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Abstract: This article focuses on the figure of the mother as represented in Ada Negri's autobiographical novel *Stella mattutina* (1921); such an image transgresses the patriarchal model of the passive and self-sacrificial woman-mother, so predominant in the 1800's and the first half of the following century. Through feminist lenses (i.e., Jessica Benjamin, Luisa Muraro), I discuss how Negri restores here the mother's subjectivity by depicting her also as an individual, and recovers the mother-daughter bond. The latter unfolds within a female genealogy as the gender and class identities of the autobiographical protagonist, Dinin, take shape in relation to the identities of her grandmother Peppina and, above all, her mother Vittoria. Ultimately, I argue that mother and matrilineage serve as narrative tools for the daughter's subjectivity as the representation, from an autobiographical perspective, of her mother as subject gives Negri the opportunity to reflect on her own condition as woman and mother.

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(Self)Representations of Motherhood in Ada Negri's *Stella mattutina*

IOANA RALUCA LARCO

Ada Luigia Teresa was born on February 3, 1870 into a poor family from Lodi, Lombardy. Her father, Giuseppe Negri, was a coachman and her mother, Vittoria Cornalba, was a seamstress and later worked as a weaver in a wool factory. After her father's death when she was only one year old, Ada Negri spent her childhood and adolescence in a porter's lodge where her grandmother, Giuseppina Panni, worked as a custodian for the Barni family, a rich family from Cremona, and later, for the new owners, the Cingia family. Thanks to her mother's sacrifices, Ada earned an elementary school teacher's diploma in 1887 from the Scuola Normale Femminile in Lodi but she received her teaching license only after turning 18. The following year, she started teaching in Motta Visconti, a small town near Milan, where she also began to write. *Fatalità* (1892), her first volume of poetry, had a strong social message and a remarkable success among her readers.¹ In 1896, Negri married Giovanni Garlanda, the son of a rich family of industrialists, owners of a wool factory in Piedmont, and, by 1900, their daughters Bianca and Vittoria were born; the latter died shortly after her birth. The differences in the social and political views between the two eventually led to their separation, and from 1913 until the outbreak of WWI, Negri lived abroad, mainly in Switzerland.

With the poems of *Maternità* (1904), the social message of Negri's first works is subdued (with some exceptions: i.e., "Le dolorose", "Martha", "Funerale durante lo sciopero") in favor of a tender reflection on motherhood and the mother-child dynamic. These themes re-emerge and evolve, respectively, into the mother-daughter relationship in Negri's autobiographical novel, *Stella mattutina* (1921). In this work, the representation of her mother and herself, through the autobiographical protagonist, transgresses in many aspects the patriarchal model of the woman-mother, so predominant in the 1800's and the first half of the following century.² Dinin, the novel's protagonist, is placed and develops within a matrilineal/female genealogy starting with her grandmother, Peppina, who labored hard as a servant her entire life, continuing with her mother, Vittoria, a worker in a wool factory, and finishing with her daughter, Bianca, to whom the book is dedicated.³ Within this lineage—and in addition to the other women in Dinin's life (i.e., the landlady

¹ In his entry on Ada Negri in *Letteratura della nuova Italia* (1921), Benedetto Croce, believing that art should be for art's sake and autonomous from all other practices, disapproves of her socialist poetry, finding it lacking in art and, consequently, artistically insincere. Croce criticizes Negri's choice to use her poetry as a tool for social purpose, more precisely to incite people to action and noble sentiments through her art.

² In her book *The Tigress in the Snow* (2007), Laura Benedetti gives a comprehensive overview of the representation of the mother (and the mother-daughter relationship) in Italian literature as reflection—and influence—of the socio-economic and cultural factors. Among such cultural models that promoted the image of the self-sacrificial mother, one of the most significant remains the cult of the Virgin Mary, strongly reaffirmed by the Catholic Church through the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, proclaimed in 1854. This model was later adopted by the Fascist ideology when various policies were put in place in order to engineer the 'new woman' with her two attributes as wife and mother, the only ones socio-economically and biologically acceptable to the regime.

³ It is interesting to note here that Dinin's brother—whom she calls Nani—is presented at the margins of this genealogy. Dinin refers to Nani as the only jarring note that disrupts the perfect harmony between mother and daughter. Nani explains all his failures (i.e., he dropped out of school, his marriage to Daria was a disaster, he was not able to keep a regular job) through the lack of help from his mother and through his growing separated from her (after the death of her husband, due to poverty, Vittoria had to put her son in her brother's care). In short, Nani believes himself unable to accomplish anything in life because he feels disconnected from and even repudiated by his mother. On this occasion, the narrator alludes to the vital role of the mother in the development of her child: "Egli [Nani] è di quelli che fatalmente nascono senza avere alcun rapporto con il ventre che li ha espulsi." Ada Negri, *Stella mattutina* (Verona: Mondadori, 1941), 162. [He is one of those who are fatally born, unrelated to the mother who bears them.] (Unless mentioned otherwise, all English translations of *Stella mattutina* are from Negri, *Morning Star*, translated from the Italian by Anne Day (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930)). However, his sister demonstrates an independent spirit, believing that

with her three daughters, her elementary school teacher, the female protagonists of her mother's stories)—Negri refines the focus of her autobiographical narrative on her mother. *Stella mattutina* celebrates a maternal figure that diverges from the familiar passive and self-sacrificial image. Instead, the narrator expresses admiration and respect towards her mother for her tenacity, hard-work and irrepressible energy; behind the mother's prematurely aged physical appearance, the narrator reveals a vivacious spirit, a complete and real woman—endowed with sexual desires—who can love and be loved, even if she shows disinterest in remarrying after the death of her husband. Negri expresses several times throughout her autobiographical narrative infinite gratitude for her mother's sacrifice, which allowed her the freedom to study and pursue her passion for reading and writing. This sacrifice does not, however, resemble martyrdom; the mother accepts it with full confidence in her choices. Moreover, Negri shows intellectual and poetic debt to her mother's language, stories and her own love for reading. Her mother's stories are mostly built around nonconformist female figures and provide a nearly caricatured depiction of conjugal relations. These stories also position the mother as a creator in the sense used in popular culture (she creates variations of a theme/story). By including such stories in her narrative and by emphasizing their importance for her artistic formation, Negri's achievement is twofold: on one side, she pays tribute to her class of origin and contributes to the creation of class consciousness;⁴ on the other, Negri exalts the working-class art and women's literature (starting with her own); and, in so doing, she challenges the *status quo* imposed by "high culture," which is also male-dominated.

Thus, *Stella mattutina* appears as an exceptional occurrence in a period abounding in literary works where the theme of motherhood is absent or has negative connotations: i.e., it is compensation for a woman's reluctance to marriage in Neera's *L'Indomani* (1889); it is rejected as an obstacle in the way of a woman's individuality and dignity in Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna* (1906); it is a chain of abnegation and self-denial passed down from mother to daughter in Annie Vivanti's *I divoratori* (1910). At the same time, the monotonic mother figure, seen mainly through the eyes of her son, is strictly dependent on the unlimited and unconditional devotion to her children. It does not come as a surprise then that the voiceless image of the mother fashioned by religion, patriarchal family structures and psychoanalysis is not deemed an adequate source of inspiration for writers and is "[t]oo weak socially to act as a positive role model" while "motherhood remains strictly subordinated to the themes of marriage and adultery."⁵ Negri, instead, attempts to recuperate the mother in what could be labeled as a feminist autobiographical text *avant la lettre* in a period when formal education and creativity were generally considered incompatible with femininity. In my reading, *Stella mattutina*, on one hand, restores the mother's subjectivity by depicting her also as an

one should also find strength within and take responsibility for one's own destiny. Although they share the same love for books and poetry, brother and sister symbolize two different ways of thinking and envisioning life. The girl believes that Nani's life is "l'esistenza dei deboli e dei ciechi, travolti nella ridda, mangiati vivi dalle passioni" [his is the life of the weak and the blind, carried on in a brawl, eaten alive by passion]. She refuses such a life, preferring "l'acqua pura bevuta dietro la minestra di riso e latte, il buon sonno riparatore dopo lo studio e il lavoro sereno, i poveri conti di casa, chiusi senza il debito d'un soldo, l'ordine che è pace, la solitudine che è indipendenza." Negri, *Stella mattutina*, 85-86 [pure water drunk after a soup of rice and milk, good restoring sleep after study and quiet labor, the poor house accounts, closed without a penny owed, the order that is peace, the solitude that is independence]. Contravening traditional imagery, it is the brother who is dominated by feelings and acts mostly under the influence of momentary impulses, while the girl appears very rational, independent and willing to rise above the slavery of passions.

⁴ The social component of Negri's work (including her autobiographical novel) deserves extensive attention. A worthy topic, it nevertheless does not constitute the focus of this analysis.

⁵ Laura Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow. Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 5.

individual (in numerous instances, the mother is referred to by her name, Vittoria, and also “Poperaia Vittoria”, a marker for her social status) and, on the other, recovers the mother-daughter bond. The latter unfolds within a matrilineage as the gender and class identities of the autobiographical protagonist, Dinin, take shape in relation to the identities of her female predecessors: her grandmother Peppina and, above all, her mother. Tess Cosslett distinguishes two opposite tensions in the matrilineal configuration: one progressive and the other conservative.⁶ In *Stella mattutina*, the emphasis on the mother’s skill as a storyteller corresponds to the daughter’s artistic talent and, ultimately, to Negri’s endeavor of self-narration. Dinin’s education and art enable her to climb the social ladder as she refuses the servant life of her grandmother and the dehumanizing work in the factory of her mother. She deeply appreciates though her mother’s honesty, positive attitude and moral strength and intends to preserve these values.

From a feminist standpoint, it cannot be ignored that the mother is depicted by her daughter from an autobiographical perspective. A gendered act of narrating and representing entails greater implications: the reflection on/narrating of her mother as a subject—a woman that exists outside her maternal functions—provides the daughter with the necessary mental space to reflect also on her own womanhood and condition as a mother. This is a complex and often conflictual experience; in fact, on several occasions throughout the narrative, Dinin, now an adolescent, discloses a problematic approach to womanhood and motherhood that is manifested both unconsciously, through dreams and phobias, as well as through lucid reflections on the topic. Motherhood and the relation with the mother are the *loci* where Negri (re)creates herself through the mirror strategy; and, like all mirrors, her narrative reproduces and inverts the image that it reflects. As I will further discuss, the depiction of the protagonist, with the various stages of her development, is an example of fluctuation between “fusion” with her mother (in this case, through matrilineal genealogy and language) and the need to find space for her individual differences and autonomy, something Dinin eventually accomplishes. The final scenes where the young girl leaves her mother to visit her aunt in the countryside ratify her indisputable “narcissistic confirmation” as a woman and writer. Ultimately, mother and matrilineage serve as textual and hermeneutical props for the daughter’s subjectivity, and this “mother-quest”⁷ is also empowering for the autobiographer.

In her article, “In search of the mirror,” Maria Grazia Minetti reasserts the mother-child relationship as a “fusion or con-fusion” of the child with the mother, a relationship that goes “from total, passive fusion to a more partial and more active fusion, in which its Self is no longer identified simply with the mother, who then becomes an ‘Object-Self.’”⁸ Drawing on psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality* (1971), Minetti explains that, at the first stage, the mother’s body and nurturing gestures give meaning to the baby’s disoriented perceptions and constitute “the first psychic matrix for the formation of a sense of *being*”⁹ which will help the child progressively feel as a whole, a body which *is*, before even knowing *who* she or he is. Nonetheless, it is necessary for the infant to emerge from this fusion in the process of maturing. The more the baby learns to do autonomously (i.e., sitting up, walking, discovering body parts, holding and identifying objects), the more he/she will experience contradictory states of mind, varying from pride to the fear of losing what has been accomplished. In this phase, Minetti continues, the mother’s response should be one

⁶ Tess Cosslett, “Matrilineal narratives revisited,” in *Feminism and Autobiography. Texts, theories, methods*, ed. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 144.

⁷ Adalgisa Giorgio, ed., *Writing Mothers and Daughters. Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), 5.

⁸ Maria Grazia Minetti, “In search of the mirror: fusion and differentiation in women’s groups,” in *The Lonely Mirror. Italian perspectives on feminist theory*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 117.

⁹ *Ibid.*

of support for the “narcissistic confirmation of the baby, respecting its needs—of both autonomy and fusion—in a delicate alternation of ‘being what the baby has the capacity to discover’ and ‘being herself while waiting to be discovered.’”¹⁰ This then so-called “maternal mirroring function”¹¹ consists in mirroring the affirmation of the infant who needs admiration and confirmation in order to build self-esteem.¹²

Feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin considers the metaphor of the mirror, along with the original psychoanalytic theory where this belongs, as unsatisfactory because it gives an “oversimplified view of the infant’s experience”¹³ and “grants the mother so much responsibility and so little concern for the conditions of her own subjectivity.”¹⁴ Drawing largely on Nancy Chodorow’s “Gender, relation and difference in psychoanalytic perspective” (1979) and Winnicott’s *Playing and Reality* (1971), Benjamin goes beyond a child-centered psychoanalysis which reduces the mother to an object of the child’s needs and desires and argues in favor of an early mother-child relationship perceived as an interaction between two subjects, distinct from one another, but also dependent on one another for recognition. The outcome of such interaction is an “intersubjectivity” founded on the balancing between self-assertion and mutual recognition. The interruption of this delicate equilibrium can result in manifestations of omnipotence and paranoia. The desire to control the other belongs to the realm of fantasy that is “the unshared property of an isolated subject”¹⁵ while reciprocal understanding takes place in a shared reality. Most importantly, the child’s need for his/her mother’s recognition must be supported by his/her ability to recognize his/her mother as an individual within her reality and outside of her maternal role.

All of these theories are significant to a reading of *Stella mattutina*. Notably, at a textual level, when acknowledging her mother’s qualities (i.e., her clear voice, energetic movements and youthful expression, her approach with unconditional love and acceptance to all living beings and things), Negri asserts her own qualities as a poet in a decidedly expressive portrayal of the mother that provides the setting for a stripped biography of her; an ornate frame for her mother’s picture:

La mamma non è più giovane (s’è sposata tardi) e ha già molti capelli grigi; ma la sua voce è squillante, di ragazzetta, e tutto in lei è chiaro ed energico: il passo, il movimento, lo sguardo, la parola. *Visse libera nella villa di Robecco sull’Oglio, con la nonna, fin dopo i trent’anni: sposa, fu cucitrice di bianco: rimasta vedova e nella più dura miseria, dovette collocarsi come operaia in uno stabilimento di filatura e tessitura di lane.*

*Guadagna una lira e settantacinque centesimi al giorno: lavora tredici ore filate: spesso è costretta alla «mezza giornata» della domenica.*¹⁶

Ma è gaia e ride, è creatura piccola e vocale come gli uccelli, e cinguetta e canta. Vive in lei il fremito pennuto dei passeri, un’elasticità sempre nuova, una così fresca simpatia per le cose e gli esseri, che sgorga con la fluidità di certe polle fra l’erba, e ne ha la mutevole trasparenza. Non porta con sé la

¹⁰ Ibid., 120.

¹¹ Ibid., 126.

¹² Italian feminist criticism is much indebted to the work of Luce Irigaray, where the principle of sexual difference constitutes a fundamental component as witnessed by the Verona group. In her doctoral dissertation, *Speculum de l’autre femme* (1974), Irigaray challenges the Western canon that functions as a mirror (*speculum*) in which man appears perfect, while the image of woman is distorted. She also uses the metaphor of the mirror to reflect (on) sexual difference as a means to restore the damaged images of women in Western culture and to construct an all-inclusive world for men and women.

¹³ Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects. Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1995), 87.

¹⁴ Ibid., 88.

¹⁵ Ibid., 85.

¹⁶ Emphasis mine.

polverosa e grave atmosfera d'un lanificio; ma, piuttosto, l'acre sentore d'una ventata di marzo, rude alla pelle, piena d'azzurro e d'elementi di vita.¹⁷

[My mother is no longer young (she married late in life) and already has many grey hairs, but her voice is loud and clear, a girl's voice, and everything about her is bright and energetic; her step, her motions, her look, her words. *She lived before her marriage at the country seat at Robecco on the Oglio, with my grandmother, until after her thirtieth year. After she was married she was a seamstress, making up white goods. Left a widow and in the direst poverty, she had to take a place as worker in a factory for the spinning and weaving of woolen goods.*

She earns less than fifty cents a day and works thirteen spinning hours, often obliged to labor until noon on Sunday.

But she is gay and she laughs, a small and vocal creature like the birds, and she chatters and sings. There live in her the quivering wings of sparrows, an ever renewed buoyancy, such fresh sympathy for things and creatures that she overflows with the limpidity of springs in the grass, and has their iridescent transparency. She does not carry about with her the dusty and serious air of a woolen factory, but rather the sharp breath of a puff of March wind, rough to the skin, full of sunshine and vitality.]

The vital function of the mother in the girl's life, and the sense of completeness that her mother gives her, are put forward through the synesthetic effect of the elements used in her description: i.e., visual ("chiaro" [bright], "la mutevole trasparenza" [iridescent transparency], "azzurro" [sunshine, lit. bright blue]), kinesthetic ("il passo" [her step], "il movimento" [motions]), auditive ("la sua voce è squillante" [her voice is loud and clear], "la parola" [her words], "cinguetta e canta" [she chatters and sings]), tactile ("rude alla pelle" [rough to the skin]), olfactory ("l'acre sentore" [the sharp breath, lit. the pungent sensation/scent], this one being a synesthesia by itself). Negri merges here constituents that present the mother not only as a resplendent creature, but most of all, as the symbol of life itself: she is associated with the clarity of water sources laying in the grass and a gust of wind in March, which also suggests life and regeneration. The aquatic component introduced in this initial description of the mother will further be recast in the narrative as the daughter's phobia.

Poetry and the poetic flow penetrate the fabric of the narrative and reemerge in a passage where the reference to the socio-economic environment of the mother continues and is stressed through the appellative "l'operaia Vittoria". Dinin is immersed in her studies, while her mother is busy with her work at the factory and housework. A progressive tension is suggested as Vittoria's songs, scanned by the rhythm of the loom at the factory, are linked to the songs of Homer that her daughter reads passionately in her room: "Ai canti dell'operaia Vittoria, scanditi sul respiro dei telai giù nella fabbrica, rispondono dalle stanzette verso il giardino del palazzo di via Roma i canti di Omero. La fanciulla è finalmente penetrata, sangue ed anima, nella poesia."¹⁸ [To the songs of Vittoria, the artisan, breathed out when the looms rested, down at the factory, there answered from the small rooms over the palace gardens on Via Roma the songs of Homer. The girl at last is steeped, body and soul, in Poetry.] The binomial structure of this image reminds us of the "terza sopra e terza sotto" type of choir, sung by agricultural workers, and used to symbolize the harmonious relation that unites mother and daughter. Nevertheless, the *sopra-sotto*, or 'up-down' opposition is inverted here in order to illustrate the girl's socio-economic aspirations to surpass her mother (in this sense, it is noteworthy that the mother is referred to by her profession). It is also suggested that this evolution will be accomplished through poetry and the girl's love for poetry, which comes in conspicuous conflict with the sensual and maternal love mentioned later in connection to her

¹⁷ Negri, *Stella mattutina*, 26-27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

mother's potential marriage, and echoed in the girl's phobia. As predicted by her Italian teacher, Paolo Tedeschi, the girl is predestined to suffer, just like her mother. Yet, Vittoria's suffering is caused by poverty and social injustice, while her daughter will suffer for—and through—poetry. The student embraces such prophesy with immense joy and decides that “[a] quella sofferenza ch'è amore ed eccesso di vita, ella non vorrà mai rinunciare: del resto, si domanda se, a un certo punto di pienezza, sofferenza e gioia non sieno la stessa cosa.”¹⁹ [She will never renounce the suffering that is love and superabundance of life. Moreover, she asks herself, whether, at a certain degree of intensity, suffering and joy may not be the same thing.] Thus, mother and daughter are once again fused in the same matrix and, at the same time, separated through a chiasmus-like image. The suffering of Vittoria caused by material poverty parallels the suffering of Dinin as part of the process of artistic creation, and the cheerfulness that the mother demonstrates as a way to cope with the daily difficulties is reiterated by her daughter and transformed in pure creative joy. In an imagined act of recognition and self-assertion, matrilineage frames the continuum that exists among the mother's songs/voice, poetry as a vehicle for the daughter's and the autobiographer's self-affirmation, and the image of water that incites the daughter's phobia and finally resolves in her consciousness.

Negri places in her narrative the patriarchal tradition, along with its literary canon (Homer, for world's literature, and Leopardi and Foscolo, in the Italian context), next to oral tradition and to popular culture. But more than Homer's *Odyssey*, Leopardi or Foscolo's *Sepulchers*, the girl finds herself under the spell of her mother's stories. Vittoria is a skillful narrator, a gift of which she seems unaware. Nevertheless, her mother's talent not only shapes the girl's literary taste and art, but it also facilitates her familiarization with all the places and the characters evoked in the stories to the point where they become fully incorporated into Dinin's own essence and experience of the world. Through her mother's stories/language, the daughter discovers the world; at the same time, she is able to identify her mother as part of this world, and communicates with her, by learning about the mother's world and reality. Speaking of the relation between one's first experience with the language (learning) and their mother, feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro explains: “Le regole della lingua che parliamo per prima, nascono dalla necessità insieme logica e fattuale della mediazione. Sono infatti le condizioni poste dalla madre perché possiamo tornare a comunicare con lei condividendo la sua esperienza del mondo.”²⁰ [The rules of our first language stem from both the rational and factual necessity of mediating. These are, in fact, the conditions imposed by our mothers so that we can communicate again with them by sharing their experience of the world.]²¹ Given that the stories of the mother are, to an extent, directly connected to her life, these also function for Dinin as an interface between the mother and life/the external world:

Racconta bene, con pause e chiaroscuri d'inconscia sapienza, scolpendo le figure del suo ricordo con pochi tratti essenziali, illuminando di sorpresa certe scene con vivissime luci istantanee, frescando alla brava quadri d'insieme: guidata da un istinto d'arte che ignora di possedere, e morirà ignorato con lei. E siccome ripete spesso le sue narrazioni, e ogni volta con nuova lucentezza e singolarità d'immagini, i paesi e le creature da lei evocate s'imprimono nei sensi della fanciulla, oltre che nella memoria, come luoghi dove ella abbia lungamente vissuto, consanguinei dei quali ella conosca ogni ruga del viso, ogni piega dell'animo.²²

[She tells them well, with the pauses and light and shade of unconscious knowledge, engraving the pictures from memory with a few essential strokes, suddenly illuminating certain scenes with most

¹⁹ Ibid., 92.

²⁰ Luisa Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1992), 77.

²¹ Translation mine.

²² Ibid., 122.

vivid instantaneous light, quickly sketching in general scenes, guided by an artistic instinct that she does not know that she possesses, and that will die with her unrecognized. And as she frequently repeats her narratives, and each time with a new brilliancy and rarity of ideas, the countries and the creatures evoked by her are imprinted on the thoughts of the girl, as well as in her memory, like places where she may have lived a long time, like relatives, every wrinkle on whose faces she knows, every habit of their minds.]

The stories recall the past life of Vittoria, who heard them during her encounters with other servants. They are also accounts about the people for whom her own mother, Peppina, and herself worked. The narrator frames our interpretation of them by insisting on their authenticity that is guaranteed by their origin in the direct experience of the mother.²³ With these stories, Negri gives her mother a voice and, through language, an opportunity for expression and self-expression. In this way, the mother-daughter bond is once again confirmed, in the realm of language, which is the foundation of subjectivity. Notably however, none of the stories bear quotation marks or any sign of orality; syntax and style appear—at least at first sight—similar to the rest of the autobiographical narrative. Therefore, the mother's stories are really told from the daughter's perspective; they are an illustration of “daughterly fictionalising”²⁴—a reconstruction through the daughter's memory and interpretation—and, in the end, assert the narrative talent of the autobiographer.

The story that the girl prefers recounts Donna Augusta, because it envelops her heart in the most intense pain and joy by revealing the miseries of human/women's condition. This story illustrates the transgressive passion of Donna Augusta for the Marquis Arnaldo Savelli; it is about the kind of love that defies all social conventions and is only concerned with its own triumph. Nonetheless, this story depicts both her and her mother, the countess Francesca, as two women of exceptional beauty, endowed however with below-average intelligence. The countess Francesca, who only married to escape poverty, with a disastrous result, embodies perverted motherhood, as she prefers her dead son over her living daughter Augusta. The girl, who inherited the beauty of her mother but also perpetuates her ignorance, is forced into marriage to an Austrian baron. When the fiancé has to return to his parents' house to take care of family business, Donna Augusta is sent to the house of friends where she falls in love with Marquis Savelli and has his child. The girl keeps her pregnancy secret and tries repeatedly to induce a miscarriage, which eventually provokes her death. Sadly enough, after having discovered the truth, nobody in her family will mourn her death except for her servant Mariani. Dinin is deeply moved by the destiny of this life. The crying from the pain of Donna Augusta will dwell in her mind as a constant reminder for the human suffering, but also as a metaphor for the entire human existence that starts and ends with a cry. That of Donna Augusta is also a mother's suffering that Dinin will later comfort through and revalorize in her writing by assigning it a universal dimension. At a narrative level, here the autobiographer proposes negative alternatives to the figures of the mother/Vittoria and the daughter/ Dinin, and to the mother-daughter bond. By suggesting what they should not do or become, Negri implicitly acknowledges and acclaims the mother (including her decision not to remarry), the daughter (with her choice to pursue an intellectual career instead of succumbing to passionate love, like her brother Nani) and their connection.

Yet another tale that stirs the imagination of the girl is the story of Donna Teodosia. The narrator explains the reason for this particular preference: her mother once knew the protagonist, an

²³ In another instance, the narrator emphasizes again the authenticity of her mother's stories by opposing them to fairy-tales and says that the girl prefers to listen to the stories told by her mother instead of reading fairy-tales because the latter do not depict real people, they are not true to life.

²⁴ Cosslett, “Matrilineal narratives revisited,” 146.

actual woman and still alive, and is the same age as her mother. So Negri challenges once more the male literary canon with its preference for heroes and symbolic characters (i.e., Odysseus) and for the celebration of extraordinary male subjects from the past (i.e., *Sepulchers*). In her youth, the beauty and innocence of Donna Teodosia were exemplary. The war allowed her to give of her best, and she enrolled as a nurse, working selflessly to alleviate the pain of the wounded soldiers. However, with the passing of years, she gradually changed and forgot her old friends. After her marriage to a rich Southerner, Donna Teodosia denied her humble origins. Thus, although it portrays a traditional feminine model characterized by physical beauty and self-sacrifice, the story of Donna Teodosia re-contextualizes such model in a negative light, and presents it as something that belongs to the past and is undesirable.

Vittoria does not seem concerned that such stories and too much suffering might trouble the young girl and shows complete confidence in her intellectual capacity and maturity. The narrator mentions several times throughout the text the pride her mother takes in her; she is certain that her daughter is special and that she will accomplish great things in life—unlike her brother, Nani. Given this trust, the mother is convinced that her sacrifice is worthwhile, which causes a sense of overwhelming responsibility in the daughter. In her mother's eyes, Dinin is a cerebral human being, capable of understanding and learning everything. Therefore, she continuously strives to expose her to every aspect of life and to teach her all she can. Something she accomplishes largely through her stories. Dinin observes that:

[i]l cervello della figlia è, per lei, nettamente separato dalla carne debole e caduca. Deve, la figlia, tutto ascoltare, tutto vedere, tutto sapere. Farà grandi cose, forse, un giorno (così si compiace di pensare la madre) quella figliuola che non è uguale alle altre ragazze. [...] E continua a raccontare.²⁵

[The brain of her daughter is, for her, clearly apart from weak and frail flesh. Her daughter ought to hear everything, to see everything, to know everything. Some day, perhaps, she will do great things (so the mother liked to think), that daughter who is not like other girls. And she goes on telling stories.]

The daughter enjoys creating and telling stories just like her mother. Yet the tales of Dinin are entirely the creation of her own imagination sparked by her secret dialogue with the opera singer Giuditta Grisi, for whom her grandmother had worked for many years. Yet the girl did not hear these stories from her grandmother, even though the latter knew the singer very well. Nonetheless, she considers her stories true not because of a supposed link to reality and lived experience—which is not the case—but because they are the product of her fantasy, which secures her full ownership of them. By presenting her art as the creation of her own making, the narrator offers a new concept of truth in art—different from that of her mother's stories—that announces the girl's development towards self-assertiveness as an artist/writer. This progress culminates when the girl decides to trace a new genealogy, an artistic one that connects her and her mother to this mysterious ancestor:

[...] che fu grande artista e gran signore. Ne ignora il nome, la persona, il volto. Ma non importa. Le piace immaginarselo. Sua madre e lei portano gl'intimi segni del suo spirito, i visibili segni della sua figura. I singolari contrasti che risaltano nella persona dell'operaia Vittoria hanno la loro ragione in lui: quella delicatezza e quella forza, quell'amore della poesia e del canto, quel far della vita un'opera

²⁵ Negri, *Stella mattutina*, 121-22.

d'arte, con gli elementi del travaglio più umile. Ella trova anche, in lui, la ragione logica di se stessa: della propria sensibilità: della ricchezza interiore che a volte l'ingorga.²⁶

[...who was a great artist and a great nobleman. She does not know his name, she does not know his face. But that makes no difference. It pleases her to picture him to herself. Her mother and herself bear the intimate seal of his spirit, the visible signs of his personality. The curious contrasts that are conspicuous in Vittoria, the laboring woman, have their reason in him. That delicacy and that strength, that love of poetry and song, that making a work of art out of her life from the stuff of the humblest toil.

She also finds in him the logical cause of her own soul, of her own sensitiveness, of the riches within that sometimes oppress her.]

The girl's self-affirmation as a writer is paralleled by her growing self-consciousness as a woman. On Sundays, in fine weather, mother and daughter spend time with Vittoria's colleagues from work and go boating. This activity terrifies the girl as she silently fights against an overwhelming fear of water. The second time her phobia is revealed in even more dramatic terms, on the occasion of the flood produced by the river Adda²⁷ and the long description of the extensive devastation that its waters caused. In both instances, the girl is accompanied by her mother. Negri frames our reading of these scenes through the use by the narrator, for the first time in the former scene, of the appellation "la figlia di Vittoria" [Vittoria's daughter] in reference to the protagonist; this appellation had been previously introduced by her brother, Nani, and clearly positions her within a matrilineal genealogy—and separated from him. The image of water (introduced in the initial description of the mother), with its implicit allusion to the amniotic fluid, therefore develops into a symbol for motherhood, while the daughter's fear of water could be perceived as a metaphor for her "[m]atrophobia" [...] the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*.²⁸ In this sense, one of Dinin's dreams—following the news that Nani and his then girlfriend, Daria, are expecting a child—seems very representative:

E verso l'alba fa un sogno.

Ha un bambino accanto a sé: in una culla: tutto nudo, che vagisce. Sa che è suo. Come l'ha avuto? e da chi? e quando? Non ricorda nulla. Nella carne, si sente intatta e sigillata: un frutto verde. Eppure il bambino è lì, che si lamenta, stringendo i pugnetti; e il padrone è lui. Ella non potrà, non dovrà più fare altro che collarlo, nutrirlo, servirlo, allevarlo.²⁹

[And towards dawn she has a dream.

She has a baby by her side, in a cradle, naked and wailing. She knows that it is her own. How did she get it? From whom?—and when? She remembers nothing. In her body she feels herself pure and sealed, an unripe fruit. And yet the child is there, lamenting, doubling his little fists, and he is her master. She will not be able, she ought not to do anything but rock him, feed him, serve him, bring him up.]

The daughter's inner conflict that becomes visible in her phobia speaks to her intense reflection on what motherhood entails: i.e., compromises, restrictions, self-questioning,

²⁶ Ibid., 136-37.

²⁷ It is interesting to note here the homonymy between the name of the river and the first name of the author, which gives rise to numerous speculations: could we see in the powerful and turbid waters of the river a suggestion for Negri's outstanding and almost immediate artistic fame? Or maybe a foreboding of the inner crisis that shadowed her last years?

²⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1976), 235.

²⁹ Negri, *Stella mattutina*, 86-87.

responsibility (towards the one who gave her life and towards the human being to whom she gave life). Finally, the daughter's phobia, understood as a fear of regression to the mother's womb, constitutes a powerful, even though unconscious, act of rebellion (against her loss of freedom/subjectivity in supporting the potential *figlio-padrone*), and self-assertion.

Against the background of diluvian proportions formed by the Adda, the mother's unexpected confession to her daughter takes place. As she reveals, she refused the marriage proposal of one of her co-workers, Giusto Ferragni. This piece of news provokes not only contradictory thoughts and feelings in the young girl, but also the realization that her mother is also a woman who needs and is capable of love for other people, besides her daughter. Additionally, it provides the daughter an opportunity and impetus to contemplate, through her mother, such topics as womanhood, the nature of love, of sexuality and of marriage. This discussion also unveils her mother's rather disapproving perspectives on marriage and men in general.³⁰ Although, by remarrying, she could have a much easier life, away from the degrading work conditions of the factory, the mother decides to put her children's well-being first and refuses the proposal because she believes that Giusto would not make a good father. This triggers more troubled reflections in the girl, as she begins to feel responsible for her mother's happiness and to doubt that she will ever be able to repay her mother's sacrifice and love.

The mother's womanhood yields to the daughter's in the scene following where the aquatic theme recurs in relation to menarche and the girl's entry to womanhood, exposed here as a disheartening reality. On one hand, womanhood is the equivalent of the loss of intellectual abilities (the girl cannot focus on her studies and has difficulties in memorizing a poem for her next Italian class). On the other hand, womanhood, with the understanding that it inevitably implies motherhood, is perceived as a ruthless and inescapable fate. The frightened girl runs to one of her neighbors, Tereson, an old servant, who mocks her and uncovers the brutal truth: “– Ma va là, scema che non sei altro! Che ti serve, allora, aver letto tanti libracci? Ne avrai di queste noie, per lo meno fino ai cinquant'anni, che Dio ti aiuti ad arrivarci! Non vuoi essere una donna? fare all'amore? aver figliuoli? Io te lo insegno, io, povera serva, che siamo femmine solo per questo!”³¹ [Go away, you stupid girl! What use is it to have read so many books? You will have troubles like these at least until you turn fifty, may God help you! Don't you want to be a woman? make love? have children? I tell you, I, a poor servant, that us women are born only for this.]³² The association of womanhood to Tereson, an old servant and the first person who explains to the girl what she is experiencing, masterfully conveys the deficient female condition. Womanhood is related to servitude, injustice and low-class (with respect to manhood), and, what is even more disturbing, education/intellectual pursuit alone is not enough to help women change this state of affairs. This view is reinforced in the description that immediately follows of her uncle's household where his wife, born into a wealthy family, becomes progressively resigned to her husband's mistreatment and consumed by the increasing poverty due to his drinking habit. Dinin's first steps towards womanhood, and implicitly to socially-bound motherhood, are suggestively presented as an act of deep humiliation to which she responds with “spasimi di ribellione isterica.”³³ [spasms of hysterical rebellion]³⁴

³⁰ The same take on the subject will be recaptured in the girl's disagreement with her brother's hasty marriage and with his becoming a father.

³¹ Negri, *Stella mattutina*, 76-77.

³² Translation mine as this passage was completely excluded from Anne Day's translation.

³³ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁴ Translation mine.

Drawing on Lacan and echoing the feminist movements of the late 60's and the 70's when women appear as “turbulence” and “whirlwinds”³⁵ threatening the solid boundaries of patriarchy, Luce Irigaray discusses in her seminal work *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977) the dichotomy man/solids-woman/fluids which—she argues—made the issue of female identity and self-expression very problematic. “Fluid [...] is, by nature, unstable. [...] Woman never speaks the same way. What she emits is flowing, fluctuating. *Blurring*. And she is not listened to, unless proper meaning (meaning of the proper) is lost. Whence the resistances to that voice that overflows the ‘subject.’ Which the ‘subject’ then congeals, freezes, in its categories until it paralyzes the voice in its flow.”³⁶ In *Stella mattutina*, Negri restores the ‘proper’ flow of femininity through the fluidity of her mother’s voice/songs/stories that permeates the daughter’s consciousness and writing, and eventually flows into the autobiographical narrative. The daughter’s studies, books and art constitute the solid ground where Negri challenges the patriarchal culture with its demeaning idea of womanhood, unstable and dangerous for the feminine subjectivity like untamed waters.

Echoing Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1976) regarding the influence on our entire life of our first years’ experience and relation with our mothers, Muraro argues in her study *L’ordine simbolico della madre* (1992) in favor of a dynamic relationship between mother and child. Ultimately, the author explains, in order to make space for the “point of view” of the child/subject, it is necessary to sacrifice the “point of view” of the mother and to place some distance between her predominant influence and the child because:

[...] come la cultura ci e si separa dalla natura, così è necessario che ci separiamo dalla madre e che voltiamo le spalle all’esperienza di relazione con essa, per entrare nell’ordine simbolico e sociale, l’agente di tale separazione essendo il padre. In altre parole, l’indipendenza simbolica si paga necessariamente con la perdita del punto di vista della coppia creatrice del mondo.³⁷

[...]just like culture separates us and itself from nature, it is necessary to distance ourselves from our mothers and turn our back to the relational experience with them, in order to enter the symbolic and social order, with our fathers as mediators of such separation. In other words, the symbolic independence is necessarily earned through the loss of the point of view of the founding couple of the world.]³⁸

Stella mattutina concludes with Dinin’s impending departure for the house of her aunt Nunzia, in the countryside, where she will spend her vacation before starting her first teaching job. By elaborating on the theme of the journey, the narrator exemplifies Dinin’s transformation and quest for self-awareness; while preparing for and reflecting on her future trip, the character acknowledges her double subjectivity: the “I” available to everybody from the external world, including her mother, and her *true* self, “l’Altra, la Vera”, the only one capable of rising above the hardship and the injustice of her condition as a woman and a member of the low class. On this occasion, Negri reuses the image of water with the river Adda that the girl will take with her, transforming it in *her* river; this will finally turn into a jet of lava, an invincible force that can both destroy and create (just like water). Citing from Cirlot’s *Dictionary of Symbols*, Pickering-Iazzi points

³⁵ Luce Irigaray, “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids,” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1985), 106.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁷ Luisa Muraro, *L’ordine simbolico della madre* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1992), 42.

³⁸ Translation mine.

out in this association with a volcano a potential reference to the role of “the woman writer as an agent of social change”³⁹:

Porterà con sé il suo giardino. [...] E anche un nascosto prezioso bene, da poco riconosciuto, ch'ella confonde spesso con il battito del cuore, la necessità del respiro, del passo, del lavoro quotidiano; [...] Più che un bene: una forza: se stessa: non quella che la madre adora, la vita allinea con gli altri, e una rustica scoletta di villaggio attende per maestra. L'Altra: la Vera: che nessuno vedrà nel viso, nemmeno la mamma: inviolabile, inviolata: senza principio, senza fine: ricca d'inestinguibile calore al pari delle correnti sotterranee. Disgrazie, umiliazioni d'ogni sorta possono accadere alla pallida, povera Dinin; ma l'Altra, la Vera, è al disopra di tutto e di tutti, [...] La sente, a volte, rivelarsi e sovrapporsi alla persona circoscritta respirante camminante, con la potenza d'un getto di lava;⁴⁰

[She will carry her garden with her. [...] And also a hidden, precious beneficence, lately acknowledged within herself, that she confuses with the beating of her heart; the necessity for rest, for progress, for daily labor [...] More than a beneficence, a strength, her very self, not the self that her mother adores, the life in line with that of the others and a simple village pupil waiting to become a teacher. The Other self, the true self, that no one will discover in her face, not even her mother; sacred, inviolate, without beginning, without end, rich with inextinguishable fires comparable to subterranean currents. Misfortunes, all kinds of humiliation may befall the pale, poor Dinin; but the Other, the True one, is above everything and all things. [...] Sometimes she feels her revealing herself and dominating the limited, breathing, walking person with the power of an outburst of lava...]

The circumscribed space of the garden, mentioned several times throughout the narrative in relation to the girl's predisposition for day-time dreaming and to her passion for beauty, art and freedom, is replaced, at the end of the novel, by the wide space of the fields and the infinite horizon. The mother-daughter “intersubjectivity” opens up a space for the daughter's fantasy where the signs of destructive omnipotence (embodied by the Adda and the image of the volcano) are recognized as personal treasures, concealed from the eyes of everybody else—including her mother—and merge in her self-affirmation. Also, this “intersubjective space [...] between mother and child establishes the distinction between the symbol and the symbolized,”⁴¹ between the real self and the self shaped by culture. Feeling detached from her country relatives for their lifestyle and unpolished language, the girl goes outside at dawn to watch the morning star, and realizes in that very moment that “il cielo era in lei, come lei nel cielo” [heaven was within her as she was in heaven], which gives her a “sensazione d'eternità”⁴² [sensation of eternity]. The narrative does not suggest that, by leaving her mother, the girl finally rejects her influence. Rather, Negri casts as undesirable certain images of motherhood (i.e., the mother-victim, the kind that denies subjectivity to the mother or the “omnipotent mother” who controls the subjectivity of her child). At the level of the autobiographical project, motherhood provides the narrative tools for a revalorization of the feminine, hence a potential positive model for Negri's own daughter, to whom her autobiography is

³⁹ Robin Pickering-Iazzi, “The Politics of Gender and Genre in Italian Women's Autobiography of the Interwar Years,” *Italica* 71, no. 2 (1994): 187.

⁴⁰ Negri, *Stella mattutina*, 155-56.

⁴¹ Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, 95.

⁴² Negri, *Stella mattutina*, 187.

dedicated. An explicit self-assertion such as Dinin's can only be compensated with the public recognition of the mother.

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