The Fire Within

The Fire Within:
Desire in Modern and Contemporary Italian Literature

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INTRODUCTION

"THE FIRE WITHIN": DESIRE IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN LITERATURE

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This book of essays, devoted to the theme of desire in the context of modern and contemporary Italian literature, seeks to extend and complement a growing body of studies on the relationship between desire and literary production. Desire sits at the nexus of many discursive fields including psychoanalysis, literary theory, and gender studies. It occupies a prominent place in contemporary works in the critical social sciences, such as René Girard's reflection on mimetic desire, and in psychoanalytical theories such as that of Jacques Lacan. Unveiling desires embedded in literary works provides invaluable insights into individual and collective consciousness.

The sublimation of desire into the creation of literary works is a prominent feature of European literature. According to Denis de Rougemont, the exaltation of desire, especially in the form of erotic love, is a major aspect of Western mentality, as opposed to the doctrines of *ataraxia* and suppression of desire characterising Eastern religions. In his influential book *Love and the Western World,* de Rougemont recognised a thread connecting Plato's philosophy, troubadour poetry, Romanticism and the popularisation of romantic love in contemporary movies and novels, all of which glorify love as unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire.

With love as unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire, the object of desire is desire itself: the goal of the courtly lover or the Romantic poet is not to fulfil his or her desire but to perpetuate it, even if this desire engenders suffering and melancholic longing. The pain that desire inflicts on the subject puts him or her onto a quest for understanding, which leads to self-knowledge and self-improvement, as symbolically represented by the

quête of the knight in medieval courtly literature. Desire is associated with knowledge and the search for one's identity. As Jacques Lacan observed, patients often cling to their desires because they give a sense of purpose in life and shape their identity.

The pain of unfulfilled desire is also a powerful source of creativity and fuels literary and artistic production. Most narratives end with the happy couple that lives "happily ever after," and the vast majority of literary texts cover instead the parable of desire and its painful longing. Both Plato's theory of *eros* and Lacanian psychoanalysis explain this fact: it is the poverty of Eros and its very desirousness for knowledge that lead to intellectual discoveries and creations that are immortal. Furthermore, according to Lacan, desire feeds on a lack, and such a lack needs to be articulated through language: demands and needs push the subject into the realm of the Symbolic, as desire cannot exist without a linguistic representation, whereas the wholeness characterising the primeval unity between mother and child is wordless.

The quintessential nature of desire is "lack." Thus, desire constitutes a "negative" moment in the history of the desiring subject. At the same time, desire is a powerful force instigating not only artistic creativity but also the quest for knowledge and self-knowledge: desire is energy. The ambiguous status of desire – both painful lack and positive force – explains the various and contrasting attitudes that have been expressed towards it. On the one hand, the Western literary tradition celebrates desire and glorifies the delightful torments of passionate love. On the other, currents of thoughts deriving from Plato's *Symposium* have insisted on the notion of desire as a "*manque d'être*," and discussed the ethical and psychological consequences of experiencing this lack. The most influential thinker to engage with the negative notion of desire in modern Europe is Arthur Schopenhauer, for whom desire is the expression of the relentless drive of the Will – a force that impels us to want more and engenders in us a painful need. Tranquillity comes only through suppression of the Will. Schopenhauer's philosophy was widely known and discussed in *fin de siècle* Europe, and his ideas strongly influenced the works of many other important figures, such Eduard Hartmann and his *Philosophie des Unbewussten,* a major text in the culture of the European irrationalism. For Hartmann, relief from the pain of existence lies exclusively in *ataraxia*, which is possible once the suffering subject becomes conscious of the illusory nature of desire. The idea of desire as lack figures prominently in Freudian psychoanalysis, inasmuch as for Freud desire is always the desire for a lost object. Finally, the theory of desire as an unfulfillable wish finds its most complete theorisation in the works of Jacques Lacan. Lacan

makes it clear that desire's *raison d'être* is not to extinguish itself with the acquisition of the desired object, but to perpetuate itself as desire, because it feeds on a demand for infinite love directed to the Other.

Parallel to this genealogy of thinkers who view desire as a lack and a source of unhappiness, there is also a current of thought praising the creative and productive aspects of desire. In Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics,* desire is nothing but appetite with consciousness thereof: it is a natural instinct that brings humans to seek out and procure what is good for them, which is also the measure of virtue. Desire, or *conatus,* is the actual essence of man, insofar as it promotes man's survival and betterment. The procuring of a desired object brings the desiring subject to a greater state of perfection. Following Spinoza, and deliberately subverting the morality of "the teachers of design," in his *Gay Science* Nietzsche deems good whatever preserves the species. Within this context, desires, even evil ones, are good, as they are useful to the species and should not be repressed for life-denying reasons. This line of thought is well present in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus,* which explicitly oppose theories conceiving desire as a lack. For these two French thinkers, desire equals productivity: desire is a machine and the object of desire is another machine connected to it. Desire is a productive force, whose root is not a lack in the subject, but rather a passion, a natural and sensuous object that is not bolstered by needs but that produces needs and coincides with the social field of human relations.

The notion of desire explored in this collection of essays engages with the two currents of thoughts discussed above as they have found resonance in the context of Italian literature and culture of the last two centuries. The ambiguousness of desire – conceived alternately as a source of unhappiness or as a springboard for knowledge, creativity and productivity – is played out within Italy's unique response to the influences of European culture.

Since its very inception, desire has been a central theme in Italian literature. The Sicilian poets at the Swabian court and the poets of *Stilnovo* reinterpreted the modes of courtly love and the phenomenology and effects of erotic desire. The masterpiece of the Italian Middle Ages, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy,* is centred on desire – desire as the *trait d'union* between man and God as well as the vast spectrum of individual desires and passions driving the sinners away from God. In the fourteenth century, Francesco Petrarca, considered the forerunner of the introspective mode in literature, analysed in great detail the nature of erotic tension and desire in his love poetry. Another great work of Italian literature, the chivalric poem *Orlando Furioso* puts into play a mechanism of desire that

is reflected in Jacques Lacan's theory- not surprisingly, as the ideals and the tropes of courtly love are still current even today – popularised by books and movies. *Orlando Furioso* also shows that desire can be the origin of narrative. The whole poem is generated by the movements of the knights incessantly seeking Angelica, who keeps eluding them, her beauty being the *objet petit* triggering the men's passions. Furthermore, the poem fleshes out an important aspect of desire: desire is mimetic, as we desire whatever the Other desires and teaches us to desire.

In the modern era, desire has become the quintessential path towards self-knowledge, as every quest for one's identity passes through the awareness of one's desire. The advent of psychoanalysis has sanctioned this: according to Slavoj Žižek, to know what you want is to know who you are. Thus, modernity inaugurates an "obsession" with desire, which informs the discourse of philosophy and the social sciences and continues to permeate artistic imagination.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Italy was a particularly fertile setting for the emergence of the notion of desire. Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* began to be widely read and discussed, and his idea of contemplation as a way of suppressing desire entered not only the moral and philosophical discourse, but also the aesthetic theory of *fin de siècle* Italian writers and artists. More importantly, the concept of the Will as the force driving the human species and the whole of nature towards survival and manifesting itself in impulses and desires intersected with a very popular scientific paradigm dominating the Positivistic culture of nineteenth-century Europe, that of evolutionism. This paradigm was imbued with the Positivistic faith in the perfectibility of the human race, which was seen as evolving towards a greater perfection. However, such a paradigm did not exclude the possibility of certain individuals or groups regressing to more primitive stages of evolution, which were characterised as a return to the predominance of animal instinct over reason. Interestingly, the groups embodying this regression were depicted as being more prone to uncontrolled desires and less gifted with rationality: not only the "savage," the underdeveloped races, but also the criminal, the woman and the child. It was precisely this anthropological *Weltanschauung,* as both Michel David and Vittorio Roda have observed, that created a background for the advent of the Freudian Unconscious: between Freud's concept of *libido* and the nineteenth-century description of the "beast within," which needs to be repressed and fit into a paradigm of normality, there is only a fine line. The biological discourse paved the way for the psychoanalytical one.

In the context of the Italian *fin de siècle*, the equation of instinct with desire is made explicit in the writings of Giovanni Pascoli, who was imbued with the culture of evolutionism but also conversant with Schopenhauer's philosophy. In works such as *L'Era Nuova* and his peculiar exegesis of Dante's *Divine Comedy,* Pascoli envisions the advent of homo *humanus,* the human species evolved to the point of mastery over desire and subdual of the "beast within." In Freudian terms, Pascoli wished for a total predominance of the *Superego* over the *Id* (desire), which he sees as the cause of all evil in the world.

In Gabriele D'Annunzio, the discourse on desire covers both sides of the spectrum: on the one hand the Abruzzese author manipulates Nietzsche's philosophy to plunge into the exaltation of the will and the celebration of the feeling of wholeness that comes from giving in to instinct; on the other, his literary production stretches out to proto-futuristic images of the body-machine, a body that has overcome all its desires, and to the protofascist idea of war as a way of channelling all deviant drives. Indeed, Fascism inaugurated a model of repression of individual desire into the social model of nationalistic society. However, as Deleuze and Guattari warn us, there is no such thing as absence of desire, as even a society that represses desire is the product of the collective desire to be repressed.

Surprisingly, the diffusion of psychoanalysis in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century did not contribute to the formation of a new language to consolidate the preexisting anthropological discourse. Italian writers manifested a widespread resistance to explicitly incorporating psychoanalytic influences into their works. Even where Freudian themes are most evident, such as in the case of Luigi Pirandello, the authors themselves refuse to acknowledge their acquaintance with Freud and his works. A special case is the situation of Trieste – a city, which, because of its proximity to Austria and its large Jewish population, was more inclined to take an interest in the new discipline of psychoanalysis, as shown by authors such as Italo Svevo and Umberto Saba. Interestingly, the only elements of Freudian psychoanalysis that penetrated Italian culture, either as the objects of criticism or as fruitful intuitions, were the concept of *libido* and the all-pervasiveness of sexual desire. Therefore, any discourse or representation of desire in literary works of the twentieth century cannot be prescinded from a relationship with Freud's theory of the Unconscious.

Michel David, in his *La psicoanalisi in Italia,* explains the rejection of psychoanalysis by Italian intellectuals partially in terms of the predominance of the myth of the Latin "healthy and solar soul," which does not like to delve into the meanders of the psyche, and partially in

terms of the preexistence of a solid scientific and medical discourse, rooted in nineteenth-century Positivism, preventing the psychoanalytical one from gaining traction. Furthermore, after the Second World War, the predominance within the literary canon of the Neorealistic school and its programmatic avoidance of psychological introspection resulted in a more "factual" and political literature. For authors such as Elio Vittorini, Italo Calvino, Natalia Ginzburg and partially Cesare Pavese, the *homo politicus* takes the place of the *homo sensualis;* the social critique replaces the analysis of the troublesome individuality.

The purposeful exclusion of psychological introspection from post-WWII Italian literature does not entail the absence of desire in the works of those authors. Pavese's diary *Il mestiere di vivere* represents the perfect counterpart to his Neorealistic literary production, as it is centred on the detailed analysis of his troubled psyche and dominated by the theme of erotic desire. Elsa Morante's novels engage with the complex relationship between mothers and children, exploring the mechanism of Oedipal desire. However, even in the absence of an explicit reference, desire is present – deterritorialised a` la Deleuze – inasmuch as the analysis of class conflict puts into play another kind of desire: the fight for political and economic predominance. In fact, it was Alberto Moravia, an author who dealt intensely with psychoanalysis and in whose works the analysis of desire plays a pivotal role, who first recognised the parallels between Freud's notion of *libido* and Karl Marx's account of materialistic greed. Furthermore, in many works of modern and contemporary literature, desire operates within the text as a literary device moving the narrative forward.

This collection of essays is an exploration of the theme of desire in Italy from the second half of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century, with the last essay making a foray into postmodernity. Set against the background of Italy's specific history and culture, this collection is organised by thematic groups, each of which deals with an aspect of desire, either as a theme of the texts or as a tension generating the narrative. The texts are examined through the lens of various psychoanalytical approaches.

The first group of essays looks at the representation of desire as a twofold phenomenon: as an erotic and lively impulse on the part of the subject, which, however, also gestures towards the annihilation of the self. In the twentieth century, the coexistence of Eros and Death constituted a central concept in Freudian psychoanalysis. In addition, in Romantic literature, desire is also portrayed as the longing for a reality beyond the here and now, either in a Christian sense or as embedded in

nondenominational mysticism. In this part of the book, the authors examine the coexistence of love, death and transcendence in the notion of desire from the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. Jessica Greenfield shows how, in the novel *Storia di una capinera* (1869), by Giovanni Verga, desire is portrayed as an overwhelming force, either reviving the protagonists' lives or consuming them. *Libido*, repressed by social conventions, is transformed into a symptom of the disease that leads to the protagonist's death. Marco Salvioli interprets the phenomenology of erotic desire in Dino Buzzati's *Un amore* (1963) as a wish for wholeness and death. Love is seen as a rupture of the ego and as a *pharmakon,* that is, as a brief intoxication or fleeting ecstasy that reveals the masochistic tendencies within the subject and temporarily annuls his or her fear of death. Gianni Festa reads Mario Luzi's poetic collection *Viaggio terrestre e celeste di Simone Martini* (1994) as the poet's last journey towards death fuelled by the desire for transcendence and reunion with God. Silvia Mondardini's essay illustrates the interlacing of eroticism and mysticism in the poetry of Amelia Rosselli.

The second section deals with desire as a force operating at the social and political level, in the Marxian and Deleuzian sense. The mechanism of individual desires can often reflect the relationship between the subject and the society in which he or she lives. In particular, erotic desire, as the desire to possess another person, reveals dynamics of power between social groups. It leads one to infringe upon the prohibitions that society creates. For instance, for women in early twentieth-century Italy, the expression of romantic and sexual desire serves as a means of dissent against the gender norms imposed by Fascism, as Kathleen Gaudet shows in her paper on Alba de Céspedes' *Nessuno torna indietro* (1938). Through erotic desire, the women of this book explore the possibility of another identity besides that of "wife and mother" imposed by Fascism. Emma Keane's essay on Alberto Moravia's novel *I due amici* (1951-52) illustrates the conflicting ideologies of wartime and postwar Italy through the opposing ideas of desire and masculinity embodied by the two male protagonists of the book.

The third part of the book explores the relationship between desire and the quest for knowledge. The Greek myth of Oedipus, the man who set out to unveil the tragic secret of his birth, unifies Marisa Escolar's and Mariarita Martino's essays, which examine the "desire to know." The Oedipal desire displayed by the texts in this section sets the characters on a path towards self-discovery and exploration of the "Other." In Escolar's essay, which focuses on Matilde Serao's *La mano tagliata* (1912), desire is gendered, and male desire is represented as a quest for identity that

passes through the woman as an obstacle and a mystery. Martino's analysis of Moravia's *L'uomo che guarda* (1985) reconstructs the protagonist's search for the roots of his existential malaise as a metaphorical journey of self-knowledge.

The essays in the fourth section enlist psychoanalysis in order to unveil the mechanism of desire hidden in literary texts. In Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, desire is often set in motion by a particular element in the desired object, which comes to metonymically represent the object as a whole. Often this element is in the "gaze" of the other, the look in a person's eyes that inspires desire and love. Furthermore, in Julia Kristeva's discourse on the central role of the mother in the articulation of the child's subjectivity, desire is framed as the nostalgia for the original unity between mother and child that is lost as the child grows into adulthood. The papers in this section engage with the notion of desire from the perspective of Lacan's and Kristeva's reflections on lack, loss and gaze. In my essay, I illustrate the mechanism of desire in Giovanni Pascoli's poem *Anticlo* (1915) through a Lacanian perspective and by showing the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer on the author. Alessandra Diazzi's essay on Italo Calvino's *Gli amori difficili* (1970) shows the influence of Lacan's theory of desire on this Italian author, in whose texts desire plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative. Katrin Wehling-Giorgi analyses Elsa Morante's novels *La Storia* (1974) and *Aracoeli* (1982) from a Kristevan perspective, focusing on the function of motherhood in these texts. Indeed, the male characters of Elsa Morante manifest a desire to reconstitute the lost wholeness of the union between mother and child.

The three essays in the fifth and last section depict desire as the origin of narrative and analyse the modes in which desire can be inscribed into a text. Enrico Minardi illustrates the formation of a "code of desire" in the poetry of Antonia Pozzi, which is based on the influence of Gabriele D'Annunzio. Alessandro Giardino's essay focuses on Giorgio Bassani's *Cinque storie ferraresi* (1956) and sheds light on the connection between the protagonists' desire to be part of the Symbolic, in a Lacanian sense, and the quasi-pictorial style employed in the text. The mechanism of fascination with the "Other," which constitutes desire, informs literary creation since the origin of storytelling, as Roberto Calasso tells us in his post-modern rewriting of Greek myths *Le nozze di Cadmo and Armonia* (1984), which is the subject of Lara Fiorani's essay.

PART I

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DESIRE: EROS, THANATOS AND TRANSCENDENCE

CHAPTER ONE

MANIFESTATIONS OF DESIRE IN GIOVANNI VERGA'S *STORIA DI UNA CAPINERA*

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I. Introduction

Giovanni Verga is most well known for establishing the foundation of Italian Verismo,[1] and certainly most remembered for his portrayal of the Sicilian working class, in novels such as *I Malavoglia* and his Sicilian short story collections *Vita dei campi* and *Novelle rusticane*. The entirety of Verga's works, however, is as vast as it is diverse. His numerous publications vary in style, theme, and setting and can be divided into two categories, his early writings and the novels and stories of his maturity. As a young writer, inspired by the Romantics who frequented the salons of Florence and Milan, Verga focused on themes of patriotism, celebrations of nature, and tortured love. In his epistolary novel, *Storia di una capinera* (1869), Verga deals with love and desire in their many forms. He portrays romantic love as a sickness and describes the plurality of desires that stem from it, manifesting themselves as symptoms.

[1] The *Verismo* movement in Italy grew out of French Naturalism. While the two movements share many characteristics, Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana established a new approach to literature wherein the author sought out genuine representatives of the human condition and acted as a passive observer, recording the lives of those that he observed. *Verismo* allows the reader a glimpse into the life of a class with which he is not familiar and, at the same time, expresses the struggles and hardships from the viewpoint of those who suffer them. Verga's "*manifesto del Verismo*" can be found in a letter to his editor, Salvatore Farina, at the beginning of "L'amante di Gramigna."

Storia di una capinera is the story of Maria, a Sicilian girl who, having been forced into the nunnery at age six following the death of her mother, dedicates her life to serving the Church and God. Following an outbreak of cholera, Maria is sent to her family, who is living outside of the city to avoid contracting the illness. There, she finds herself as an outsider to the life of her father, stepmother, stepsister, and stepbrother, causing her to reevaluate her own life and her place in the world. Although the love she and her father share is true, his life no longer parallels hers and therefore this increases the sense of marginalisation that Maria is experiencing.

Maria's family is friendly with the Valentini family, which has also sought safety in the hills outside of Catania during the cholera outbreak. Although Maria is in the final stages before taking her vows to become a nun, she develops romantic feelings for Antonio Valentini, whom she lovingly refers to as Nino. This creates such an intense conflict inside of Maria that she eventually retreats from him, turning into herself, seeking answers and solace. The desire she feels for Nino is not only confusing and mysterious, but for a girl whose entire life has been sheltered by the walls of a convent, it is also as sinful and torturous. Her only outlet is to share her feelings with her friend Marianna, while simultaneously attempting to deny, hide, and overpower those same feelings. For Maria, her upcoming vows represent the point at which all her personal desires must be extinguished, and thus the event carries with it a sense of impending doom, the convent becoming her own personal prison. As her time "on the outside" dwindles, her desire to be with Nino begins to physically manifest itself and her attempts to negate that desire wreak havoc on Maria's health.

Maria's desire is further incited by the engagement and eventual marriage of her own stepsister, Giuditta, to Nino. Adding injury to insult, the marriage of Giuditta and Nino takes place in the very church to which Maria is confined. Desire takes many forms in this novel: erotic desire makes way for the personal desire to control her own feelings and eventually leads to the desire to rid herself of the suffering that consumes her body, mind, and soul. The multitude of ways in which desire is manifested in this story culminates in Maria's insanity and eventual death from a broken heart and mind. Although the exact span of time in which the story takes place is impossible to know, as many of the later letters are not dated, one can assume that about three years elapse from the time when Maria is a carefree young nun in training to when she succumbs to the insanity that eventually leads to her demise.

Desire is a multifaceted emotion that is manifested in a variety of ways. The demonstration of desire in literature is as various as it is

common. Each and every period of Italian literature has showcased desire in its many aspects. It is, perhaps, the most prominent and common element in Italian literature – from Dante Alighieri to Niccoló Machiavelli to Ugo Foscolo to Leonardo Sciascia, desire is often present in the works of the great Italian writers. The manifestations of desire can appear in many forms, from carnal desire to greed, from religious fervour to the hunger for power. Less commonly considered, perhaps, is how one may attempt to suppress desire – what does that mean, how does it look, what are the results of its suppression? This article will explore Giovanni Verga's representation of desire and its symptomatic manifestations in the epistolary novel, *Storia di una capinera*, looking particularly at how the main character attempts to suppress her desire and the physical consequences that result. Following a brief survey of the theory of desire and the politics that surround it, and with a focus on Adrian Parr's reading of Gilles Deleuze, this article will then analyse Verga's short novel looking at the different ways in which desire is manifested in the main character and paying particular attention to how memory, trauma, and symptoms spur these desires.

II. Theory and politics of desire

Memory is an important element that can shape how one confronts events in one's life. In his book, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, Adrian Parr maintains that memory is so powerful that it can shape how one deals with social situations. He states:

> How we remember also affirms how we live our lives today and tomorrow: defensively or joyfully. Memory is dynamic and its movement is largely ungraspable. It can open new linguistic, economic, historical, and energetic combinations that either normalize or reinvent how the social field organizes itself.[2]

Parr goes on to explain the difference between memory and remembrance. Remembrance is attached to time and space, whereas memory is independent from it. Remembrance is concrete while memory is abstract:

> Memory, unlike remembrance itself, is not *in* time and space, although it can be said to produce space-times. Memory does not happen to a body, it subsists throughout it. A body does not remember a defined slice of time,

[2] Adrian Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008), 1.

> for memory is in excess of the chronological compartmentalizing of discrete temporal units.[3]

This distinction between memory and remembrance will become important in the discussion of desire in *Storia di una capinera,* because memory and remembrance will produce distinctly different manifestations of desire in the main character.

Just as memory and remembrance are important factors influencing the manner in which desire is dealt with and manifested, so is trauma. Parr argues that the emotions produced by a trauma must find a means of escape, for if they do not, those emotions begin to mutate, forming a symptom.[4] "Symptoms are therefore the physical result of intensive emotional disturbances that have found no means of escape."[5] While the term trauma is in itself quite problematic (because how can an outsider define what level of emotional disturbance constitutes a trauma?), emotional disturbance is a common theme in late Romantic literature, the genre to which *Storia di una capinera* belongs.

Memory and past trauma are central to Deleuze's philosophy of desire, as is evident in his co-authored works with Guattari, explains Philip Goodchild in *Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire*. Goodchild emphasises that desire appears as a main focus of Deleuze and Guattari for a brief five-year period, beginning in 1972. He notes, "[desire] functions neither as a universal principle governing the whole of existence, nor as an underlying ground determining the nature of all existence – instead, desire lies outside or alongside existence."[6] Therefore, while desire may not contribute directly to existence, it is a constant that plays alongside it; they are mutually exclusive everyone who exists experiences some kind of desire.

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[3] Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 1.

[4] Sigmund Freud, who presented a different approach, also dealt with symptom, the result of unreleased emotions from some disturbance. In introducing the idea of repression, Freud was able to argue that trauma can be eliminated from consciousness. Parr explains: "Once unconscious, trauma simmers away. When this repressed and now magnified affect returns, it does so as a symptom. As noted, symptoms are cured by making their cause conscious, implying the cure lies upon the premise that what is represented is somehow immune to repression" (Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 20). Repressible and irrepressible traumas present an interesting approach to Romantic literature, especially when juxtaposed with desire and its manifestations.

[5] Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 18.

[6] Philip Goodchild, *Deleuze and Guattari: Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 11.

Another important idea for Deleuze in the evolution of his philosophy of desire is the idea of a deterritorialisation of desire. That is, Deleuze removes the term desire from the territory in which it is most commonly used, erotic encounters, allowing for a more general use of the term. Goodchild explains:

> Desire is a deterritorialized concept in that it does not derive its meaning from the territory in which it is first located, in this case, sexual relations. Desire is a 'sexuality,' which extends beyond gender relations, because it can relate entirely heterogeneous terms and territories, a multiplicity of sexes.[7]

Therefore, desire may apply to sexual relations, but can also be applied in other situations. This essay will examine Maria's desires: to be loved, to feel part of a family, to love and be loved, and to be with Nino. As will be explored below, Maria's desires pull her in several directions at once. While one part of her wants to dedicate herself to the Church, becoming a faithful and dutiful servant of God, another part of her cannot fathom being away from Nino, a man who makes her cheeks flush and her hands tremble. The variety of desires exhibited by Maria in Verga's novel provides the basis for the discussion to follow.

III. Manifestations of desire in *Storia di una capinera*

Giovanni Verga's *Storia di una capinera* is the fictional account of Maria, who is eventually driven mad by her desire to love and to repent, while simultaneously struggling with her inability to express those emotions, resulting in physical symptoms. Due to limitations of space, I will focus solely on Maria's struggles with her desires and not discuss those of other characters in the novel.

As noted above, memory is regarded as an element that shapes how one lives his or her life. In the case of Maria, the memories of her mother and their life together as a family are the driving factors behind her approach to relationships, both inside and outside of the convent where she is obliged to live since the age of seven. Early on, Maria says that the death of her mother makes her the most desperate amongst the girls preparing to enter the nunnery. Furthermore, as a result of the lack of physical contact and love, Maria tends to romanticise her relationship with her father and relishes the hug she receives from him when she is sent home to wait out the cholera outbreak in the city.

[7] Goodchild, *Deleuze and Guattari*, 41.

> I'm the unluckiest of all of us novices, that's definite, since I lost my mother! You know that I was confined to the convent when I wasn't even seven years old, soon after my poor mother died! … You can't imagine how I feel inside when my father says good morning to me and hugs me. Nobody ever hugged us down there at the convent; you know that Marianna! The rules forbid it. Yet it doesn't seem wrong to feel so well loved …[8]

Having spent more than thirteen years in the convent, which becomes more and more of a prison as she moves toward her final vows, Maria is disheartened upon her realisation that family life is quite different from what she imagined. Writing to her friend Marianna, Maria describes the new family that her father has formed by remarrying after the death of his wife. While she is thrilled with her stepbrother and in awe of her stepsister, Maria finds it quite difficult to address her stepmother as *mamma*. She writes:

> Mother … (Marianna, if you only knew how difficult it is for me to call my stepmother by this sweet name! It's as if I were betraying the memory of my own poor parent … And yet I have to call her Mother!)[9]

Compounding the difficulty of finding her place among this established family unit is the fact that they are much wealthier than Maria and her father ever were (in fact, one of the reasons she was sent to the convent in the first place was her father's lack of money to raise a daughter on his own). Maria's desire to fit into this new family unit compels her to dote on her younger stepbrother and almost act as a housemaid to her stepsister, Giuditta, feeling ashamed of her own station in life, while simultaneously admiring Giuditta's beauty and wealth.

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[8] Giovanni Verga, *Sparrow,* trans. Lucy Gordan and Frances Frenaye (New York: Italica Press, 1997), 3; "Io sono la più disgraziata di tutte le educande, è vero, perché ho perso la mamma! … Tu sai che io fui chiusa in convento quando non toccavo ancora i sette anni, allorché la mia povera mamma mi lasciò sola! … Tu non puoi immaginarti quello che io provo dentro di me allorché il mio babbo mi dà il buon giorno e mi abbraccia! Nessuno ci abbracciava mai laggiù, tu lo sai, Marianna! … *la regola* lo proibisce … Eppure non mi pare che ci sia male a sentirsi così amate." Giovanni Verga, *Storia di una capinera* (Palermo: Selino's S.R.L., 1869), 15.

[9] Verga, *Sparrow,* 8; "e la mamma … (Marianna, se sapessi come mi vien difficile dare questo dolce nome alla matrigna! Mi pare di fare un torto alla memoria della mia povera madre … Ma pure bisogna chiamarla così!)" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 19.

Maria explains to Marianna that she brushes Giuditta's hair and admires her dresses and fine fabrics and ribbons while feeling her cheeks redden at her own clothing, issued by the convent. The discrepancy between Maria and Giuditta is emphasised on Father's day when Maria is unable to present her father with an elegant gift as Giuditta can. She writes:

> Judith had given Father a lovely silk beret, which she had embroidered in secret so it would be a surprise. I couldn't give him anything but a bunch of wild flowers, which I'd picked at dawn. They were still dewy. My dear father appreciated my present as much as my sister's and hugged us both with tears in his eyes.[10]

Although her father treats the girls equally and is thankful for the gifts that each one presents him with, Maria cannot help but feel inadequate when confronted with her stepsister's seeming perfection.

Following her return to the city, memory plays an important part in Maria's growing hatred for the convent. Having been placed there at such a young age, her entire life is lived in a controlled environment and it is only as a result of the cholera outbreak that she is able to experience the freedom and pleasure of nature in the countryside. While she may lack the lifetime of childhood memories one who has grown up in the family home would have, she creates new memories during her time at home during the cholera outbreak. She tells Marianna:

> I do nothing but run in the meadows, gather wild flowers, and listen to the song of little birds … At my age! I'm almost twenty … you understand! I'm ashamed of myself too, but my dear father doesn't have the heart to scold me. He doesn't know how to do anything except hug me and say: 'Poor little thing! Let her enjoy these few days of freedom!'[11]

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[10] Verga, *Sparrow*, 20; "Giuditta avea regalato al babbo un bel berretto di seta, che aveva ricamato di nascosto per fargliene una sorpresa; io non potei far altro che recargli un bel mazzo di fiori di campo, che avevo raccolti all'alba ed erano ancora umidi di rugiada. Era un povero mazzolino mio; ma il buon padre gradì il mio regalo quanto quello di mia sorella e ci abbracciò entrambe colle lagrime agli occhi." Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 28.

[11] Verga, *Sparrow*, 8; "Non faccio altro che correre pei campi, raccogliere i fiorellini, e ascoltare il canto degli uccelletti … alla mia età! Ho quasi venti anni … capisci? Ne arrossisco io stessa; ma il mio caro babbo non ha cuore di sgridarmi; egli non sa far altro che accarezzarmi e dire: 'Povera piccina! lasciatele godere questi giorni di libertà!" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 19.

She continues to explain to Marianna her assumptions on why she enjoys the expanse of nature so much more than her stepsiblings:

> Our world was so restricted: the little altar, the poor flowers withered in airless vases, the belvedere from which we could see rooftops and, then away in the distance, as in a magic lantern, the countryside, the sea, and all of God's beautiful creations. The cloister walls around our little garden must have been built higher than the trees on purpose. It took only a hundred steps to cross the whole garden. We were allowed to walk there for an hour a day under the supervision of our mother superior, but we weren't allowed to run around and have a good time … such was our whole world![12]

Following her time with the family in the countryside, the remembrance of that freedom and the ability to run freely throughout the fields without restrictions hinder Maria's ability to return willingly to the strict rules of the convent.

While she does not fault the convent for the restrictions put upon her and her fellow nuns, her desire to break out of those constraints grows exponentially as she nears her final vows. The bars that once kept her safe from the outside world now trap her in a concrete prison with no grass, nowhere to run, and trees that can only be seen from a small *belvedere,* but that do not cross the walls of the convent itself. As her desire to run in the fields and climb trees and stroll through the forests grows, so does her contempt for the small room to which she is bound: "I only want to be like everybody else, nothing more, and to enjoy all these blessings that the Lord has given to everybody: fresh air, light, freedom!"[13] Eventually, in the most desperate throws of her sickness, the convent is nothing more than a sepulchre that awaits her death.

Maria meets Nino, the son of a neighbour family, also temporarily residing in the countryside to avoid the cholera outbreak, during one of her family's many social outings with his family. While Maria is initially

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[12] Verga, *Sparrow,* 20; "Il nostro mondo [il convento] era ben ristretto: l'altarino, quei poveri fiori che intristivano nei vasi pieni d'aria, il belvedere dal quale vedevasi un mucchio di tetti, e poi da lontano, come in una lanterna magica, la campagna, il mare e tutte le belle cose create da Dio, il nostro piccolo giardino, che par fatto a posto per lasciar scorgere i muri claustrali al di sopra degli albri, e che si percorre tutto in cento passi, ove ci si permetteva di passeggiare per un'ora sotto la sorveglianza della Direttrice, ma senza poter correre e trastullarci … ecco tutto!" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 28.

[13] Verga, *Sparrow*, 3-4; "… vorrei esser soltanto come tutti gli altri, nulla piú, e godere coteste benedizioni che il Signore ha date a tutti: l'aria, la luce, la libertà!" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 23.

friendly with the Valentini's daughter, who is roughly her same age, she is almost immediately drawn to Nino, just as he is drawn to her. Initially Maria is unaware of the implications of Nino's actions toward her, as a result of her sheltered religious upbringing, and thinks he is trying to anger her. For example, she laments Nino's offer of his arm while they stroll in the woods, noting that he does not offer help to her stepsister, Giuditta:

> Nino offered me his arm twenty times. As if I needed it! He must have done it on purpose to get a rise out of me. Otherwise why didn't he offer it to my sister? After all, she's the one who kept complaining about the climb, who needed his support, not me.[14]

However, their relationship grows as the families spend more and more time together.

From family walks in the woods to dancing together in the evening, the relationship between Nino and Maria progresses to the point at which she finally recognises her desire to be near him. While normally the desire to be near someone would produce feelings of happiness and joy, for Maria those feelings create a sense of dread within her, and encourage her to question whether or not she is being faithful to her upcoming vows. She tries to explain to Marianna:

> Because he is a very well mannered young man and extremely kind to me … But I wouldn't know how to describe the affect he has on me … It's not dislike or aversion … and yet I'm scared of him. Every time I run into him I blush, turn pale, tremble, and want to run away. Then he talks to me. I listen, stand beside him … and I think of Father Anselmo, when he preached about the fascination of evil, and I'm scared.[15]

The initial symptom of this suffering for Maria is fear and the flight response, but when her stepmother begins to notice her reaction to Nino, Maria is forbidden from attending any outing at which he is present. Being

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[14] Verga, *Sparrow*, 14; "Il signor Nino mi ha offerto venti volte il braccio, come se ne avessi bisogno, io! L'avrà fatto apposta per farmi arrabbiare! Perché dunque non l'ha offerto a mia sorella che si lagnava della salita e che ne aveva bisogno lei? non io!" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 32.

[15] Verga, *Sparrow*, 25-26; "… colui è un buonissimo giovane, ed anche pieno di attenzioni per me … Ma io non saprei spiegarti l'impressione che egli produce in me … Non è antipatia, non è avversione … eppure lo temo … eppure ogni volta che lo incontro arrossisco, impallidisco, tremo, e vorrei fuggirmene. Ma poi egli mi parla, lo ascolto, rimango a lui vicina … non so perché … mi pare che non potrei staccarmene … e penso al Padre Anselmo, allorché ci parlava dal pulpito del fascino dello spirito del male, ed ho paura …" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 38.

banned from Nino's presence only intensifies Maria's desire to be near him, and creates the same response in Nino: at one point he tries to speak to her through the window of her room before leaving for the city at the end of the cholera outbreak.

The impact of Maria's pain only becomes evident to the reader when she explains the all-consuming passion that has taken hold of her. She writes:

> I love him! It's a dreadful thing to say, a sin, a crime! But there's no use denying it. This sin has me overwhelmed. I've tried to run away, but it grabs me, holds me down with my chest against my knees, my face in the mud. My whole being: head, heart, and blood, is full of this man. He's before my eyes now as a write to you, in my dreams, and in my prayers. I can't think of anything else. Every word I utter turns into his name. Whenever I hear his voice, I'm happy. When he looks at me, I tremble. I'd like to be with him all the time and yet I run away from him. I'd die for him. Everything I feel about the man is new, strange, terrifying; it's more passionate than the love I feel for my father, more intense than my love for God! This is what they call "Love" in the outside world; I've experienced it. It's horrible, horrible! It's God's punishment, my ruin, my curse. Marianna, I'm damned! Marianna, pray for me.[16]

Although this soon to be confirmed nun sees her love as a sin, it is only with this revelation that the reader is able to understand the all-consuming emotion and struggle that she faces. Maria wants nothing more than to banish these feelings and to focus on her upcoming confirmation and her devotion to God, but her love for Nino proves overpowering.

Maria's desire to be close to her family grows ever more difficult as Maria discovers her feelings for Nino. As her emotions cripple her, Maria

[16] Verga, *Sparrow*, 31-32; "L'amo! È un'orribile parola! è un peccato! è un delitto! ma è inutile dissimularlo a me stessa. Il peccato è più forte di me. Ho tentato di sfuggirgli, esso mi ha abbrancato, mi tiene in ginocchio sul petto, mi calpesta la faccia nel fango. Tutto il mio essere è pieno di quell'uomo: la mia testa, il mio cuore, il mio sangue. L'ho dinanzi agli occhi in questo momento che ti scrivo, nei sogni, nella preghiera. Non posso pensare ad altro; mi pare che ad ogni istante il suo nome mi venga sulle labbra, che ogni parola che profferisco si trasformi nel nome di lui; allorché lo ascolto son felice; quando mi guarda tremo; vorrei stargli vicina ad ogni momento e lo fuggo; vorrei morire per lui. Tutto ciò che sento per quell'uomo è nuovo, è strano, è spaventoso … è più ardente dell'amore che porto a mio padre; è più forte di quello che porto al mio Dio! … Questo è quello che al mondo chiamano *amore* … l'ho conosciuto; lo veggo … È orribile! è orribile! … È il castigo di Dio, la perdizione, la bestemmia! Marianna, io son perduta! Marianna, prega per me!" Verga, *Storia di una capinera*, 42.

discovers in herself a growing sense of envy toward her stepsister, Giuditta, who not only has nicer things than she has, but also feels completely at ease around Nino and his family. Recounting one evening when Maria's family is socialising with the Valentini's she exclaims:

> How beautiful Judith was in her lovely sky-blue dress, leaning on his arm, laughing and chatting with him! Oh! … My God, how envious I am! How wretched I am! I had to think about him to keep from sobbing. In order not to envy them, I had to remind myself of the way Nino had been staring at me …[17]

While her desire to be close with Giuditta was originally complicated by their differing financial situations, the relationship between the two sisters becomes increasingly strained as Giuditta spends more time with Nino. Following Maria's return to the convent, which by this time is turning into her own personal prison, Maria's desire to see her family grows – until they come to share the news that Nino and Giuditta will be wed. The turmoil that erupts inside of Maria – her desire to be happy for her stepsister, while battling her envy of Giuditta and her frustration with her own station in life – finds no means of escape and contributes to the undiagnosable illness that leads to her eventual death.

Another element that complicates Maria's life is the desire to be loved. As noted above, Maria lost her mother and was committed to the convent before she reached the age of seven, lamenting to her friend Marianna that there was a marked lack of affection during her upbringing. Upon her return to her family, she basks in the affection that her father shows her and cherishes each embraces that she receives. The abstract memory of the love of her mother and the concrete remembrance of her father's love lead her to be the one to give love and to desire it from those around her. Unfortunately, one of these types of love comes from an unwanted source: Nino.

Following the discovery of her feelings for Nino, Maria is left confused and in search of security, wanting nothing more than to return to the sheltered life of the convent. She writes to Marianna, unable to share her feelings with anyone else, imploring her friend to love her in her time of need. She writes: "I've been writing to you, but my eyes are so misty with tears that I don't even know what I've written. Forgive me and love

[17] Verga, *Sparrow*, 38; "Come era bella Giuditta col suo bell'abito cilestre, appoggiata al braccio di lui, ridendo, chiacchierando con lui! … Oh! Dio mio! come sono invidiosa! come sono cattiva … ! Ho dovuto pensare a lui per non singhiozzare; ho dovuto ricordarmi dello sguardo che fissava su di me per non invidiarli …" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 36.

me because I desperately need to be loved."[18] The love that she craves in this instance is the love that a mother would give to a daughter, but since Maria is unable to seek solace from her stepmother, she looks elsewhere for someone to fill that void.

During the cholera outbreak, Marianna reveals to Maria that she will not be returning to the convent and will instead remain with her family. Maria is envious of Marianna's freedom and the love that her family clearly feels for her, allowing her to remain with them and saving her from a life of chastity and devotion to God. Shortly thereafter, Marianna reveals that not only will she remain with her family instead of returning to the convent, but she will also marry. Seeking a way to reconcile her desire for Nino and her desire to be happy for Giuditta, who will marry him, Maria once again desires the happiness that the rest of the world seems to enjoy and that evades her at every turn. She writes:

> Since you are a happy bride-to-be too, please describe the joy, the excitement, the delight my sister must be feeling. Tell me what her innermost sentiments must be now that she can always be by the side of her beloved without self-consciousness, guilt, or fear. She is so lucky to be the centre of attention and pampered by everyone. Tell me how happy she must be to think that she'll be his and he'll be hers, that she'll see him every day, at all hours, hear him speak, lean on his arm, whisper in his ear whatever passes through her head, take his name, and one day rock his children on her knee and teach them to love and pray to God for him … To think that everything will be a joy and that this joy will never end! How kind the Lord is to grant so much happiness![19]

Mixed with her desire to love and be loved, is her desire to feel the joy that others receive.

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[18] Verga, *Sparrow*, 30; "Ti ho scritto cogli occhi velati di lagrime; e non so nemmeno quello che ho scritto. Perdonami e amami, ché ho molto bisogno di essere amata." Verga, *Storia di una capinera*, 66.

[19] Verga, *Sparrow*, 66; "Tu che sei sposa, tu che sei felice, dimmi com'è fatta quella gioia, quella festa, quel gaudio che deve provar mia sorella; dimmi che cosa ci deve essere nel suo cuore vedendosi sempre accanto la persona amata senza scrupoli, senza rimorsi, senza paure, benedetta, festeggiata, accarezzata da tutti; dimmi come deve essere fatta la felicità di pensare che ella sarà di lui, ch'egli le apparterrà, che lo vedrà tutti i giorni, tutte le ore, che l'udrà parlare, che si appoggerà al braccio di lui, che gli dirà all'orecchio tutto quello che le passerà per la mente, che si chiamerà col nome di lui, che verrà il giorno in cui si cullerà sulle ginocchia i suoi figli e insegnerà loro ad amarlo, a pregare il buon Dio per lui … Pensare che tutto sarà una festa, e che questa festa non avrà mai fine! Com'è buono il Signore a concedere tanta felicità!" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 76.

As Maria falls deeper into her illness and nears her death, her letters to Marianna evolve into a disparity that seems to grow with every letter. As her weakness grows, Maria is segregated and bedridden, and she writes to Marianna, pleading with her to love her: "I need so much to be loved, to love … to love very deeply since my life is slipping away!"[20] As the life of Maria drifts away and she nears her death, all of Maria's desires seem to come to the surface. She begs Marianna to help her be faithful to God, to tell her how to stop loving Nino and forgive Giuditta for marrying the man she cannot live without, to remember the love and devotion she felt towards God before she met Nino. Even to her last moment she is torn, riddled by the symptoms of her desire and love for Nino, and wastes away without ever reaching a compromise between her guilt and her desires.

IV. Symptoms of desire

Desire can involve positive emotions, but, as is evident in the various examples of desire in Verga's epistolary novel, it can also conjure up negative and even physically debilitating reactions. Desire can have a transformative effect on emotions. While originally Maria feels a sense of elation in Nino's presence, that joy is transformed into dread and finally into physical symptoms so strongly debilitating that they eventually lead to her death.

In her book devoted to Jacques Lacan's theory of desire, Karen Coates discusses the different faces of love and the effects on its victims. While initially the love that Maria feels for Nino engenders happiness and joy, those feelings evolve into melancholy and misery. Coates notes that "the love involved in melancholy is regressive, consuming …"[21] and, as is evident in *Storia di una capinera*, a step along the path toward utter desperation. Melancholy is one of the symptoms arising from the lack of emotional release of the psychological disturbance that is Maria's love for Nino.

As Maria tries to reconcile with her destiny as a nun and with her separation from Nino, her health briefly stabilises and she expresses her gratitude to God for allowing her health to improve. However, just as Maria seems to accept her future without Nino, she discovers that her stepsister will soon wed him and this revelation absolutely destroys her, pushing her so far to the edge of insanity that she cannot control herself.

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[20] Verga, *Sparrow,* 66; "Ho tanto bisogno di essere amata, di amare … di amare assai poiché la vita mi sfugge!" Verga, *Storia di una capinera,* 73.

[21] Karen Coats, *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire, and Subjectivity in Children's Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 37.