'unica cosa intellettuale che faccio è guardare dei film. E la seconda non mi va perché a fare i barboni ci si ammala quasi subito e si diventa pieni di croste e malati e bruttissimi.

C'è pure un terzo modo, alla fine: un salto fuori dal cerchio che ci hanno disegnato intorno.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸¹ Elisa Bellotti, "I segni dell'appartenenza. La gioventù postmoderna tra sperimentazione e frammentazione" in *Studi di Sociologia*, Anno 41, Fasc. 2 (Aprile-Giugno 2003), p. 215.

⁴⁸² Enrico Brizzi, *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, [1994] 1998), p. 54.

The *gioventù cannibale* in effect, “si costituisce a partire dalla coscienza dell’alienazione, della violenza e dell’aberrazione del contesto socio-politico postmoderno”,⁴⁸³ according to Ganeri. Sociology of youth shares this perspective, as referred by Furlong who cites Côté: “the adult community [has] segregated and isolated young people, depriving them of institutionalized supports and ritualized passages into adulthood, the industries of mass culture have moved in, selling young people common sources of *ersatz* identity and ritual” so that young people have to learn to manage their identities in order to “continually fit into a community of strangers”.⁴⁸⁴ The spiraling pattern of growth indeed responds to this phenomena of dispersion and transience, of surpassing thresholds that are rarely generative of established ways of belonging and significance.

The coming-of-age stories analysed in this study proceed in expressing a deep existential isolation that is so endemic that is not even uttered by the characters, in contrast to what happens with the *giovani narratori*. In addition, teenagers are rarely set in opposition to adults and institutions, having their identities formed in a much more dissolved web of relationships, one that already mimics the volatility of the digital. So that, in opposition to the transgressive characters of cannibal writers, there is no rebellion against isolation and distress, which remain there, looming in the background. It is the “solitude of the global citizen” to quote Bauman in a world where:

somewhere along the line, friendship and solidarity, once upon a time major community building materials, became too flimsy, too rickety or watery for the purpose. Contemporary hardships and sufferings are fragmented, dispersed and scattered; and so is the dissent which they spawn. The dispersion of dissent, the difficulty of condensing and anchoring it [...] makes the pain the more bitter.⁴⁸⁵

Modalities of identity also remain connotated by this isolation, which expresses not only a need for otherness but for a significant otherness, able to activate processes of recognition and meaning making. As discussed in the fourth chapter, when recognition takes place, as in the case of *Io non ho paura*, *I bambini delle rose* and *Stabat Mater*, it happens within the narrower circle of peers or in the individual interiority. Instead, society as a whole – and specifically the adult world – is viewed as a threat to growth; in this

⁴⁸³ Margerita Ganeri, *Postmodernismo* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1998), pp. 81-85.

⁴⁸⁴ Andy Furlong, *Youth Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 241.

⁴⁸⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 14.

sense, not only the novels deny the supremacy of adulthood, they also deny that teenagers' identities are formed solely (or even primarily) in relation to adults.

Normally, the protagonists should learn from their elders who guide their development; but in these novels the adults represent the contradictions of society, as they become the embodiment of uselessness; they are unable to guide, support and inspire their children, leaving up entirely to them to cope with their growth and identity. Because of the loosening of familiar ties, one of the strongest societal assets in Italian culture, families are not there to encourage the children to develop their point of view, nor they provide a secure base from which to explore the social world. Instead, they make these children feel increasingly more isolated and lonelier, so that they need to look for guidance in peers or surrogate figures that exploit or abuse them, as in the case of *Certi bambini* or *Dei bambini non si sa niente*.

Secondly, it is to acknowledge that part of the experience of growth takes place within a private sphere and in a separate space, far from the adult's gaze. In traditional narratives this secondary space was adjacent to the normalizing space of adults, who were ready to interfere with the adventures of the children by providing guidance, support or punishments when needed. In the case of these novels, the adult world emerges as indifferent to the fate of children, when not malicious; the primary space is not a safe space to return to when in need, instead it becomes a dangerous space populated by people unable and unwilling to help.

In this sense, the adult world is characterized by a profound nihilistic attitude, so that the traditional tension towards the adult society typical of the *Bildungsroman*, once a privileged locus to investigate identity, is reduced to a relationship made of absences and antagonism, with few aspects that lead towards a positive formation. As Curnutt has expressed, contemporary coming-of-age stories portray an untrustworthy adult authority that has nothing left to teach children.⁴⁸⁶ Adults are themselves isolated, alienated in their own concerns; they do not challenge the hero coming from a position of enhanced wisdom, instead they are petty, egoistic and unloving. Exemplary is the case of Michele's father, who turns from the beloved parental figure of the beginning of the book, to becoming the bogeyman, "l'uomo nero", the evil one to fear.

With adults often struggling with their own identities, it is no surprise that children find themselves more confident in their relationships with peers; as Bauman has observed,

⁴⁸⁶ Kirk Curnutt, "Teenage wasteland: Coming-of-age novels in the 1980s and 1990" in *Critique*, Fall 2001, p. 101.

in solid societies young people were, to some extents and not without tensions, able to construct a sense of selfhood by reconciling objective and subjective experiences through the interactions with significant others, especially family members. In postmodernity, the isolation of the individual and the fragmentation of experiences makes it very difficult to learn from others: it is not simplistically a matter of drifting values, but it is about the disappearance of roles and, worse, of that self-awareness essential to growth.

This is why growth emerges from these novels as a senseless process; partially this is due to the liquidity of society which has altered the ways of undergoing experience and liquefied milestones of growth into a spiraling continuum of indeterminacy, so that by questioning normative assumptions about growth, these novels provide a complex interrogation of the conditions that have previously enabled young heroes to attain agency.

But growth also appears senseless and directionless because of a direct lack of guidance. When adults are depicted as incompetent and irresponsible, it is the children who must take control of situations and pay the price for their naivety, so that conventional constructions of adulthood are also disrupted. The result, therefore, is a provocative reformulation of the role and responsibility of adult characters, against the myth that adulthood is the stable apogee of identity development. Because of the liminal nature of teenager years, it is not surprising that an analysis of young characters also yields interesting insights into the construction of adulthood today.

3. Useless Adults

Perciò io che sono una bambina in scadenza, penso:

- a) Che i grandi non hanno più nulla da insegnarci;
- b) Che sarebbe meglio se noi prendessimo le decisioni, e i temi scolastici contro la guerra li scrivessero loro;
- c) Che dovrebbero smettere di fare i film dove la giustizia trionfa e farla trionfare subito all'uscita del cinema.

Ebbene sì, sono polemica.⁴⁸⁷

These are the words that Margherita, the 14-year-old character of Stefano Benni's *Margherita Dolcevita* (2005), uses to introduce herself to the reader. As expressed by sociologist Elena Besozzi, it is impossible to discuss youth without referring to adulthood too. This means that

⁴⁸⁷ Stefano Benni, *Margherita Dolcevita* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2005), p. 12.

la realtà giovanile non può essere considerata semplicemente una questione intra-generazionale, qualcosa cioè che accomuna secondo età e l'esperienza, bensì è anche, e in modo non secondario, una questione inter-generazionale, che quindi costringe le generazioni adulte e quelle giovani a esplorarsi a vicenda, a interrogarsi reciprocamente e su sé stesse e in larga misura a trovare compromessi nelle diverse questioni cruciali.⁴⁸⁸

As said, the transition to adulthood has been traditionally considered a linear process, making adulthood the cognitive and formative horizon; as expressed by Franco Moretti, youth is meaningful exactly because “it does not last forever”.⁴⁸⁹ Yet, growth milestones have fallen apart in the last decades and a status of “prolonged youth” requires us to question adulthood itself.

Due to the failure of the economies in most Western societies to sustain wealth and provide employment after the economic boom, in the 1980s and 1990s many young people struggled to attain the five linear “transitions in status”: leaving school, finding employment, leaving home, setting up home and marriage.⁴⁹⁰ The problematic economic circumstances, worsened by the recession in 2006 and combined with the mass media revolution, turned traditional pathways of growth into an increasingly problematic process. According to Besozzi, this is what happened to the last two generations, now living in a “stato di attesa, con ampie incursioni nelle pratiche e nelle esperienze adulte senza conseguire di conseguenza lo status definitivo”. The result being that “la giovinezza sfuma costantemente nell’adulthood e al contempo se ne ritrae, ma la stessa adulthood perde i suoi contorni precisi”.⁴⁹¹

Similar to what I discussed in advocating for rethinking the linearity of growth models in literature, traditional milestones of adulthood also need a fundamental reconsideration. As voiced by writer Marco Mancassola, the contemporary status of youth is not necessarily improper or wrong but worthy of discussion, at least:

⁴⁸⁸ Elena Besozzi, “Verso una riconcettualizzazione della condizione giovanile” in *Studi di Sociologia*, (Gennaio-Marzo 2012) Anno 50, Fasc. 1: Agency e chance di vita: i giovani alla prova, pp. 3-15.

⁴⁸⁹ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The "Bildungsroman" in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987, p. 6.

⁴⁹⁰ Joanna Wyn and Rob White, *Rethinking Youth* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 19.

⁴⁹¹ Elena Besozzi, “Verso una riconcettualizzazione della condizione giovanile” in *Studi di Sociologia*, (Gennaio-Marzo 2012) Anno 50, Fasc. 1: Agency e chance di vita: i giovani alla prova, pp. 3-15.

È sempre più ovvio che il problema non è perpetuare il modello delle generazioni precedenti. Si tratta di immaginare modelli nuovi. La sola via d'uscita dalla crisi è quella di trasformarla in un'opportunità. Tanto per fare un altro esempio: quando smetteremo di sospirare perché non riusciamo più ad avere un mutuo per comprarci un appartamento-gabbia in qualche brutta periferia suburbana, e inizieremo piuttosto a organizzarci in movimenti per un abitare diverso, per nuove forme di convivenza e di vita? [...] Le generazioni precedenti ci hanno condotto in un vicolo cieco ed è inutile spingere per riuscire a percorrerlo. Sarà anche per questo che una parte ingombrante di quelle generazioni, soprattutto in questo paese, sessanta e settantenni uncinati al potere, con la faccia liftata e la coscienza sporca, se ne stanno piantati lì in mezzo, non accettando di farsi da parte, proiettando la loro ombra e ostruendo la visuale: per non farci vedere che la loro strada non andava da nessuna parte.⁴⁹²

Mancassola's words account for a reality where growth is characterised by discontinuity rather than continuity, and above all decidedly centred on new forms of identity and belonging, if compared to traditional and consolidated models. This is characteristic of a generation that is living a new form of bourgeois anxiety as the standards of happiness in the "democracy of wealth and comfort", to cite Bauman, are unattainable when not rejected.

Mancassola's words are also interesting when considering that the writer was 37-year-old when he wrote this article for *Il Manifesto*, voicing the distress of a generation of *thirtysomethings* paralysed – "riuscendo al massimo a muovere una palpebra" – by a seemingly impossible achievement of milestones. According to Carlo Genova, as symbolic events in the passage to adult life are "being postponed more and more, the age boundaries were moved to include in the concept of 'young adults' those up to the age of 40."

Genova also explains how, since 2000s, the progressive "juvenilization" of society has created a growing confusion between generations and precise thresholds.⁴⁹³ Massimo Galimberti sees that being reflected in contemporary literature and cinema as we see the proliferation of "bambocci", so that

⁴⁹² Marco Mancassola, "Generazione Locked In" in *"Il Manifesto"*, 7 novembre 2010.

⁴⁹³ Carlo Genova, "Social practices and lifestyles in Italian youth cultures" in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 23:1, 2018, pp. 75-92.

A dominare c'è la negazione continua di ogni forma di progressione temporale e l'ambizione maggiore è tornare all'infanzia, o quantomeno di continuare a vivere in quella fase edenica, protettiva, priva di ogni tipo di responsabilità. [...] Ci si rifiuta di crescere anche quando il corpo ci dice il contrario. Non è mai un "come eravamo" ma un "come vorrei tornare ad essere"; la malinconia possibile si trasforma in rammarico.⁴⁹⁴

Once milestones of growth are deconstructed, not only the transition from childhood to adulthood becomes problematic, but the entire experience of growth is arrested to embrace a condition of permanent puerilism. The ambiguities I discussed in relation to characters such as Nico and Rosario are indicative of a wider phenomenon of the adult-in-child and the child-in-adult, so that for example many of the characters from the earlier cannibal production are hybrid figures of "young adults" that look more like aged teenagers.

In the first chapter I have anticipated how, in the aftermath of the world wars, child characters brought charges against the adults' world. However, nowadays teenage characters no longer voice a neglected growth, but rather they bring at the forefront the dissolution of growth itself. In this way, they become the expression of a liquid society that is deprived of points of anchor, so that even the boundaries between ages become unstable. As age boundaries become fluid and adults refuse their role, for young characters becomes almost impossible to find their pathway. As seen, they are left alone, often at the margins of society and they canalize tensions far bigger than themselves: in this way, the characters' growth becomes an expression of contradictions, possibilities, hopes and despairs. From this picture they emerge more resourceful in coupling with the uncertainty of the world, but at the same time less equipped and supported in navigating such a contemporary fluidity, so that when the adult horizon changes so does growth, and the resilience of children is all that remains.

4.The Way Forward

In this research I have traced thematic links between varied coming-of-age novels to highlight how the process of growth has been described, how it has been altered to fit individual coming of age and how, taken as a whole, certain repetitions and images become a manifest component of the genre. In this way, the aim of this work is to

⁴⁹⁴ Massimo Galimberti, "Il romanzo di formazione" in *Romanzo popolare: narrazione, pubblico e storie del cinema italiano negli anni duemila*, edited by Armocida and Buffoni (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2016).

demonstrate the need to reconsider traditional linear models of growth within literary criticism, also encouraging further studies that dare to question the established features and boundaries of the novel of formation.

However, this study has not addressed two interesting aspects, leaving them for future studies. First, it does not consider the position of the authors in respect to these coming of age narratives. Indeed, one can argue that the fluidity just discussed extends beyond the characters. This might be the reason why Isabella Santacroce still writes about rebellious young girls, Diego De Silva transitioned to writing a saga about a precarious layer, and Niccolò Ammaniti keeps privileging child characters. Coming-of-age stories seem to become increasingly more radical as adulthood distances itself from being the epistemic horizon. So that what happens, is that these “young” writers, who are already close to their fifties, keep narrating about syncretic identities and unrealized growth. According to Galimberti, Italian cinema is also witnessing a proliferation of adults who are constantly looking back: “film su trenta/quarantenni scritti da trenta/quarantenni che sembrano usare il cinema come esercizio terapeutico attraverso cui accettare la perdita della giovinezza, condividendo un senso di inadeguatezza e la voglia continua di cambiare per non accettare la propria maturità”.⁴⁹⁵

In effect, contemporary formation is also born out of consumerism, which not only creates new modalities to define one’s identity, but also valorizes the ephemeral, transient, horizontal and agile if compared to the solidity of the previous century. Even if the experimentation typical of pulp aesthetics has been overcome, and these authors have moved towards a certain realistic view of the world, this epistemology of plurality and fragmentation has not changed. We can say that the authors mentioned are not only writing stories about growth, but are also attempting to map how growth looks like for others like themselves. Indeed, those whose growth does not fit within the norm are unlikely to be able to recognise themselves in canonical models, being almost forced to create new narratives. In this sense, one could argue that this difficulty of constructing one’s identity reflects the deforming and plural view that authors have of growth, within the society where they live.

Also, this study does not consider the reader’s position and his/her response to the novel. Readership is a fascinating topic which requires a different set of questions at the

⁴⁹⁵ Ibidem. (Galimberti)

crossroads with other disciplines, especially as the age of readers changes together with the authors' ones.

Another interesting area for further study is to look at how new technologies and the digital world are going to change the patterns of growth in coming-of-age stories. In fact, the time when the coming of age stories considered in this study were written (1995-2008) was a key decade for the digital revolution,⁴⁹⁶ delivering another blow to the solidity of contemporary society. As Alessandro Baricco in his essay *The Game* (2018) has argued, the latest technological revolution has done more than providing people with new tools: it has created new mental paradigms naturally oriented towards movement and fluidity. Actions such as surfing the web opened up the possibility for individuals to move across a digital time and space, finding new ways of experiencing a world that is both digital and physical. Moving from hypertexts to social media, in this new habitat individuals started to become 'hypermen' in Baricco's words, abandoning the principle of linearity to embrace the fluidity of the network, since "tutta la rivoluzione digitale aveva questo pallino di sciogliere il mondo in frammenti leggeri, veloci, nomadi... non si limitava a smaterializzare le cose, smaterializzava anche gli umani!"⁴⁹⁷

We might need to wait a couple more decades and a new generation of writers to see a new meaning of growth explicitly surfacing from coming-of-age stories. Young writers who see linearity as a constriction – why move linearly if you have all dimensions to explore, would argue Abbot in *Flatland* –⁴⁹⁸ and are willing to give shape to spiraling stories of growth not only to produce outrage (as the cannibals did) or to cast light onto extreme experiences of growth (as in the novels examined in this study), but to investigate a new modality of growth.

Significantly, the novels considered in this study also present characters before the great digital revolution; there are no mobile phones and no social networks to partake in the growth of characters such as Rosario, Nico, Martina, Cecilia or Michele. But, as we move towards the current decades, it will be interesting to map how the identities presented and created in the most recent novels are dissolved or supported by the employment of these technologies and social networks. Possibly, a way to present this new model of coming-of-age stories with its potentially positive and negative aspects, is

⁴⁹⁶See Alessandro Baricco, *The Game* (Torino: Einaudi, 2018).

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid (Baricco).

⁴⁹⁸ Written by Edwin Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* is a satirical novella first published in 1884 by Seeley & Co. (London).

to finally give technology the space it needs in the narratives for adults. Cannibal writers were already presenting a world increasingly more digital, but if we go back to many coming-of-age stories published in the 2000, technology is not as central as we would expect when dealing with teenagers, whose lives and relationships are increasingly moving into the realm of the digital world.

Technology remains absent from contemporary Italian literature, and even when widening the frame to the novels published in the last decade, the tendency is always to go back a couple of decades to portray childhood before the digital became mainstream, as discussed in regards to Elena Ferrante, Michela Murgia and so on. A possible reason is simply a misalignment with the age of the authors and their willingness to refer back to a time they know, that is the one of their own infancy. But this does not explain why after a strong decade of generational writers, from Pasolini and Tondelli to the *gioventù cannibale*, narrating youth as it unfolded, we are now witnessing this return to memorial and retrospective narratives.

One could argue that the resistance to writing coming-of-age stories today is connected to a profound incapacity to narrate growth in the technological age. In this sense, the international landscape of literature for young adults seems to provide some interesting examples of identities constructed through new media, showing the inescapable link between growth and technology. For example, Irish writer Sarah Crossan's *Apple and Rain* (2014) and *One* (2015) manage to portray the normality of teenagers communicating via text messages, wondering whether they should post something on Facebook and watch reality tv, all whilst creating their sense of selves. Others could also argue that we need to wait for a new generation of writers to be published, as it is happening for example in Ireland with Sally Rooney, whose coming-of-age stories have been praised for being able to represent unapologetically certain types of contemporary youth experiences. There are definitely interesting opportunities for comparing representations of growth, in literature for young adults and literature for adults, but also for looking at representations of growth outside Italy.

Nevertheless, my hope is that future researchers will offer their unique perspectives by building upon this study's findings, to feel bold and empowered to continue the conversation on what literature can teach us about contemporary challenges of growth.

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