

(RE)FORMING ITALIANS: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ITALY, 1929-1939

by

Marisa Giorgi

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Eugenia Paulicelli

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

André Aciman

Date

Executive Officer

Giancarlo Lombardi_____

Paolo Fasoli_____

Ruth Ben-Ghiat_____

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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Adviser: Eugenia Paulicelli

My dissertation argues for the centrality of children's literature under Fascism as a tool to bring about the ultimate goal of forming the "new" Italian. This project examines the relationship between children's literature, the creation of culture and the transmission of ideology in Fascist Italy. I chose the period 1929-1939 because this decade encompasses the years the regime actively sought consolidation of power and consensus, as well as the years of the fascistization of Italian schools. These novels are conduits of fascist ideology veiled as adventure stories, historical novels, bildungsroman or romantic fiction for children and young adults and deserve scholarly attention.

The aim of children's literature is ostensibly to impart life-lessons, however, this seemingly benign goal takes on a different meaning in the context of a totalitarian regime. Children's literature, an extension of popular literature, reveals the cultural dynamics of a society and the values it holds most important. Children's novels from 1930s Italy contain valuable insights into the ways the regime attempted to mold the "new" Italian, imbuing the youngest and most impressionable minds and bodies with fascist values. There is a current need for research that pokes and probes fascist hegemony during the 1930s. My dissertation's analysis of children's literature from 1929-1939 aims to fill this void.

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Introduction

C'è nel ragazzo e nel giovanetto, un incoercibile bisogno d'imitazione, ... di perfezionamento, per il quale il fanciullo tende sempre a rifare le azioni, ad assumere gli atteggiamenti dell'adulto e di chi ritiene superiore a se stesso.... il fanciullo tende sempre a ripetere ciò che lo distingue dai suoi compagni, lo eleva, lo avvicina a colui che ha scelto come modello.... (Giovanazzi 18)

In 1938, a National Convention for Children's Literature¹ was held in Bologna, where Giuseppe Giovanazzi² pronounced the above quote in his presentation: "Gusti letterari dei ragazzi." The aim of this conference was to discuss the state of children's literature in Fascist Italy and address its purpose as well as ways to make it more effective with regard to the regime's goal of forming the "new" Italian. This conference and its proceedings support my argument that children's leisure-time literature was used as a means of inculcating fascist values in Italy's youth. Indeed, in the very same article, Giovanazzi states: "Il Convegno di Bologna affermò in modo inequivocabile la necessità di una letteratura infantile e giovanile, che abbia l'impronta etica ed artistica della nostra Mussoliniana Italia imperiale" (25). My premise that the novels I examine were meant to provide attainable, positive role models for children to imitate is sustained by Giovanazzi, who emphasizes children's desire to imitate what they see, hear and read.

While the aim of literature for children is ostensibly to impart life-lessons and to form well-adjusted members of society, these seemingly benign goals take on another meaning in the context of a totalitarian regime. The meaning and intent of these materials must be considered

¹ The conference was organized by the "Ente Nazionale per Le Biblioteche Popolari e Scolastiche" and the "Sindacato Nazionale Fascista Autori e Scrittori."

² Giovanazzi was an author of children's books, several of which were published in the Bemporad series, "I libri dell'ardimento," including: *Per l'Italia e per la mamma* (1934); *La grotta dell'orso* (1936); *La culla tra le congiure* (1938); *Il talismano conteso* (1939); *L'arciere infallibile* (1934).

within the larger socio-historical context of Italian Fascism, and in particular Mussolini's goal to reform Italians—the “anthropological revolution,” as Emilio Gentile has coined it. Mussolini's sexual politics were the driving force behind this anthropological revolution, and thus, the re-formation of the Italian people was divided along gender lines. My dissertation examines children's novels from the fascist period and their contribution to the formation of the “new” Italian. I argue that they contain valuable insight to the role of fascist ideology in Italian society and Mussolini's attempt to create the “new” Italian. I analyze and compare the leisure-time novels under study, recognizing them as important relics of fascist culture. Focusing on the types of role models—proposed along gender lines—depicted in these novels, I examine how Mussolini's sexual politics and fascist ideology is communicated to children. These materials deserve a close and careful reading because they are rich and valuable artifacts of Fascism. There is no study in either English or Italian that examines children's literature as a product of fascist culture, nor is there a study that analyzes and compares these leisure-time novels. My dissertation aims to fill this critical void.

My research relies on the regime's ever increasing attempts to establish hegemony and gain social and cultural consent throughout the *ventennio* and builds on the work of some of the foremost scholars of Italian Fascism, in particular, Emilio Gentile, Sandro Bellassai, Victoria De Grazia and Luisa Passerini. My dissertation addresses the variety of ways the regime attempted to create a culture of Fascism and build consent, with special attention to the inculcation of children through literature. Patrizia Dogliani and Luisa Passerini have identified the Fascist youth organizations as one of the most successful programs that the regime implemented (169; *Mussolini* 184) and one of the primary ways Fascism was able to achieve hegemony. Gentile has observed that children were not simply the most vulnerable or most exposed to fascist culture,

but were also targeted as a means of ensuring the duration of Fascism (Gentile, *Il culto* 187). The regime viewed Italian youth as: “Forza fresca dei popoli, fermento di nuova vita, speranza del domani...li manipola a piacimento, prima nei balilla, poi negli avanguardisti, poi nella milizia, con gli esercizi ginnici, con tutti gli sport, con le gare, le gite, i campeggi, con conferenze bellicose e religiose” (qtd. in Gentile, *Il culto* 190). Likening Fascism to “a lay religion,” Gentile details how the regime was able to establish hegemony through the many Fascist holidays, the cult of the hero, the glorification of the fallen soldier and appearances by Mussolini (*Il culto* vii). These activities, so central to the regime’s consensus building program, are all prominently featured in the literature under study. With regard to appearances by Mussolini, Passerini, in her book *Mussolini immaginario*, elaborates on the importance of the image of Mussolini. She discusses the “real” Mussolini, as well as his presence in literature, especially children’s literature. She sustains his presence was used as a means of inculcating Italian youth, from the earliest age, to “believe” in Fascism, to “obey” the Duce and to “fight” for the Patria. By highlighting the ubiquity and proliferation of the Duce’s image, especially in the 1930s, Passerini establishes that Fascism increasingly became “Mussolinism.”

I limit the years of this study to between 1929 and 1939 since the regime had effectively established a culture of Fascism by this time and it is the period generally considered to be the years of the regime’s consolidation of power and consensus. This decade also encompasses the successful fascistization of the schools as well as the mandatory inscription of boys into the Balilla program, *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (Koon 34; 95). The fact that the novels under study are leisure-time novels is significant because they are conduits of fascist ideology that were supplemental to propaganda that children were exposed to in the schools and through the fascist youth organizations. Even though they were not part of the state controlled curriculum, Passerini

argues that the regime was involved in most, if not all, literary productions for children: “La produzione libraria per i giovani era largamente governata dal regime....anche la letteratura per l’infanzia e l’adolescenza fu condizionata direttamente o indirettamente dal sistema, con la collaborazione più o meno spontanea di autori ed editori” (*Mussolini* 184). Further, the importance of the role of leisure-time literature was not overlooked by speakers at the 1938 children’s literature conference. In their article, “Il libro di cultura fascista per i ragazzi,” Carlo Caretta and Renato Liguori discuss the benefits of leisure-time literature, vis à vis formation, versus textbooks and assigned readings:

In ultima analisi il libro, se vuol essere veramente “di cultura” e non soltanto una “traccia” per l’insegnamento educativo, deve poter esser preso a sé, senza necessità di chiosature, svisceramenti e spiegazioni a scuola. Non solo, ma per essere invece un ausilio alla scuola, deve andare al di là di quanto la scuola può fare. Anche perché se il libro di cultura vuole arrivare a produrre vero e proprio vantaggio alla formazione culturale del ragazzo, deve essere—se non del tutto fuori—almeno in parte e in apparenza estraneo alla scuola: deve *superare* la scuola.

[...] se un libro è materia di scuola, rischia di essere imparato sì a memoria, ma di non lasciare alcuna traccia effettiva e profonda nell’animo del fanciullo. Deve quindi apparire a lui non come uno studio, anche se richieda uno sforzo mentale, ma al di fuori e *al di sopra* dello studio scolastico per quella giusta e naturale smania di tutti i giovani e giovanissimi di precorrere i tempi e avvicinarsi quanto possibile ai “grandi.” (113-4)

Caretta and Liguori’s statements further support my argument that leisure-time novels were used as tools to teach children about fascist cultural mores. Although the novels have an agenda, which is how to be a good fascist, the message is always veiled. Through adventure stories, historical fiction and formation tales, these novels provide clear role models and important lessons of comportment without being pedantic. Further, children would ostensibly read these leisure-time novels at home, thus bringing fascist cultural productions into the home. This is significant because for many anti-fascist families, the home was a place where fascist culture did not penetrate. Another important factor is the accessibility of these novels. Since they were

written for children, the language is very clear and simplistic. Thus, parents who only had an elementary school education would be able to read and enjoy the books their children were reading. In his remarks, Giovanazzi states that he frequently saw “con quanto interesse certi padri leggevano i giornalini comperati per i loro figli” (13). In addition to the education levels of families, there were also economic considerations; the books had to be affordable. During the same convention, Enrico Vallecchi addressed this very concern, stating: “è necessario che il prezzo dei libri sia modesto” (46). Indeed, the price of many of the novels under study was no more than 2 or 3 lire. Vallecchi’s argument was that more expensive books would not be accessible to the general population, underscoring the desire to reach as many children and households as possible.

It is clear that the primary function of literature for children from this period was to indoctrinate Italy’s youth in fascist ideology. Regardless of the particular message that a novel conveys, the identification between the reader and the protagonist is always present. This recognition of similarity is usually implicit and appears at the beginning of the narrative. According to Giovanazzi, it was not just the authors of novels that encouraged this identification between the protagonist and the reader. In this quote from his presentation at the national convention on children’s literature, he further suggests that children *naturally* want to identify with the hero/heroine of novels:

Che se noi vogliamo indagare la base psicologica di questo desiderio di verità, la troviamo, io credo, proprio nel bisogno di esemplarità, di cui abbiamo prima parlato. Il ragazzo, il giovanetto vogliono trovare, negli eroi delle loro letture, personaggi da imitare e nei fatti letti vicende che almeno fantasticamente si possono rivivere. (Giovanazzi 21)

Giovanazzi’s assertion, that children want to imitate the heroics of a novel’s protagonist, is hardly news. However, his statements point to a direct and deliberate use of literature by the

regime to a didactic end, that is, as a means of molding children according to the fascist ideal. Since the protagonists of these novels function as role models for the young reader, it should come as no surprise that the very ordinary nature of the protagonists is often emphasized. At times, the narrator even states that the protagonist is just like “you,” thus, explicitly and directly inviting the readers to identify with the hero/heroine, who therefore becomes an attainable role model. Indeed, direct discourse is a technique employed as a means of connecting directly with the reader. Sometimes the narrator shares special information with the reader, like a character’s real name or nickname, while other times, information about the school or town is mentioned as if the child reader were already familiar with the people and places associated with the novel.

The preface to the published proceedings of the 1938 children’s literature convention consists of a “Manifesto della letteratura giovanile,” by Marinetti. He states: “ho spesso pensato ai principi e ai sentimenti che una letteratura infantile e giovanile deve soddisfare...” (7). As a prominent fascist intellectual, it is significant that Marinetti was concerned with children’s literature. It makes sense that Marinetti, the father of Futurism, would have a stake in the formation of Italy’s youth—the future. Marinetti, like many other fascist intellectuals, recognized that the future of Fascism relied upon the regime’s successful indoctrination of Italy’s youth. Thus, Marinetti’s manifesto details the themes and qualities that literature for children should reinforce. Interestingly, his very first declaration in the manifesto is “La Fede in Dio e nel divino che nutrono d’ideale e di bellezza la terra il mare il cielo la bandiera della patria le guancie della madre della sposa dei figli” (7). This first point is meant to reinforce the relationship between Fascism and the Catholic Church. Indeed, religion plays a significant role in many of the novels under study. Among the more interesting and relevant points of this manifesto, regarding the present study is Marinetti’s insistence on “la verità storica,” however, only when the “historical

truth” portrays Italians in a positive manner. Marinetti, continues: “rispettata ma sottomessa all’orgoglio italiano per modo che in tutte le narrazioni i nostri infortuni siano trattati con laconismo e le nostre numerose vittorie con lirismo” (7). What Marinetti is championing here is a “historical truth” that is convenient for Fascism, and thus, supports the fascist myth that World War I was an Italian military success. As might be expected, the novels included in this study that deal with World War I (*Guerra!*, *La grande diana*, *Alza bandiera!*, *Soldatini d’ogni giorno*) speak only of the bravery and courage of the soldiers and veterans. The manifesto dictates that children’s literature should also have the following qualities:

Il coraggio fisico di una forza muscolare agile pronta e spiritualizzata da insegnare ai bambini e alle bambine in tutti i momenti della vita.
L’amore del pericolo della lotta dell’avventura culminante nell’ansia sublime dell’eroismo che non disgiunta dalla dolcezza degli effetti può sempre consolare guarire e ringiovanire.
L’amore per la vita militare e per l’esercito considerato come il nobile e indispensabile custode dell’onore nazionale. (8)

The above sections of the manifesto demonstrate the many similarities between Futurism and Fascism, emphasizing: physical courage, agile muscular strength, a love of danger, fighting and the military. Significantly, these are the very same qualities that the regime was simultaneously attempting to instill in Italy’s adult citizens. All of these qualities, deemed essential by Marinetti, are incorporated in the literature under study. Therefore, these novels meet the requirements that Marinetti laid forth in his manifesto.

The majority of the novels included in this study were part of series of books for children and young adults published by Mondadori and Bemporad. The Mondadori series was “Il romanzo dei ragazzi,” in which about twenty-five novels were published between 1933 and 1935, targeted toward children of all ages, from the very young to young adults. Many well-known authors contributed to this series: Antonio Beltramelli, Annie Vivanti, Giuseppe Ernesto

Nuccio and Olga Visentini, the series' editor. Significantly, Mondadori had a well-documented relationship with the regime.³ Similar to the Mondadori series, the Bemporad series, "I libri dell'ardimento," also had contributions from several famous children's authors, including Giuseppe Giovanazzi and Giuseppe Fanciulli. While it is debatable whether the fascist ideology echoed in many of these novels was an intentional aim to collaborate with the regime on the part of the authors, or if they were simply hoping to please their editors, who in turn were closely affiliated with the regime, the novels under analysis from these two series promote fascist culture and behavior encouraged by the regime. The "libri dell'ardimento" included approximately twenty-one novels published between 1934 and 1944.⁴ While the two series were very similar in scope, the Bemporad series seems intended for an audience slightly older than Mondadori's "Il romanzo dei ragazzi" series. One might gather from the name, *ardimento* that the series was aimed at a mostly male audience, since *ardimento* was an important quality of the "new man." Unlike the Mondadori series which includes several novels for girls, few if any of the books in the Bemporad series were written exclusively for girls and young women. When the first novels in the series were published, Emilia Santamaria Formiggini, who reviewed many children's novels in the monthly periodical, *L'Italia che scrive*, had this to say about its debut in 1934: "una nuova collezione per giovenetti dagli undici ai quattordici anni, tutti ispirati a coraggioso amore per il proprio Paese. C'è chi crede che una esuberante fantasia sia necessaria per scrivere libri attraenti per la giovanissima età; invece è la realtà quella che più commuove ed educa" (8-9: 241). There are two interesting points that Santamaria makes: the first is that she identifies a specific audience for these novels, boys between eleven and fourteen. The other interesting point is, similar to Marinetti and several of the participants of the 1938 children's literature

³ For more on Mondadori's relationship with the regime, see Scotto Di Luzio, especially chapter 1.

⁴ Interestingly, the first book in the Bemporad series was Giovanni Giovanazzi's, *Per l'Italia e per la mamma* in 1934, while the last novel in the series from 1944 was *Tutto da rifare*.

conference, she promotes the importance of the realistic quality of the novels. As cultural artifacts, these novels are indicative of the regime's desire to use "literature to inculcate fascist values" and more generally, illustrate the "didactic function the regime envisioned for culture..." (Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist* 49).

The emphasis on realism by Marinetti, Santamaria and other fascist intellectuals is significant not only because it renders the novels more didactic, but also because realism was the regime's preferred aesthetic for literature and film for adults. With regard to the popularity of realism and the regime's preference for it, Ben-Ghiat points to the relevance of "the merger between art and life that Mussolini had always advocated" (*Fascist* 63). Another reason the regime so enthusiastically endorsed this aesthetic was the experience of World War I: "it produced a predilection for prose styles that would reflect the harsh and essential quality of combat experience" (*Fascist* 49). Indeed, World War I is a crucial reference point in the novels for young boys under study. The representation of World War I in literature was a theme that Mussolini encouraged: "he chided his audience for not drawing more inspiration from two 'capital events' such as the war and the revolution...writers must...become 'interpreters of their own time,' which, he specified, 'is that of the fascist revolution'" (qtd. in Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist* 63). Mussolini's desire that authors become "interpreters of their own time" is especially significant with regard to the children's literature under study, since in many cases, the authors recount a historical event in the not too distant past, which the authors themselves witnessed.

While most of the novels included in this study are formation novels, many can also be categorized as historical novels, since they take place at a precise moment in history: World War I, the Ethiopian War; others take place in present-day Fascist Italy, employing Marinetti's "verità storica."

La commozione è un portato della fantasia più aderente alla profonda realtà delle cose; il raccontare ai ragazzi imprese eroiche, o drammatiche, o comiche, o il ragionar per loro e con loro di immaginarie ma possibili creazioni scientifiche, riesce ai medesimi più utile e accetto che non le storielline di un tempo, a sfondo irreal e assolutamente arbitrario. (Vallecchi 44)

All of the novels emphasize the realness of the events surrounding the fiction of the narrative, however, Italians and especially the military are only portrayed in the most positive and awe inspiring ways. Needless to say, none of Italy's embarrassing military history is included in the narratives. Thus, the realist aesthetic was used as a means of presenting fascist culture in a meaningful and imitable way to children through literature. It also served an important function in children's literature, making the protagonists and their actions increasingly "real," and imitable. The authors' "interpretation" of Italy's "capital events" coupled with the representation of everyday life in these novels renders them didactic.

In addition to using realism, another technique authors implemented to connect to the audience is the absence of parents. Indeed, a recurring theme in these novels is orphaned children.⁵ In most of the novels under study, at least one of the protagonist's parents has died prior to the beginning of the narrative. It is very likely that many of the young children who read these novels had a father who participated in World War I, and given the high casualties of the Italian military from that war, we can infer that children would identify with protagonists who lost a father to the war. In many cases, parents are substituted by aunts, uncles, grandparents, older siblings, neighbors or some authority figure with whom the average child would be familiar. However, the action of the story generally takes place in the absence of adults, particularly in the case of conversion, formation and adventure novels. In the case of formation

⁵ This is a relevant theme for the following novels: *Guerra!*, *La grande diana*, *Alza bandiera!*, *Mammetta fascista*, *Il richiamo dei fratelli*, *La via del Falco*, *La conquista di Albanara*, *Il focolare*.

novels, it is a technique that allows the child protagonist to grow and come into his/her own. In the adventure stories, it provides space for the child protagonist to take the required journey that inevitably results in lasting positive effects. One of the ways that this theme is incorporated into the literature for boys is that the young male protagonist goes in search of his father. Instead, in the novels for girls and young women, this theme is used to demonstrate how effectively Fascism had “domesticated” girls, since in many cases the female protagonist must become a caregiver/surrogate parent. Significantly, the adult characters of the novels function as role models for the protagonists, thereby demonstrating the kinds of role models the young reader should look for in his/her own life.

Given that the protagonists of these novels are designed to be role models for the young reader, an important theme of my dissertation is to identify and analyze the strict definitions of gender roles and the types of models proposed in the texts under study. In this way, I attempt to shed light on the mechanisms at work in Mussolini’s anthropological revolution. As the name of the Bemporad series—*ardimento*—suggests, the inculcation of Italian youth into a military culture was of utmost importance to the regime and premised on the innate virility of Italians. Mussolini was, naturally, the ultimate model of virility, and at the same time, the ultimate father figure for all Italians. As the pinnacle of Italian masculinity, the male characters of the novels are inevitably compared to Mussolini, directly and indirectly. While the “new” Italian man was the sportsman/warrior/soldier, the “new” Italian woman was to be the *moglie e madre esemplare*, a woman who was dedicated entirely to her husband, children and, of course, Mussolini.⁶ In promoting the ideal models of the “new” Italian, many internal enemies were identified. Chief among these enemies were the intellectual, bourgeois man and the *maschietta*, who with her thin,

⁶ The sports-woman was a controversial figure, at one point heralded by the regime as evidence of Italian racial superiority, and at other times, derided as against nature. See Gori *Italian Fascism*, especially chapter 4.

boy-like frame, short hair and interest in modern (American and Parisian) culture was considered sterile and selfish. As Lucia Re has astutely noted, “the weakening or blurring of gender difference was a threat to the entire Fascist hierarchy” (82-3). This is significant with regard to the materials under study because the antagonists of the stories for children are often modeled after these internal enemies, as clear examples of undesirable and unacceptable behavior. In other cases, the protagonists themselves portray these undesirable characteristics prior to undergoing a conversion. Similar to many of the novels and films for adults from this period, these negative images of men and women, boys and girls, are clearly constructed in direct opposition to the positive characters and role models.

I group the novels under study into four chapters. The first two chapters focus on literature for boys, while chapters three and four address literature for girls. Chapters one and two discuss novels that propose models of masculinity through what Sandro Bellassai calls a “pedagogy of virility.”⁷ The protagonists of the novels discussed in the first chapter are *naturally* fascist, that is, they inherently possess the essential qualities of the “new man.” Conversely, chapter two deals with narratives of conversion. In the last two chapters, I discuss models of femininity and examine narratives that promote the ideal, “new” fascist woman and the formation of future *mogli e madri esemplari*. While chapter three discusses the formation of the regime’s ideal new woman, the fourth and last chapter explores novels that propose non-traditional female models. Two of the novels under study, *Soldatini d’ogni giorno* (1938) and *Il focolare* (1929), are exceptional in that they do not present predictable models of comportment,

⁷ Bellassai uses this term to describe the regime’s attempt “aimed at every male of every age” that proposes “the ideal masculine model of the combatant devoted to action; in this way it aimed to fight the negative product of modernity: the reflexive, hypersensitive and frail man whose passive and uncertain character derived from an excess of rationality” (“Masculine,” 320).

and in fact, some of the details included in these novels could be considered subversive with regard to fascist culture.

In the first chapter, I explore the formation of the “new man” through the war experience. Eros Belloni’s *Guerra!* (1933) and Antonio Beltramelli’s *La grande diana* (1934) are historical-formation novels that demonstrate the necessity of the war experience, not only for the creation of the “new man,” but for the rise of Fascism. These novels focus on the inculcation of boys and young men into a military culture. Indeed, the centrality of World War I to fascist ideology and rhetoric is at the heart of both novels that I discuss in this chapter. These novels aim to make children of the fascist era understand that the Great War was the defining event of a generation and essential to the rise of Fascism and the salvation of the Patria.

In the second chapter, I analyze narratives that depict life under Fascism and make use of the popular and successful fascist youth organizations to demonstrate just how good life is under Mussolini. *Alza bandiera!* (Giuseppe Fanciulli, 1934) and *I piccoli diverranno grandi* (Aurelia Nutini, 1935) incorporate the activities of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) and summer *colonie*. The exercise regimens and uniforms associated with these programs were evidently meant to simulate the war experience, preparing male youth for the war that would one day come. In this way, the ONB activities serve as a substitute for the war experience especially in its goal of forming the “new man.” Thus, their presence in the novel is relevant to the formation of the protagonists. Interestingly, Savator Gotta and Olga Visentini’s 1938 novel, *Soldatini d’ogni giorno*, drives home the same message, but in a counter-intuitive way. That is, the novel presents a father who is the antithesis of the “new” virile fascist man and serves as a model of negative behavior, or rather, how not to be. However, his sons are *naturally* fascist, meaning that they inherently exhibit the desired qualities of the “new man.” Since this chapter will treat both tales

of formation and conversion, I will also address the distinction between “born” fascists and the need to “make” fascists. Overall, the novels analyzed in this chapter, while demonstrating the importance of virile masculinity to the successful formation of the “new man,” simultaneously function as pedagogy of virility to the young reader.

In the third chapter, I examine narratives for girls and young women, written by men. Similar to chapters one and two, I analyze the models proposed in these novels with regard to the fascist ideal, in this case, the “new woman” that the regime attempted to create. *Il richiamo dei fratelli* (Ernesto Nuccio, 1934) and *Mammetta fascista* (Alessandro Berutti, 1937) provide narratives of formation that demonstrate the importance of fascist social and welfare organizations, in particular ONMI—*Opera Nazionale per Madri e Infanzia*. These novels reinforce the regime’s prescribed role for women as mothers of the state.

In the fourth and final chapter, I discuss novels that contrast with the type of woman idealized by the regime and discussed in chapter three. While still presenting acceptable models of comportment by fascist standards, the novels for young girls written by women celebrate notably different models. Olga Visentini’s *La conquista di Albanara* (1934) and Maria Luisa Fehr’s *La via del Falco* (1934) both present positive female role models, however, the narratives are less about the formation of *la moglie e madre esemplare* and more about the benefits of an active and healthy lifestyle, far from the stifling and corrupting effects of the city. They therefore, reinforce the regime’s ruralization campaign. Indeed, both novels can be considered adventure novels, with young girls as the protagonists. The last novel I examine is Camilla Del Soldato’s 1929 novel, *Il focolare*. The narrative is striking because it depicts strong female figures and relatively weak men. The novel is an anomaly for the period in which it was written precisely because it challenges the strict gender roles prescribed by the regime. This chapter

sheds light on the competing and often contradictory models of femininity proposed by the regime by analyzing the models and morals presented to young girls via leisure time literature.

My dissertation proposes an innovative way of approaching Italian Fascism and understanding the construction of culture, especially with regard to gender comportment and appearances. The lack of similar published analyses leads me to believe that there is still significant work to be done in the area of Italian Fascism, and I hope to contribute to filling that void. By closely examining these largely ignored and mostly forgotten texts, my dissertation will further elaborate, in a unique way, on the regime's consolidation of power and culture of consent in 1930s Italy. The materials that influenced children's behavior and formation under the regime have yet to be adequately studied. In critically analyzing the children's novels under study, my dissertation aims to reveal the discourses of Fascism present therein and attempts to more fully understand the mechanisms at work in Mussolini's anthropological revolution.

Chapter 1

The New Man

Voglio correggere gli italiani da qualcuno dei loro difetti tradizionali. E li correggerò. Voglio correggerli dal troppo facile ottimismo, dalla negligenza che segue talvolta una troppo rapida ed eccessiva diligenza, da questo lasciarsi ingannare dopo la prima prova, da questo credere che tutto sia compiuto mentre non è ancora incominciato. (Mussolini, qtd. in Susmel 22: 100)

1.1 Introduction

In 1866, Massimo D’Azeglio famously declared, “now that Italy has been made, we must make Italians.” This pronouncement, made shortly after the unification of Italy, anticipates how central the notion of “making Italians” would be to fascist ideology. However, as demonstrated by the quote above, Mussolini desired more accurately, to “re-make” Italians. The sentimental Italian of the Liberal era was not nearly bellicose or virile enough to satisfy Mussolini’s vision for the Italian people, what they should become and how they should be perceived. Thus, he set out to create a “new” Italian man, one that more closely resembled the image that Mussolini had created for himself. Indeed, one of the more unique aspects of Italian Fascism is that Mussolini attempted to re-make Italian men in his own image and likeness, promoting the image of the strong, virile, active and bellicose Italian through the bombardment of propaganda images of the “new” Italian that he embodied. This is the phenomenon that Emilio Gentile calls Mussolini’s anthropological revolution. The regime attempted to implement this revolution through youth and after-work organizations, literature, newsreels and feature films, attempting to change the appearance and character of Italians. Significantly, the regime sought to use literature and culture to a didactic end, that is, as a means of inculcating fascist values in Italians. This chapter will examine how narratives of World War I, written for young boys, present positive models of

virile masculine behavior for the young reader to imitate and, thus, functioned as tools for the regime's goal of forming the "new" Italian man.

Gentile's assertion that Mussolini's sexual politics were at the root of the anthropological revolution, the heart and soul of the regime's agenda, has greatly informed this project. Gentile states: "dal successo della rivoluzione antropologica, i fascisti facevano dipendere il successo di tutto il loro esperimento totalitario di costruzione di un 'uomo nuovo' e di una nuova civiltà" (*Fascismo* 235). The anthropological revolution, like the regime's "totalitarian experiment" ultimately failed. Gentile observes that until very recently, studies specifically on the "new" Italian man and on fascist masculinity in general, have remained scarce. Therefore, this chapter seeks to further investigate an important area of Italian Studies that has received far too little scholarly attention. In fact, a critical source for men's studies remains George Mosse's seminal work, *The Image of Man*. In this pioneering study, Mosse looks comparatively at the rise of modern masculinity in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, demonstrating how the crisis of modernity and nationalist movements during the 19th century brought about the "new man." Nationalism, he argues, co-opted a stereotype of masculinity that became the "norm" in both Germany and Italy. Significantly, the advent of the First World War bonded the notions of nationalism and masculinity more closely than ever.

Expanding on the groundwork laid by Mosse and Gentile, Sandro Bellassai has written extensively on the centrality of Mussolini's sexual politics to the fascist agenda, rooted in virilistic, anti-modernist and anti-democratic rhetoric. His work analyzes the myriad ways the regime attempted to implement the anthropological revolution. Many of these themes are present in the literature analyzed in this chapter. Similar to Mosse's argument that World War I solidified the nationalistic sentiments of the "new man," Bellassai argues that war functioned as

“*therapy* for masculinity.” First the Libyan War and then World War I provided Italian men with the much-anticipated opportunity to display their virile masculine prowess. The virile rhetoric surrounding the War, that is, prior to and after, culminates in the exaltation of the warrior, not only as the pinnacle of masculinity but also as the destiny of the “new” Italian. The celebration of war as a redemptive experience was celebrated as early as Marinetti’s 1909 Futurist Manifesto where he declared war to be the “only hygiene” for the world.

In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate the singular importance of the creation of the “new man” to the fascist agenda by examining how the regime’s message was communicated to, arguably, the most important demographic for the success and longevity of the regime. The schools were successfully fascistized between 1929 and 1939,⁸ which included the implementation of the single State textbook. Additionally, the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB), established in 1927, actively recruited members and exposed them to fascist ideology. Thus, analyzing popular literature for boys, sheds light on the mechanisms at work in the anthropological revolution because it depicts a more complete picture of the culture children were exposed to under Fascism.

World War I has been established as a crucial point for the formation of the “new” Italian man, and so I begin with narratives that recount this war experience in Italy from the point of view of two young boys. World War I is also a central reference point for the novels discussed in chapter two. Regardless of the temporal setting, the reader is constantly reminded of the man-making effects of the combat experience from the Great War. In all of these novels the

⁸ Koon establishes this period as the fascistization of the schools because of a series of events: “increasing influence of the regime in academic affairs, competition between schools and youth groups for the time and attention of the students, conflicts with the Catholic church over educational policy and the series of counter-reforms or ‘retouchings’ (*ritocchi*) that all but made the Gentile reform a dead letter” (34).

protagonists learn how to be “men” through a “pedagogy of virility.” That is, they learn how to be “men” by following the models of comportment set by their war-veteran fathers and/or neighbors. In this way, these novels serve as a microcosm for the greater hierarchical nature of fascist culture established in Italy during the 1930s.

1.2 World War I Narratives: *Guerra!* and *La grande diana*

L'orgoglio italiano solidamente costruito sulla Grande Guerra i cui settecentomila morti produssero la massima vittoria della storia italiana... e sulla Rivoluzione Fascista che dallo squadristico sanguinoso di piazza è giunta alle più liete organizzazioni agricole commerciali industriali portuarie ferroviarie aviatorie. (Marinetti 7)

Io non conosco bambini. Gli uomini devono essere uomini sempre... chi porta i pantaloni deve imparare a vivere fin da principio.... (Beltramelli 7)

The novels, *Guerra!* (1933), by Eros Belloni and *La grande diana* (1934) by Antonio Beltramelli demonstrate the importance of the Great War to Italy, the rise of Fascism and the formation of the “new” Italian man. Each novel follows the personal history of a young male protagonist and inserts him into history. The world-changing event that was World War I is re-written, in both cases, from the perspective of a young boy whose father is fighting in the War. Neither book simply re-tells the familiar events of the famous War, rather each story follows the life-changing experiences of the young protagonists brought about by World War I. For these reasons, I consider both novels to be hybrid historical-formation novels, as each novel recounts the formation of a fictional character rooted in the historical past. As my analyses will detail, both protagonists grow infinitely out of the war experience. These novels, written at the height of the regime’s influence and power, present World War I as a thoroughly positive event and completely essential to Italy’s salvation, i.e., Fascism. Thus, these novels reiterate much of the regime’s own rhetoric regarding the Great War.

Furthermore, these novels appear to respond to the regime's desire for more virile and, thus, less-sentimental popular literature for children. In this respect, Adolfo Scotto Di Luzio has observed that the sentimentalism of the most popular children's books at the time Collodi's *Pinocchio* and De Amicis' *Cuore* rendered these novels, according to the powers that be, "insufficiente rispetto alle esigenze educative dell'italiano nuovo" (146). Since these novels did not promote the ideas conducive to forming the "new" Italian man, precisely because of their alleged sentimentalism, they were of little use to the regime and its goals for forming the male youth. Indeed, Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg argues that the language of sentimentality popular at the end of the 19th century grew out of "the crisis of liberalism, the crisis of religious conscience, and the crisis of paternal, masculine performativity" (4). Furthermore, the culture and language of sentimentality combined with the "crisis of masculine performativity," exacerbated by Italy's poor military performances,⁹ led to an alleged international perception of Italians as the proverbial lovers, not fighters. It is this image of the Italian man that Mussolini and the fascists were reacting against. Mino Maccari states as much in the first issue of *Il Selvaggio* (1924): "It is a question...of giving back to all classes of Italian society a sense of force, virility and willfulness [...] of defending the warrior tradition of our race: to make Italian males, considered by foreigners as pasta eaters, mandolin players, etc. into men" (qtd. in Bellassai, "Masculine" 317). The tradition of sentimentalism and the popularity of Collodi's and De Amicis' children's books speak to the necessity of a new kind of literature for a "new" Italian.

⁹ For example, the embarrassing defeat suffered by the Italian army at Adua in 1895.

Thus, the fact that *Guerra!* deals specifically with the virile actions of a ten-year-old boy, Cibanti, and his own war experience, is significant. When his blacksmith father,¹⁰ along with his schoolteacher and most of the men from their small village in the Veneto are called up to fight in the War, Cibanti is driven to be reunited with his masculine role models. Significantly, we are told that Cibanti's mother died a few years before the period of the narrative begins, which means that he is effectively orphaned when his father is called up to fight. Left in the care of a cruel and abusive man, his desire to escape this situation, as well as the bond between father and son, propel him to go in search of his father. This adventure, as well as his association and eventual participation with the Black Shirts contribute to his formation into manhood. Cibanti's actions are admirable precisely because he controls his own destiny. He is not a sentimental character; he goes into action rather than silently suffering, awaiting his father's return.

Indeed, the preface, which is addressed directly to the young reader, clearly states how this novel breaks with the "sentimental" tradition of popular children's stories, specifically, *Pinocchio*. The author emphasizes the realism of his novel, the similarity between the protagonist and the reader, as well as the importance of God:

Cibanti era un ragazzo come tutti gli altri ragazzi del mondo; non aveva il naso lungo, il vestituccio di carta e la testa di legno; era proprio figliuolo vero come voi che leggete questa storia. E neppure era un eroe di quelli che compiono mirabolanti imprese sulle pagine di romanzi; quantunque, se vorrete ascoltarmi, lo troverete più volte di fronte ai pericoli troppo grandi per un piccolino come lui, pure vi assicuro che, senza essere un eroe, se la cavò sempre come ve la sareste cavata voi se vi foste trovati nei suoi panni.... In questa storia non sentirete mai parlare di Fate che scendono dalla cappa del camino, di cani che parlano, di lumicini lontani lontani che insegnano la strada a un bambino sperduto nella notte. No. Lasciamo le Fate dormire il loro sonno interminabile nel buio delle foreste favolose....se...Cibanti riceva, in momenti difficili, aiuti miracolosi, vi

¹⁰ Cibanti's father's occupation is significant because it indicates his status as a humble, working man of the people. It is also significant that Mussolini's father was a blacksmith.

assicuro che non furono certo le Fate a portarglieli, ma fu il buon Dio, sempre misericordioso verso i bimbi buoni e coraggiosi. (1-2)

This invective against fairy tales, fantastic themes and unrealistic heroics appears to be aimed directly at Collodi's *Pinocchio* and is significant precisely because of the regime's claim that *Pinocchio* and *Cuore* were too sentimental and did not reflect the themes and morals that the regime wanted to instill in Italy's youth. The perceived inadequacies of this sentimental literature, thus, support my argument for the relevance of the literature included in this chapter. Indeed, the abundance of children's literature created in 1930s Fascist Italy is a result of the regime's demand for children's books that reflected the values and modes of behavior of fascist culture.

Scotto Di Luzio, referencing Olindo Giacobbe, further discusses the regime's judgment of the old tradition and its irrelevance in 1930s Fascist Italy.¹¹ His remarks support Belloni's statements in the preface to *Guerra!*:

Scritte "quando il pregiudizio liberale cercava di allontanare l'anima dell'infanzia dalla religione cattolica, facendo, per un mal compreso sentimento di patriottismo, un'unica questione del potere temporale e della grandezza spirituale della chiesa," *Le avventure di Pinocchio* non erano "il libro ideale che vorremmo solamente vedere nelle mani dei nostri fanciulli." La stessa insoddisfazione per *Cuore*, alle cui "esasperazioni sentimentali ed umanitarie" si opponeva a una 'più maschia consistenza d'ideali. Il tratto fondamentale dell'opera deamicisiana era ravvisato nel "sentimentalismo;" un progetto educativo fondato sulle lacrime che contrastava con la pedagogia della virilità e che diventava la cifra della letteratura educativa del XIX secolo. (147)

The elements of *Pinocchio* that the author objects to are what Scotto Di Luzio's study reveals as contrary to the "pedagogy of virility." Indeed, the fascists viewed sentimentalism as responsible for producing weak Italian men, whose emotions prevented them from being virile and active. Here, Gentile describes the liberal sentimental man that the "new man" would replace: "[la]

¹¹ Specifically, Scotto Di Luzio is referencing Giacobbe's 1934 book, *Letteratura infantile*.

senilità e [la] viltà dell'uomo borghese, liberale e democratico, disprezzato perché considerato dubbioso, pavido, tollerante, ipocritica, senza fede, senza vitalità, senza volontà di lotta e di azione" (Gentile, *Fascismo* 247). This description essentially consists of the opposite of the "new man," that is, for a description of him one would simply remove the "senza" before each adjective. Therefore, the choice to introduce *Guerra!* with such a scathing rebuke of specific elements of *Pinocchio* is relevant to the interpretation of this novel and to the overall relevance of contemporary children's literature to the formation of the "new man." The appearance of numerous children's series from the major publishing houses in 1930s Italy (Mondadori and Bemporad, among them) at the same time important members of the regime bemoaned the tradition of children's literature cannot simply be coincidental; it calls to mind Passerini's observation of the regime's influence—direct or indirect—on children's authors during that same period.¹² The regime desired a new children's literature tradition that would help forge a sense of strength, virility and love for the Patria in its young male readers, which would eventually help the regime realize its goal of forming the "new man." I argue that the leisure-time novels published during the 1930s and included in this study are the answer to the regime's quest for literature that reflected fascist culture and the exigencies of the regime.

What is further striking about the above quote from Scotto Di Luzio's study and its relevance to the opening of *Guerra!* is the accusation that Liberal Italy's prejudices attempted to keep children away from Catholic teachings. This is particularly relevant with regard to the narrator's explanation that Cibanti owes any good fortune that he may encounter in his adventures to God alone, thus, effectively supplanting the fantasy of children's literature with religion. Furthermore, the author's statements criticize the laic tradition of Liberal Italy and

¹² See Introduction.

simultaneously praise Fascist Italy's relationship with the Catholic Church. Stewart-Steinberg observes that in the years after the Unification of Italy, the emphasis on being Italian (and making Italians) and on nation building was so emphasized that it "potentially signified the exclusion of a Catholic identity" (5). Therefore, the author's emphasis on religion and negation of fantasy has a multifaceted role: it stresses the importance of God and faith, effectively promoting the teachings of the Catholic Church, the regime's strongest ally, and at the same time it rebukes the culture and policies of Liberal Italy. Significantly, *Guerra!* was published in 1933, four years after the signing of the Lateran Accords in 1929, which formalized the alliance between the Church and the fascist state and ended the public squabbling between the two entities for the right to educate and mold the minds and bodies of the future of Italy.¹³ Despite the rifts during the 1920s between the Church and the regime regarding the education of Italy's youth, the two institutions found common ground on more than a few issues, including: conservative and traditional values regarding the family unit and women's role in society, a common enemy in Communism, the necessity and importance of hierarchy, discipline and a strong-will—all values that both Catholics and fascists believed were integral to an individual's formation. Furthermore, Koon notes the mutual benefits of the Fascist-Catholic relationship: "If Mussolini saw religion as a valuable tool in his campaign to produce consensus for his regime and greatness for the nation, the church also attempted to use fascism for its own ends: the restoration of Catholic influence and power..." (119).

Another function of the narrator's tirade against fantasy is that it simultaneously argues for the validity and, thus, realism of his own tale. That is, the less fantastical the story is, the

¹³ For an extensive discussion of the regime's relationship with the Church regarding education and children, see Koon, 116-142.

more real it becomes. In fact, the reader is meant to believe that the people and events of the story are real since the narrator states that he personally knew Cibanti, whose real name is Paolo Sacchi, though he admits he never knew why our hero was always called Cibanti (2). The insistence on the realism of the story lends veracity to the accounts related throughout the narrative. The narrator's direct address coupled with the protagonist's authentic (real) child qualities make him a more readily available model for boys to emulate. In an attempt to ensure that the reader identifies with the protagonist, the narrator confides to the reader "in un orecchio" (3) that Cibanti does not enjoy school and is not a good student. Thus, the more of himself the reader can recognize in the protagonist, the more likely it is he will imitate the positive (fascist) behavior displayed in the story.

Another element of the realism of the novel is that the narrative voice of the novel is largely instructive, and at many times it is unclear whether it is the audience or the characters of the story who are being addressed. This ambiguity functions as a narrative device, utilized to serve the didactic nature of the story, for example, when Cibanti's teacher explains what the Patria is:

È questa nostra bella Italia piena di sole e di fiori, dove tutti noi siamo nati, dove sono nati i nostri padri e i nostri nonni, dove è nata colei che ci dette il latte e la vita, dove sono le nostre case e le tombe dei nostri morti. È questa terra che tutto il mondo c'invidia, bagnata dal sangue dei martiri che si sacrificarono per lei affrontando la morte col suo caro nome sulle labbra; è questo suolo santo che oggi lo straniero ci vuole rubare. Amatela, figliuoli miei, questa Italia bella e pregate Iddio che la salvi da ogni pericolo. (44-5)

The ambiguity of the intended audience, coupled with the content of the speech, indicates that this definition is directed at the readers as much as Cibanti and his classmates. Additionally, Cibanti's reception of his teacher's explanation is meant to cause a similar reaction in the young reader: "Voglio andare anch'io col mio babbo alla guerra. Non voglio rimanere solo!..." (45).

The aim of the speech is to evoke a sense of patriotism and a desire to protect the Patria at any cost in both the reader and Cibanti. Significantly, the teacher's explanation echoes fascist rhetoric, specifically the cult of the martyr, which only grows as a result of World War I and with the rise of Fascism. In fact, Mosse has argued: "The cult of the war dead, of the fascist or Nazi martyrs, was the centerpiece of the fascist...political liturgy" (160).¹⁴ Becoming a martyr for Italy is the ultimate sacrifice.

In the narrative, the culmination of the men leaving for war, his teacher's explanation of the Patria, and especially the emphasis on the cult of the martyr, seem to bring about an awakening of sorts, evinced by Cibanti's desire to join his father in combat, which is a demonstration of his inherent *italianità*. Participating in the war was the ultimate display of masculinity for the fascists, and Cibanti witnesses this firsthand as he stumbles upon a merry group of soldiers on his journey to find his father, vividly described by the narrator. Cibanti, immediately, almost instinctively admires them:

Quei soldati sembravano uomini di ferro; erano i figli più belli e più forti d'Italia, che marciavano incontro al grande destino della Patria. Andavano allegramente, verso la battaglia, cantando. Andavano alla guerra per combattere, per vincere, per morire, e sembravano andare ad una festa. (87)

This image of soldiers happily and dutifully going off to war as if they were fulfilling their destiny, as well as their "natural" duty, calls to mind Mussolini's famous quote "La guerra sta all'uomo come la maternità alla donna," pronounced during a 1934 speech to Parliament. During its twenty-year reign, Fascism created a military culture, and therefore, a large part of the success of it depended on an understanding of war, not only as desirable, but as a necessity—hence its

¹⁴ Emilio Gentile also notes that "Il culto dei caduti già presente nelle tradizioni rituali dei diversi nazionalismi, fu la prima, universale manifestazione liturgica della sacralizzazione della politica nel XX secolo, e diede nuovo impulso alla santificazione della nazione" (*Il culto* 35).

promotion as a required component to becoming a virile man. The soldiers in this passage, said to be going to “fight,” “win,” and “die,” recalls the famous quote “credere, obbedire, combattere” and reinforces the belief that dying for the Patria is an honor; it is the ultimate display of bravery and virility. This novel, like many others from this period for boys, presents the soldier as the ideal man. Fascist rhetoric regarded the soldier’s body as the pinnacle of physical beauty. Indeed, in the above passage they are described through the eyes of Cibanti as the strongest and most beautiful sons of Italy, men of steel.¹⁵

Those soldiers whose lives were spared in combat received another kind of honor. Alongside Mussolini, they were charged with renewing the country. It was the war experience, however, that cultivated them into these men of steel and produced the prototype of the “new man.” In this regard, Mosse has written:

It was precisely the actual experience of war that, in fascist eyes, predestined veterans to lead the new men of the future. Those who faced death were said to have been the true heroes who knew the meaning of sacrifice, even though they had lived life to the full. Soldiers who have passed the test of war challenged death precisely because of their vitality and love of life. The glorification of the First World War played a major role in fascist ideology: *to have experienced the war led to true manhood...*¹⁶ (158)

Such was the effect of becoming a soldier, experiencing the war and, most important, seeing combat. This quote illustrates the significance of the very war that is being recounted in these pages to the future of Fascism. Indeed, Emilio Gentile reaffirms the impact of World War I on the creation of the “new man,” stating that out of the “catastrophic” event of war: “avviene una rigenerazione dell’uomo e si forma, attraverso l’esperienza della lotta e del sacrificio, un ‘uomo

¹⁵ This image of “man of steel” recalls Marinetti’s *Mafarka*. I do not believe Belloni was intentionally conjuring up the image of Mafarka, nor would his audience of children be familiar with either the novel or its author. However, I think it is important to mention because the relationship between futurist ideology and fascist ideology is clear here to the more sophisticated reader. That is, the image of the hard, bellicose man idealized by Marinetti and the Futurists had been seamlessly adopted by fascist ideology.

¹⁶ My italics

nuovo.”” (*Il culto* 30). Thus, the novel’s account of World War I, its significance to Fascism and the creation of the “new man,” echoes fascist propaganda. Significantly, *La grande diana* supports this argument, as well. In these narratives, participation in the war generally signifies a turning point for characters, indicating that our protagonists will become “new men.”

This encounter with the soldiers is significant for both Cibanti’s “spiritual” and physical journey. Not only do they inspire him, but they also lead him to the infirmary where he, rather predictably, finds his father. The commanding officer sends him to Sister Maddalena who tends to the wounded soldiers and manages the infirmary.¹⁷ There, Cibanti helps her to care for the soldiers. When father and son are finally reunited, we learn of the events that led to his father’s loss of sight—a common result of the trench warfare of World War I—which occurred in the noblest way: a hand grenade exploded near him as he was saving his commanding officer’s life. This act of bravery, underscores the hierarchical nature of fascist culture and earns Cibanti’s father a medal for his valor, rendering him: “un eroe fra gli eroi figlio anch’egli prediletto della Patria, che per difenderla ha dato la vista, il bene più grande che Dio abbia donato all’uomo” (111). Cibanti’s father is, thus, inserted among the Patria’s war heroes for the sacrifice he made, as the family’s personal history continues to intersect with the nation’s history. As a war hero he can only encourage his own son to follow in his footsteps: “Io non potrò più essere un soldato, ma sono felice di aver dato il sangue per la mia terra. Ricordalo, e sii sempre degno di me; promettimi che anche tu un giorno servirai la Patria, come io l’ho servita” (111). While his father’s comment speaks to the importance of military legacy, once again, this direct address is meant as much for the reader as it is for Cibanti. A war hero, albeit fictive, is asking for sons of

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Sister Maddalena is the only woman that appears in the story and that her role is exclusively that of caregiver to wounded and broken men.

Italy to become future soldiers to defend the Patria. This statement echoes Mussolini's own goal of creating a society of *cittadini-soldati* out of Italy's male youth population. It also foreshadows Cibanti's inevitable participation in Italy's future wars. Like the reader, he did not have the opportunity to actively participate in the Great War, and his father's instructions indicate that he (and the reader) will have the opportunity to make the ultimate sacrifice. Just as a generation of men had waited for the man-making experience in the form of the Great War, so will the new generation have theirs.

Cibanti's father is the ultimate model of masculinity, a war hero and a loving father, an important figure in his own right. On one level, becoming a father was a way to prove one's virility and, therefore, masculinity. In this respect, Bellassai writes: "Procreando copiosamente per la patria e dirigendo virilmente l'educazione guerriera di numerosi figli maschi, egli avrebbe pubblicamente esibito una mascolinità molto più onorevole di quando, giovane, scapolo, s'inorgoglia della propria sessualità gagliarda e spensierata" (*La mascolinità* 93).¹⁸ This notion ties in with the importance of the family unit, at the core of both Catholicism and Fascism, specifically, the regime's demographic campaign. The virile bond between father and son is the catalyst that sets this narrative in motion, providing the young protagonist with an opportunity to prove himself worthy of the title "new man." Cibanti's desire to be reunited with his father is the motive behind his adventure. The relationship between a father and son is important to fascist ideology on both a familial level as well as a national level. Here, I am referring to the fact that the ultimate father figure of Italians is Mussolini, the progenitor of the Italian race. Therefore, the

¹⁸ Furthermore, in 1926 the regime imposed a "tassa sull'egoismo" on men 26 and older as a way to discourage bachelorhood, only a year before Mussolini's famous Ascension Day Speech in which he announced the demographic campaign "per rinvigorire la stirpe italica minacciata dai molto più popoli 'selvaggi' i quali... mettevano in pericolo il futuro dei popoli 'civilizzati.'" (Bellassai, *La mascolinità* 49). See also Wanrooij 105; Benadusi 107.

emphasis on the bond between father and son that is exploited in many children's novels can be extrapolated as a means to serve a greater end. That is, it is a metaphor for the bond between Mussolini, and Fascism and by extension, the Patria.

Mussolini's charisma and embodiment of the "new" Italian is emphasized in a scene several years after the end of the war in which Cibanti's father recalls his war experience, and specifically a young charismatic *bersagliere*:

Tante cose che io, povero fabbro ferraio, non potevo capire, ma, quando parlava, mi faceva rimanere a bocca aperta. Diceva che, finita la guerra, avrebbe riunito i combattenti buoni, quelli veri, per fare dell'Italia una delle nazioni più grandi e più forti del mondo. Era un caporale... [...] Si chiamava... si chiamava...: Mussolini.

These "combattenti buoni" that Cibanti's father is speaking about are none other than the future *squadristi*. His interlocutor informs him that since the war, Mussolini has made a name for himself, having founded the *Fasci di combattimento*:

Era nella mia compagnia, e mi voleva tanto bene! Me lo ricordo: aveva due occhi che se te li piantava addosso, ti faceva diventare piccino piccino... Quello sì che ci vorrebbe ora, per mettere a posto questa canaglia che grida... Basterebbe che apparisse sulla soglia della porta! (137-8)

With this, Mussolini enters the narrative. It paints a picture of Mussolini, the soldier, for the young audience who knows him only as Il Duce. The message to the young reader is clear: Mussolini is a natural leader, and it was his destiny to become the leader and protector of the Patria. Passerini, in her discussion of children's literature, has noted the importance of teaching children the biographical details of Mussolini to the regime's youth education goals: "La conoscenza di elementi della biografia mussoliniana diventa parte essenziale del patrimonio culturale e ideale del giovane fascista, sia nel tempo libero sia nella scuola" (189). Also worth noting is the myth surrounding the cult of Mussolini, highlighted here by the effect he has on

Cibanti's father, simply by looking at him, as if he truly possessed mystical powers.¹⁹ In real life too, Mussolini's contemporaries attested to the power of his glance. Falasca-Zamponi reports that Emilio Settimelli affirmed after a 1922 meeting with the Duce that his " 'personal magnetism is enormous' and that 'his magnetic glances mean command'" (49). Additionally, Passerini, noting the importance and significance "dell'incontro fatale tra una generazione e colui che sarebbe diventato il suo duce," cites Bottai's recollection of his first meeting with Mussolini: "'m'incontrai con Mussolini, la mia vita fu decisa, con quella di un'intera generazione'" (184-5). Central to many of the narratives in this chapter is Mussolini's role in the War, which is significant not only for the characters and plots of these stories but also, as mentioned above, serves to inform young readers of Mussolini's valor in war and the "making" of Mussolini, from soldier (*bersagliere*) to Duce.

The ideological conflict that defined the first post-War years in Italy and eventually brought about Mussolini's rise to power features prominently in many of these novels. In *Guerra!* the war-veteran-heroes and their families are the victims of communist aggression, when they suffer an armed attack by a Russian vagrant who is immediately recognized by the *squadristi* upon their arrival.²⁰ But before they arrive, Cibanti, with his courage and physical toughness—evidence of his *italianità*—is able to take down his assailant by shaking pepper into his eyes and then delivering a knockout punch to the chin. The *squadristi* thank Cibanti for his heroics and explain that the Russian distributes communist propaganda throughout the region, and he is quickly taken into their custody:

¹⁹ Tracy Koon notes, in particular, that "his eyes were scintillating, flashing, blazing, smoldering, sparkling, like thunderbolts" (24).

²⁰ Spackman observes that these "'foreign agents' within the body politic" were to be removed and quotes Mussolini from his Ascension Day Speech (1927): "Si levano questi individui dalla circolazione come un medico toglie dalla circolazione un infetto" (qtd. in Spackman 146). Spackman's analysis concludes that the 'foreign agent' represents the danger of "infection."

[...] il ragazzo dalla camicia nera aperta sul petto [disse] “ora, non scomoderò più il mio fedelissimo manganello che, come vedete, porto appeso alla cintura, ma ho qualche cosa di meglio per voi, rispettabilissimo signore: credo, che le emozioni di questi giorni, i discorsi alle masse, la bastonatura ricevuta e le ore trascorse in quella osteria, legato come un salame, tutte codeste forti emozioni, insomma, devono avervi prodotto un certo disordine nelle viscere: per regolare il loro funzionamento, sarà bene che voi beviate il magico liquore contenuto in questa fiasca, che vi offro.” Così dicendo, il giovine mise sotto al naso dello straniero, una grossa bottiglia ricoperta di paglia...in Italia questo liquore si chiama: olio di ricino. (155-56)

On one hand, this celebration of *squadristi* violence, which was an integral part of the early *fasci* and the rise of Fascism, is somewhat surprising to see in a novel for children written in 1930s Italy. Mussolini wanted the regime to be seen as a legitimate government and began distancing itself from its violent origins almost immediately after the March on Rome. In fact, Spackman observes that as early as 1927 the “continued existence [of fascist squads] was both a threat to [Mussolini’s] power and a source of embarrassment...” (153), and Mussolini ridiculed the nostalgia for those early years as “idiotic.” On the other hand, “squadristism” is an undeniably important part of the early years of Fascism, and this is in part, a historical novel. This episode serves to remind the reader of the important role so many World War I veterans played in helping Mussolini ascend to power and bring about Fascist rule. In fact, Mosse reminds us: “The former combatant imbued, with the proper spirit, who had truly experienced the war as it should have been faced, became a member of the Italian fascist squadrista...representing the prototype of the ‘new man’” (160). Therefore, the significance of the presence of the *squadristi* is that it represents the earliest inception of the “new” fascist man.²¹

Cibanti, seduced by his encounter with the Black Shirts decides to join them, along with a friend (Figure 1 p. 45). The narrator informs us that: “i due ragazzi non si erano resi conto del

²¹ Furthermore, Gentile remarks: “Il ‘senso religioso’ del fascismo si sviluppò soprattutto all’interno dell’organizzazione squadrista. Per i fascisti, la squadra non era soltanto un’organizzazione armata, ma un gruppo legato dalla fede comune, dai vincoli di cameratismo, da un senso di *comunione* (*Il culto* 50).

grande atto di audacia che avevano compiuto, vestendo la divisa fascista in una contrada ostile com'era, a quel tempo, quella nella quale vivevano" (163). The characters are unaware of the significance of their "extraordinary" actions precisely because of their *italianità*; they were simply doing what came naturally to them. The novel ends on a celebratory note with Cibanti, his friend and their fathers (both World War I veterans) all donning their black shirts and participating in the March on Rome. We are also left with a message from the narrator, declaring what may have happened had Mussolini and the Black Shirts not arrived and ultimately saved Italy:

[...] la propaganda sovversiva, fatta nelle masse operaie, avrebbe portato l'Italia alla rovina, alla perdizione e forse anche al ritorno della dominazione straniera. Lo sforzo compiuto dai nostri eroici soldati sarebbe stato vano, inutile il sangue dei combattenti, sparso a fiumi: tutto sarebbe stato cancellato, come parole scritte sulla sabbia al soffiare del vento. (168-9)

The above passage sums up the regime's propaganda regarding the direct link between World War I and Fascism and thus the necessity of the *squadristi*. If Mussolini and the *fasci* had not fought against the communists and their "subversive propaganda," then the blood shed and soldiers who gave their lives for the Patria would have all been for naught. The violence of the *squadristi* is justified because they were combating a foreign enemy that may have ultimately led to foreign domination of the peninsula (again). The ending of the novel neatly ties up the key moments in Fascism's short history up until this point: World War I and the March on Rome. As a historical novel, it presents the "capital events" that led to the March on Rome and the rise of Fascism in a direct and accessible way to young boys. While its role as a formation novel demonstrates the bravery of a young boy who did his part to protect his family and his country through his war experience and participation with the Black Shirts. There is an undeniable correlation between the two, that is, it is Cibanti's own war experience that entitles him to don

the Black Shirt and become a “new man.” In this way, Cibanti serves as a model for the young readers of the story. The narrative is effective in promoting the positive effects of war and militarism and as something to be desired, therefore encouraging the military culture that, by 1934, Fascism had effectively established in Italy.

The relevance of the retelling of World War I that both *Guerra!* and *La grande diana* engage in is the importance of the war experience, for the individual as well as the Patria. Indeed, neither title leaves much to the imagination about its subject matter, and in both cases, the maturity of the protagonist occurs through his direct involvement in the fictional events of World War I represented in the novel. The fascists believed that they were the “true inheritors” of the war experience and, thus, that Fascism was a product of that war (Mosse 155). These characters, too, are products of the war—the war experience dramatically alters the paths of their lives. Like the rhetoric surrounding this war, these two novels propagandize and mythologize Italy’s participation and performance in World War I, framing it as the defining man-making experience, while focusing on the personal histories of everyday, humble people. Therefore, the understanding of Italy’s performance in World War I and representation of it in these two novels is central to the idea and construction of the “new” Italian man.

Antonio Beltramelli’s *La grande diana* provides a nostalgic look at World War I, where men were drawn to the battlefield out of a sense of duty to protect the Patria, as well as to prove the strength and virility of the Italian soldier.²² The story takes place in Romagna at the height of the war and follows the adventures of Martino and his sixty-year old guardian, Fra’ Tamburo, from whom he is inseparable. Martino’s father, Ludovichi Sante (Babbo Sante), is fighting in the

²² According to Sandro Bellassai, the Great War was seen as a “precious therapeutic occasion” on a socio-political level, as a means to shape the “new man,” and also an opportunity for “virilità performativa”—to prove that Italy was militarily competent after their well-known military failures (Bellassai, “Masculine” 316-17).

war and has charged Fra' Tamburo with the role of looking after his wife and three young children, but especially Martino. When word reaches home that Babbo Sante has been sent to a hospital in Rovigo with life-threatening wounds, Martino's mother leaves for Rovigo to care for her husband. After a few days with no word from either of Martino's parents, he and Fra' Tamburo become concerned and decide to travel to Rovigo to find his parents. Once Martino's mother leaves for Rovigo, she does not reappear until the end of the story, since the narrative is about the relationship between men—a virile bond—and the positive effects of the war experience. It is also significant because upon his mother's exit from the narrative, Martino is effectively orphaned. Although Martino begins his journey together with Fra' Tamburo, they are separated almost immediately after embarking on their adventure. The linear narrative, first follows Martino's adventure, then shifts to recount what has simultaneously been happening to Fra' Tamburo. The separation is necessary for the growth of the characters and the advancement of the plot. Martino and Fra' Tamburo experience the war and see combat, which ultimately leads to a re-birth for both.

In her book *Libri e ragazzi* (1935),²³ Olga Visentini celebrates this novel as Beltramelli's masterpiece (175), emphasizing its idealization of a simple way of life: "Tutti umili in questo romanzo, quasi a velare suggestivamente con la loro stessa umiltà gli episodi e le scene *vigorese*, il dramma umano... si accende quando la Patria chiama, si dona compiutamente con l'intuizione sublime di darsi alla madre..." (177-8). Visentini's emphasis on the humility of the characters in the novel and the human drama that takes place during war seems to support a *strapaese* reading of the novel, a movement that becomes increasingly important for the regime's propaganda

²³ *Libri e ragazzi: Storia della letteratura giovanile e infantile*, first published in 1933 is a thematically organized catalog of children's books and authors. A synopsis and brief analysis appears for each of hundreds of entries of popular children's books from the Fascist era and earlier.

machine in the 1930s. Throughout the novel, Beltramelli details the humble background of his characters and the hardships the poor must face. It is precisely these admirable qualities of the characters that privilege a *strapaese* reading. This movement in Italian literature shares a common ideology with the regime's ruralization campaign. Ruralization and *strapaese* both celebrate the simplicity and humility associated with rural life. In contrast to city life, rural living did not present the dangers of corrupting elements present in urban areas.²⁴ Sacrifice is naturally part of everyday rural life, and the characters of *La grande diana* are no exception. Perhaps the correlation is that humble, rural people, so familiar with the act of sacrifice more readily accept the sacrifices they must make for the good of the Patria.

Beltramelli's portrayal of his protagonists as poor and humble people and as supporters of the war is significant because Romagna, in addition to being the homeland of Mussolini, was also a hotbed of socialist activity. Indeed, the necessity of the war and validity of the Patria comes into play during an ideological debate at an osteria. A group of young men, "ubriachi... più dalle correnti sciocchezze del basso socialismo che non dal vino..." (22) question Italy's participation in the war and even the existence of the Patria: "A chi fa comodo che esista? A noi poveretti o ai ricchi?" (22). Thus, questioning the two most important events in Italian history: the unification of Italy and World War I. The local charlatan who is drinking with the socialists shares, in what would appear to be a moment of clarity, the following:

Questo gran guerriero! Ha gridato per tutte le piazze che la Guerra era giusta, che bisognava farla, che se l'Italia non ritrovava il suo coraggio sarebbe diventata l'ultima fra le Nazioni e poi ha lasciato partire gli altri e lui è restato a casa... Ma io conosco uomini di sessantacinque e di settant'anni che hanno preso un fucile e sono andati via coi ragazzi

²⁴ See Bellasai, "The Masculine Mystique," pp. 318-20. See also Horn, especially chapter 5, "The Sterile City." Of course, the other side of the coin is the regime's promotion of what Ben-Ghiat has coined "fascist modernities," whereby fascists sought to redefine modernity so that it retained traditional Italian values and avoided the dangers inherent to modernity associated with American and Parisian cultures.

a farsi ammazzare in trincea...i volontari che avevano giurato di non ritornar vivi. Così fanno gli uomini che si rispettano. (23)

The charlatan's sentiments regarding those individuals who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country seem sincere. Regardless of his own political beliefs and the actions of the man in question, the words that he repeats are significant as they establish Italy's participation in World War I as a necessity. Similar to the last passage analyzed from *Guerra!* it suggests what may have happened had Italy not entered the war. This dreaded outcome of becoming "last among nations" is a political ploy based on fear, and one that Mussolini increasingly capitalized on throughout the 1930s, from legitimizing Italy's colonial presence in Africa to allying Italy with the Germans, and ultimately, entry into World War II. In addition to the necessity of participating in World War I and the consequences of not entering, this passage underscores the importance of men of all ages to the Patria; it does not limit participation to the young, which will be key to the narrative.

The novel is primarily concerned with teaching boys that they are inherently men and that boyhood is simply the period in which one becomes accustomed with what it means to be a man. One way this is demonstrated is through Martino's desire to join his father in defending the Patria. He does not see his age, size or inexperience as an obstacle; he feels a pull toward combat to defend his country. Before they embark on their journey to Rovigo, Martino continuously tells Fra' Tamburo that they should join the ranks and go to the frontlines. Tamburo's response is always the same: Martino is too young and he is too old. When Martino eventually does see combat, his instinctive reactions to this experience are celebrated by the soldiers around him. The emphasis on instinct in this novel, as in *Guerra!*, is central to fascist rhetoric and is generally attributed to *italianità*. These are themes very near and dear to the regime and expressed in

remarks made by Carlo Caretta and Renato Liguori at the 1938 National Children's Literature

Convention:

Oggi nulla deve nè può avvenire che non sia *fascista* e il ragazzo, o il giovanetto, deve essere in ogni sua esplicazione intellettuale e morale indirizzate al Fascismo, fino a far sì che il Fascismo divenga per lui come una seconda natura, un abito morale istintivo da cui possa staccarsi e vi sia spinto senza sforzi nè ragionamenti; fino a far sì, insomma, che si formi nel fanciullo il vero "animus" fascista definitivo e completo....

E bisogna anzi tutto stabilire a priori che il Fascismo non è costituito da mere formalità, da atteggiamenti d'apparenza, utilitari a volte, contingenti; non è una "vernice" che si spande a coprire esteriormente una sostanza diversa e agnostica; ma è veramente, completamente un carattere, una forma mentis, un indirizzo concettuale totalitario dell'individuo e della collettività. (109-110)

Beltramelli's 1934 novel²⁵ is an exemplary text in demonstrating Caretta and Liguori's argument that fascism is a way of life that requires specific modes of comportment that must be ingrained in the individual so that they come naturally to him. The constant exposure to fascist ideology in schools, during after school activities, summer camps and in popular literature aimed to ensure that the youngest generation of Italians grew up "fascist." Thus, the above comments indirectly argue for the necessity of novels like *La grande diana* that teach, via example, the importance of fascist behavior. The strong character that Martino possesses is the most important component of the "new man," and yet, the hardest to teach. Molding a strong, hard body is one thing, but first and foremost that body must have strong will. Indeed, Mosse has observed that the emphasis on physical exercise in Fascist Italy was a character-building activity as well as a means of preparing for war, simulating war in a time of peace to make men out of boys (162). Rounding out this military culture with narratives that celebrate war and idealize the image of the soldier was an effective way to inculcate Fascist Italy's male youth into its military culture.

²⁵ The edition cited in this chapter from the Mondadori series "Il romanzo dei ragazzi" from 1934 is a reprint. Adolfo Scotto Di Luzio reports that the original novel was published in 1930 by the publishing house Littorio di Roma (240).

Beltramelli was, of course, no stranger to the fascist ideal of the “new man,” having written *L'uomo nuovo* in 1923, one of the first biographies of Mussolini and also set in Romagna. Passerini has noted that the former novel highlights the humbleness of the Romagnolo people, declaring many of them *uomini nuovi*.²⁶ The relevance is, that Martino and Mussolini come from the same background, and they are cut from the same cloth. Indeed, from the onset of the novel we are led to understand that while Martino is a poor, humble boy there is something special about him; he is slightly bigger and stronger than most boys his age, and overall he seems to have a rather mature understanding of man, as Fra' Tamburo explains to the local bishop: “Martino non è un ragazzo, Eccellenza. Ancora non ha avuto tempo di crescere, ma non è un ragazzo. Pensa come pensiamo noi...Martino si è già fatto una ragione nel mondo, Eccellenza. Ha capito che cosa sono gli uomini e cos'è la vita...” (39). Unlike with *Guerra!*'s Cibanti, the narrator of *La grande diana* does not draw any specific comparison between the reader and Martino. Martino is an excellent role model, however, his actions are not as imitable as those of Cibanti. Martino instinctively understands life, and is well on his way to manhood. During the battle scenes, Martino is inexplicably unafraid. He performs valiantly and effectively as a soldier, without having had the benefit of any training. As mentioned in the quote above from the children's literature convention, for Martino, reacting in the face of danger is second nature. I would argue, that it is his *italianità* that informs his behavior; he is instinctively a warrior and exudes those characteristics that will become the basis of the “new man.”

These vignettes into Martino's character help set the stage for the next part of his adventure, when Martino is found by a group of soldiers who are on their way to the frontlines,

²⁶ Luisa Passerini's observations of Beltramelli's *L'uomo nuovo* are interesting with respect to *La grande diana*: “L'oralità che raccoglie Beltramelli inserisce Mussolini nelle tradizioni sulle sette città romagnole, le lotte tra di esse, i santi i poeti e i condottieri di Romagna—questi ultimi anch'essi ‘uomini nuovi’—nel quadro complessivo dell'austerità delle famiglie antiche, compresa quella dell'autore” (*Mussolini* 43).

and they take him with them. During Martino's first experience on the battlefield he sees and hears grenades detonating near him, Giovanni, a fellow soldier tells him: "Da questo momento tu sei un soldato d'Italia e hai avuto il tuo battesimo" (76). This baptism is, of course, the experience of war itself, and it suggests the completion of Martino's re-birth, from civilian to soldier and from boyhood to manhood. It also solidifies his camaraderie with his fellow soldiers. According to Mosse this "camaraderie of males, and such male bonding was considered the foundation upon which the [fascist] state rested" (158). Indeed, as a result of his virile performance, Martino has earned the right to join the ranks of this military camaraderie:

Si era portato veramente come un piccolo soldato di molto fegato... Vollerò vestirlo come loro, dargli un fucile, farne un vero soldato. Scovarono un bersagliere sarto, una vecchia divisa, gli combinarono un elmetto, fu armato con un moschetto di cavalleria, austriaco... Martino vestì il grigioverde, ebbe la sua berretta rossa col fiocco nero, fu fierissimo di far parte di un reparto di assalto. (76)

Now that Martino has proved that he has what it takes on the inside—the character ("the guts")—to be a soldier, he appears outwardly as one (Figure 2 p. 45). His appearance will finally match what has been inside him all along, the "material" of a warrior. Upon seeing Martino dressed as a soldier, one of his companions tells him: "Siamo qui per provare che l'Italia è un grande paese e che i soldati d'Italia sanno combattere e morire" (77), information that Martino instinctively knows. However, this statement simultaneously invokes the cult of martyrs, as well as emphasizes the virility of Italian men, and Martino is clearly one of them: he knows how to fight and he is not afraid to die. In fact, further evidence of Martino's innate virility is illustrated through his thoughts on death, which the narrator communicates to the reader:

Passò rapidamente un treno bianco con grandi croci rosse dipinte sul tetto dei vagoni... Tutto quel bianco e gli uomini e le donne in lunghi camici dello stesso colore, non ridestarono nel ragazzo nessuna idea funerea; egli pensò che morire non fosse gran cosa né molto diversa dal sonno: anche le lenzuola del sonno erano bianche e il corpo vi riposava in pace. (58-9)

This quote demonstrates that, like a true warrior, Martino does not fear death. He understands that making the ultimate sacrifice for the Patria is the bravest display of virility and Italian masculinity, and one that he is willing to make. The cult of the hero and martyr, as already seen, reassures young boys that it is an honor to die for the Patria. As is demonstrated throughout the novel, Martino's "fierezza nativa" (63) is clear to all who meet him. Confirming what Fra' Tamburo had already noted, he is told by one man whom he meets on his travels: "in te c'è la stoffa dell'uomo e puoi far molta strada nella vita" (63). Being the warrior that he is, once he experiences combat and the camaraderie of virile men, he cannot leave them. He receives word that his mother is with his father who is recovering in the hospital in Rovigo, and it is all the comfort our young hero needs to continue on with the soldiers. As a result of his war experiences, Martino has matured into a true man: "Abbronzato dal sole e dalle intemperie, indurito alle fatiche e ai pericoli della Guerra, si era fatto più uomo" (125). Even the language used here—"più uomo" (more of a man)—seems to confirm Fra' Tamburo's opinion that Martino is not a boy. Furthermore, it reflects the moral of the novel itself, that boys are inherently men, and must learn to behave like men, i.e., in a virile manner and as early as possible. Martino's audacious behavior is meant to inspire the young readers of the novel.

As the narrative leaves Martino's adventure, it picks up with that of Fra' Tamburo. Of course, Tamburo and Martino have no knowledge of each other's whereabouts or actions, since they are happening contemporarily. Through Fra' Tamburo's several misadventures, which are too numerous to recount here, he finally finds Martino's father who informs him that Martino is fighting alongside the *bersaglieri*. Fra' Tamburo, like the reader, is inspired by Martino's bravery and decides that he will join Martino in fighting for the Patria. In his search for Martino, Fra' Tamburo encounters many soldiers who seem to know him, or at least of him: "È laggiù coi

bersaglieri. Un ragazzo con un fegataccio, sapete? Vi da onore” (110). Fra’ Tamburo participates in the war and eventually does see combat, and while the war experience infinitely matures Martino, it physically and spiritually rejuvenates Fra’ Tamburo (Figures 3 and 4 p.46).²⁷ This is demonstrated by his valor in carrying a wounded fellow romagnolo man from the battlefield, who with his dying breath whispers: “la nostra Italia” (124), underscoring the inherent *italianità* of the romagnolo people, and thus denying the socialist tradition of the region. The illustration of Fra’ Tamburo’s bravery depicts him as a man whose actions and appearance belie his sixty years. When compared to those earlier in the novel, this illustration clearly reinforces the propaganda of the positive effects war has on men. Both Martino and Fra’ Tamburo have been made soldiers and have become new men, both with respect to their former selves, as well as the ideal “new man.”

While they want to stay and continue to fight, Fra’ Tamburo is responsible for bringing Martino back to his mother and father in Cervia. Their fellow soldiers are saddened to see them go, as the narrator remarks: “la guerra fa gli uomini e li affratella” (129). Because they are strong, virile and humble men, Fra’ Tamburo and Martino walk home from the battlefield near Pavia to Cervia, and along the way “non avevano bisogno né del letto, né di cose molli. La Guerra li aveva induriti alla vita” (130). Just as the war experience hardened them to life, it also transformed them into hard, virile men. The novel’s overall significance to Fascism and worth as a children’s book can be interpreted, not only as testament to the formation of the “new man,” but also in its representation of a historical event—World War I—and how nobly the humble people of Romagna acted under the difficult circumstances of war.

²⁷ Youth is, of course, another defining aspect of Fascism. As Passerini reminds us: “Si rafforza quindi il tema del giovanilismo, del mantenersi e apparire più giovani che si è” (*Mussolini* 186).

1.3 Conclusion

The centrality and importance of World War I to fascist ideology and rhetoric is at the heart of *Guerra!* and *La grande diana*. The novels aim to make children of the fascist period understand that the Great War was the defining event of a generation and essential to the rise of Fascism and the salvation of the Patria. Mussolini's singular importance to the Patria, significantly, is explained in terms of World War I. Indeed, the cult of the Duce is celebrated in these novels, declaring Mussolini's near single-handed restoration of the Patria in the first post-war period. These historical-formation novels demonstrate that the war experience was crucial to the formation of the "new man," by retelling the details of the war from the perspective of two young boys who benefit firsthand from their own combat experiences. The virile strengthening experienced through combat taught a generation of men how to be warriors, who, in turn would pass on the benefits of the war experience to their sons—future soldiers. This last point is demonstrated through the relationships between fathers and sons depicted in these novels; the "pedagogy of virility" is (preferably) transmitted from father to son.

Guerra! and *La grande diana* both focus on the qualities of the "new man" that their protagonists innately possess. In both cases it is the experience of World War I that allows Cibanti and Martino to become "new" Italians. The question regarding whether Italian males are inherently virile warriors or whether they must be formed into warriors by Mussolini's will, can be understood as a product of the contradictions inherent to fascist ideology and will be addressed in the following chapter. As will be illustrated, conversions are also possible, but only through regime-sanctioned activities. Generally speaking, the characters that are in need of a conversion were exposed to foreign and corrupting ideologies, namely socialism. The novels that I will discuss in chapter two deal more with the specific ways that the regime tried to mold

Italian boys into the “new man,” through fascist youth groups, summer *colonie* and physical activity. Also, similar to the way the World War I narratives insist on the realistic representation of humble people during the war, these novels are concerned with representing the everyday, contemporary lives of children under Fascism.

The following chapter examines two novels that present the everyday lives of children growing up under Fascism. *Alza bandiera!* (1934) and *I piccoli diverranno grandi* (1935) each presents a different type of masculine model. The former shows the process of conversion, while the latter presents a protagonist whose actions are entirely imitable by the young reader. Both novels treat the possibility of conversion to the “new man” in similar ways, that is, through regime sanctioned entities and events. The final section analyzes a novel, *Soldatini d’ogni giorno* (1938) that breaks with the traditional formula established in the novels analyzed throughout the chapter. Instead of a father who is a positive adult male role model for his son to look up to, we see a character similar to the “hypersensitive and frail man” described by Bellassai as a negative product of modernity. Significantly, the young protagonist seeks out more virile masculine models, which he finds in his World War I veteran uncle and upstairs neighbor.

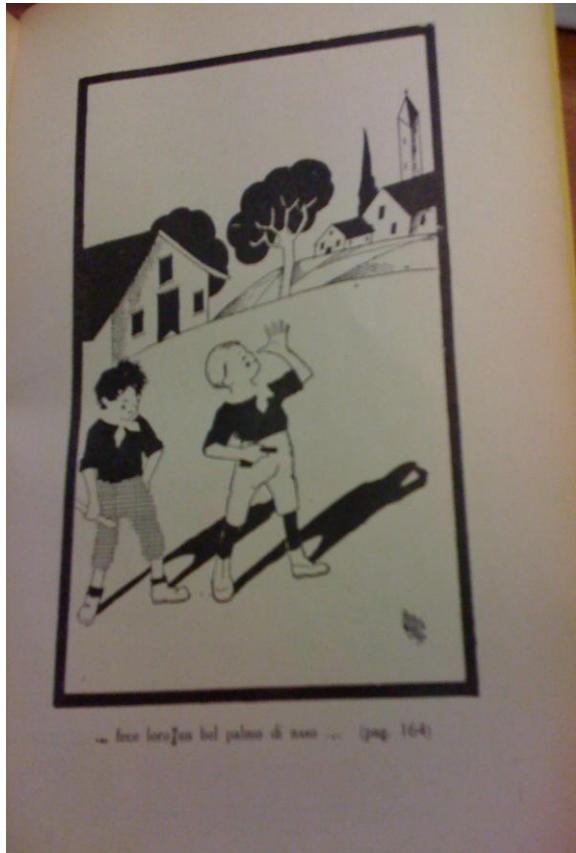


Figure 1: Cibanti dressed as a Black Shirt. (*Guerra!* 164)



Figure 2: Martino dressed as a soldier. (*La grande diana* 75)

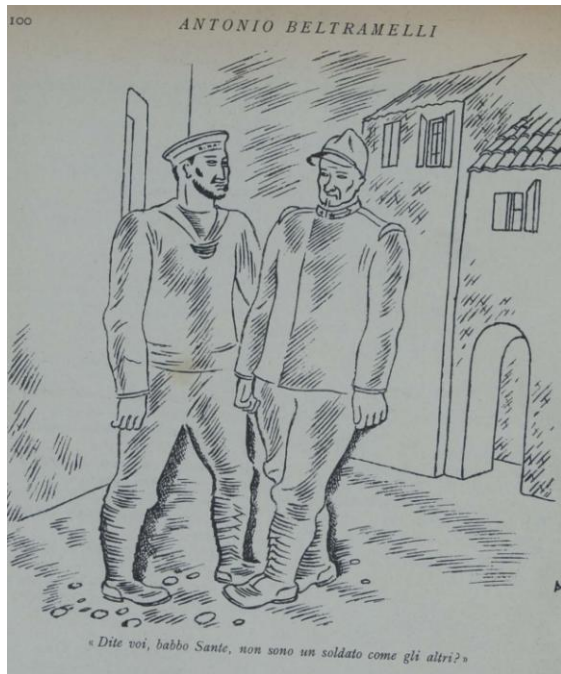


Figure 3: Fra' Tamburo pre-combat experience.



Figure 4: Fra' Tamburo carrying a wounded, fellow Romagnolo off the battlefield. He appears years younger than in previous illustrations. (*La grande diana*, 100; 121)

Chapter 2

Growing Up “Fascist”

L'indirizzo spirituale della nuova Italia suscita ogni giorno nuove esigenze anche nel campo della letteratura per la gioventù; per questo la nostra Casa inizia la presente collezione nella quale saranno raccolti volumi di autori italiani, atti a coltivare nei lettori le più alte qualità del carattere e lo spirito d'ardire e di iniziativa, formando così una gioventù sana di corpo e di animo, coraggiosa e intraprendente, consona insomma al nuovo tipo dell'Italiano come lo vuole Mussolini.²⁸ (Bemporad Catalogue, qtd. in Carboognin, et al)

2.1 Introduction

The novels we encounter in this chapter are set in contemporary 1930s Fascist Italy, and the first two are from Bemporad's “I libri dell'ardimento” series. Giuseppe Fanciulli's *Alza bandiera!* (1934), Aurelia Nutini's *I piccoli diverranno grandi* (1935) and Olga Visentini and Salvator Gotta's *Soldatini d'ogni giorno* (1939), in dialogue with the World War I narratives of the first chapter, illuminate the contradictions inherent to fascist ideology.²⁹ The protagonists of *Guerra!* and *La grande diana* are *naturally* fascist, that is, they innately possess those masculine qualities that the regime attempted to inculcate in all Italians. Instead, the following novels that I will discuss deal with the possibility of conversions, implying the need to ‘cure’ deviance. These seemingly paradoxical theories regarding the “new” fascist man stem from Mussolini's own inconsistent rhetoric regarding the appearance and creation of the “new man.” However, as Gentile reminds us when arguing for the legitimacy of fascist ideology, the presence of contradictions does not delegitimize it as an ideology per se, citing Hobsbawm, he states:

“l'ideologia non è un teorema geometrico, non deve rispondere al principio di non

²⁸ The website www.letteraturadimenticata.it reads: “Da un catalogo Bemporad 1935 leggiamo di questa ‘nuovissima collezione di libri per ragazzi e giovinetti.’”

<http://www.letteraturadimenticata.it/Bemp%20breve%20storia.htm> (Accessed 1/21/12).

²⁹ For more on the relationship between fascist rhetoric and ideology and its contradictions, see Spackman's preface to *Fascist Virilities* especially p. x-xi. Also, for a more lengthy discussion on the legitimacy of fascist ideology see Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo* p. 77-80.

contraddizione né deve essere necessariamente originale” (78). Dismissing Fascism as an “aberration” for lack of a coherent ideology is no longer an acceptable way of understanding the twenty-year period in Italy between 1922-1943. However, to not discuss Fascism’s contradictions would only present half of the story. In this respect, I think it is helpful to review Gentile’s definition of ideology:

Se, all’indagine storica, l’ideologia fascista si presenta poco logica e poco sistematica, questo non significa che il fascismo non ebbe una sua ideologia, diversa da altre preesistenti, contemporanee o successive.... L’ideologia fascista non va ricercata nei trattati appositi... Bisogna piuttosto esaminare tutte quelle forme di espressione, che manifestano una concezione della vita e della società, un ideale di comportamento e un complesso di valori, che furono tipici del gruppo (o dei gruppi) che si definì fascista. (78)

This review of fascist ideology is necessary because at various times Mussolini and fascist intellectuals simultaneously argued for the need to reform Italian males, molding them into virile warriors, while insisting that Italian males were inherently virile and it was simply a question of “defending the warrior tradition” of the Italian race. In his 1927 Ascension Day speech, Mussolini reiterates the importance of youth to the future of the regime and ostensibly denies the possibility of conversions:

[...] adesso non si diventa più fascisti. Tanto peggio per i ritardatari.... Ma come nutriremo il Partito di linfe vitali? Con la giovinezza.... questa leva in massa della gioventù, che entra nel Partito e riceve una tessera, che è qualche cosa come ricevere un moschetto, che infinitamente è di più. (qtd. in Susmel 22: 383)

Mussolini’s stance, that fascists are born and not made, contradicts his own mission of molding Italians into citizens for the “new” Italy. The entire existence of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) was to ensure that the youth of Italy grew up “fascist.” Although Mussolini’s statements above appear to make the distinction between molding adults into fascists versus forming fascist youth, it is still at odds with the goals and activities of the PNF for children and adults alike. As Ben-Ghiat affirms: “Mussolini intended not only to ‘make Italians,’ ... but to remake them....

Through a combination of indoctrination, legislation, and punitive action, he and his followers aimed to mold behaviors and bodies...” (*Fascist* 3). Simply put, there is an incongruity between Mussolini’s rhetoric and the activities of the regime, enforced at the Duce’s own behest. Indeed, Gentile quotes Mussolini from an October 1926 speech (a mere seven months before making his remarks): “‘creeremo l’italiano nuovo’, un italiano che non rassomiglierà a quello di ieri. Poi verranno le generazioni di coloro che educiamo e creiamo a nostra immagine e somiglianza: le legioni dei balilla e degli avanguardisti” (qtd. in Gentile, *Fascismo* 249). Furthermore, in 1939 when Achille Starace resigned his position as secretary of the Fascist Party, he informed his successor that: “the creation of a new man was the constant object of the party’s attention, a task to which the party must devote itself with all its might” (Mosse 164). Thus, the goal of making “new” Italians, i.e., fascists, remained the defining goal of Fascism throughout its twenty-year reign.

The novels discussed in this chapter attribute all that is good in Italy to Mussolini and the Fascist regime, thus, implying that the country’s problems of the past were the result of an ineffective Liberal government. A theme directly related to the alleged failures of Liberal Italy and the possibility of conversion is the threat of “contamination” from the “foreign enemy,” that is, socialism. It is no coincidence that the very novels that deal with conversions, also address the “dangers” of exposure to socialism. The ideological conflict is addressed differently in these novels that deal with life under Fascism than those World War I narratives analyzed in the first chapter, namely in the regime’s ability to cure its citizens of this “disease.” The socialist characters introduced in these novels are defined as such because of either the ideological beliefs of a family relative or as a result of exposure to socialism outside of Italy. In each case, socialism is seen as a corrupting element, that has “infected” an otherwise healthy Italian. These characters

must be rehabilitated through healthy exposure to fascism. In the narratives, association with and participation in the various activities of the ONB, proves to be the most effective way of curing a child of this deviance and converting him into a fit young fascist.

Similar to the World War I narratives that were analyzed in the first chapter, the importance of the realism in these novels is evident through the portrayal of the characters and the events. What makes these stories so real are the contemporary settings as well as the inclusion of contemporary youth organizations, which are central to the plot. These aspects render the models presented in these narratives that much more attainable to their young readers. One of the “real” factors in these novels is the ONB, the youth organization for boys between the ages of eight and fourteen. Membership in the ONB was not mandatory until 1939, though the regime actively sought to make it obligatory prior to that date (Koon 95). Passerini and Dogliani remind us that the regime’s youth organizations were among its most successful initiatives (*Mussolini* 169; 184). *Alza bandiera!* and *I piccoli diverranno grandi*, in particular, provide *Balilla* characters as tangible models for proper fascist behavior, and simultaneously promote participation in the ONB. Another contemporary youth program featured in *Alza bandiera!* is the summer *colonie*—sponsored by the ONB—portrayed as much-desired summer destinations. The summer *colonie* generally revolved around healthy, outdoor physical activity, far from the stifling effects of city life. Although they were summer retreats, “Fascism was a constant presence at these camps, even during the hours of recreation and play” (Koon 102). The activities of the *colonie* and the ONB employed sports training to the end of military purposes. They instructed children how to “credere, obbedire, combattere” and functioned as a way to prepare Italy’s youth, physically and psychologically, for the combat they would one day see, training them to become soldiers for the Patria. In this regard, Mosse stated: “Mussolini’s ‘new

man'... lived in a state of permanent war. The constant wearing of uniforms, the marches, the emphasis on physical exercise, on virility, were part of the battle against the enemy" (160).

Mosse's observation sums up nicely the reality and ultimate goal of the Fascist youth programs and illustrates that they were a substitute for actual war, an experience that benefited the previous generation and formed the prototype of the "new man." That is, since the Great War had come and gone and there was no new war on the horizon, the activities of the ONB were meant to inculcate Italian youth into a military culture, imbuing them with discipline and strong will.

2.2 Narratives of Conversion: *Alza bandiera!* and *I piccoli diverranno grandi*

Dei nostri Balilla lettori si può ben dire quello che il Giacobbe ha acutamente scritto dei ragazzi della Via Pal: "Non ci chiedono di esser lasciati liberi ai loro capricci"... vogliono "innestarsi nell'ingranaggio della vita seria, sentirsi investiti di un compito da assolvere, di una responsabilità che impegna le forze della volontà e dell'intelligenza..." e ciò per "avere quell'importanza che ai loro occhi solo gli adulti hanno." Questa è certo stata un'esigenza spirituale dei fanciulli, dei giovani di ogni tempo, ma dobbiamo riconoscere che soltanto il Fascismo, che è giovinezza, l'ha saputa a pieno comprendere e mettere in valore.³⁰ (Giovanazzi 22-3)

Giuseppe Fanciulli's 1934 novel, *Alza bandiera!* certainly hit many of the marks desired by the regime for children's literature, as it was the winner of the P.N.F. children's book competition that year.³¹ The preface to the novel announcing the honor bestowed upon it states that it:

Risponde appieno nello spirito e nella forma al bando del concorso che richiedeva un libro di carattere essenzialmente moderno, con una vicenda avvincente e tale da interessare vivamente i ragazzi, da formarne il carattere, da farne vibrare i sentimenti più profondi e le forze ancora inesprese. (4)

³⁰ Here, Giovanazzi refers to a popular series, *I ragazzi della via Pal*, written by Hungarian author, Ferenc Molnàr, in 1907.

³¹ Vincitore "del concorso indetto del P.N.F. in occasione della II Mostra Nazionale del Libro per il Fanciullo."

This statement by the awarding committee highlights the importance of the realist aesthetic in children's literature. The book's value lies in its representation of a boy, in modern Italy, whose exciting adventure and (implied) fascist behavior will help form a strong character in the reader, presumably because he will follow the example set for him in the novel. The emphasis on modernity is interesting because it demonstrates to the young reader, that Italy is a thoroughly advanced and modern country, but also that heroes do not exclusively belong to the past, in history books or historical novels. Furthermore, there are several aspects of the plot that are exclusive to the modern times of Fascist Italy, specifically *bonifica* or land reclamation, which as Ben-Ghiat has noted, was central to many discourses on modernity (*Fascist* 4).

The narrator, like that of *Guerra!*, personally knows the characters of the book, confiding to the reader several characters' real names, nicknames, and in some cases even how they got their nicknames. Another narrative device that emphasizes the realness of the novel's events and characters is the inclusion of special editions of the local paper, *La sveglia*—chapter eight is formatted to look like a special edition of an actual newspaper. The edition includes a front-page article on the birth of Rome, a detailed program of the events for the anniversary celebration, a poem by Virgil and a story with a map of the new street that they are building in honor of the local war hero (the Colonel), the opening of which coincides with the celebration. The special edition of the paper included in the novel renders the novel's events and people more real, while evoking Rome's glorious past through Virgil's poem and the celebration itself.

Alza bandiera!, from the Bemporad series, "I libri dell'ardimento," deals with a multitude of issues relevant to growing up in 1930s Fascist Italy, which speaks to the slightly older

audience of this book than the previously two analyzed novels.³² The story deals with a poor family who has recently returned to Italy after years of living in Belgium. Carlo and his four children, Luisa, Raoul, Stefano and Ninì experience difficulties integrating into their new community as a result of living in a society sympathetic to socialism. Complicating matters at home is the death of their mother, which precedes the narrative. Shortly after returning to Italy, Carlo receives an opportunity to work on a *bonifica* site in Grosseto, leaving the children in their small Tuscan town under the care of their fifteen year-old-sister, Luisa. The absence of parents is significant because it sets up two important and recurring themes in children's literature from this period: 1) the children are orphaned and 2) the separation of father and son results in the inevitable journey of a son (Raoul) seeking out his father. Raoul is a troubled character at the beginning of the novel, but will successfully be converted to a "new" Italian man through his adventure that leads to a reunion with his father.

The conflict at the core of the novel is that the children have been exposed to corrupting socialist ideology, by virtue of the fact that they were raised outside the Patria. Therefore, they are distrusting of their new fascist neighbors: war veterans, *Balilla* members and their families. The local children refer to this family as *i francesi* because they lived for so long in Belgium.³³ The recently repatriated children are outsiders in the community. Raoul only causes the family more pain by antagonizing the very people from whom he feels excluded, Pepe, Giannino and Lello, who are *Balilla* members. Initially, they want revenge against Raoul, however, they

³² As discussed in the introduction, the Bemporad series seems that it was intended for a slightly older audience than the Mondadori series "Il romanzo dei ragazzi."

³³ Although they were raised in Belgium, the family is referred to as *i francesi*. Not only were the children exposed to corrupting socialist ideology in Belgium, but Gentile notes that in France, Fascism "fu quasi inesistente come forza politica, mentre ebbe una notevole risonanza culturale" (*Fascismo* 79), thus highlighting *i francesi*'s lack of familiarity with Italian Fascism.

evaluate the circumstances of *i francesi* and come to a different conclusion, taking pity on the family as Giannino argues:

[La mamma] Non ce l'hanno [...] La figliuola maggiore è una ragazzina di circa quindici anni; poi vengono due maschi e l'ultima una bambina di tre o quattro anni. Sono tutti nati in Francia, a Charleroi... [...] vi ripeto per la milionesima volta che sono italiani, perché italiano è il loro babbo e italiana era la loro povera mamma. Siamo giusti; se li hanno portati a nascere all'estero, non ci hanno colpa loro, mi pare. (44-5)

This distinction is important to the narrative. Even though these same characters refer to the family as *i francesi*, this excerpt establishes that our protagonists are indeed Italian, regardless of where they were raised. The boys understand that the children are certainly not to blame for the circumstances in which they find themselves. Indeed, they pity the poor family because they have no mother. Rather astutely, Giannino later adds that they have lost two mothers: “Una è rimasta lassù: e questa qui, l'Italia, non l'hanno più ritrovata” (48). That is, their actual mother died in Belgium, and it is *Italia*, mother to all Italians, that they have figuratively lost. The significance of Giannino's logic is that they have lost the connection to their true national (Italian) identity. Since Luisa and Raoul, in particular, spent their formative years outside the Patria, they were undoubtedly informed by the socialist ideology that surrounded them. In fact, the narrative confirms the corrupting elements of life outside the Patria when in a rare view of the family's life in Belgium, the narrator explains that, once, priests came to their mining village—“where God had been forgotten”—but were mistreated by the largely socialist community and accused of being fascist spies. The omniscient narrator tells us that the family sympathized with the priests since they were practicing Catholics, but could do little to help them because of the hostile environment in which they lived. Their mother taught them prayers at home and sent Luisa to a Catholic school where the nuns taught her to read and write. Thus, we understand that the children had a proper Catholic upbringing while their mother was still alive.

The ideological conflict at the core of this narrative and illustrated through the tension experienced by this poor family's return to Italy can also be connected to the regime's criticism of Liberal Italy's "failed policies."³⁴ We can infer, through a comment made by Luisa, that their father was forced to find work outside the Patria because he returned from World War I to no job: "Non abbiamo nessuna simpatia per i militari...nostro padre è stato alla guerra e allora sono incominciate tutte le nostre disgrazie" (73). Thus, we are made to understand that the economic crisis in Italy during the first post-war period that led to high unemployment rates, most notably among war veterans, was ultimately what drove Carlo's family outside the Patria. That is, the only reason the family moved to Belgium was so that Carlo could find work in a mine. The sad chain of events of *i francesi* echoes the regime's contempt for the alleged incompetence of Italy's liberal-era government. Although this is not explained in the novel, it is certainly implied. This implication becomes more evident when Carlo finds work in Italy through the regime's *bonifica* project, highlighting the regime's propaganda surrounding its inherent modernity, while emphasizing the fact that wherever Liberal Italy failed, Fascist Italy triumphs. This particular case touts the regime's creation of jobs, thus, eliminating the need for emigration.

The family's lack of awareness of their own Italian identity is illustrated when Pepe, in an effort to make peace with the family, invites the children to partake in the community's festivities to celebrate April 21, the anniversary of the mythic founding of Rome. However, since they were raised outside of Italy, the children do not understand the significance of this date, an important fascist holiday. Luisa and Raoul are not persuaded by Pepe's peace offering and his request for their participation in the—community building event—construction of the Colonel's

³⁴ Interestingly, Falasca-Zamponi points out that Mussolini argued that the politics of Liberal Italy were weak and not virile enough. "To the old liberal system, Mussolini presented the alternative of a new, 'very strong,' and 'virile' fascist state" (23).

road. Instead of joining in with the community, Raoul attacks Pepe and his *Balilla* friends in the open field where the road is to be built. Raoul's pattern of misguided aggressions against the *Balilla* stands in stark contrast to the magnanimous behavior that Pepe and his friends display toward Raoul and his family. This contrast makes it easy for the young reader to identify the correct behavior to imitate.

Of course, Raoul and his friends are no match for the *Balilla*. When their impending loss becomes evident, a friend tells him: "i Balilla sono piccoli soldati, e gli Avanguardisti sono soldati un po' più grandi, coraggiosissimi, avvezzi alla disciplina, pronti a tutto per l'Italia e per il suo Duce..." (99-100). This is an important, if not humbling, experience for Raoul because it is where he learns what it means to be a *Balilla*. His antagonism toward the community and especially toward the *Balilla* members stems from his exposure to socialism, resulting in his inability to relate to his new life in Fascist Italy and leaving him ostracized in the community. Tracy Koon's observations on the tight-knit community of ONB members underscore Raoul's status:

[ONB] members wore snappy uniforms, they sang catchy songs, they learned mysterious rituals and rites that fostered a sense of belonging and exclusivity. In addition, the varied sports and leisure time activities provided the children with a ready-made social life. The education imparted in the schools and the activities of the ONB aimed at the child's renunciation of self and his acceptance of the collective life of the regime. (96)

Koon's observations of the reality of the *Balilla* program help explain Raoul's exclusion from this group. Raoul is immediately identifiable as an outsider for what he lacks: a *Balilla* uniform, and therefore an understanding of their cultural practices. The reason behind his exclusion from the *Balilla*, and thus his ostracism from the community is the result of his lack of a national

identity to embrace.³⁵ Because he was raised in a non-Italian society that was sympathetic to socialism, he does not yet realize that he, too, is a son of Italy. Raoul is unable to identify with the *Balilla* or even dream of becoming one of them because he does not yet feel connected to Italy. Moreover, he lacks a strong male presence in his life, Luisa recognizing this, states: “Se almeno fosse stato lì suo padre! Tra uomini ci si intende meglio...” (123). Luisa takes care of her younger siblings in the best way she can, but the need for a strong father (figure) is clear. Raoul must find his father, and in the process discover his *italianità*.

Indeed, because of the above-stated reasons, Raoul is incapable of identifying with the community father figure, the Colonel. The much admired and loved figure, at the heart of the small community is described as: “un uomo ancora abbastanza giovane; coi capelli grigi e i baffetti neri, asciutto, rosso, due occhi vivissimi” (84). It is clear that he is very much a virile man, however, he is confined to a wheelchair as a result of injuries from World War I combat. He is such an important and respected person in the novel because he is the only war veteran present in the community, and he also bears physical evidence of his heroism. Furthermore, even though he is a *mutilato di guerra*, we are told that he joined in the March on Rome, which speaks to his virility and strong will. His character, therefore, sets an example for the children of the narrative as well as the reader.

Eventually, Raoul’s ostracism and confusion surrounding his identity drive him further away from the community. His first step in acknowledging his *italianità* will be to embrace his Catholic upbringing, thus, renouncing the socialist ideology that has corrupted him and is the origin of his ostracism. Although she is not physically present in the novel, the children’s mother

³⁵ Falasca-Zamponi’s assertion that “fascism’s program was to endow Italians with a national identity via the elimination of internal divisions and the creation of a classless society ideology” (22) is relevant here.

plays an important role in this respect. This is made clear when he enters an abandoned church and: “Faticosamente Raoul ritrasse dalla memoria i frammenti delle sue preghiere...

L’inquietudine di Raoul si placava. Ricordò sua madre, certi suoi gesti” (128). His mother’s spiritual presence leads him to embrace his Catholic roots and is a necessary part of his conversion. This realization emphasizes the inseparable nature of *italianità* and Catholicism and highlights the relationship between the regime and the Church. Raoul’s religious awakening and desire for a virile bond and male camaraderie, like the one shared by the *Balilla* members, catalyze him to set off on a journey to find his father:

Lì non poteva più stare. Troppi nemici...Più conosceva tutti quei ragazzi e più li destava; erano sempre affaccendati per qualche cosa, stavano insieme a scuola, giuocavano nel prato, come in un loro regno... E c’era dell’altro, che non si capiva bene, non si poteva dire, sebbene fosse causa di tutto: un fuoco comune a tutti, un fervore, un’animazione... Si vedeva, si sentiva che quei ragazzi erano in marcia, obbedienti a un solo comando, animati da una sola passione. E lui, Raoul, no: era solo, lasciato indietro, abbandonato sul bordo di una strada vuota, fuori da quella luce, fuori dalla scia di quei canti. (119-120)

It is evident from this passage that Raoul is jealous of the *Balilla* members and the bond that they share. He does not yet realize that their “fuoco comune,” the passion that unites them, is their love for the Patria. They are obedient to the Duce’s command, and therefore, worthy of his love. Raoul has yet to realize that although he has lost his biological mother, the Patria is the mother of all Italians, and therefore, he has a stake in that “fuoco comune.” The reunion with his war-veteran-father and contribution to the *bonifica* in Grosseto will help him realize his *italianità* and future service to the Patria.

During his journey, he encounters a man having car troubles; the car itself is a symbol of modernity. Raoul’s ability to help him—because he had a driver friend in Belgium—is indicative

of his own affinity for modern technology and is thus, an indication of his pending conversion.³⁶ The American driver, in his broken Italian expresses, his enthusiasm for the Fascist regime, telling Raoul: “Splendida strada; ora tutte strade di Italia, bellissime. Fascismo può correre...’ e sorrideva. ‘Sei Balilla tu? [...] ‘Oh, male!... Sarai, però. Io grande Balilla. Viva Duce!’” (158-9). The American’s admiration of Italy’s beautiful highways, is a nod to the regime’s propaganda regarding its successful modernization of Italy. His praise of Italy’s current state and of the regime is noteworthy precisely because he is American and, thus, his comments function as a way of legitimizing the regime. The fact that he encourages Raoul to become a *Balilla*, thus joining a community of his peers, is also significant because he inadvertently addresses Raoul’s underlying issue—lack of a community with which he can identify.

Raoul accepts the American’s offer to take him as far as Livorno, where he will meet his family. As they drive along the modern highway, stopping in Pisa to admire the city’s famous monuments, the narrator describes the beautiful rolling hills and seascapes. The experience is the perfect combination of Italy’s natural beauty, cultural patrimony and fascist modernity, and all serve to help Raoul realize his *italianità*. What further moves Raoul toward this realization is an encounter with Italian soldiers, whom he meets in Livorno. This brief experience with the soldiers is a surprisingly positive one for Raoul:

Non aveva gran simpatia per i soldati; si era abituato a considerarli come una specie di guardie, che in tempo di scioperi o di dimostrazioni respingono la povera gente coi calci dei fucili, e qualche volta sparano. Ma quelli, tutti giovani,—ragazzi grandi—vestiti di

³⁶ The regime’s relationship with modernity was a fragile one. Ben-Ghiat notes in the introduction to her book, *Fascist Modernities*, that “fascism offered the fantasy of a mass society that allowed economic development without harm to social boundaries and national traditions.” Furthermore, Fascism was presented “as a movement that would forestall the spread of standardization and degeneration while bringing to Italians the benefits of contemporary life” (3). In short, Fascism promised all of the benefits of modern society and none of its shortcomings. The automobile was a symbol of modernity and considered a benefit of ‘contemporary life.’ Thus, the regime deemed it a positive aspect of modernity.

panno azzurro, con un berrettino piccolissimo messo di traverso, visi franchi, parlata allegra, non suscitavano, certo, diffidenza. E poi, allora, il ragazzo aveva un'anima pronta a disciogliere i nodi neri della vita troppo triste. (174)

This excerpt gives us a clear understanding of Raoul's perception of the military, based on the "false ideologie socialiste" (Visentini, *Libri e ragazzi* 183) that he was exposed to outside the Patria. The reality of the Italian soldiers represents a stark contrast to his preconceived notions of the image of the soldier. It is as if Raoul's foundation begins to crumble upon the sight of these young soldiers. Their appearance seems to resonate with him, as if he can finally identify with their youthful vigor and eagerness. He inherently trusts the soldiers and asks for their aid in finding his father. They happily help him reach Grosseto where Raoul is reunited with his father.

In Grosseto, Raoul is immediately accepted into the community where he goes to school during the day, and then works and sleeps alongside his father. News of his adventures reaches home where he is praised as a courageous *ragazzo italiano*, no longer referred to as *francese* because he has earned the right to be called Italian. The Colonel himself considers Raoul and all the men working on the *bonifica* to be soldiers, and Raoul has indeed become a man: "Pareva un uomo....Viso abbronzato e fiero, spalle quadre, mani brune; ma di vicino era ancora ragazzo, per una luce di innocenza che gli rischiarava la fronte, sotto il ciuffo dei capelli neri" (223). In fact, from the physical description of Raoul, he truly appears to be one of *i ragazzi di Mussolini*, a "new man" in the making. He now knows that it is his duty and honor, as an Italian, to defend the Patria and declares that when he joins the military—now a forgone conclusion—he will join the Air Force, the most modern branch of the military. Raoul's conversion is complete, and he owes it to his embracement of his Catholic roots, his first-hand encounter with Italy's natural beauty and virile soldiers, as well as the regime's affinity for modernity: automobiles, paved highways and *bonifica*.

The novel's celebration of fascist propaganda regarding modernity and youth organizations is evident throughout, and never so much as with its representation of the summer *colonie*, which function as direct invitations to the reader to join, touting the fun and wide-ranging adventures available to Italy's youth, thanks to the regime, of course. The novel takes on an epistolary form as the children's exchange of letters from their various *colonie* appears in the text. The locations of these *colonie* include: mountain resorts, seaside resorts and camping in forests, something for everyone. The description from Lello's letter of his camp experience on the coast of the Mediterranean seems particularly enticing to the young reader:

Ci stiamo in più di cinquecento ragazzi, eppure non facciamo troppo putiferio, perché c'è una bella disciplina....Del resto si dorme anche di giorno, si fanno due bagni, si mangia con un appetito spaventoso, si fa il saluto alla bandiera, si cantano gli Inni della Patria, si dicono le orazioni, si giuoca sulla spiaggia, si fanno le corse, le fotografie, si scrivono le lettere.... (210-11)

Including “discipline” among the positive experiences of this retreat is pure propaganda, since “inculcating obedience to authority” (Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist* 96) was among the principal goals of these summer retreats. Otherwise, the passage is an enticing description of the summer camp, sure to lead many readers to persuade their parents to enroll them in similar programs. While Raoul's siblings have bonded with the community and participate in the various activities; Raoul does not. However, this is only because he is no longer the boy he was at the beginning of the narrative, having been converted to a son of Italy and a “new man.” His carefree summers are gone, and instead he has responsibilities to the Duce and the Patria. Thus, he remains in Grosseto to complete the *bonifica* alongside his father and many other men.

Alza bandiera!, like *Guerra!*, concludes by invoking the memory of World War I and Italy's sad state in that post-war period. A letter from the Colonel published in another special edition of *La sveglia*, and “reprinted” in the novel, credits Mussolini with saving the country:

“l’Italia era stanca, tradita da amici malfidi e dai suoi stessi figli. Allora una voce gagliarda chiamò gridando: ‘A noi!’ Era il bersagliere Mussolini, che voleva salva e gloriosa la gran Madre” (230). Invoking the cult of the martyr, the letter is addressed as much to the fictional characters of the narrative as it is to the young reader: “Ma il compito della giovinezza non è finito, come non è finita la sua benedizione. Ricordatevi che per la Patria *bisogna vincere ogni giorno*; state saldi in questo proposito; sarà la vostra onoranza più bella per i ragazzi di ieri, per i vivi e per i morti” (231). This ending, fittingly, emphasizes the importance of youth to the future of Italy while simultaneously honoring the cult of the fallen soldier. Recycling the early fascist slogan *vincere*, reminds children of Italy’s past while placing the future of the country squarely on their shoulders.

An enthusiastic promotion of the ONB is one of the several themes connecting *Alza bandiera!* to *I piccoli diverranno grandi*. In both cases, the comportment of the *Balilla* members is to be admired and imitated by the young male reader. As is to be expected, the virile bond shared between father and son and their inevitable separation is at the core of these narratives. Significantly, the possibility of conversion is also addressed in *I piccoli diverranno grandi*. In Raoul’s case, he was required to embrace his religion, thus denouncing his socialist tendencies and recognize, despite what he believed, that the Patria had welcomed him home with open arms; he needed only to reciprocate. In the case of the next novel, our protagonist’s story is one of formation, whose skills learned in *Balilla* training will prove essential. However, the novel also lends insight to how the regime attempted to change the appearance and behavior of socially deviant children, reforming them in the image and likeness of the Duce.

Aurelia Nutini’s didactic, formation novel, *I piccoli diverranno grandi. Romanzo per il bimbo nuovo* (1935)—also from the Bemporad series—tells of the adventures of eight year-old

Silvio Silvani. Both parents are present in the novel and they are exemplary models of the ideal man and ideal woman promoted by the regime. This is particularly interesting because the author of the novel is a woman; I will return to the significance of this later. The father, *babbino* or *il Capitano*, is a war veteran and respected member of the entire community; in this respect, he enjoys a role similar to that of the Colonel in *Alza bandiera!*. Silvio's mother's role, however, is clear: caregiver to her husband and small children. Unlike her husband, she has no role outside the home and very little interaction with non-family members. The action of the first half of the novel takes place in a Tuscan town near Florence and depicts Silvio's relationship with both his mother and father. The latter half of the novel, after Silvio's father is called away by the Duce, takes on an epistolary form. We learn much about Silvio's character through the letters he exchanges with his father, whose departure sets up Silvio's inevitable journey to find him.

The narrator addresses her audience directly, claiming in a unique way, to personally know the protagonists while establishing a direct relationship between the characters of the novel and the reader. Her technique is effective, creating a feeling of familiarity with her characters by introducing the protagonist's friends to the reader and referring to people, events and places as if the reader already knows these people and places: "E se non conoscete Fuffi, vi dico subito chi è: è il figlio del bottegaio che ha un grande negozio là in Piazza...ed Ezio è quel demonietto figlio dell'elettricista..." (9). This narrative device allows the reader to be pulled into the story and more easily identify with the characters of the novel and their actions. The desired result is that the reader will more readily accept and imitate the models of behavior proposed in the novel, especially those characters who are considered *naturally* fascist.

The didactic novel is evidently geared toward the promotion of the formation of the "new" Italian; this is suggested by its subtitle: *Romanzo per il bimbo nuovo*. Thus, the novel also

addresses the question at the core of the anthropological revolution, the art of *making* the “new” Italian. Silvio and his father are described as *naturally* fascist; they inherently possess the qualities of the “new man”—I will discuss exactly how a little later on. For now, I would like to turn my attention to those characters who must be rehabilitated. When Silvio complains to his father about the behavior of some of the less-fortunate children in the community, his father comments: “i cattivi sono dei malatti” (29), suggesting that the family in question is communist. Fascist rhetoric routinely considered communism—and any ideology that contrasted with fascism—“a disease.”³⁷ The continuation of their conversation gives further credence to the assumption that Silvio’s father is referring to communists, he states:

ho conosciuto il nonno di Pirro: beveva terribilmente, era litigioso, violento: una belva! ...Silvio, i figli dei bevitori, i nipoti dei pazzi, sono un poco pazzi anche loro: bisogna comprendere e provvedere....Li cureremo col sole, con la ginnastica, con la disciplina e allora tutti saranno buoni, devoti alla Patria, forti di animo e di corpo. (29-30)

The description of Pirro’s grandfather as a violent and litigious drunkard is behavior often associated with communists in fascist literature and films. Additionally, evoking the image of the “belva”—generally used to describe someone with questionable morals—is further evidence that “i malatti” in this case are indeed communists. However, like Raoul in *Alza bandiera!*, the children can be cured of their “disease” by joining the ONB and participating in its various activities, aimed at molding them into soldiers for the State. The physical exercise imposed by *Balilla* training sought to instill a sense of discipline in the youth population, while the summer *colonie* promoted the benefits of outdoor activities, and claimed to “cure” children with the sun. Silvio’s father’s comments argue for the necessity of the ONB for the successful regeneration of Italians, but also for the ultimate redeemability of Italians. Communism is a disease that—like

³⁷ Mussolini refers explicitly to bolshevism as a disease in his Ascension Day Speech (1927): “[...] si sono uccisi quei roditori che portano dall’Oriente malattie contagiose: quell’Oriente donde ci vengono cose gentili: febbre gialla e bolscevismo” (qtd. in Susmel 22: 362).

malaria—the regime claims to be able to eradicate. The prescribed physical activity and military culture of the regime’s youth organizations are celebrated as means of molding the perfect citizen-soldier out of the most defective Italian.

Discipline and obedience were the core values upon which the re-formation of Italians was based, a necessity for “una nuova razza italiana di dominatori, di conquistatori e di creatori di civiltà” (Gentile, *Fascismo* 235). These values were to be instilled in young Italians, and so the novel’s emphasis on the importance of discipline is relevant. The following passage, which describes children returning from “a sun therapy *colonia*”³⁸ is unrelated to the plot of the story and seems to serve simply as an opportunity for the narrator to educate the reader and demonstrate desirable children’s behavior:

Però non corrono a casa, ma con ordine, ora in un senso, ora nell’altro; poi si fermano, eseguono la flessione del busto, rovesciano la testa, alzano le braccia, flettono le gambette, secondo l’ordine breve ed energico del Tenente che li comanda. . . . Tutto è disciplina, là; così si educano il corpo e l’anima; i piccoli diventano forti e buoni; si addestrano e si temprano al sole caldo, biondo d’Italia. . . . Sono i bimbi nuovi, fusi nel bronzo dalla volontà titanica di Mussolini. (70)

The narrator is clearly impressed by the virile, disciplined performance of these youngsters. However, it is not simply the depiction of military discipline that is remarkable in this passage; rather, it is the stunning description of these youthful bodies that the Duce willed into their current form. A physical appearance of strength and virility was what the exercise regimens in Fascist Italy aimed to cultivate, often referred to as *bonifica umana*, literally the reclaiming of the body. In this view, the bodies of the Italians were to be “reclaimed” by Mussolini who would then re-form them to ensure that they were physically worthy of the Italian stock (*stirpe*). Fascist ideology held that a healthy body was representative of a healthy mind and a healthy race.

³⁸ “Colonie Elioterapiche.”

Mussolini's *bonifica umana* project set out to re-form Italians in his own image and likeness, one of virility and strength. The fact that Mussolini's will is described as "titanic" in the above quote is relevant because although small in stature, everything about Mussolini's character was larger than life, and the ubiquity of his image certainly contributed to this perception; it was all part of his very calculated public image to appear larger than life: "Mussolini wanted to appear above human limits" (Falasca-Zamponi 73).

Silvio's father's comments regarding the necessity to "cure" the character of the deviant members of Italian society, combined with the physical requirements necessary and described in the excerpt above, are evidence of how Mussolini attempted to form the "new" Italian. The presence of these characters in the novel serves to educate children on the proper way to become a "new" fascist man and certainly indicates the possibility of conversion. Here, I think it is useful to note Falasca-Zamponi's observations regarding Mussolini's role as artist-politician and his goal of re-making Italians:

The artist metaphor linking the politician to the sculptor who smashes and carves the marble led Mussolini to declare the need for 'reshaping the Italians,' 'making the Italians' character,' 'creating a new generation of Italians.'...Mussolini aimed at forging the Italians' character into a work of art to carry out his political vision. By building a new, fascist Italian and by establishing new, fascist ways of living, Mussolini would create his final masterpiece: a long-lasting fascist Italy. (26)

The best way to ensure the longevity of the Italian Fascist state and the project of re-making Italians was to start molding the youngest generations first, "since the formation of new generations of fascists depended on the reform of character and spirit as well as custom and behavior" (Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist* 96). Indeed, Gentile has argued that children were not simply the most vulnerable or most exposed to fascist culture, but were targeted as a means of ensuring the duration of Fascism (*Fascismo* 25). Silvio's father's comments, understood in the context of the

regime's anthropological revolution, lend insight to how the regime attempted to go about re-shaping the Italian population, specifically those children who came from less-than-desirable backgrounds or those who needed to be rehabilitated in light of fascist ideology. Thus, literature for children about the benefits of participating in the ONB only further encouraged behavior the regime wished to instill in Italy's youth.

As mentioned in the introduction to this novel, Silvio's path is one of formation, not conversion. Highlighting Silvio's apparent burgeoning virility, we are told: "È un maschietto, lui, e tutto ciò che non è forza, lo irrita!..." (11). Perhaps this bombastic insistence on his nascent masculinity is an example of overcompensation by the female author. On the other hand, his innate virility is obviously inherited from his war-hero-father, who is described as the "new man" in the vein of Mussolini:

Ecco il babbo, alto, biondo, pallido, che torna dall'ufficio, e Silvio gli corre incontro. Ha un'adorazione, per il babbo suo affettuoso e severo ad un tempo che porta sul petto il segno del mutilato come una stella ed ha nella carne viva le cicatrici di due gloriose ferite....Ma il bimbo non lo sa; babbino è un'anima forte, romanamente forte: sorride quando soffre; sorrideva davanti alla mitraglia, avrebbe sorriso eroicamente alla morte. (17-18)

Silvio's father, his role model, embodies the qualities of the warrior-hero much desired and propagandized by the regime. Above all, he is a war veteran and carries the proof of his valor in the form of scars from his battle wounds. More important, however, is his strong will, "l'anima forte," and the fact that he is not afraid to die. Indeed, the last sentence of the above excerpt is crucial to our understanding of *Il Capitano* as the embodiment of the "new man"—he is prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the Patria.

The comparison being drawn between Mussolini and Silvio's father is quite clear, and in Silvio's everyday life, as well as in the community, he serves as a proxy for Mussolini. So that

this comparison is not entirely lost on the young reader, it is made explicit later on in the narrative when Silvio returns to his room after his induction into the *Balilla* and contemplates two photos hanging on the wall, one of his father and the other of Mussolini—“il papà di tutti i Balilla” (87). Each photo carries an inspirational and nationalistic message for Silvio that is key to his understanding and identification as a “new” Italian:

quella [foto] del babbo che lo fissava coi suoi occhi d’aquila, e romanamente lo salutava e quella del Duce che lo guardava col suo buon sorriso fiero e animatore. Sotto la fotografia del babbo era scritto: ‘Sii degno della razza che ha dato al mondo Cesare, Dante, Michelangelo.’ E sotto quella del Duce, nella calligrafia rude e nervosa di Lui: ‘A chi l’Italia, piccolo Balilla? A noi!’ (87)

Silvio’s father’s message squarely places himself, the “new” Italian man, and his son, *il bimbo nuovo* as the inheritors of the ancient Roman “race,” via a few of the most accomplished and famous men in Italian history, tracing their lineage back to Caesar. Interestingly, Silvio’s father’s message points to the past glories of the Italians, while Mussolini’s message focuses on the future, emphasizing the delicate balance between the regime’s self-proclaimed ancient Roman lineage and its cult of youth. This delicate balance is described by Gentile in terms of “*i romani della modernità*,” that is “una razza di uomini nuovi capaci di realizzare nel mondo moderno, come i romani avevano fatto nel mondo antico, una civiltà imperiale fondata sulla organizzazione totalitaria dello Stato” (*Fascismo* 254).

Discipline and obedience to the Duce apply to every Italian, not just children; this is made clear when Mussolini’s titanic will—the very same that molds young boys into soldiers—summons Silvio’s father. The news that his father must leave crushes Silvio. He is able to rationalize the situation by telling himself that his father is simply being a good fascist and obeying the wishes of the Duce: “[S]e il babbino *doveva* partire, lui non *doveva* piangere; se il Duce lo voleva a Roma, lui *doveva* dire semplicemente: *obbedisco!* Perché i bimbi d’Italia sono

assuefatti alla disciplina e obbediscono sempre, anche quando essa par terribilmente dura e indicibilmente dolorosa...” (48). The hierarchical nature of Fascism relies on obedience and subordination to the Duce. Silvio, as a *Balilla*, and his father, as a soldier and war veteran, are beholden to the Fascist credo: “credere, obbedire, combattere,” and ultimately to the Duce and his every whim. Therefore, this excerpt serves as an example to children that everyone, even grown-ups, must answer to the Duce, and thus aims to instill an understanding of hierarchical society in its readers.

Once Silvio and his father are separated, they remain so until the end of the narrative, and as a result, the story takes on the form of an epistolary novel. Much about their father-son relationship is revealed in their letters to each other, specifically, details regarding Silvio’s character and the effectiveness of his exposure to the regime’s propaganda. In one letter, Silvio recounts the usefulness of his athletic skills cultivated through *Balilla* training, as he proudly narrates his heroic and physically demanding feat of diving into the Arno to save a drowning boy: “E io, come Balilla, capirai, ho dovuto gettarmi in Arno, così vestito e riprenderlo...è stato un po’ d’ardimento, gettarsi nell’acqua, così d’inverno e salvare un bambino come Cirillo...Sono campione di nuoto dei Balilla fiorentini ed ero fiero e senza un briciolo di paura” (144-5). Silvio credits his bravery and athleticism simultaneously to his *Balilla* training and his father. In his account of the episode, Silvio tells his father that he swam “vigorosamente,” just as his father had taught him. The fact that swimming is used as an example to showcase Silvio’s masculine qualities is significant because swimming was regarded as a “modern” sport. The inherent modernity of swimming as a sport speaks to the regime’s alleged successful modernization of Italians.

The regime's affinity for sport and insistence on the value of athletics aimed to make a fit and healthy population, but also sought to maintain a military readiness. Indeed, with no war to fight, it effectively replaced the war experience as the recipe for making men out of boys. The physical regimens implemented by the ONB and detailed in this novel, are tantamount to the combat experienced by the protagonists of *Guerra!* and *La grande diana*, in regard to their man-making function. Mussolini considered physical education "an effective means of inculcating discipline and team spirit..." (qtd. in Gori, "Model" 45), while his own athleticism and penchant for sports was renown. Indeed, according to Gori, one of the more unique factors of Italian Fascism was that "Mussolini came to symbolize virility, not only for the virile strength of his ideas...but also for the power of his muscles and the talent, which it was recounted allowed him to practice any kind of sport with success" ("Model" 43). He was celebrated for his athleticism and his athletic body in literature, arts and film, and any image of the Duce that might mar his reputation as a youthful, strong, virile leader was proscribed (Gori, "Model" 38; Falasca-Zamponi 73; Spackman 3). Gori sums up Mussolini's obsession with athletic figures by observing that his body "perfectly embodied the male prototype of the 'Italic descent'" ("Model" 55) and thus the healthiness of the Italian stock. While physical activity and sports were requirements for a healthy nation, they were also implemented as effective means of controlling the Italian people, providing them with a strong sense of national identity.³⁹

In another letter, Silvio demonstrates his knowledge of Italy's history, from the Ancient Roman Empire to more recent historical events. Silvio promises his father: "noi, bimbi d'oggi, non faremo come gli uomini del 'dopo guerra,' te lo prometto." (67) Silvio, although he is only

³⁹ For more on sports and national identity in Fascist Italy, see Martin, Simon. *Football and Fascism: The National Game under Mussolini*. Oxford: Berg, 2004.

eight, can make this promise with relative certainty, because “today’s children” are growing up in Mussolini’s Italy, with all of the benefits that entails. The exercise regimens that are part of the *Balilla* training, which simultaneously help cultivate a military culture, also ensure that the “new” Italian will not make the same mistakes as the older generations. Simply put, Italians today are *made* differently; they are not flawed like the generations that came before them. With the Duce at the helm, Italy is headed in the right direction and will be prepared, physically and mentally for the next war to come.

While Silvio’s father is in Rome, ostensibly attending to State matters, he becomes ill. Silvio learns of his illness when the doctor arrives to inform the family. This news is very upsetting to Silvio, but he refrains from crying, and he makes sure to tell his father in his letter because he knows it will make him proud: “puoi esser certo che non ho pianto. Ho, sì, ancora nella gola, questo stupido nocciolo di pesca che non va nè su, nè giù... ma piangere, no, assolutamente no, non ho pianto...! E sono forte... proprio come mi vuoi tu...!” (170). The lesson here is clear: virile men don’t cry. Though becoming increasingly worried about his father’s health and his unresponsiveness to his letters, Silvio soon begins to imagine the impossible, as the narrator tells us: “Paparino suo non poteva morire...Egli era un simbolo: il puro simbolo della Patria eroica e gloriosa, e i simboli non muoiono” (176). Instead of crying, Silvio decides to travel to Rome by himself to find “paparino suo.” Like a good fascist, he recognizes the benefits and superiority of action over “sentimental” emotions. His father is a decorated World War I veteran, a living monument to Italy’s brave and valiant performance in that war. The war experience, undoubtedly, cultivated in him the great sense of *italianità* that he passed on to his son through a “pedagogy of virility.” Silvio’s decision to find his father in Rome

is a manifestation of his own *italianità*, and although his mother is concerned, the doctor who delivered the news of his father's health, celebrates Silvio's audacious behavior:

Arriverà, si, arriverà!... Noi siamo vecchi... Siamo delle vecchie pantofole!... Ma loro, arriveranno, i giovani... *di nove anni...!* [...] è bello quest'ardimento in un Balilla! Guarda con occhi limpidi la vita: vuole andare a Roma dal padre e ci va! Li ha gettati Mussolini del bronzo dei nostri elmetti, nell'acciaio delle nostre baionette, questi monelli, e quando avranno venti anni, vivaddio...! L'Italia sarà la prima delle Nazioni farà tremare il mondo...! (187)

Simultaneously, the doctor credits Silvio's audacious act to youthful ardor, Mussolini's will to re-make Italians and the valor of World War I veterans. The doctor has no doubt in his mind that Silvio will safely reach his father and shows very little concern for the well-being of the young protagonist. It is precisely this kind of behavior that should be celebrated and will lead to Italy's rise among the world powers. This "new" Italian that Silvio embodies, under Mussolini's command, will lead the Patria to greatness. The above excerpt clearly supports the fascist rhetoric regarding the importance of youth to the future of the regime, as well as the necessity to ensure that the youth of Italy physically and characteristically resembles the Duce; the future of Fascism and the Patria depend on it.

In the narrator's account of Silvio's journey we learn that he relies heavily on the skills he has learned in *Balilla* training to overcome some of the more arduous circumstances, like traveling through the forest for several days. At a certain point Silvio recalls a quote from Mussolini for inspiration: "quando una determinazione è presa *non si deve tornare in dietro!* A Roma devo arrivare!" (193). Regardless of the difficulty of the task at hand, Silvio decides that he must reach Rome, at all costs, to make his father and the Duce proud. He is eventually found by fascist soldiers on the lookout for a runaway boy fitting his description. They subsequently fly

him to Rome to be reunited with his father. Upon his arrival, he sees Mussolini and recounts the sighting to his father once they are reunited:

E qualcuno ho visto ieri, che non dimenticherò mai più: il Duce! L'ho visto in Piazza Venezia; ad un balcone, dritto là, con la sua mascella quadrata e gli occhi d'aquila...E ho udito la sua voce potente: ogni frase è un colpo di piccone, è una cannonata; a ogni frase è uno scoppio formidabile di applausi...! Il Duce ha finito dicendo che noi viviamo in una grande èra; che una nuova storia è incominciata e da Roma il mondo aspetta una nuova civilita!... (222-23)

Much like Cibanti's father's brief encounter with Mussolini in *Guerra!*, this experience for Silvio is awe-inspiring. He and his generation of peers are those expected to carry out this new civilization, the very children who are being molded through *Balilla* training and propaganda. The sheer joy at having seen and heard the Duce is evident in Silvio's recounting of this experience to his father.

The novel ends with the return of father and son to Florence, with Silvio having proved that he is worthy of the title "*bimbo nuovo*." The epilogue to the novel includes details of Silvio and his friends' lives after "some years" have passed and the children have grown up, or *diventati grandi*. Silvio, following the example of his two idols, his father and Mussolini, fulfills his destiny as a "new" Italian and becomes a pilot in the army.⁴⁰ Because Silvio, like his father, innately possesses the qualities of the "new" Italian man, his story is not so much that of a conversion, but rather, one of formation. The narrative recounts the events that are most pertinent to his formation as a "new" Italian, from his induction as a *Balilla*, his lone adventure to find his father, his encounter with the Duce, and finally his decision to become a pilot in the army. At each point he serves as a model for young boys to follow.

⁴⁰ Significantly, this is the same fate that awaits Raoul of *Alza bandiera!*

An interesting point, then, considering Silvio's function as a role model, are his opinions on women, especially since the author is a woman. His view of women is evidently a misogynistic one and clearly informed by fascist rhetoric. At one point, in a letter to his father, he complains about the "cosmopolitan" air of modern girls, stating that he prefers those who have more "traditional" values: "E io preferisco la Rita che cucina così, a certe signorine che danzano, parlano Inglese e Tedesco e non sanno nemmeno, ci scommetto, frigger le patate, perché io le patate fritte ben rosolate, le preferisco alle danze classiche, te lo assicuro, paparino!" (114). Silvio's opinion echoes fascist rhetoric regarding the role of women in society. His comments also support the understanding that Italians should be influenced exclusively by Italian culture, and that the influence of foreign culture is corrupting. Silvio's apparent disdain for the girls who speak English and German is a result of the model of woman that the regime demanded: a mother who remained at home and whose interests revolved exclusively around her husband and children. In another example of male chauvinism, Silvio tells his father: "E io, la [Gigliola] non la vorrei davvero per sorella, almeno Titti, è piccina, ma ha molta ammirazione per me e capisce che i maschietti sono da più delle ragazzine!" (88). Silvio prefers his younger sister, Titti, to Gigliola because she knows her place in the family and in society is secondary to boys and always will be, as long as fascist hegemony prevails. Yet another instance of his understanding of women as inferior to men occurs when, on his adventure, he overhears that fascist soldiers are actively looking for him. He immediately assumes that his mother is to blame: "Paparino suo non gliel'avrebbe fatto un affronto simile... Già le donne, si sa...! [...]" (215). Clearly, only a woman—because she doesn't know any better—would worry about a *Balilla* going off on his own. By extension, his father would not have insulted Silvio by thinking that he would need help. Silvio's negative and dismissive attitude toward women, from his female

coetane to his own mother, is ostensibly interpreted as positive behavior for fascist youth to imitate. I can only interpret this tiring perpetuation of women as inferior—from a woman author no less—as a form of consensus and thus, an indication of the regime’s success at subordinating women in society. Chapters three and four will deal more specifically with models of femininity for young women and the regime’s attempts to create a female population dedicated to the Duce, the State and the family.

Alza bandiera! and *I piccoli diverranno grandi* present contemporary Fascist Italy in a positively modern way, through the incorporation of the fascist Youth organizations and the regime’s land *bonifica* projects. The ONB and summer *colonie* highlight both the regime’s commitment to modernity and to the successful formation of the “new man.” The presence of the World War I veterans, the Colonel and *Il Capitano* who serve as role models in their communities, highlights the importance that the First World War serves to the creation of the “new man” in fascist society and mirrors the regime’s own delicate balance between the exaltation of war heroes and martyrs and the celebration of youth and modernity, that is, the future of the Patria. The most interesting aspect of these novels, however, is the possibility of conversion, which is realized in each case through State-run organizations and regime sanctioned events, emphasizing the regime’s power to cure deviance. Conversions will be addressed in the next section, as well, however, they are brought about exclusively by religious experiences.

The novel that I will analyze in the final section breaks the pattern established by the novels treated thus far. One way it achieves this novelty is by focusing on the role of parents and the role models of the child protagonist almost as much as it focuses on the protagonist himself. Unlike the passive or practically non-existent adult women characters we have encountered thus far, the mother in *Soldatini d’ogni giorno* is far from submissive; in fact she has a commanding

role in her house. The father, instead, is far from the masculine ideal, presenting an anomaly in terms of children's literature and fascist ideology. Indeed, the father's physical appearance and behavior is antithetical to the "new" fascist man proposed by the regime. As opposed to the idealized mother and father—because she is completely submissive to her husband—presented in *I piccoli diverranno grandi*, this set of parents does not fit the pre-fabricated mold advocated by the regime. Indeed, the father figure is entirely deferential to his wife, relinquishing his (fascist) right as *capofamiglia* to her. Thus, the novel's portrayal of a strong mother and a shockingly weak and passive father figure effectively challenges Fascism's strict definitions of gender roles and performance, revealing that not all Italian men are "new men."

2.3 The Right Role Model

Salvator Gotta and Olga Visentini's *Soldatini d'ogni giorno* (1938), like all of the novels under analysis in this chapter, addresses themes at the core of narratives for young males: the centrality of World War I to Fascism and the formation of the "new man," the importance of religion, the use of realism (and a lack of fantasy) and a son who must seek out his masculine role model, generally his father. Like *Alza bandiera!* and *I piccoli diverranno grandi*, *Soldatini d'ogni giorno* takes place in contemporary Fascist Italy. Although the centrality of World War I to the formation of the "new man" is fundamental to the narrative, the title invokes an important quality of the everyday life of children during Fascism, reminding the reader of the military culture of Fascism. This novel, however, promotes the formation of the "new" fascist man in a counter-intuitive way. An anomaly among novels for boys from this period, the protagonist's father is not the model of virile Italian masculinity one would generally expect. Instead, the young protagonist, Paolo Negri, is a "new" Italian in spite of his father, as opposed to because of his masculine influence, juxtaposing the elder Negri's passive nature with Paolo's inherent

italianità. This juxtaposition serves two primary purposes: it underscores the generational differences between father and son, specifically that Tommaso is the weak, timid, passive man that the “new man” will replace and that Paolo is a *naturally* fascist young man. An important omission in the novel regarding Paolo’s father, Tommaso, is mention of his participation in World War I, while the war experience of other characters, both minor and major is discussed at length. This leaves the reader with one conclusion: Tommaso did not participate in the war, and therefore, his failure at being a good and active father is directly connected to his lack of war experience. This omission is relevant because he did not benefit from the “man-making” experience of the war. Thus, Paolo’s search for a masculine role model, will not lead him to his father, rather, to a World War I veteran. A by-product of Tommaso Negri’s lack of virile masculinity is that the gender-biased roles of mother and father are turned upside down, granting a much more dominant role in the home to Paolo’s mother, than any other mother figure we have encountered thus far.

Salvator Gotta and Olga Visentini, two of the most prolific and important children’s writers of the fascist period,⁴¹ present the protagonist’s “search” for his father as figurative, since both parents are physically present in the novel. The story follows the formation of the eleven-year-old, Paolo Negri and his male role models within the narrative, highlighting the importance of the combat experience of World War I. The Negris are a typical working-class Roman family who live on via Giulia “una delle più vecchie vie di Roma...” (11). This detail highlights the connection between modern day Italy and Ancient Rome. Indeed, from the everyday activities of

⁴¹ Salvator Gotta wrote the lyrics to the Fascist anthem “Giovinezza,” as well as “due libri che tutti i ragazzi d’Italia debbono leggere...*L’altra guerra del piccolo alpino* and *Il piccolo legionario in A.O.*” from the preface of *Soldatini d’ogni giorno*. With regard to Olga Visentini’s ideological leaning, Sabrina Fava observes: “Il periodo in cui nella letteratura per l’infanzia si accentuarono i toni di propaganda furono gli anni Trenta, durante i quali scrissero, non a caso e almeno in parte, autori come Olga Visentini...” (235).

the family described in the novel, the reader may feel like he already knows the family. Paolo lives with his mother, father, (older) brother Edoardo, (younger) sister Anna and Zio Federico. The upstairs neighbor, Angelo Dalmi, is also an important figure in the novel. The narrative takes place in contemporary 1930s Italy, but occasionally moves back in time to allow Angelo Dalmi to recount significant moments from his audacious youth and his formative years in the Italian navy. Though they are too numerous to discuss them all here, I will relate any relevant events pertaining to the central narrative. Since the Negris are a “humble,” working-class family each member’s job is mentioned: Edoardo is a factory worker, Mamma Teresa is the *portinaia* for the *palazzo*, Paolo is too young to work but, significantly, he is a *Balilla caposquadra*. Zio Federico is a disabled war veteran, having lost his sight fighting in the Great War, though we are told that he was a mechanic before he was blinded by a grenade blast during combat; Angelo Dalmi, too, is a veteran of World War I, while Paolo’s father, Tommaso, is a tailor.

Tommaso Negri’s occupation is significant because it is not “virile.” His physical description is quite the opposite of the virile “new” Italian; he is: “un uomo di statura comune, ma così magro da sembrare quasi piccolo...così pallido da sembrar trasparente” (13). The “new” Italian man is always a healthy, muscular, fit and often tanned individual, evincing the good health and strength of the Italic race; one need only call to mind the myriad images of Mussolini. Instead, Tommaso Negri is described as weak, pale and sickly; while Dalmi, in contrast, is described on the first page: “un vecchio alto, segaligno, con la pelle coloro di legno appiccicata sulle ossa robuste...portava un cappello a cencio da cui sfuggivano alcune ciocche bianche...” (6). Even though Dalmi is presumably older than Tommaso (we know that he was in Africa shortly after the Libyan wars in 1911), the description of him fits that of the virile “new man.” The pathetic physical description of Tommaso Negri combined with his lack of war experience,

which as described in the previous pages, brought about the “new” fascist man, leaves the reader with the conclusion that he is ineligible to claim the title, “new man.”

Given Tommaso Negri’s undesirable physique, the narrator assumes that Edoardo and Paolo have inherited their strong physicality from their mother. Mamma Teresa is described as a robust woman, in the vein of *la massaia rurale*, and states that Paolo takes after her: “tutto bruno come la mia gente, con gli occhi grandi e arditi che sembrano anche più lucenti quando indossa la camicia nera, con un ciuffo di riccioli neri” (181). According to the narrator, her older son, Edoardo also resembles her: “il fratello maggiore, un giovane ventenne che aveva ereditato dalla madre la robustezza fisica e dal padre la dignitosa compostezza” (15). In addition to Mamma Teresa’s physical/biological contributions to her family, the narrator gives the impression that she is the de facto *capofamiglia*. In the following example, Paolo has taken a letter addressed to Angelo Dalmi and attempts to deliver it himself:

Mamma Teresa, scrupolosa dei suoi doveri di portinaia, e orgogliosa della correttezza che le aveva procurato la stima di tutti gli inquilini, non aveva mancato di appioppare a quel “diavolo” [Paolo] qualche scappellotto, chiamando in aiuto, per un rimprovero, perfino il silenzioso marito. (61)

The narrator’s use of language here, suggesting that she has resorted to asking (even) her reserved husband for help, indicates that Mamma Teresa is indeed the parent in charge. She is at once the disciplinarian, the primary caregiver to her family and responsible to others outside the home, in her capacity as *portinaia*. She is the first mother figure that we have encountered in the literature under analysis who actually has agency.

Tommaso’s apparent subordinate role in his own home is highlighted again when Paolo, intrigued by Dalmi’s reclusiveness, asks his mother (not his father!) if he can invite him to Christmas dinner at the Negri household. Out of respect to her husband she asks him, and he:

“passava il ferro da stiro sopra una giacca appena rammendata, sussurrò senza sollevare il capo: ‘Quel che fai tu, Teresa, è ben fatto’” (64). Both Tommaso’s response and actions evince his submissive role in the household. Not only does he relinquish the decision making power of the household to his wife, but he is ironing as he does it, perhaps the least possible masculine activity in an era when speed, power and strength were heralded as defining male qualities. It is as if he completely surrenders his natural (fascist) right, as husband and father, to rule the home to his wife and brother. In fact, before allowing Paolo to deliver the invitation, Mamma Teresa decides to send Zio Federico with him, stating: “Se vai tu, Paolo, è un rifiuto quasi sicuro; l’invito acquisterà valore se Federico vorrà accompagnarti” (65). Tommaso’s rightful position as alpha-male is usurped by his brother, and at his wife’s behest. After this, he does not even appear again in the novel. This portrait of Tommaso serves as a criticism of the pacifist, as well as the non-virile, antithesis of the “new man,” which are one in the same in this case.

Zio Federico accompanies Paolo instead of Tommaso Negri because of his status as a World War I hero. This is established immediately, when Angelo Dalmi greets Zio Federico and Paolo at his door:

Nell’appartamento all’ultimo piano Angelo Dalmi li accolse con una cordialità inaspettata: mosse incontro al cieco e gli rese ambo le mani: “Voi mi fate onore.” Il cieco sussurrò: “Anche voi avete combattuto.”
 “Ero sul mare durante la grande guerra.”
 “Allora siamo camerati.” (65)

As already mentioned, what Tommaso Negri lacks is combat experience, and the exchange between Angelo Dalmi and Zio Federico confirms this. Dalmi greets his unexpected visitors so kindly because he recognizes Zio Federico as part of that camaraderie formed between the soldiers of the Great War. Paolo, perhaps because he is *naturally* fascist, is aware of his father’s shortcomings and thus rejects his father as the model “new” fascist man. He needs a more

masculine role model to help him cultivate his innate virility, and since his father cannot fill that role for him, he must look elsewhere. Therefore, his “search” for a positive virile influence leads him to identify with his uncle and also to seek out the upstairs neighbor, Dalmi; it is no coincidence that both men are war heroes. Thus, the authors’ message is clear: Zio Federico’s status as a veteran of World War I, regardless of his handicap, supersedes Tommaso’s role as husband and father. The contrasting roles of Zio Federico and his brother Tommaso is an interesting aspect of this novel. Further, the critical portrayal of a husband and father by two fervent supporters of the regime (Gotta and Visentini) is striking. I would argue that the novel proposes a solution to young males who have fathers like Tommaso Negri, that is, men who did not participate in the Great War or who are otherwise not representative of the ideal “new man.”

Although Zio Federico does not have children of his own, he functions as a father to his brother’s children. They adore him the way children should adore their own father, according to fascist rhetoric, and he engages with them as if they were his own children. Toward the beginning of the narrative the narrator tells us how Paolo and his siblings view their uncle:

Zio Federico era cieco di guerra...questa sciagura aveva improntato di pietà e d’orgoglio, di coraggio e di malinconia i cuori dei nipoti: conoscevano l’anima ipersensibile del cieco, erano i suoi confidenti, cercavano di inondare la sua ombra con la visione della loro chiara e promettente giovinezza. (10-11)

In contrast, the reader receives no such information about the children’s relationship with their actual father; indeed, that relationship is non-existent in the novel. They are proud of their uncle, and he has earned their respect and admiration in a way that their father cannot. Like the many adult male figures that appear in the novels in this chapter, Zio Federico bears the scars of his combat experience, which serve as a constant reminder to himself—as well as the reader—and those around him of the sacrifice he made for the Patria. The Great War was the defining

experience of a generation that brought about Fascism, as detailed in the first section of this chapter. Paolo and his brother Edoardo are growing up under the command of the Duce and are well on their way to becoming “new” Italians, but they need a strong male role model like their uncle to look up to. In a proud moment for Paolo, donning his *Balilla* uniform, he looks to Zio Federico for approval: “Il ragazzo si preparò...e si pose con piglio militaresco dinanzi al cieco: ‘Zio Federico, mi vedi?’ L’uomo protese le mani, le passò sul fez, s’indugiò sui galloni e disse con un sorriso che velava appena la profonda malinconia: ‘Ti vedo’” (21). This seems to be a moment that would be more appropriate for Paolo to share with his father. He cannot, however, because Tommaso is incapable of understanding the bond between the World War I veteran and the future soldier. The strong emotion evoked by Federico’s realization that Paolo is wearing his *balilla* uniform establishes their relationship as one based on a shared and strong love for the Patria. This moment is melancholic for Zio Federico precisely because he wishes he could still serve the Patria in some capacity, and in a way, he does. By serving as a role model to Paolo, he performs his duty as a World War I veteran to “transmit...a sense of pedagogy of masculinity to the next generation” (Bellassai, “Masculine” 317), and in doing so he fulfills a role that his brother cannot.

Another instance of Zio Federico’s father-like relationship with his niece and nephews occurs when Paolo’s sister, Anna, asks Zio Federico to help her make a doll for a sick friend. He explains to her that he carved wood in the trenches during the war to pass the time and essentially carved in the dark. Thus, carving as a blind man is no different. In this way, Zio Federico’s war experience directly allows him to relate to his young niece. While he makes the

doll, Anna sews the doll's clothes.⁴² This exercise with Anna results in a new hobby for Zio Federico, who decides to make dolls for all the sick little girls at the *Casa del Sole* in Ostia. When one of these young girls asks him for a *Madonnina*, he reluctantly carves the doll with trepidation and begins chanting *Ave Maria* for inspiration; miraculously his sight is restored.⁴³ The religious experience of praying and carving the figure of the Madonna cures his blindness, which suggests a re-birth for the war veteran. The family is overjoyed, though his brother is conspicuously absent from the celebration that culminates when Zio Federico sees his pride and joy for the first time:

Poi venne Paolo: tornava da un'adunata, ed apparve sulla soglia in divisa di Balilla, alto, vigoroso, con un ciuffo di riccioli sfuggenti sotto il fez: stette immobile, pallidissimo, sull'attenti, come un giovane soldato: e il reduce della grande guerra sgranando gli occhi su quella mirabile immagine dell'Italia nuova, comprese tutto il valore della propria rinascita. (182)

Significantly, it is the combination of Zio Federico's love for his country and faith in God that allow him to be reborn and made whole again, underscoring the importance of the relationship between the Church and the State. When Zio Federico finally sees Paolo dressed in his *Balilla* uniform, his young nephew appears to him as a symbol of the "new" Italy, but simultaneously reminds him of his younger self and his own contributions to the formation of the current state of the Patria. As a result of his profound faith, he will finally be able to see Mussolini's face; it had deeply troubled him that he could not imagine the Duce's face even though it had been described to him many times. In fact, the novel ends with an appearance of Mussolini, which has a very emotional effect on Zio Federico, and elicits a comparison to Caesar from the narrator: "quel volto, in pieno sole, traspirante un non so che di divino, come la statua di Cesare ch'egli

⁴² Anna's interest and practice making clothes for her dolls will train her to be a good *mammetta*, as she will one day have to care for her children and make clothes for them.

⁴³ The narrator does inform us at the beginning of the novel that Zio Federico's condition is psychological and not physical: "I medici dicevano che l'organo era intatto, e che la cecità era dovuta a un trauma psichico" (10).

contemplava attonito quand'era bambino" (190). Zio Federico is whole again, and so, in a symbolic showing he dons his military decorations.

The other key role model for Paolo, and the young reader, is Angelo Dalmi, the character whom Paolo actively seeks out in his search for a more virile father figure. Paolo spends a great deal of time with him in his upstairs apartment where he learns the details of his formation and the audaciousness of his youth. Dalmi recounts how he defied his father's wishes that he follow in the family tradition and become a *salumaio* and ran away to become a sailor in the navy. As a child runaway he had to rely on his *italianità* and athletic ability, noting that he would have been caught had he not been such an excellent swimmer: "era abilissimo nuotatore e poteva stare sott'acqua a lungo, passare tra le chiglie delle imbarcazioni, nascondendosi tra i pilloni, i gavitelli: meglio di un pesce" (77). At once, we are struck by Dalmi's courageous behavior as well as his athletic ability, particularly in such a modern sport. This account of Dalmi's audacious youth is significant because it is meant to recall Mussolini's own youthful ardor. The similarity is made evident through Passerini's description of the Duce's early years recounted in his autobiography, noting that his "carattere vivace, ribelle, vendicativo, l'irrequietezza fisica e morale sono annunciate dalle prime righe" (*Mussolini* 16). Dalmi's function in the novel is not only that of an exemplary "new man," but, in effect, he—young Dalmi—is a proxy for Mussolini. He has earned this status through his military service and combat experience in World War I.

Another similarity between Dalmi and Zio Federico, aside from their status as World War I veterans, is that they are both deeply religious men, again, highlighting the importance of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the regime. Zio Federico's prayer to the Madonna is answered with the restoration of his sight, leading to his conversion, or *rinascita*. We also

learn that Dalmi, as a young soldier in Libya, facilitates a conversion, resulting in the second miracle of the novel. These two conversions by divine intervention indicate that Fascism and Catholicism are collaborative entities in the shared goal of making “new” Italians.⁴⁴ As Dalmi narrates his adventures as a young man in Libya, he tells of his encounter with an African boy, Ahmed, with whom he develops a special relationship. Ahmed stows away on Dalmi’s ship, full of Italian sailors. Dalmi recounts that “il piccolo selvaggio” began stealing things from him and the other sailors. At a complete loss of how to communicate with Ahmed and to morally educate him, he turns to the Bible and teaches the young African the Passion of Christ:

Quando la regina nave toccò di nuovo Tripoli, Ahmed era trasformato: sapeva esprimersi in italiano, sia pure con zeppe di errori e con asprezza di pronunzia, rispettava la proprietà altrui e desiderava ardentemente diventare un bimbo di Cristo all’ombra del tricolore. (135)

Miraculously, after his exposure to Catholicism via the Bible, Ahmed can speak Italian, evidence of his successful conversion. Angelo Dalmi witnesses and facilitates the young Ahmed’s conversion to Christianity. Significantly, Ahmed will eventually become an *ascaro*, an African soldier at the service of the Italian military. The seeds of his eventual allegiance to the New Roman Empire are planted in this religious experience. The “miraculous” events that occur in this novel as a result of prayer, seen together with Raoul’s religious awakening in *Alza bandiera!* underscore the importance of the Catholic church to the Fascist agenda.

Soldatini d’ogni giorno, like the all the novels in this chapter, reinforces the significance of the World War I experience to fascist culture and the formation of the “new man.” As detailed above, both of Paolo’s role models are devout Catholics, indicating that piety is an important quality of the “new man.” After all, many of the qualities of the “new man” were not

⁴⁴ See section 1.2 for a discussion of the alliance between the Catholic Church and Fascism.

all that “new” or exclusive to Fascism; rather, they were appropriated by Fascism in its attempt to establish consensus.⁴⁵ Contrasting Tommaso’s weakness—physical and character—to his brother’s and Dalmi’s virile masculinity emphasizes the importance of World War I and military readiness for the salvation of their own generation as well as the formation of the generation growing up under Fascism. *Soldatini d’ogni giorno* recognizes that the presence of virile male models in society is crucial for the successful regeneration of Italians. Significantly, the title reinforces the centrality of military culture to Fascism and emphasizes that the regime’s main goal is to make soldiers out of boys. Acknowledging the necessity of virile male models in a book for children reaffirms the importance of the readers’ own models of masculinity in their everyday lives.

2.4 Conclusion

Life under Fascism portrayed in *Alza bandiera!* and *I piccoli diverranno grandi* makes use of the popular and successful fascist youth organizations to demonstrate just how good life is under Mussolini. While the ONB and summer *colonie* evince the regime’s self-proclaimed modernity, the exercise regimens and uniforms associated with these programs were meant to simulate the war experience, preparing male youth for the war that would one day come. In this way, the ONB activities serve as a substitute for the war experience especially in its goal of forming the “new man.” The fascist setting (1930s Italy), accordingly, allows for the possibility of conversions. While the protagonists of the World War I narratives are *naturally* fascist, in part, because they have the benefit of experiencing the war firsthand, the novels set in contemporary Fascist Italy tackle the issue of converting “deviant” children into “new” Italians.

⁴⁵ Interestingly, Gori argues “The cult of the virile male answered the consolidated instincts of an Italian society that was deeply sexist and strongly patriarchal” (“Model,” 47).

Naturally, the conversions take place through a combination of exposure to the regime-sanctioned entities and activities: the ONB (physical exercise), the summer *colonie* (sun and fresh air), the Catholic Church, modernity (*bonifica* and Italy's modern highways) as well as a healthy dose of fascist rhetoric. This remedy appears to be an effective means—according to fascist rhetoric echoed in these novels—of curing deviant (socialist) habits in children, transforming them physically and behaviorally. Significantly, conversions are only possible after the advent of Fascism, as the Duce was the necessary and ultimate model of masculinity.

In presenting a husband and father antithetical to the “new” fascist man, *Soldatini d'ogni giorno* breaks the pattern of the father-son relationships, established throughout this chapter. Instead, the novel promotes the formation of the “new” fascist man in a counter-intuitive way, by contrasting Paolo with his non-virile, pacifist father and in the process granting a more active role to mother figures. The novel is exceptional, moreover, for its pathetic portrayal of a husband and father figure, who is, without a doubt, the least virile man depicted in any of the novels under study. The novel's open criticism of Tommaso Negri's decidedly non-virile character and physique dismisses him as non-essential to either the narrative or the family. Indeed, his early exit from the novel is reminiscent of the insignificance of the mothers to the narratives of all the other novels discussed until this point, in which they are either dead or completely irrelevant. An important difference is that Tommaso Negri is relevant to the moral of the story; his character serves a significant purpose. That is, the narrative makes an example of Tommaso to demonstrate that not all men are “new men,” teaching young males to follow Paolo's example and seek out a virile model of masculinity in the community.

The novels analyzed in this chapter, while demonstrating the importance of virile masculinity to the successful formation of the “new man,” simultaneously function as pedagogy

of virility to the reader. Just as the protagonists of the novels seek out their virile role models, the protagonists themselves are presented as models for proper behavior and exhibit the desired qualities of the “new” fascist man to the young reader. Thus, these leisure-time novels transmit valuable lessons of Italian masculinity. In this way, these fiction novels work in tandem with the lessons learned in the fascistized schools and through participation in the ONB. In the cases where children were not already *Balilla* members, the literature that portrays contemporary life in modern Italy also encourages children to join their local *Balilla*. Thus, the presence of fascist rhetoric and ideology in leisure time literature aimed to form well-rounded, fascistized youth, all but ensuring his destiny as a “new man.”

Chapter 3

The New Woman

Nella sua brutale chiarezza, la rappresentazione fascista dei generi fornisce un esempio eloquente della dinamica di complementarità che è sempre insita nella costruzione normativa dell'immagine dell'uomo e della donna: l'esaltazione della mascolinità tradizionale ha un assoluto bisogno di fissare le regole di una femminilità che non rappresenti in alcun modo una minaccia per l'equilibrio tradizionale del potere, rispecchiandosi nella quale l'uomo trovi la conferma della propria indiscussa superiorità. (Bellassai, *La mascolinità* 94)

3.1 Introduction

Just as World War I was a significant turning point for the image of man and the development of the “new” Italian man, it was similarly significant for the role of women in Italian society. As Victoria De Grazia argues, World War I made women politically and nationally important. The consequences of the war brought women into the workforce where they experienced newfound responsibilities and liberties. Of course, these liberties were to be short-lived, because of Mussolini’s sexual politics, which among many other injustices towards women, resulted in a reduction of the female workforce to no greater than ten percent.⁴⁶ The liberated woman was not easily “re-domesticated,” but she was nevertheless sent back to the home to dutifully care for her husband and many children. De Grazia has observed that “men’s claims to citizenship were recognized insofar as they were producers and soldiers; women’s only insofar as they reproduced the species” (167). Indeed, among the regime’s chief concerns was the self-esteem of jobless men, provoking Mussolini to state as early as 1934: “With women replaced by men, legions of men would raise their humiliated heads....The very labor which in women causes loss of generative attributes, in men, brings out a powerful physical and moral virility” (Mussolini qtd. in De Grazia 173).

⁴⁶ In a decree-law dated September 5, 1938, the regime “ordered state and private offices to cut back female workers to 10% of their total staff” (De Grazia 166).

Despite its best efforts, the “new” fascist woman that the regime proposed and attempted to create was very different from the “average” Italian woman. The regime’s attempts to create the image of the “new man” were an effort to counter established pre-conceptions (regarding his military readiness and virility, for example) and provide damage control for the failures of Liberal Italy. With regard to the image of woman, the regime was fighting more of an uphill battle: popular culture and mass consumption. As De Grazia and Gori, among others, have documented, young women showed little interest in traditional female activities or in having large families.⁴⁷ Rather, they preferred modern activities of going to the movies, dancing, listening to jazz music and wearing the latest fashion trends from New York and Paris. The regime’s “highly ambitious and optimistic outline of the ways in which Fascism hoped to mould the bodies and minds of girls and young women, so that they could fulfill their prescribed destinies as models of the ‘new woman,’ never came close to being fully implemented” (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 107). To counter the popular foreign influences on young Italian women, the regime manufactured two diametrically opposed types of women: the *donna crisi* also known as *la maschietta*, “cosmopolitan, urbane, skinny, hysterical, decadent and sterile,” and the *donna madre* (*l’angelo del focolare*), “national, rural, floridly robust, tranquil and prolific.” Furthermore, their importance to the state was emphasized with hyperbolic names like: “bearers of numerous children,” “mothers of soldiers” and “procreators of the race” (De Grazia 73). Thus, the regime privileged feature films and novels that depicted the traditional, submissive

⁴⁷ De Grazia, referencing a 1937 survey conducted by Maria Dez Gasca of girls fourteen to eighteen, notes: “They were mostly uninterested in traditional female handicrafts such as knitting and sewing and they preferred dancing to singing, music and painting. Housework was regarded as tedious, if not repulsive, and ideas about having families of their own were ‘extraordinarily vague’... they regarded babies as burdensome, and thought births best limited to one or two, with a preference for daughters. Self-confidence rather than tractability was the virtue they prized most highly, and the ‘desire to command, rather than to obey’ was common” (119-120). Further, Passerini reports in her study of Fascism in Turin that many women often chose to limit the number of children they had as a form of passive resistance, precisely “to spite Mussolini” (*Fascism* 150).

angelo del focolare. Indeed, De Grazia has noted that novels for young women that portray the fascist image of the “new woman” were key to combating the image of the “modern woman” and the fashionable, desirable women portrayed in Hollywood films, fashion magazines and ‘cheap novels.’ (118).

Aware of the influence of mass culture and foreign trends, the regime had to contend with this image of the “modern woman” and attempted to make its model for women more appealing. From a very young age, girls were made to believe that their duty in life and contribution to society was limited exclusively to their ability to care for their homes and their families. Just as young boys were given the model of the Roman soldier to emulate, girls were also given a Roman image, whose behavior served as the ideal to be imitated. This is made evident by a young schoolgirl’s composition from 1939. Significantly, she is also a *Piccola Italiana*—the female equivalent of the *Balilla*. In her essay she makes clear her understanding of women’s duties in Fascist Italy:

Italian women must imitate ancient Roman women. They stayed at home to raise their children and educate them. They wove cloth and they cleaned the house. We should follow their example, stay at home, and clean, wash and cook. These are the duties of a real Italian woman. (qtd. in Gori, *Italian Fascism* 95)

There are two especially striking details about this passage; the first is the idea that the ancient Roman woman, much like the ancient Roman man, serves as a “modern” example of positive comportment. In seemingly every aspect of life under Fascism, the ancient Roman period remains the gold standard: the men were the virile ideal, and evidently, the women were the feminine ideal. The second noteworthy aspect of the passage is the definition of women who stay at home and make their domestic responsibilities their first priority as “true” Italian women. The implication, of course, is that girls and women who do not aspire to similar goals are less Italian

because they fail to fulfill their feminine duty. Therefore, the novels for young women and girls that promoted the “new” fascist woman are significant because they depict their positive qualities and also demonstrate their importance to the state and the future of the regime. Similar to the objective of the novels for boys analyzed in the first chapter, which were reacting against the sentimental male of the Liberal era, these novels also depict positive role models for girls in an effort to combat the image of the “modern,” “liberated” woman.

This chapter will examine two novels written by male authors that present models for young girls similar to the above-described *angelo del focolare*, who was completely dedicated to her family. Alessandro Berutti’s *Mammetta fascista* (1937) and Giuseppe Ernesto Nuccio’s *Il richiamo dei fratelli* (1934) can be classified as historical novels. They incorporate historical events to further enhance the “real” aspect of the plots as well as to advance the fascist political agenda, into narratives of simple, humble people. *Mammetta fascista* closely follows the events of Italy’s Ethiopian invasion, while *Il richiamo dei fratelli* constructs a plot surrounding the 1930 Vulture earthquake. I argue that these real, historical events are included simply to promote fascist propaganda and tout the state-controlled social services provided by the regime for the poor, active soldiers, veterans and especially single mothers and orphaned children. In the former novel, the focus is on the *Fasci Femminili* and the protagonist’s volunteer efforts. In the latter novel, the *Opera Nazionale per la Maternità e Infanzia* (ONMI)⁴⁸—founded in 1925 and reorganized in 1933—is essential to the survival and well being of the two young, orphaned protagonists. Furthermore, the gendered perspective of the authors regarding the development and treatment of female characters is significant and will be detailed throughout the analyses of

⁴⁸ “The main focus of its services were women and children who fell outside the normal family structure. These were typically unwed mothers, impoverished widows, and married women whose husbands, because they were disabled, jailed, or otherwise absent, could not support them. It also proposed...to care for abandoned children up to age eighteen” (De Grazia 61).

these novels. The differences in their depictions of young women will become increasingly evident when compared with those models presented by female authors in the final chapter.

3.2 Mothers for the Patria: *Mammetta fascista* and *Il richiamo dei fratelli*

Girls and young women must be prepared to worthily perform their duties as wives and mothers: it is essential for young women to be prepared to organize and manage the household, raise children, and assist their relatives if the need should ever arise.⁴⁹ (qtd. in Gori, *Italian Fascism* 104)

Alessandro Berutti's *Mammetta fascista* (1937) deals with the hardships of a poor, humble family and the resolve of a young woman, Delfina, who is approximately fifteen years old, to care for her family and raise her young siblings after the death of both parents. The novel opens with the death of her father as a result of a mining accident and the death of her mother 48 hours later, again continuing the theme of orphaned children in literature for children from this period. Immediately following the funeral, Delfina moves her family from France where they had been living, to return to Italy, their ancestral land.⁵⁰ Once repatriated, she becomes increasingly involved with the *Fasci Femminili*. The novel is realistic in its following of the events of the Ethiopian War, as well as its inclusion of real fascist organizations and the protagonist's participation in those organizations. Furthermore, the illustrations are black and white photographs, as if to lend further credence that the events and people of the novel are all real. These staged photographs give a "documentary" feel to the novel and are an important aspect with regard to its alleged representation of reality. At the same time, there is also a fairytale element to the novel: in the end, Delfina is rewarded for her dedication to her family and the state, as well as for her overall selflessness, with a husband and a son of her own.

⁴⁹ Article 7, 1931 Rulebook of *Le Piccole Italiane*.

⁵⁰ This detail is not insignificant, especially with the additional information that Delfina's father was a World War I veteran. Much like in the novel *Alza bandiera!*, (see section 2.2) it is a safe assumption that Delfina's father was driven to France to find work during the economic crisis in Italy following World War I.

This novel, similar to those novels for young boys, focuses on “gente umile e forte,” thus, reinforcing the *strapaese* culture and propaganda of Fascism.⁵¹ In the preface, Piero Gozzetti states that the novel celebrates “l’esaltazione della forte e dolce femminilità della montagna, dal Fascismo plasmata per le più conquiste dello spirito,” concluding: “ogni cuore di fanciulla vedrà risplendere le proprie speranze più belle—d’italiana, di sposa e di madre—nella luce di *Mammetta fascista*” (2). Thus, the preface is explicit in relating the novel’s aim: that girls and young women follow the example set by the protagonist of this novel and dedicate their lives to their families and the Duce. Delfina’s character is constructed as a role model, in the vein of the *angelo del focolare*, for young girls and women to look up to and ultimately imitate.

The detail that Delfina’s family lives in France is significant, not only regarding Fascist policy on emigration, which actively recruited Italian émigrés to return to the motherland, but as Gori notes, also recruited their children to attend the summer *colonie*:

The regime paid special attention to children of the numerous Italians who had emigrated. From 1927 onwards they were regularly invited by the PNF to spend holidays at seaside or mountain resorts in Italy. The main objectives of this program were to maintain close ties between emigrants and their native country, and to bring up the children in Mussolini’s ideology so that eventually they could help to teach the rest of the world “to believe, to obey, to fight.” (*Italian Fascism* 117-18)

She further notes that these *colonie* presented opportunities for “ideological manipulation of young people” (116). This is especially significant for children, like Delfina, who would have grown up outside the Patria and emphasizes the regime’s far-reaching goals of inculcating all Italians in fascist values, regardless of their country of residence. Indeed, in the novel, much is made of the fact that Delfina and her siblings return to their ancestral land because they are going to live among their people, Italian fascists. “[Delfina] rivide la sua Italia, la Patria Fascista, con

⁵¹ See section 1.2.

una gioia grande in cuore...” (38). The narrator clearly emphasizes the importance of returning to Fascist Italy, thus subtly reminding the reader that when Delfina’s family left Italy, the advent of Fascism had not yet occurred.

The above-mentioned details are further significant for the novel because it is revealed that Delfina was sent to Italy to attend these summer *colonie*: “gl’insegnamenti avuti alle Colonie Fasciste le ritornarono in mente; e tale ricordo le servì d’incentivo per accelerare i preparativi della partenza, per il ritorno nella Valle dei suoi, presso la nonna” (34). Upon returning to Italy, Delfina and her siblings move in with their grandmother, however, it is clear that Delfina is completely capable of caring for her siblings, in part because of her exposure to fascist ideology through the summer *colonie*. The author specifically states that Delfina is responsible for the domestic duties, and that she is the caregiver for her younger siblings, not their grandmother: “[Delfina] prende possesso della cucina...e da quella sera, la buona vecchietta non dovrà più avvicinarsi al ‘fuoco’” (42). Since Delfina’s new responsibilities require her to become the *mammetta* to her younger siblings, the obvious connection is that the lessons she had in the *colonie* taught her how to be a good mother. The regime’s primary concern for women was that they become good wives and mothers.

Once the family re-establishes itself in the small Italian Alpine village, we are told that Delfina frequently stops by the *Fascio Femminile* to ensure that needy families receive the necessary help. Again, the narrator emphasizes her maternal skills as a caregiver. She not only looks after her own family, but the community members, as well. An interesting point here, is the way the narrator describes her actions, insisting on Delfina’s domestic, and thus, feminine qualities:

La nostra eroina pare nata per svolgere tale compito. Non è una fata, un essere soprannaturale, no: è una donna, una giovine donna fascista...il suo carattere è stato maturato dal dolore e dalle responsabilità, ed è illuminato dal suo grande amore per il DUCE rinnovatore della sua Patria. (54)

Similar to the way in which the warrior instincts of the Italian man are emphasized in the novels for young boys, the narrator here emphasizes that the domestic duties that Delfina carries out so effectively come *naturally* to her. The understanding is that a woman is in her *natural* state when caring for people. Thus, we are once again reminded of Mussolini's famous quote: "La guerra sta all'uomo come la maternità alla donna." However, De Grazia argues that interpretations of service, similar to those that Delfina performs, were divided along gender lines. That is, men thought of it as "subordinate and auxiliary," while women "conceived their involvement in social work, much as they had before fascism came to power, as a means of modernizing female roles in the family and the society" (98). In addition to Delfina's maternal instincts and qualities, her love for the Duce is also credited for her ability to not only deal with the grief of having lost her parents, but her ability to care so lovingly and effectively for her siblings. The narrator's description reinforces the idea that a woman's sole purpose in life was to serve as a caregiver, and, therefore, Delfina is simply fulfilling her destiny. Further, the Duce, indirectly receives credit for Delfina's actions, as well as her character. The narrator would have his audience believe that the Duce is solely responsible for creating a society where it is possible for a young woman like Delfina to exist. Interestingly, as in the quote above, it should be mentioned that "DUCE" always appears written in the text in all capital letters, an act of reverence usually reserved only for reference to God, himself. This usage for Mussolini equates him and his effect on people like Delfina and on the country, in general, to God-like.

Although the Duce does not make a physical appearance in the novel, he nevertheless becomes a prominent figure in the household, both literally and figuratively. An effort, no doubt,

to reinforce the family's humility, we learn that Delfina decides to wallpaper the house in newspaper clippings, including images of Rome and of the Duce:

appeso alla parete di fronte, una grande fotografia del DUCE, nell'atteggiamento del saluto romano; e tanta è l'espressione del suo maschio volto volitivo che chi entra, istintivamente, sente il bisogno di salutare....Luciano e Gustavo, i quali, dopo l'apposizione della fotografia, più non si affacciano sulla porta di casa senza salutare rispettosamente, prendendo la prescritta posizione....(50)

This description highlights the Duce's general ubiquity in Fascist Italy.⁵² Falasca-Zamponi notes that the Duce's image was not only present in many Italian homes, but similar to these fictional characters, his image was venerated: "Mussolini's omnipresence colonized people's lives... Millions of postcards and photographs of the Duce, for example, became part of home décor..." (78). She goes on to argue that the Duce's omnipresence was meant to effect a God-like similarity; he was in all places at all times, observing his people. In the case of Delfina's family, the Duce's "presence" also serves another purpose: Mussolini effectively becomes the "man" of the house, and he, thus, functions as a father figure, especially to Delfina's younger brothers.

Delfina exhibits the qualities of the "new" fascist woman, not only in her dedication to her family, but also in her loyalty to the Duce and the state. She is involved with the local *Fasci Femminili* and writes letters to the soldiers from her village serving in Africa. Indeed, she is a perfect example of what De Grazia calls "a remarkable new hybrid" because "she served her family's every need, yet was also zealously responsive to the state's interest" (77). Her dedication to the state culminates in the *giornata della fede*. On December 18, 1935 women

⁵² In fact, Gori notes that more than "30 million postcard pictures of Mussolini" were in circulation during the Fascism ("Model" 47). Further, Italo Calvino's essay "The Duce's Portraits" relies entirely on his memory of images of the Duce and how these images changed during the course of Fascism. Passerini also describes how "la figura di Mussolini fu sottoposta a processi di gonfiamento ed esaltazione, in una crescente produzione letteraria e pubblicità di svariati livelli, ma nella maggior parte non imposta né direttamente sollecitata dal regime, bensì dettata da motivi di opportunismo o di convinzione personale degli autori stessi" (*Mussolini* 79).

across Italy donated their gold wedding bands to the Duce, following the example of Queen Elena and Donna Rachele. The humble and loyal characters of the novel are no exception and although Delfina does not have a wedding band of her own, she donates those items most precious to her, the gold wedding bands of her late mother and grandmother:

Vuole offrire alla Patria gli unici oggetti d'oro che ella possiede, e che pure le sono tanto cari: la 'vera' della Madre e della Nonna. Tutte le buone montanare della frazione...il mattino del 18 dicembre dell'Anno XIV, freddo mattino di neve e di tormenta, vengono a cercarla, per scendere in capoluogo. Ognuna di esse sente la bellezza del gesto e dell'offerta; tutte sono fiere di compiere questo gesto, che assurge a valore simbolico e che è garanzia di resistenza e di vittoria. (96-7)

The inclusion of the details of the *giornata della fede* in the plot is striking, even for a novel whose aim is to create a model of the *donna-madre* type for young women to imitate. Certainly many young girls witnessed their own mothers and female relatives donating their wedding rings, thus, the fact that the characters of a fictitious novel also heed the Duce's request is rather significant to the young reader and is an example of art imitating life. The entire purpose of women donating their wedding rings to the fascist state was an act of propaganda, devised by Mussolini and the regime as a way to maintain women's relevance to the state; this act of benevolence secured women's "entry as full-fledged citizens onto the stage of national history", sealing "a new union between Italian women, their families, and the fascist state" (De Grazia 78). Including *la giornata della fede* in the narrative, then, reflects the regime's attempts to merge the public and private lives of Italians. More significantly, it is an attempt by the author to further exploit the historicity of the novel, as well as his own political agenda, which is to encourage fascist culture by depicting female characters who are dedicated entirely and simultaneously to the state and their families.

The significance of women collectively donating their wedding rings to the state within the narrative and in history symbolized a union, of sorts, between women and the state. In fact, Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi described the symbolism of this day as a wedding between Mussolini and the female population of Italy: “In exchange, the Duce distributed his own little iron rings, as if he had become *Husband* who was leading women to a second marriage, *a mystic marriage...*” (72). We can take this analogy even further when we consider that Mussolini asked Italian women to procreate for the benefit of the fascist state, specifically male babies who would *naturally* become soldiers.⁵³ Fascist policy with regard to women was meant to encourage her to “abbracciare gioiosamente i ruoli della brava e ubbidiente massaia e della patriottica fattrice di futuri soldati” (Bellassai, *La mascolinità* 95).

Of course, what brought about the *giornata della fede* were the economic sanctions imposed against Italy for its bombing of Ethiopia, a fellow League of Nations country. After these sanctions were imposed, the regime advocated a policy of economic autarchy, which remained in effect for the duration of Fascism. Mussolini’s tireless portrayal of Italy as a victim was no different in the face of these sanctions. Indeed, not only did the Duce show no remorse for the bombing, he remained defiant, continuing to defend his actions with his rhetoric and paint those nations who voted to levy sanctions against Italy, as the proverbial “bad guys.”⁵⁴ The

⁵³ De Grazia notes: “As early as 1930, it [the regime] set out to habituate mothers to the idea that their offspring belonged to the nation and that in case of war they had to be sacrificed to its well-being. The dictatorship thus combined paternalism in the familiar, humanitarian sense with a murderous, abstract claim on the lives of dependents; it obsessed about the privileged bond between mothers and children, and then brutally violated it” (110). She also adds: “Any legitimacy the dictatorship may have acquired from its humane treatment of children was undercut by Mussolini’s brutally frank admissions that more soldiers was the main objective of his campaign for more babies” (112).

⁵⁴ In a 1936 speech, Mussolini declared: “Nel quinto mese dell’assedio che rimarrà nella storia d’Europa come un marchio d’infamia, così come gli aiuti materiali e morali forniti all’Abissinia vi rimarranno come una pagina di disonore, l’Italia non solo non è piegata, ma è in grado di ripetere che l’assedio non la piegherà mai. Solo una ignoranza opaca poteva pensare il contrario” (qtd. in Susmel 27: 242).

narrator's comments here, which are presented as Delfina's own opinion, mirror Mussolini's rhetoric regarding the sanctions and constitute pure Fascist propaganda:

Quasi tutti gli Stati d'Europa, per non dire del Mondo, paiono porsi contro di noi, cercando di ostacolare l'azione del DUCE; anche quelli per i quali i vecchi combattenti avevano prese le armi, ed erano corsi alla frontiera per combattere nella Grande Guerra. Soltanto coloro che furono i nostri avversari sui campi di battaglia (guardate qual contrasto e quale amara constatazione!) si schierano, oggi, al nostro fianco... Il disconoscimento dei nostri buoni diritti da parte di certi stati, a fianco dei quali combattemmo, e taluno dei quali fu salvato dalla sola nostra entrata in guerra, indispettisce tutti, specialmente Delfina....(82)

The narrator's thoughts on the economic sanctions are interesting not only because they mimic Mussolini's rhetoric, but also because they expose young girls to the current political situation while providing them with a model of what they should think about the sanctions, insisting on the idea that Italy was simply a victim. Indeed, Delfina's interest in the domestic and political repercussions of the Ethiopian war appear to be historically accurate, as De Grazia observes: "Women played no identifiable economic role...until the Ethiopian war. In the wake of the sanctions, there was a surge of interest: suddenly women were pivotal to the household as consumers, as well as producers of goods and services!" (83). In effect, Delfina is a model for young girls because of her exemplary behavior, as well as her conservative values regarding the family, the state and politics.

Delfina has more than proved herself worthy of the title "new woman," the only component missing is a husband. Of course, by the end of the novel Delfina will be a dedicated wife as well as a mother. Significantly, she will have brought a baby boy of her own into the world. Upon his successful return from Ethiopia, Giovanni, a young man from the village, whom Delfina has known for many years and with whom she corresponded while he was in Africa, asks for Delfina's hand in marriage. On their wedding day:

I due formano veramente una coppia eccezionale: lei in costume valligiano, lui in divisa coloniale....E quanto maschia e fiera la figura di lui nella divisa di milite coloniale! Idea geniale e significativa quella di ripudiare, per la circostanza solenne, i vestiti alla moda cittadina, per ritornare alla tradizione degli avi! (145-6)

The emphasis on their traditional and humble wedding attire, again, underscores the importance of the characters' simplicity and purity (Figure 5 p. 116). Similarly, Delfina's young brothers are dressed in their *Balilla* uniforms, while her sister wears her *Piccola Italiana* uniform. These details stress not only the humility of the characters, but also highlight their loyalty to the state, while emphasizing the ever blurring of the line between private and public, family and state. Additionally, the reader is meant to infer from the narrator's comments that these characters, unlike city-dwellers, are entirely uncorrupted by the dangers of the modern city. Their preference for simple and military—in Giovanni's case—wedding attire that recalls their ancestors is appropriate given the period of austerity caused by the economic sanctions against Italy. The narrator's comments here, stress the *strapaese* propaganda promoted by the regime. This is no coincidence since the anti-urban/ ruralization campaign and the demographic campaign were two sides of the same proverbial coin, as Mussolini reiterated during his Ascension Day Speech in May, 1927:

Ma voi credete che, quando parlo della ruralizzazione dell'Italia, io ne parli per amore delle belle frasi, che detesto? Ma no! Io sono il clinico che non trascura i sintomi e questi sono sintomi che ci devono far seriamente riflettere. Ed a che cosa conducono queste considerazioni? Primo, che l'urbanesimo industriale porta alla sterilità le popolazioni; secondo che altrettanto fa la piccola proprietà rurale. Aggiungete a queste due cause d'ordine economico la infinita vigliaccheria morale delle classi cosiddette superiori della società. (qtd. in Susmel 22: 366-67)

In examining the narrator's comments and Mussolini's own words, the similarities between the two are evident. That is, there is a direct correlation between the corruptness of the modern city and its inhabitants. Specifically, they claim that the luxuries of modernity have made "city folk" lazy and sterile. Instead, the rural people who hold onto traditional values are more

(re)productive.⁵⁵ Naturally, Mussolini's rhetoric did not account for socio-economic differences between upper and middle-class city dwellers and the poorer families who remained in the countryside, especially with regard to pro-creation. Indeed, pointing to socio-economic factors, De Grazia argues: "ruralization exploited the safety net of kin solidarity. It both presumed and enforced family togetherness, the beleaguered head of family drawing in unpaid female and child labor in the homes, the fields, and small rural industries" (85).

Furthermore, the narrator at the end of his description of Delfina and Giovanni's wedding, observes: "Simpatica, l'immagine del Legionario africano che viene a rapire la bella montanina, come ai tempi dei cavalieri antichi!" (146). The imagery the narrator provides is that of the knight in shining armor, here substituted and "modernized," to appeal to the youth of the time, by a Colonial soldier, coming to save the young, virginal maiden. This description is clearly meant to evoke the fairytale tradition/fantasy of the prince who rescues the young maiden. This use of fairytale imagery further emphasizes the necessity of a husband in fascist culture, in general, and also with regard to the specifics of the narrative. Even though throughout the novel Delfina is an exemplary mother to her younger siblings, she needs a husband to provide her with a child of her own and, more important, to complete the fascist fairytale. In a sense, it is almost as if Delfina is too capable on her own, and the narrator must reduce her independence by equating her to a helpless maiden awaiting the arrival of her prince who will marry her and, thus, legitimize her. Furthermore, this use of the fairytale imagery functions as a narrative device to further establish identification between the female protagonist and the audience. After all, most young girls want to be the fairy princess of their favorite tale. Thus, at

⁵⁵ Horn writes: "Women were lured from the home and domestic duties by jobs that promised financial independence...In both medical and social scientific discourse, the city was seen to denaturalize and defeminize women, just as it emasculated men, even at the level of the physical body....The city was objectified as the medical, moral, an existential antithesis of the countryside" (98-9).

the end of this fairytale, an obedient and loyal young woman, the image of perfection, is rewarded for her patience and exemplary behavior with a husband and child of her own.

The narrator's over-the-top praise of Delfina's maternal instincts and domestic qualities is very telling of the male perspective of women's role in society. Similarly, in *Il richiamo dei fratelli*, Giuseppe Ernesto Nuccio depicts two adult female characters whose maternal—and even angelic—behavior set up certain expectations of women in society. Although women are the heroines of the stories, the “incredible” feats they accomplish remain in the domestic realm. While the young male protagonists experience adventures, the women are treated as precious commodities, essential to maintaining the health and well-being of Italian children.

The title of Nuccio's 1934 effort, *Il richiamo dei fratelli*, refers to the arrival of the fascist brethren to help the community of Melfi after the earthquake that struck the Vulture region in the summer of 1930 destroys the *casa* ONMI. The narrative, however, is concerned with celebrating the maternal image of woman; while the protagonists of the novel are two orphaned brothers, Francesco and Lillo, the true heroes of the story are women. Although the novel cannot be defined strictly for a gender specific audience, the image of the “new woman” portrayed sets up certain expectations of women for young boys and girls, alike. On the surface, it is an adventure story, but upon closer inspection, the novel deals with and celebrates elements fundamental to fascist society, specifically the home and the family, of which the “new woman” reigns supreme.

Passerini has linked the cult of the mother, celebrated in fascist culture and throughout this novel, to Mussolini's devoutness to his own mother. In Mussolini's autobiography, his reverence and admiration for his mother is unmatched, and after her death, he practically revered her as a saint: “My greatest love was for my mother. She was so quiet, so tender and yet so

strong. Her name was Rosa” (Mussolini qtd. in Passerini, *Mussolini* 93). Passerini observes: “Ecco il ritratto di una madre: tranquillo silenzio, tenerezza e forza, sempre pronta a dare e a sacrificarsi, ripagata dall’ ‘amore più grande,’ di egoismo e osmosi, che la privilegia al di sopra di ogni altra donna” (93). Mussolini’s mother, then, can be interpreted as the ultimate model of femininity in fascist society, just as Mussolini, himself, serves as the pinnacle of masculinity and virility. Although Gori argues that the image of the “new woman” was rather abstract, in part, because “no woman had enough personal charisma or power to embody it convincingly” (*Italian Fascism* 59), I would argue that the most likely candidate to take on this role is the quasi-beatified image of Mussolini’s mother. The significance of modeling the “new” fascist woman after his own mother reinforces the idea that a woman’s most valuable service to society was in her reproductive capabilities, maternal instincts and domestic responsibilities and subconsciously highlights her responsibilities to Mussolini himself. Only in her fulfillment of these areas could a woman be understood as successfully contributing to fascist society.

The novel opens with our protagonists, Francesco and Lillo, wandering the countryside and sleeping outdoors; we immediately learn that Francesco had promised his dying parents that he would care for his younger brother. However, Francesco does not possess the skills necessary to function as a surrogate parent for Lillo. He is not *la mammetta fascista*, Delfina. Indeed, only a few pages into the novel, the brothers are separated. Amid various adventures, they will eventually be re-united, underscoring the importance of family. Throughout the novel, there is the ever-present promise of a home, and family, which will ultimately be fulfilled by the state through the social services offered by ONMI. The children and female characters are entirely noble. The heroines, Mamma Alba and Maria Rosa, are celebrated as saintly women, not only in their actions but also in their appearances. At various points Mamma Alba and Maria Rosa are

compared to saints, fairies, princesses and the Madonna herself. Adjectives connoting otherworldly goodness like *bianca*, *capelli d'argento* and *beata*, are used to describe these women, who even appear with *l'aureola* of golden hair, again emphasizing the angelic quality of the mother figure. These unique women must also be cared for, which the Duce does through ONMI. On the other hand, the adult men, Don Cesare and Mastro Vanni (Maria Rosa's husband) are both selfish, the latter to a criminal extent. Indeed, Vanni will attempt to commit two robberies in the novel: the first when he tries to steal a silver coin from Lillo and the second when he attempts to break into the treasury of the *casa* ONMI. In the latter case, his actions are especially deplorable because he not only attempts to commit a crime against some of the most unfortunate people in Italy ("gente povera e umile"), but also against the state, since ONMI is an organization funded and run by the fascist state.

In her review of the book for *L'Italia che scrive*, Emilia Santamaria Formiggini describes the novel as an exuberant celebration of the social services provided by Fascist Italy and of the women that run these agencies:

Nuccio si propose col 'Richiamo dei fratelli' di mostrare che tutto il bene viene all'Italia dal fascismo: bimbi ricoverati, madri sostenute, vittime del terremoto dissepolti e soccorse... Insomma, i tipi che qui agiscono stanno alla realtà spirituale degli uomini come le gote paffute e rosee e il sorriso della minuscola bocca di graziosissime bambole stanno al viso vario e vivo delle loro piccole padroncine. Basta, però, mettersi in mente che non si è davanti alla vita, ma ad una scena—la quale deve necessariamente ricorrere a tratti schematici e vividi per dare a distanza l'illusione della vita—per trovare il libro gradito. (1: 12-13)

Significantly, Santamaria Formiggini emphasizes the importance of the "real" qualities of the novel and its relationship to the novel's portrayal of Fascism, noting its promotion of fascist organizations and the good that they bring to Italy. What she neglects to mention in the review is the important role that the women protagonists play in helping the fascist state to achieve its lofty

goals of serving the underprivileged. The role that women play in these organizations and in the novel, while relegated exclusively to the domestic sphere, is fundamental to the plot and to the salvation of the young orphaned boys at the center of the story.

It is made clear from the onset of the novel that ONMI does not exist purely because of maternal benevolence, rather it was born out of the Duce's massive will, as the *Balilla* Angelo, Mamma Alba's son, who befriends Lillo states:

Chi comanda e regge l'Italia ha voluto che le madri povere fossero assistite come le donne più care alla Patria. E lo stesso ha voluto che si facesse per i fanciulli. Nessun fanciullo italiano, di quelli che non hanno i genitori, deve più patire o fame o freddo o abbandono. A migliaia vengono raccolti e curati amorosamente, e tutti trovano una casa e una madre e tanti fratelli. (21)

Even though this novel celebrates women and their maternal instincts, Mussolini still receives credit for the good works performed by the women who manage the various ONMI centers across Italy, and as mentioned above, the promise of family is evident in this quote. Indeed, shortly after Angelo introduces himself to Lillo, who is upset because he cannot find Francesco, he is reassured that he and his brother will be reunited, but also that there is a family waiting for him at the *casa* ONMI. Angelo tells Lillo: "Stai certo che verrà. Attendilo con pazienza e ricordati che c'è una mamma e una casa che ti aspettano... e anche un fratello, anzi tanti fratelli!" (22). Angelo, as a *Balilla*, is a symbol of the social good that the regime provides for young children. Further, the grounds of the *casa* ONMI are described as a magical place, while the *Balilla* who live there are specimens of the physical superiority of the Italian race:

Un largo viale, che pare cosparso di polvere d'oro, guida alla grande casa quadrata, tutta bianca, sulla quale svetta una grande bandiera tricolore tra due fasci littorii. Attorno alla casa corrono, a cerchi concentrici, viali dorati anch'essi chiusi da siepi di rosmarino: tra un viale e l'altro, aiuole, dappertutto, dalle quali balenano piccole fiamme multicolori: sono i fiori sui quali il sole batte la sua bacchetta magica intrecciata di fili d'oro. In ogni aiuola un *Balilla* dalla tuta turchina, il torso e le gambe nude e scure come il bronzo,

irrigidito sull'attenti fa il saluto romano reggendo nella destra un rastrello o una falce.
(50)

The *casa* ONMI is portrayed as a dream come true for orphans. Here, children are rewarded with a large and loving family, but are also given the opportunity to live in a magical place provided for by the Duce and the hard work of women like Mamma Alba. Aside from the streets dusted with gold and the general magical description of this place, what is also noteworthy is the physical description of the *Balilla*, whose image is likened to that of bronze, which speaks to their level of fitness. Clearly, these boys are well-nourished and well-cared for, their tanned skin and muscular torsos and legs are evidence of their physical well-being.

Lillo wants to bring Francesco with him when he goes to live with Angelo and the other *balilla* at the *casa* ONMI; so before accepting Angelo's invitation, he decides to go find his brother. In his search for Francesco, Lillo encounters Mastro Vanni who attempts to steal his silver coin, Lillo's sole possession. Through a series of misadventures, Lillo and Francesco are reunited, however, Lillo falls ill with a fever as a result of the attack. Don Cesare, feeling guilty for having let Lillo leave with Vanni in the first place, takes the brothers in. Maria Rosa, "la moglie sventurata del carrettiere Vanni," (40) is pregnant and convinces the brothers and Don Cesare to not report Vanni's actions to the police for fear that she and her unborn child will be indirectly punished for his crime. Furthermore, she attempts to pay for her husband's transgressions: "Maria Rosa, sapendo Lillo ammalato, si era messa a curarlo con amore grande. Ormai, tutte le mattine, veniva a preparargli il desinare, a rassettargli la cameretta e la sera a fargli recitar le preghiere..." (40). On one hand, Maria Rosa's actions can be interpreted as penance for her husband's crime; on the other hand, she is simply fulfilling her maternal destiny and putting her instincts into practice. Of course, her actions on behalf of her husband are all for

naught, as he will once again attempt to commit a criminal act when he tries to break into the treasury of the *casa* ONMI.

When Angelo returns to the inn to take Lillo and Francesco to the *casa* ONMI, Don Cesare lies about the brothers' whereabouts. Maria Rosa protests, but Don Cesare reminds her that they have to pay their part for what happened to Lillo, since they both feel somewhat responsible for his misadventure with Mastro Vanni. Don Cesare feels guilty because he let Lillo go off alone with someone who he knew to be less than honorable, and Maria Rosa feels the need to make-up for her husband's actions. Furthermore, both Don Cesare and Maria Rosa had grown fond of taking care of Lillo, and the boys had grown fond of their caregivers, even calling Cesare "papà Cesare." Don Cesare is childless and he uses Lillo's presence and illness as a way of becoming a father. Although Maria Rosa is pregnant, she attempts to fulfill her maternal instincts by caring for Lillo as if he were her own son. However, the little family that they have created is not sanctioned by the regime; therefore, it cannot continue to exist. Don Cesare and Maria Rosa are not married and Maria Rosa is pregnant with her husband's baby. This is an inappropriate family with regard to fascist and Catholic values, and it is certainly inappropriate in a children's novel that such an unorthodox family might function; thus, they must be broken up. Since Francesco and Lillo have no family, they will be "adopted" by the Duce and Fascism, that is, they will be taken to the *casa* ONMI and cared for by the state. Quite literally, the state retrieves the brothers and takes them into custody: because of Don Cesare's continued refusal to let Lillo and Francesco leave with Angelo, two members of the Fascist *Milizia* are sent to retrieve the boys on behalf of the Director—Mamma Alba—of the *casa* ONMI. Eventually, Maria Rosa, since she is a single mother, will also be taken into the *casa* ONMI.

This last detail brings up an interesting point regarding the regime's stance on women's role in society. A critical function of ONMI, in addition to caring for orphaned children, was also to provide for single and unwed mothers. In the case of the narrative, Maria Rosa falls into the former category, however, this service provided by ONMI implies a contradiction in the regime's own propaganda regarding women's *natural* maternal role. De Grazia observes that these government services implicitly: "cast doubt on whether women were naturally the best nurturers, especially when the women were unwed, delinquent, or simply impoverished." Furthermore, she argues that these social services "silently undercut the control traditionally exercised by female kinship and community networks over childbirth and infant nurturing" (60). Indeed, De Grazia's comments highlight how the regime's actions sought to eat away at the social fabric, blur the line between private and public lives and destroy any sense of solidarity or independence in a community. Mussolini was meant to be the sole caregiver for the Italian people, upon which they were entirely dependent.

The night that Vanni attempts to rob the poorest and most unfortunate people— orphaned children, single mothers and the women who care for them—Lillo and Angelo immediately recognize the culprit. Their first thought, however, is not to attack Vanni or to secure the contents of the treasury, but rather, to provide for the safety of their new family and especially their "mother," Alba. Lillo e Francesco gather their newfound "brothers" and run to Mamma Alba's side to protect her. She awakes to find herself "dentro la corona dei suoi coraggiosi figlioli armati d'amore!" (56). The image of these small children protecting their surrogate mother is noteworthy for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, it highlights the ultimate importance, according to propaganda, of the function of mothers to fascist society. Furthermore, the "crown" that surrounds her is meant to remind the reader of the crown that the Virgin Mary

wears. Therefore, a comparison is being drawn between Mamma Alba and the Madonna. Lastly, the children prove their warrior instincts by protecting their “mother,” while underscoring the importance of family over material goods. The significance of their decision to protect Mamma Alba, and not the money and jewels kept in the treasury should not be underestimated; they understand the importance of mothers. Significantly, as emphasized throughout the novel, mothers and mother figures are necessary for the ultimate success of the fascist state.

To further emphasize Mamma Alba’s beatific qualities and general benevolence, Lillo describes her in the following manner:

[Lillo] non poteva capacitarsi come la mamma di Angelo, la padrona della “casa dei fanciulli,” fosse ancora più bella e più buona di come egli l’aveva immaginata. Una principessa pareva, anzi una fata. Aveva nel viso, negli occhi, in tutta la persona, fino nel gesto delle mani lunghe e sottili e nel tono della voce una bellezza e una bontà...forte, energica, che pareva potesse trasformare le cose cattive in buone, le tristi in gioiose. (45)

Maria Rosa also elicits comparisons to the Madonna. When reminded of her own imminent motherhood: “si illuminava tutta di dolce speranza nel viso, così soave come quello di certe Madonne antiche dipinte su tele scure” (44). Furthermore, because her child is due to arrive close to Christmas, her newborn serves as the baby Jesus in the manger scene at the *casa ONMI*.⁵⁶ Indeed, Christmas morning after the birth of her son, Maria Rosa seems to have been re-born herself, becoming a mother to a child of her own: “Mi sembra d’essere diventata regina! Ci fosse mio marito! Diventerebbe tanto buono!” (61). The elevation of the image of the mother to immortal levels highlights the hyperbolic sentiment of the male author toward women’s role in

⁵⁶ Interestingly, Gori notes: “The demographic policy was celebrated with a special day dedicated to maternity and infancy in general, and to the most prolific Italian mothers in particular. In 1933 it was decided that this celebration would take place on 24 December, in order to emphasize that to be a mother was both a secular duty for the Fatherland and a religious vocation comparable to that of the Virgin Mary herself” (*Italian Fascism* 62).

fascist society.⁵⁷ Further, Maria Rosa's belief that becoming a father would make her husband a better man, supports the fascist ideal that men needed to father children to truly be considered the "new man." Combined, these details serve to emphasize the importance of children to fascist ideology and society.

The summer following the birth of Maria Rosa's baby is when the Vulture earthquake hit, on July 23, 1930. The earthquake provides the background for Vanni's redemption and subsequent death. Upon arriving to help the victims of the earthquake at the *casa* ONMI, Vanni tells Francesco: "Queste mie creature mi hanno richiamato fin qui. Salvarle voglio e poi morire qui, tra queste rovine" (66). Vanni does not get the opportunity to save Maria Rosa and their child; instead he helps free Lillo from the rubble, knowing full well that he must sacrifice his life to save the young boy. Vanni summons "i suoi sforzi inumani" (70), and ultimately saves Lillo. Finally, Vanni redeems himself by sacrificing his life to save the very person against whom he committed one of his gravest transgressions. However, to fully pay for his sins against his wife, Lillo and the state, Vanni must die. However, it is a noble and just death, and he dies literally with a smile on his face; only in death can Vanni be reborn.

As evinced by the necessity of Vanni's redemption through the ultimate sacrifice, the adult males in this story are far from the ideal "new man;" their physical descriptions alone communicate this message. Don Cesare is short, overweight and generally unkempt, especially when compared physically to the members of the fascist *Milizia* who confront him (Figure 6 p.117).⁵⁸ Vanni is described as "tozzo" and "rossiccio come un demonio" (55). They are both

⁵⁷ This tendency in fascist society in general, was no doubt informed, at least in part, by Mussolini's own relationship with his mother.

⁵⁸ As discussed in chapter 1, soldiers were understood as the pinnacle of Italian masculinity and were the embodiment of the "new man."

incredibly selfish: Cesare exhibits this tendency in his attempt to keep Lillo at the inn with him, even though it is not in Lillo's best interest, while Vanni's greed leads him to attempt robbery twice. These dysfunctional male characters contrast greatly with the benevolent female figures of the novel, highlighting that the role models of this story are exclusively women.

In addition to providing the set up to Vanni's redemption and death, the earthquake serves another function in the narrative: it allows Mussolini's benevolence and superhuman ability to care for each and every one of his citizens to be celebrated once more. Black Shirts report to the site of the earthquake as quickly as possible to lend humanitarian aid to the villagers and, especially, to the inhabitants of the *casa* ONMI. Don Cesare states: "Colui che da Roma guarda all'un capo e all'altro d'Italia, ha sentito col suo cuore immenso il nostro richiamo e ha dato il comando" (72). The King, himself, comes to survey the area and the damage caused by the earthquake, and upon meeting la signora Alba and her brood, invites them to Rome, indicating that the Duce has invited them:

Il Re entrava. Aveva sul volto pallido il sorriso buono di chi accorra alla sua casa a ritrovar la sua famiglia colpita dalla sventura per rincorarla. Scattarono in piedi i piccoli e tutti si tenevano le mani e Angelo e Lillo che erano vicini a Mamma Alba, da una parte e dall'altra, tenevano le sue, strette. Il Re giunse. Vide quella lunga catena di amore; sorrise e venne alla signora Alba.

"Tutti questi figlioli?"

"Sì, figlioli dell'Opera Maternità e Infanzia, figlioli d'Italia...."

"Verranno con me. Roma li vuole...." (79)

The Duce, as we are often reminded in this novel, is responsible for all of the good in Italy. In the case of the earthquake, he is credited for the arrival of the Black Shirts, as well as for the invitation extended to the children of the *casa* ONMI to Rome. Indeed, when the King says "Roma li vuole," it is clear that "Roma" refers directly to the Duce. Further, Mamma Alba refers to the children as children of Italy, that is, of the Duce. Thus, we are meant to interpret this

command as Mussolini calling for his children. To ensure that none of this meaning is lost on the young reader, Mamma Alba recounts the story of Mussolini's 101 wounds received during World War I and of his famous encounter with the King in the infirmary: "Sapevano tutti chi era quel bersagliere che non si lamentava per le sue cento e una ferita e che, poi, per l'Italia, aveva fatto e faceva tante cose grandi, belle e buone!" (80). While Mussolini does not make a physical appearance in the novel, his (omni)presence is felt throughout.

Even in a novel that praises women's role in fascist society and her importance to the state via her maternal and domestic responsibilities, the reader must still be reminded of who Italy's true hero is: Mussolini. The novel's unrelenting celebration of women and juxtaposition of them with unsavory male characters is somewhat overshadowed by the constant reminder that it is Mussolini, the father of all Italians, who actually provides for Italy. The insistence at the end of the novel that Mussolini's sacrifice for the Patria is far greater than any other, serves to remind the reader why he is the Duce. Despite the Duce's show-stealing final act appearance, the novel's message with regard to women's primary function in fascist society should not be forgotten. The narrative is especially effective in promoting women as selfless servants for the betterment of the Italian population and to help the Duce create a nation of "new" Italians.

3.3 Conclusion

The image of woman presented in *Mammetta fascista* and *Il richiamo dei fratelli* by prominent male authors is consistent with the image of the "new" Italian woman promoted by the regime. Delfina, Mamma Alba and Maria Rosa are depicted as completely and simultaneously dedicated to their families, their communities and the Duce. Interestingly, dedication to one's husband in both of these novels is de-emphasized. Rather, the narratives

focus on a mother's relationship with her children, the community and the Duce. For example, Delfina does not marry until almost the end of the novel and Alba's husband is completely absent from the narrative. Only Maria Rosa's husband is present throughout the narrative, and his is a cautionary tale. Perhaps the lack of emphasis on husbands can be attributed to the fact that these are stories for children, who can relate to the relationships between mother and child depicted in the novels.

Further, the absence of fathers combined with the Duce's presence in both novels is certainly meant to emphasize his function as father to all Italian children. Indeed, the Duce's role in these stories is outsized, simultaneously underscoring his importance to the Patria and individual families, again blurring the line between private and public. In the story of *Mammetta fascista*, the image of the Duce watches over and "protects" Delfina and her younger siblings. Her young brothers dutifully salute his image upon entering and exiting the home. Thus, it serves as a constant reminder of the Duce's capability of caring for all Italians. Throughout the pages of the novel, the reader sees DUCE written in all capital letters, again, underscoring his God-like qualities. In *Il richiamo dei fratelli*, the novel's title is a direct reference to the Duce; it is he who calls the fascist brothers into action to help the earthquake-ravaged town of Melfi. Additionally, he brings the children of the *casa* ONMI to Rome, sending the King to deliver the message, no less. While the novels praise the domestic duties of women, they nonetheless celebrate the Duce and all the good that he has brought to Italy.

Another way in which the Duce, or at least his policies, influences the narratives of the stories is the fact that each protagonist has a child of her own—a son in every case—in addition to caring for children who are not their own. This detail is a not-so-subtle reference to the demographic campaign and highlights the importance of producing male offspring, who would

become future soldiers of Italy. The fact that each of these fictional women has a son is, I argue, further evidence of the bias associated with the gender of the author. These details are especially important since these novels appear to be aimed at a primarily female audience and because the female protagonists are presented as positive role models whose behavior should be imitated.

The novels written for young women by women that I will discuss in Chapter four present entirely different images of young women than those depicted in the novels by Berutti and Nuccio. In the novels explicitly for young girls, written by women, the maternal aspect of the novels' protagonists is completely missing, with the exception of the final novel, *Il focolare* (Del Soldato, 1929). These young girls participate in adventures, while still proposing acceptable images of the "new" fascist woman. Del Soldato's novel returns to the maternal image, while providing a more liberated image of woman than any of the other novels I encountered in my research.



Nella chiesetta alpestre la cui porta d'entrata è fiancheggiata da due caratteristiche piante montane, Delfina, attorniata dai tre fratellini, vede benedetta la sua unione con Giovanni Reynaud.

Figure 5. Delfina and Giovanni wed. (*Mammetta fascista* 144)



Figure 6. Don Cesare denies to members of the Fascist *Milizia* that he knows the whereabouts of Francesco and Lillo. (*Il richiamo dei fratelli* 45)

Chapter 4

Women Writing for Women

[L]e preoccupazioni del regime sulla “devianza” femminile [che] riguardavano...molto più le giovani donne della piccola e media borghesia urbana (le categorie più a rischio di perversione), che non le operaie o le contadine, utili all’economia per i loro bassi salari e non altrettanto trasgressive sul piano della femminilità. Così anche in Italia si poteva osservare, a partire della metà degli anni venti, la diffusione di acconciature ‘alla maschietta’, di una moda più disinvolta, di un nuovo e più spregiudicato utilizzo del tempo libero (balli moderni, automobili, sigarette) da parte di esponenti non più solo dell’aristocrazia, ma anche della borghesia urbana. (Bellassai, *La mascolinità* 96)

4.1 Introduction

The modern, urban, bourgeois woman that the above quote refers to was an undesirable product of modernity and closely resembled the 1920s American flapper. She was thin, wore short hair and makeup, shaved her legs, wore pantyhose and the latest Parisian and American fashions and was seen as a threat to Italian masculinity, traditional Italian values and most notably, the family unit. The regime devoted a great amount of attention to her, demonizing her and denouncing her and the danger she presented to Mussolini’s gender politics. She had several names, most notably: *maschietta*—because of her physical resemblance to men⁵⁹—and *donna crisi*, or crisis woman. As Bellassai observes, this modern woman, who according to the regime was in a constant state of “crisis,” because of her alleged rejection of traditional values, was identified by what she wore, where she lived, what she did and how she looked. Indeed, the adoption of these modern and foreign practices was more common in the city, since that is where most of these so-called crisis women lived, as the city notoriously provided a space for female

⁵⁹ Citing Meano, Paulicelli observes that the *maschietta* was especially problematic for the regime because “it was no longer possible to tell women’s age and status. This was a case of gender trouble that had the effect of subverting the perception of the social hierarchy then in place that was organized according to age, gender and class” (37).

emancipation: she could work, go out and meet men, far from the protective gaze of the family.⁶⁰ Thus, a wide generalization of the negative image of the modern woman—as opposed to the “new woman,” who was “modern” only as defined by the regime—is that she was a bourgeois, city inhabitant and a far cry from the lionized rural housewife (*la massaia rurale*). Interestingly, Wanrooij notes that the adoption of these foreign trends became increasingly popular in the 1920s, at the same time certain ways of dressing ceased to be a means of differentiating between social classes. Thus, bourgeois women adopted modern and foreign means of distinguishing themselves, fashion-wise and also with regard to personal hygiene practices, from the lower classes.⁶¹

Fascist popular culture, mostly in the form of cinema, routinely denounced the various “types” of the modern woman the regime had identified, from the *maschietta* and crisis woman to the *femme fatale*.⁶² The *femme fatale* or “bombshell,” unlike the *maschietta* was ultra-feminine and sexy, therefore, not feminine in the matronly sense, which was idealized by the regime in the form of the *massaia rurale*. Mussolini and the regime were especially bothered by the non-traditional (non-matronly) appearance of these types of modern women because it allegedly indicated non-traditional values. Indeed, the harshest criticism that the regime launched against

⁶⁰ Gundle confirms that “the growth of cities, service industries and modern entertainment was leading women towards ideals of self-fashioning and independence that conflicted with their conventional confinement to the domestic sphere. Modern notions of womanhood which were geared to the public sphere and involved the consumption of goods like cosmetics, clothes, magazines and cinema were sustained by advertising agencies, big stores, magazines and entertainment” (80).

⁶¹ [P]er tutto l'Ottocento la donna borghese aveva confermato attraverso un 'gioco di apparenze', basato su segni visibili—quali una pettinatura particolarmente elaborata, la crinolina, il cappello ecc.—l'identità sociale della sua classe... La crisi economica del dopoguerra obbligò i ceti medi ad adottare un abbigliamento meno dispendioso, accessibile anche a strati più bassi della popolazione; come risultato, il modo di vestire diventò sempre meno segno di distinzione sociale. È vero d'altra parte che nello stesso tempo le cure fisiche vennero acquistando un significato nuovo: attraverso una maggiore attenzione per l'igiene intima, la depilazione e l'uso di cosmetici il corpo della donna veniva rimodellato e trasformato in un nuovo simbolo di status sociale... (Wanrooij 90).

⁶² *Gli uomini che mascalzoni* (Camerini, 1932), *Terra madre* (Blasetti, 1931), *I grandi magazzini* (Camerini, 1939), *La signora di tutti* (Ophuls, 1934) are all films that denounce, in one way or another, the modern woman, who is influenced by foreign trends and styles.

the *maschietta* was that she was sterile. Her “infertility” was deduced from her thin, boy-like/adolescent frame. Instead, the *femme fatale*’s failure to produce many children was blamed on her cosmopolitan lifestyle and selfishness. The regime, in its attempt to eradicate these unwanted images of the modern woman, waged an all-out cultural war. In 1931, Gaetano Polverelli, head of the regime’s press office gave the following order to newspapers:

La donna fascista deve essere fisicamente sana per potere diventare madre di figli sani, secondo le regole di vita indicate dal Duce nel memorabile discorso ai medici. Vanno quindi assolutamente eliminati i disegni di figure femminili artificialmente dimagrate [sic] e mascolinizzate, che rappresentano il tipo di donna sterile della decadente civiltà occidentale. (Polverelli qtd. in Cutrufelli et al, 163)

In fact, as a result of the regime’s order Gino Boccasile’s famous ultra-feminine, yet modern, drawings of women for the magazine *Le Grandi Firme*, featuring the *signorina Grandi Firme* were banned during the 1930s because her image was said to be the result of the influence of foreign cultures on Italian women. She was tall and thin, with an impossibly slim waist and disproportionately long legs. In short, she presented an improbable female body, which was also contrary to the ideal body type proposed by the regime, that is, a rounder figure with large bosoms and broad “child bearing” hips.⁶³ Her common sin with the *maschietta*, according to the regime, was the improbability that such a figure could bear children. Stephen Gundle remarks, “her pin-up qualities made her an idealized version of the secretaries and shop-girls who could be found on Italian streets” (81).⁶⁴ This image of woman, therefore, glorified and idealized an image that was contrary to the one favored and proposed by the regime, even though this style was popular among everyday Italian women, as Gundle’s comment suggests. He also points to

⁶³ Indeed, Gori reports that: “Mussolini himself led a battle in favor of ‘feminine fat’ and encouraged physicians to convince their women patients, especially those living in the cities and therefore more likely to be in touch with dangerous foreign fashions, that slimness was unhealthy while being comfortably heavy was a sign of good health” (*Italian Fascism* 171).

⁶⁴ Gori notes that: “Boccasile was allowed to go on providing portraits of beautiful young women for posters and magazines, but they had to be more modestly dressed and had to have dark brown hair. Once again the regime was trying to change reality by simply denying it...” (*Italian Fascism* 180).

“cinema and the press” as “powerful influences and also sources of the negotiation of new models of appearances and behavior” (81).

The *signorina Grandi Firme* was not the only image of the modern woman to be banned. As indicated above, any image of the crisis woman or the *maschietta* that glorified her as an object of desire was banned from being reproduced in magazines and newspapers. Of course, images and cartoons ridiculing her were permissible. Also banned from publication was mention of the slim physique of female Hollywood stars “in the name of upholding Italian standards of health and maternity” (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 171). In fact, at the root of the regime’s campaign against these modern images of women was the fear that they would not reproduce, either by choice or because a certain lifestyle rendered them sterile.⁶⁵ Therefore, both the “sterile” *maschietta* and the voluptuous Hollywood bombshell (*femme fatale*) were derided by the regime in favor of a more “traditional” woman:

They [Hollywood film stars] wore relatively large amounts of make-up, had beautifully slender bodies and were self-confident, but they were less tomboyish than the fashionable women of the previous decade. In Fascist Italy, however, the regime’s demographic campaign and its increasingly close relationship with the Church...led it to favor a totally different, supposedly indigenous model, that of the “true woman” with a curvaceous body who was loyal to traditional aesthetic standards, was modest and graceful, and was capable of producing numerous children. (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 169)

Aside from their perceived lack of fertility or lack of desire to reproduce, what these images of the modern women also have in common is their social status. As previously mentioned, for the most part, it was the bourgeois woman of the city who embraced the latest fashion trends and was able to afford the lifestyle where such behavior was welcomed. Significantly, these women also produced fewer children (De Grazia 46). The more traditional image of woman that the

⁶⁵ “[T]he Mediterranean model of flourishing and modest womanhood, symbolized by broad hips and round breasts [supposedly] favored maternity” (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 60).

regime advocated was the rural housewife who tended exclusively to her domestic responsibilities and, thus, did not have the time or means for the frivolous lifestyle of the modern woman.⁶⁶

Interestingly, the debate revolving around women, lifestyle and fashion choices had a direct result on the uniforms of the organizations for young girls and women in Fascist Italy, specifically the *Piccole Italiane* and *Giovani Italiani*. As a backlash to the modern styles of fashionable and bourgeois women, their skirts became longer and were paired with button-down shirts tucked into the skirts with a simple black tie. Gori notes that these uniforms emphasized the feminine qualities of these young girls; that is, they highlighted their hips and breasts (*Italian Fascism* 169). While the uniforms were otherwise very drab, Gori further notes that they differed greatly from the militaristic style of the *Balilla* and *Avanguardisti* uniforms, “presumably to make as clear a distinction as possible between gentle femininity and ‘hard’ masculinity” (*Italian Fascism* 169). However, after 1937 and the various military interventions in Spain and Ethiopia that Italy became involved with, the uniforms of these organizations were changed once again, in favor of a more militarized style (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 177).

This discussion about the negative image of the modern woman in 1930s Fascist Italy is crucial to understanding the type of woman with which the female protagonists of the novels I analyze in this chapter are juxtaposed. That is, none of the novels under study in this chapter present the undesirable “modern” woman described above. However, her existence in society is acknowledged, and therefore, the idea of this negative woman becomes important to the narratives. Thus, to better understand this abstract presence in the novels, it is helpful to

⁶⁶ Precisely the image proposed in *Mammetta fascista* and *Il richiamo dei fratelli*.

understand the negative connotations associated with the “modern” woman and the regime’s disdain for her. The three novels I analyze in this chapter, *La via del Falco* (1934) by Luisa Maria Fehr, Olga Visentini’s *La conquista di Albanara* (1934) and Camilla Del Soldato’s *Il focolare* (1929) propose non-traditional, yet acceptable models of comportment for young girls. The models proposed are non-traditional in the sense that they are not mothers or caregivers. Further, the value of these novels lies as much in the protagonists that they portray as in their criticism of the modern, fashionable and frivolous woman: the crisis woman. The protagonists of the first two novels, Lalla (*La via del Falco*) and Marilena (*La conquista di Albanara*), differ from those discussed in the previous chapter in that, these young female protagonists do not find themselves in situations in which they must become caregivers or mother figures. Mothers and fathers are entirely absent from these narratives, continuing the theme of orphaned children in children’s literature from this period. Only *Il focolare* includes parents in the narrative, and even in this case, the children are effectively orphaned after the father abandons his family and the mother falls ill. *Il focolare*, which I discuss in the last section of this chapter, is a protest novel in which the female voice is clearly privileged. The young protagonist, Elisa, finds herself with the burden of caring for a sick mother and an ungrateful older brother. While this last novel protests the status quo of gender relations under Fascism, in the end, the power dynamics of the family are restored and, thus, it ultimately does not question fascist ideology to a dangerous point.

La via del Falco, the first novel I consider in this chapter, is best described as romantic fiction/formation novel for young women. Lalla’s struggle to remain true to her Italian identity is challenged by the presence of the modern/bourgeois (negative) woman. The labeling of this novel as romantic fiction/formation novel is significant because it provides an acceptable model

for young women and girls. It clearly depicts what constitutes appropriate behavior and appearances, while also contrasting it with what is not proper comportment. *La conquista di Albanara*, is essentially a formation novel in which, Marilena, a young spoiled *milanesina* is sent to live with her elderly and wealthy distant relatives in a rural setting, where she must adapt to a more “traditional” lifestyle without all the modern conveniences of the city. Significantly, both novels depend on dichotomies regarding the different types of women and the types of models the novels propose. The authors juxtapose their protagonists with flawed, and even forbidden types, suggesting that if you’re not one, you’re the other. That is to say, if the reader does not follow the positive example set by the protagonist, she runs the risk of turning into the negative model, whose presence in the novel serves simply as a juxtaposition against the protagonist’s positive behavior. In both stories the young female protagonists come dangerously close to imitating or becoming the wrong kind of girl/woman. However, in the end they make the correct choices that put them on paths to stay true to their Italian heritage and identity and become the “true” woman, promoted by fascist propaganda. At the same time, Lalla and Marilena are both realistic models for young girls, whose actions are both believable and entirely imitable.

4.2 New Models for the New Woman: *La via del Falco* and *La conquista di Albanara*

Nowadays *chic* means to be a woman who is flat-chested, skinny and pale (the opposite of a rural woman’s ruddy complexion), with an eternally adolescent body. Women cut down on their meals, swallow pernicious pills and adopt other malignant expedients in order to obey this tyrannical and arbitrary fashion. (Mario Pompei qtd. in Gori, *Italian Fascism* 171)

The sixteen year-old Lalla “comes of age” throughout the pages of Fehr’s *La via del Falco*. She and her two older brothers, Piero and Nanni, are motherless and abandoned by their father, when he decides to seek his fortune in Italy’s African colonies. After his departure, he sends a letter to his cousin, Roberto, who is a fisherman and owner of the boat, “Il Falco,” asking

if his children can join Roberto onboard. Thus, the entirety of the novel takes place onboard the boat or in port in Sardinia, where Roberto and the rest of his crew are headed for fishing season. The plot is rather slow and concentrates mostly on Lalla and her “schoolgirl crush” on Roberto. Her brothers and the other characters are all marginalized. As Lalla matures throughout the novel, Roberto begins to see her as less of a child and more of a young woman. Thus, he seems to accept her as a possible love interest. However, it is not just the age difference between Roberto and Lalla that stands in the way of the two becoming a viable romantic couple; rather, an enemy is identified, none other than the modern/bourgeois woman. From the novel’s onset it is apparent that Lalla will be competing against this “type” of woman—modern, bourgeois, flirt—for Roberto’s attention. To win Roberto’s affection she must resist the temptation to become like these women, who are representative of this negative model, and remain true to her identity.

In her review of the book in *Italia che scrive*, Emilia Santamaria Formiggini completely overlooked the novel’s negative portrayal of the modern woman, deeming the work: “tanto lineare e semplice, che corre il rischio di apparrire alquanto monotono.” She further noted:

S’imbastisce sì, nel corso di quei due mesi, un idillio tra il proprietario della barca e la sua graziosa ospite sedicenne, idillio a lieto fine; si dà una guardata superficiale a Cagliari; si seguono due o tre partite di caccia in territorio sardo desolato e affocato; ma è poco per trattenere di continuo l’attenzione. (6: 152)

While the novel may not be the most fascinating read ever, it is not an adventure novel, even though it takes place aboard a boat and includes a few moments of hunting excursions and suspenseful moments on the high-seas. The novel should be read as romantic fiction that would have appealed to girls a little younger than the sixteen-year-old protagonist. Therefore, what is important is that there is a happy ending to Lalla’s romantic ambitions regarding Roberto.

Naturally, her desire for Roberto is chaste and comes across as more infatuation than actual love. Nonetheless, as she matures throughout the pages of the novel, she also becomes more of a realistic romantic partner for Roberto, thus, resulting in the above-mentioned happy ending.

An interesting point regarding Lalla's viability as a romantic interest for Roberto is that her sexuality is downplayed or outright dismissed. Throughout the novel she is constantly referred to with diminutive adjectives, such as *piccola*, *piccina*, *bambina* and *bimba*. This is reflected even in Santamaria Formiggini's review of the novel, as she refers to Lalla as *graziosa*. This makes sense since sexiness and flirtatiousness were associated with the degenerate modern woman, who betrayed her Italian-ness to appear modern and fashionable. From the very beginning of the novel, we understand that Lalla will be juxtaposed against this modern, bourgeois flirt. Indeed, before setting sail Lalla observes a bourgeois family and the way the daughters attempt to attract Roberto's attention:

Gente modesta, borghesi di dentro terra impacciati e ridicoli nelle loro mascherature da spiaggia...la maschietta in capelli cortissimi e pantaloni arcobaleno, lo scamicciato, la mamma gelatinosa, coi figli impertinenti, nei lunghi accappatoi bianco-sporco, e la vergine matura che mangiava spilluzzicando, riservata e sentimentale....Gli occhi della maschietta e della vergine infiocchettata non lasciano il viso di Roberto.... (20-1)

Roberto's suitors are depicted in this disparaging manner throughout the entirety of the novel. These women are described through the critical eyes of Lalla. While she indeed criticizes them, at the same time, she is intrigued by them and by the fact that Roberto pays attention to them at all. Furthermore, these women are clearly depicted as dangerous entities whose presence and influence corrupt young girls, but may also corrupt a good fascist man like Roberto, who is depicted as very good-looking and the picture of masculinity.

Indeed, his appreciation for such women does not go unnoticed by Lalla. One day while running errands for the ship, Lalla is asked to pick up the mail from the post office while they are

docked at a port in Sardinia. She dutifully obliges, but is made rather jealous when she sees that there are letters for Roberto from foreign, female admirers: “L’indirizzo di Roberto era tracciato da una calligrafia alta, un po’ grossa, elegantissima, evidentemente femminile.... Il francobollo era svizzero, il nome di un ‘Palace’ famoso era scritto in caratteri blu...” (66). Even worse, the envelopes have been sprayed with a perfume. The description of these letters is inherently foreign, from the Swiss stamp to the use of the word *Palace*. Further, we are led to assume that the perfume is of foreign origin, since perfumes were associated mostly with bourgeois Parisian culture. The significance is that these are all foreign influences that, although they appear very elegant and glamorous, and it seems that Roberto has some sort of relationship with these women, Lalla must resist the temptation to adopt these foreign practices.

Lalla perceives these elegant and mysterious women as a threat, and in a moment of weakness she attempts to imitate them. While completing her errands and with the money leftover, she buys herself a small compact of perfumed powder and a lipstick. At first, these seem like rather innocuous purchases for a sixteen-year-old, however, they symbolize transgression and an adaptation of foreign trends.⁶⁷ Shortly after applying her powder and lipstick, a young officer approaches her and strikes up a conversation: “L’ufficiale pare un piccolo pavone che faccia la ruota, Lalla chiacchiera, ride, imita i gesti, gli sguardi di certi modelli di civetteria studiati con cura; le par d’essere cresciuta di un palmo... Oh, se Roberto

⁶⁷ Regarding the use of cosmetics: “The austere aesthetic of the ‘true woman,’ who also had to avoid make-up and coquetry, was predictably supported by the misogynistic Catholic Church and many possessive Italian men; it doubtless also resonated among poorer men who believed that their wives were spendthrift, as well as among the more fanatical female Fascists” (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 172). Gundle also notes that prior to the 1920s, cosmetics were the “prerogative of actresses and prostitutes... They signaled the rise of artificial beauty in which appearances were deracinated from milieu and morality” (82).

potesse vederla così!” (70).⁶⁸ Of course, she imitates the very behavior that earlier she found so abhorrent, in the hopes of making Roberto jealous. Indeed, when Roberto sees Lalla flirting with the young officer, he becomes upset. Upon closer inspection of the situation, he sees the powder on her nose and the lipstick “mal messo sulle labbra” (72) and throws both the lipstick and the compact into the ocean. Incidentally, Lalla’s attempts to make Roberto jealous and her inability to properly apply lipstick highlight her immaturity. Although it is unclear whether Roberto is jealous or simply upset to see a young girl for whom he is responsible acting in such a way, Lalla interprets his reaction as a jealous rage and is quite pleased with herself for being able to provoke such a reaction in him. However, at the same time, she realizes that she cannot compete with the glamorously chic women who can afford to stay in a *Palace* and spray expensive perfume on envelopes.

Indeed, the next time we see Lalla in a setting with bourgeois men and women, she is in her rightful place, no longer attempting to adopt the foreign and forbidden trends that she was initially drawn to. When Roberto and the rest of the crew of “Il Falco” receive an invitation to a party, Lalla realizes she has nothing to wear. Robertone—not to be confused with Roberto—part of the crew of “Il Falco” and Lalla’s confidant, takes her to the local shops to find a dress. However, their search is fruitless: “vestiti troppo carichi, troppo ricchi, e Lalla vi spariva dentro” (112). Bypassing the latest fashion trends, Lalla decides to buy material and sew herself a dress. Of course, in her homemade dress, Lalla is the “belle of the ball,” with a full dance card and compliments from urbane bourgeois women:

⁶⁸ The use of direct discourse here implies that not only is the narrator rooting for Lalla and Roberto, but that the reader should also be in favor of this union. It simultaneously establishes a familiarity between the narrator, the reader and the characters of the novel.

Come non s'accorgevano tutti che lei non era altro che Lalla, l'insignificante Lalla, l'insignificante bambina, trattata a rimbrotti e canzonature dai fratelli e dagli amici? e che il suo vestito non era una "toilette di Parigi" come aveva detto qualcuno, ma che era fatto con una stoffa da quattro soldi e che l'aveva cucito lei, con dei grossi punti maldestri, bucadosi tutte le dita, che ne portavano ancora il segno scuro? (117-18)

There are two interesting aspects regarding this quote and the scene of the party, in general. First, there is the obvious fact that although Lalla is not wearing an expensive, *haute-couture* dress from Paris, she is still the hit of the party among men and women.⁶⁹ This detail, of course, highlights her humble and traditional background and lifestyle, which is significant regarding fascist fashion policy, considering the regime paraded around women in regional costumes, which were "emphasized as a form of true *italianità*" and a "reinforcement of the 'true' rural Italian tradition as opposed to what was considered a 'dangerous' cosmopolitanism" (Paulicelli 21).⁷⁰ At the same time, this scene mocks these allegedly sophisticated people for mistaking an obviously homemade dress of inexpensive material for a piece of high fashion from Paris.⁷¹ Furthermore, this crowd is duped into thinking that Lalla is one of them, simply because she is dressed up and acts the part. Even she, Lalla, is surprised by the warm welcome she receives at the party and how easy it is to fit in: "Lalla è in centro di una piccola corte. Chiacchiera, ride, dice delle sciocchezze. Tutti si divertono, l'incoraggiano, l'applaudiscono.... E lei credeva che il sostenere una conversazione in società fosse una cosa difficile! Basta dire quello che càpita in testa e il successo è immediato" (118). The narrator's comments regarding Lalla's reaction to her acceptance at this party emphasize the novel's overall criticism of precisely this kind of social

⁶⁹ Interestingly, Gori observes that beginning in 1937 the regime banned all images of foreign fashions from magazines, even women's magazines which, previously, had continued to publish these fashions, but neglected to mention that they were of foreign origin (*Italian Fascism* 174).

⁷⁰ This is also related to the regime's policy of ruralization, see chapter 1.2.

⁷¹ Paulicelli notes that: "[...] valorizing at one and the same time the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, fascist policy on fashion was complex and contorted, a further complication came as the result of the social, political, and cultural transformations of social classes and individuals that took place in the nation as the process of modernization gathered steam in the latter fascist years" (26).

setting and behavior; it is all a farce. The novel, therefore, highlights the importance and need to return to more “traditional,” that is, fascist values.

The reader sees the consequences of Lalla’s “flirtatious” behavior when, during the party, she finds herself alone on a beach with a young boy. When he eventually tries to kiss her, she slaps him across the face, underscoring her immaturity despite her appearance. At that moment, Roberto comes over and teasingly tells her: “sei stata troppo civetta, tu, Lalla, stasera” (122). Although he makes light of the situation, there is truth to his statement and he makes sure his message gets through to Lalla. In fact, realizing that society life is not for her, Lalla asks Roberto when they will be returning to “Il Falco” and, thus, the ruggedness of life at sea. He promises her that they will be returning the following day, while confirming the dangers of parties, dances and bourgeois society life, in general, telling her: “ti giuro che in società non ti ci porto mai più” (123). The evening of the party serves to demonstrate the inherent dangers associated with bourgeois lifestyle and the non-traditional values that are associated with it. By showing that a young, impressionable girl like Lalla can be affected by the kind of people who are impressed by modern and foreign trends, thus, the novel attempts to reiterate the importance of traditional/fascist values.

Interestingly, yet not surprisingly, there appears to be a double standard regarding parties, social events and gender. Lalla is effectively told that she will not be going to any more parties and events, yet Roberto is still allowed to inhabit this world. The crew of “Il Falco” continues to receive social invitations and accept them, and while Lalla and her brothers are always invited, we are told that with the exception of the party described above, they do not attend these

events.⁷² As opposed to Lalla, who is deemed too delicate and impressionable for these social events, and is described as “una povera bambina di cui nessuno si cura,” Roberto is depicted in the following manner:

Roberto sembrava il centro di quella vita mondana. Ovunque appariva, quel suo corpo snello e alto, quel viso bruno cesellato come nel bronzo più puro, quegli occhi stellanti e l’alta fronte e il sorriso dei denti bianchissimi, attiravano su lui tutti gli sguardi. C’era una virilità ardente e spiritualizzata... (156)

Roberto is clearly the virile archetype of the “new” fascist man. What we also learn from this quote is that Roberto is capable of inhabiting both the modern, bourgeois world as well as the rugged life of a fisherman. He is not corrupted by the experiences of the former world or the people that inhabit it; he remains true to his humble roots and lifestyle, underscoring the ultimate superiority of men and, thus, the weakness of women. Further, based on this description, it is clear why women fawn over him and why Lalla becomes so jealous when other women vie for his attention, specifically, the modern *americanine* that are disparagingly described in the novel. In fact, shortly after the narrator paints this dashing portrait of Roberto, she affirms his disdain for the crisis woman, giving the young reader hope that he will ultimately choose Lalla. In a conversation with his dog, for which Lalla is present, Roberto declares: “[Lalla] è una buona bambina [...] a volte è un po’ sciocchina, si fa far la corte da tutti i bellimbusti più idioti [...] Le insengneremo noi a vivere [...] Niente balli, niente fronzoli, niente flirt. Questi van bene per le americanine d’importazione...” (163). Roberto mentions the activities of the crisis woman that the regime objects to because they are of foreign origin. Indeed, Roberto’s comments reinforce this idea by declaring that those pastimes are fine for “imported women,” or women who imitate foreign trends, but not for a genuine Italian woman, like Lalla. Roberto’s declaration of his

⁷² “Eran continui inviti a colazioni, a pranzi, a tè, a gite nelle ville dei dintorni. Lalla e i fratelli eran sempre compresi negli inviti, ma una sola volta avevan seguito gli amici, a un ricevimento in una villa vicino a Cagliari e l’esperimento non fu ripetuto” (154).

preference for the “true woman” is significant given that the novel’s aim is to promote a viable alternative model for young women to the modern crisis woman, who was rampant in popular culture in Fascist Italy, despite the regime’s best efforts.⁷³

By the end of the novel, we see Lalla completely transformed, in more ways than one. She has grown up and in the process become more confident in who she is and in the kind of person she wants to be. Interestingly, what Lalla wears throughout the novel is an indication of her growth as a person, or lack thereof. Just as the makeup was an indication of her immaturity, the homemade dress was a sense of her “coming into her own.” In the final episode of the novel, Lalla goes on a hunting excursion with her brothers and the crew of “Il Falco,” and is dressed in the following manner: “si vestì lesta, mise le lunghe uose [sic] di fustagno, comperate a Cagliari, la chiara camicetta maschile e si guardò con soddisfazione, allo specchio” (171). Lalla is dressed simply, humbly and appropriately for a hunting excursion. However, her clothes are also an indication of her maturity. She now understands that she does not have to imitate the *americanine* that flirt with Roberto. She knows that, like a good fascist man, he wants a “true” Italian woman, who will care for him and with whom he can have a family. The message is clear: men like Roberto ultimately do not settle down with crisis women; *those* women are not the marrying type.⁷⁴ As confirmation of Lalla’s transformation, her older brother observes the changes that have occurred in his little sister in such a short amount of time: “[Piero] non sapeva parlarle, non sapeva interrogarla, la sua bimba, che a poco a poco, come in un miracolo di

⁷³ “In Italy worries about United States cultural hegemony were especially disturbing. Domestic cultural production was unusually vulnerable to American competition, given Italy’s relative economic backwardness.” De Grazia continues, “not least of all, Americanized leisure threatened to transform Italian girls, making them masculine and independent like their American counterparts” (209). Further, Stephen Gundle notes that the United States “became the source of new ideas and models of behavior. This led to an ongoing cultural conflict in which anti-Americanism served as a filter through which modernity itself was evaluated and absorbed” (82).

⁷⁴ According to fascist propaganda, the alleged “‘easy ways’ [of the crisis woman] discouraged any serious wedding proposals” (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 170).

primavera, andava facendosi donna...” (181). Once Lalla has matured into a confident young woman, she is rewarded with Roberto’s undivided attention.

Although the novel is harsh in its criticism of the crisis woman, it still proposes a viable model for young girls that is neither a mother figure nor a caregiver. Lalla is a carefree young woman, and surprisingly, there are no expectations for her to care for her older brothers. This fact, in and of itself, is rather rare in literature for girls during Fascism. The potential for Lalla to eventually become a mother is not negated, and the novel seems to suggest that she is a “true” woman. Therefore, it is certainly significant that Lalla ultimately rejects the trends and lifestyle of the crisis woman and that she learns from her mistakes when she attempts to imitate them. Within the short time-span of the novel (two months) we see Lalla transform from an immature and capricious girl into a fine young woman, who understands the importance of “traditional” Italian values.

Another type of woman that the regime promoted in opposition to the crisis woman/ *maschietta/ americanina/ femme fatale*, was the athletic sportswoman. For the purposes of this study, the promotion of an athletic woman as a model of behavior is also a viable alternative to the mother figure/ *massaia rurale/ angelo del focolare*. Indeed, in Olga Visentini’s *La conquista di Albanara*, nine-year-old Marilena, a spoiled young girl from Milan learns to embrace life in the country and the joys of spending time skiing in the midst of nature, rather than in the movie houses of Milan. Interestingly, the novel’s title has a double meaning. It simultaneously refers to the fact that Marilena “conquers” the hearts of her stodgy old relatives in Albanara, but also that she does nothing short of revolutionizing the quiet town, encouraging the opening of a ski resort. The novel proposes participation in sports as a wholesome alternative to the corrupting activities of the city. Further, it is significant that Marilena is encouraged to engage in sports, instead of

playing with dolls or learning domestic skills that would function as training to help her one day maintain a household as an adult.

Naturally, the regime did not see the sportswoman and mother figure as mutually exclusive; on the contrary, participation in sports was seen as a way of increasing one's health, as well as demonstrating the physical fitness and superiority of the Italian race: "Fascism wanted girls to be healthy, strong and 'curvilinear,' rather than slim, so that they become respected mothers who bring up their children to practice the purest virtues" (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 177). Additionally, certain sports, such as swimming and skiing were promoted as positive ways to tone the feminine body, without making them hard and masculine.⁷⁵ Although women's participation and success in various sporting activities can be interpreted as a means of liberation and independence, it was also another way that the regime attempted to control women's bodies and produce a positive image of Italians abroad.⁷⁶ Indeed, Wanrooij argues that the implementation of competitive sports for men and women was "una risposta al bisogno di trovare nuovi modi per sottolineare la diversità dei sessi" (223). Therefore, not only did the practice of sports and exercise help build a healthy and fit nation in the eyes of Mussolini, it also helped to separate and delineate the sexes and their respective roles in society.

Further evidence of the regime's aim of using sports as a means to distinguish between the sexes and more explicitly carve out different models of comportment along gender lines,

⁷⁵ De Grazia notes that: "Pastimes such as skiing, tennis, swimming, horseback riding, or sailing were like piano playing for the nineteenth-century bourgeois young women; they enhanced social grace, offered occasions to meet eligible young men, and were part of a common modern upper-class style of life..." (220).

⁷⁶ Gori argues in the last chapter of her book: "Women's emancipation through sport under Fascism and after," precisely that through participation in sports, women found a certain amount of independence and liberation.

Gori makes note of the physical activities promoted by the ONB and ENEF (*Ente Nazionale per l'Educazione Fisica*):⁷⁷

During its brief existence the ENEF promoted a physical education program for schoolgirls that was completely different from the one for schoolboys, basing it on the notion that girls should develop grace, elasticity and aesthetic sense. The ENEF also tried to prevent girls from practicing sports that might induce them to want to imitate boys. (*Italian Fascism* 98)

As evinced in this quote, the regime was deeply concerned with the apparent “gender confusion,” which was a by-product of modernity. Effeminate men and masculine women went against the natural order of things, as far as Mussolini and the regime were concerned. At the root of the issue, again, was that this “gender confusion” based on physical appearance and/or lifestyle was believed to impede re-production. This belief is, perhaps, why the regime so desperately wanted to divide the sexes with regard to sports and athletics. Further establishing the differentiation in physical activity for boys and girls, Koon observes that the *Piccole Italiane*—the division of the ONB for girl’s between eight and twelve—engaged in activities and physical exercise that was meant to teach them mothering techniques: “the younger girls danced around poles or played at something called the ‘doll drill,’ passing in review holding dolls ‘in the correct manner of a mother holding a baby’” (97). She concludes that while military exercises for young boys were meant to forge the citizen-soldier, these exercises for young girls “clearly had a eugenic purpose: mass production of prolific citizen-mothers” (98). Since the *maschietta* was regarded as a “masculinized” woman, it is significant that as the regime promoted this feminized sportswoman, it simultaneously denounced the *maschietta*, thus juxtaposing the two types as mutually

⁷⁷ This organization was absorbed by the ONB in 1929 (Gori, *Italian Fascism* 96).

exclusive; the former was seen as healthy and fertile, while the latter was demonized and depicted as sickly and infertile.⁷⁸

Not surprisingly, outdoor-sports were especially advocated for girls and young women: “praise for sport and women is often justified by the fact that outdoor sports contributed enormously to the ‘improvement of the race...’” (Paulicelli 80). This is especially important for the novel in question precisely because the protagonist, Marilena, leaves the stifling city of Milan for the rural site of Albanara where she will become a champion of ski, converting the sleepy town into a ski-resort destination. The significance of skiing, as the sport of choice for Marilena is doubly significant since it is an outdoor activity, thus, allowing her to pass many hours outside in the fresh country air. Also relevant to our discussion is the fact that the city that Marilena leaves behind is Milan, because it was the city predominantly associated with the evils of modernity. Indeed, Horn notes that the regime depicted Milan as “the construction of the industrial city...a locus and generator of ‘artificial,’ ‘antinatalist,’ and ‘dysgenic’ practices...” while lauding “rural areas as spaces of health, ‘normal’ gender relations and ‘naturally’ high fertility” (16).” What I would especially like to highlight from Horn’s comment is the emphasis on “normal gender relations,” which, according to the regime, only take place in rural areas. That is to say, that the city is a dangerous place, in part, because of the confusion of gender relations. Since Marilena is a young girl, and thus, impressionable and susceptible to the corrupting environment of a city like Milan, she is whisked away to a “safer” place, a haven, far from the potential dangers of the city.

⁷⁸ “In fact, the *maschietta*...is moralistically condemned and considered out of fashion. Nevertheless, the changes in culture that had nurtured these new models of femininity did not completely disappear and the iconic message of females engaged in sports and outdoor activities exhibiting strong bodies inevitably suggested a dynamic vision of women” (Paulicelli 80).

As the review by Santamaria Formigginì in *Italia che scrive* confirms, Marilena serves as an exemplary model of behavior for young girls of her age to imitate:

La piccola Marilena... è anch'essa—a suo modo—una fanciulla ideale: generosa e così piena d'affetto, che potrà avere forse alcune sosia nel mondo, ma non certo essere superata. Però è almeno una vera fanciulla, fresca, spensierata, spesso irriflessiva, che non di rado dà qualche pensiero agli zii coi quali vive, ma dei quali piano piano conquista il cuore, tanto per merito delle sue qualità quanto forse dei suoi difetti... ella è così viva, gaia, piena di sorprese, che il racconto è sempre nuovo. E termina con un episodio così gentile, che commoverà certamente, facendoli migliori, i coetanei della decenne fanciulletta. (4: 108)

Indeed, Santamaria Formigginì's last statement reaffirms the aim of the novel: that the young protagonist, Marilena, serves as a positive role model. Further, the reviewer believes that by emulating her behavior, the young readers will become "better," that is to say, more well-behaved, and perhaps even better fascists. What she leaves out from her review is the fact that Marilena goes through a conversion. As my analysis will detail, Marilena transforms from a spoiled "product" of the city to the poster-child for proper comportment for young girls.

Marilena, like many of the child-protagonists and virtually all of the female child-protagonists included in this study, is an orphan. The novel recounts that her father, an officer in the Italian army, died, presumably in battle, and that her poor mother essentially worked herself to death in a tiny apartment in Milan. Therefore, Marilena ends up in an orphanage where her father's wealthy, yet distant relatives—the Noiraghi—come to claim her. The novel opens with Marilena's arrival in Albanara, where she has been sent to stay with even more distant—and wealthy—relatives, the Alasi family, on account of the Noiraghi family's financial issues. Upon meeting these new relatives, she tells of all the modern activities she is accustomed to doing in Milan: going to the cinema, listening to the radio, learning all the latest dances. Marilena's description of her life in Milan makes it seem as if there was never any downtime, and in

contrast: “quei signori campagnoli le sembravano molto buffi e molto ingenui” (11). She goes on to list all the modern dances she knows, including: the rumba, the tango, the “*scimmy*, *l’hesitation*, il *Charleston*” (12).⁷⁹ Further, she recounts a typical afternoon in Milan, while simultaneously declaring her love of all things cosmopolitan and modern:

Ma se il tempo era buono, andavamo fin in Piazza del Duomo, a vedere le *réclame* luminosa, d’estate a prendere il gelato in galleria, e d’inverno all’ “Odeon,” al “Corso,” al “Reale,” a “San Carlo” a vedere le *premiers* del cinematografo. Io ho la passione del cinema: mi condurrà, zio Giacomo? (12)

Marilena’s knowledge of popular American dances of the time, as well as her use of French words and her general familiarity with the world of cinema are all indications of the corrupt and modern world she has been exposed to in Milan. Significantly, Zio Giacomo tells her that there are no movie houses in Albanara, while his sister, Zia Ghetta, comments to him: “Giacomo, quella non è una bimba; è un deplorable prodotto della città, ne conosce tutte le diavolerie, e ne parla con una baldanza da stringere il cuore...” (13). Indeed, Zia Ghetta’s observation is most revelatory concerning Marilena and her upbringing, underscoring the necessity of her stay in Albanara. Of further significance is Marilena’s small stature: she is often mistaken for a child of six or seven instead of nine or ten because she is so small for her size. Her smallness is, no doubt, attributed to the ill effects of city living and the lack of exposure to fresh, country air. Clearly, she is on a dangerous and unhealthy path, and throughout her experience in Albanara, recounted in the novel, she will be reformed into an exemplary model of behavior and health for young girls through exposure to nature, sport, humble people and their simple way of life.

⁷⁹ Gundle, referencing Daria Banfi Malaguzzi’s *Femminilità contemporanea*, reports: “Young women should be forcibly kept away from movie theaters, dance halls and some popular literature, she argued, to preserve their innocence from spiritual corruption....Girls needed to be educated as to their sacred duty of motherhood” (86).

However, Marilena's "transformation" is not immediate and she will need a period of adjustment to properly adapt to her surroundings and her new way of life. Shortly after her arrival in the country, Marilena assesses her situation.

Marilena disse infantilmente: "Qui non c'è nulla: né tram, né automobili, né tassí per le strade; e nelle case non esistono ascensori, né termosifoni, né *water*, né chiavette per l'acqua corrente, e neppure la radio: come nelle cinematografie *Africa parla!*, *Samba*, *Naturich la moglie Indiana*, *Tarzan*, *Trader Horn*, *Congorilla*, che si svolgono tra i selvaggi." (11-12)

In effect, Marilena's comments draw a comparison between the primitive way of life of the "barbaric" Africans and the way people live in Albanara. By naming all of the things that are lacking in her new life in the country, Marilena reveals all of the comforts of modernity to which she has become accustomed. While it is true that Marilena's origins are modest, the fact that she only has memories of her life with the Noiraghi family effectively renders her a privileged child, spoiled by the conveniences of a modern, cosmopolitan life which are not associated with a "traditional" Italian lifestyle, and are, therefore, contrary to fascist values. Furthermore, the fact that Marilena draws a comparison between real life in rural Italy and fictional stories about life in Africa is indicative of her childish perception of the world and reality. Significantly, this seems to support fascism's (and the novel's) argument that modernity is a corrupting element in society vis-à-vis its effects on Marilena.

Another interesting aspect of Marilena's adjustment to life in Albanara is her first encounter with the local children and her new classmates. Although her relatives are quite wealthy, the majority of the families that live in Albanara are simple, humble people and Marilena stands in stark contrast when compared to her new peers.

E Marilena guardava la gaia brigata: piccini infagottati, dai volti riarsi dal sole, mezzo nascosti sotto i cappelacci a cencio; occhi bruni, capelli ispidi; e bambinette in gonne quasi lunghe come donnine in miniatura, con le treccette pendule, o ravvolte sulla nuca o

sulle orecchie, le gote rosse, le mani più rosse. Marilena rivide le sue compagne di via Spiga, tutte in grembiule bianco, tutte a gambe nude e a capelli corti, chiacchierine, petulanti, capricciosette: e nel contrasto intuì che quei montanari umili e ammiranti sarebbero stati tutti ligi a' suoi ordini e alla sua volontà...(23)

Much like in *La via del Falco*, the author takes pains to describe with detail what Marilena, her *milanesi* friends and her new peers wear, underscoring the drastic cultural differences between the city and the country. Their clothes and fashion styles are relevant both to the narrative of the story, as well to the greater context of Fascism and its insistence that the “true” woman remain faithful to traditional Italian dress codes. Indeed, in this case it is indicative of the behavior and social status of these young girls.⁸⁰ The image of these girls in such plain and humble clothing highlights their rural way of life and symbolizes a “return to the land” that the regime advocated with its ruralization policy. With their long skirts and floppy braids, these young girls are almost a characterization of the typical “country girl,” while the depiction of Marilena’s precociousness attempts, once again, to underscore the inherent dangers of city life and how easily young girls can be influenced and corrupted by their surroundings. In both the narrator’s description, as well as the artist’s illustration of this scene, (Figure 7 p.162) Marilena appears much more sophisticated than her new friends. Indeed, the illustration includes young girls with ankle-length skirts, modest long-sleeved dresses and either kerchiefs covering their heads or their hair worn in two braids. Marilena, instead, stands in the middle of the circle, ready to command, in a very fashionable short-sleeved, knee-length dress, as her wild blond curls surround her face. She represents a much more modern and cosmopolitan type of girl, who with all probability, has been influenced by foreign fashion trends.

⁸⁰ Indeed, the illustration of this description recalls De Grazia’s accurate generalization of the “types” of girls and young women: “Girlhood types thus ranged from the most emancipated, namely, the working girl of Milan... was a savvy consumer of fashion, fan magazine etiquette, and movie glamour, to the prim Catholic provincial who, in long braids and heavy socks, learned social responsibility and self-control in the female sodalities of the *Gioventù cattolica*” (122).

At first, Marilena plans to take advantage of her “superior” status, but she soon realizes the desperate conditions in which the majority of her new friends and classmates live. She learns that it is not simply a game, but comes to understand what a truly charmed life she has led. This realization occurs to her during the winter months when she gets lost while skiing through the vast lands surrounding her relatives’ home. She finds shelter in a run-down shack, where upon knocking on the door, a young child recognizes her as if she were a local celebrity: “Nonna! È la bambina degli Alasi!” (33). The shack belongs to her family’s gardener. Even though she is inside, she is told to keep her coat on because the house is so cold, underscoring the abject poverty in which the family lives. To further illustrate the family’s misfortune, we learn that the eldest child, Raffaele, who is also one of Marilena’s classmates, stole the bread that they eat for dinner. This episode serves as a turning point for Marilena, and from this point on she is less demanding and capricious and genuinely appears to want to help the local inhabitants who are, for the most part, much less fortunate than she.

Marilena’s interest in sports, as previously stated, is an important aspect of the novel and for her function as a good role model. During the summer, we learn that Marilena plays tennis with her cousin, Claudio, who comes from Milan to visit her: “il cortile era a volte trasformato in campo di tennis e Claudio e Marilena si contendevano la vittoria, con le racchette brandite, agili, rosei, allegrissimi; zio Giacomo se li contemplava compiaciuto; i contadini sostavano per ammirare...” (56). Claudio and Marilena are the picture of health in this description, which illustrates the positive effects of participating in sports. *I contadini* who admire their more fortunate neighbors are not bystanders for long. Claudio quickly organizes a game of soccer, teaching the children how to play on a team. In the winter, instead, Marilena teaches her friends how to ski. Thus, the affluent and privileged share their pastimes with the local children,

allowing them the opportunity to participate in sports that might otherwise be economically impossible for them.

However, Marilena's greatest contribution to the small rural town is still to come. She devises a plan that simultaneously requires her rich relatives, the Alasi, to give back to Albanara that will make money for the town and is also a means for all of the local children to participate in outdoor sporting activities, thus, giving them the opportunity for a healthier lifestyle. Marilena manages to convince her elderly and curmudgeonly relatives to allow their land to be turned into a ski resort, as she confidently tells her uncle:

Vedrai zio Giacomo! L'*Albanara* diverrà uno dei primi campi sciatori d'Italia ... Claudio porterà tutti i suoi compagni di scuola, Benedetto Gelli, molta gente da Pontremoli: la radio trasmetterà i nostri salti ai giornali sportivi, i quali chiederanno le fotografie del signore dell'*Albanara*: allora dovrai sciare anche tu....(83)

The small town will only benefit from the opening of the ski resort, and not only financially and with regard to exposure; indeed, Zio Guido—Zio Giacomo's brother—defends the positive effects of the sport of skiing to his sister, Zia Ghetta: “è uno sport delizioso, sano, che rivela le doti di razza...” (89). Thus, the success of the resort itself will demonstrate the superiority of the Italian race and their athletic ability. At the same time the ski resort seems to represent the merging of tradition and modernity. The grand opening and celebratory first race of the *Campo Sciatorio Guido Alasi* is reported in the *Corriere della Sera*. In addition to donating the land for the ski resort, the Alasi family also provides the 1,000 lire prize for the winner of the race.

The novel ends with an exhilarating description of the race, in which Marilena competently competes against her cousin, Claudio, as well as two local boys, including her classmate and friend, Raffaele (the very same boy, whose family's misfortune she witnesses firsthand). While Marilena and her cousin Claudio are relaxed and experienced skiers, Raffaele,

to whom the sport is new, is described as “grave in volto, senza sorriso, come se tenesse i denti serrati in una preparazione di tenacia” (92). Raffaele, as opposed to Marilena and her cousin, seems as if he is preparing to go into battle. Of course, the prize money would mean a lot more to him than to his affluent competitors. Although Raffaele performs strongly, the novel makes it clear that Marilena lets him win:

Un attimo la bimba accennò a superare il compagno, poi furono di nuovo alla pari, e si scambiarono così, in corsa, alcune parole: nessuno li udì, ma tutti notarono la conversazione fatta a volo; e da quel colloquio rapido, la bimba cominciò a rallentare: Raffaele la superò di un metro, di due metri. (94)

After the race, Raffaele quietly thanks Marilena. Although he does not explicitly thank her for letting him win, it is certainly implied. The fact that Marilena could have won the race, but slows down to let a less fortunate, male friend win, is interesting on a number of levels. Marilena's benevolent act clearly demonstrates her generosity and good nature, allowing her needy friend to claim the cash prize; it is also telling of how much she has grown since the beginning of the novel. However, from the point of view of gender politics under Fascism, this scenario delicately balances on the border of taboo. The fact that Marilena is even competing against boys is a surprising detail, let alone the fact that she clearly slows down so that Raffaele can win. The implication, of course, is that Marilena is a better skier than even her cousin Claudio and the other male competitors who are just as experienced as she is. I argue that only a woman author would entertain such an egalitarian possibility under Fascism, slyly reassuring young girls that they are not necessarily inferior to men. However, in the end, it is significant both for the moral of the story and for the balance of gendered and hierarchical value systems in Fascist Italy that it is Raffaele who wins the race and not Marilena.

The moral of this story is that Marilena's relocation from Milan to Albanara is essential to her transformation, growth and ultimate salvation. Had she remained in Milan, the corrupting factors of the cosmopolitan city would have undoubtedly damaged her beyond repair. Although the Alasi family is quite wealthy, her exposure to the *contadini* and a rural way of life in Albanara is what allows her to transform from a spoiled brat into a generous and understanding young girl and an exemplary model of comportment. It is worth recalling that at the beginning of the novel, Marilena had plans to control the other children, and instead, by the end she is collaborating with them for the betterment of the community. Her commitment to the sport of skiing and her dedication to including her new friends in this traditionally privileged sport help to make her such a likeable and positive role model for young girls. Indeed, the fundamental lessons of generosity and selflessness that Marilena exhibits are applicable to any situation in which the young readers may find themselves. Further, the ending is especially exciting for young girls (especially sports enthusiasts and athletes) because Marilena proves herself to be as accomplished a skier as the boys against whom she competes. Again, while this borders on taboo regarding the hierarchical nature of Fascism, it certainly sends a positive message to young girls.

Overall, the message of both novels, *La via del Falco* and *La conquista di Albanara* is positive, especially from a feminist/women's emancipation point of view because they provide alternative models to the mother figure for young girls. While my argument is not that either author was a feminist or part of the women's emancipation movement of the early 1920s, I do think that they intended to depict models of comportment for girls and young women who were not necessarily mothers. Lalla and Marilena stand out as positive role models because they are young and carefree girls who manage to escape the burden of having to be caregivers. However, I also want to emphasize the fact that nothing included in these novels precludes either Lalla or

Marilena from becoming mothers one day. It is precisely the open-endedness of these novels and the girls' respective futures that is so refreshing within the context of fascist sexual politics. In the next section I will address a novel, *Il focolare* (1929), whose female characters are even further removed from the *angelo del focolare* model. The protagonist becomes a single mother after questioning her husband's decisions, which causes him to abandon his family for America. This simple act of protest by this brave mother renders her truly unique among female characters in children's literature from this period.

4.3 Strong Women: Camilla Del Soldato's *Il focolare*

Within the context of the Fascist regime, which censured female enterprises diverging from the maternal role, women's acts of writing, of putting their thoughts, emotions, and experiences to paper, may be read as a site of nonconformist ideology. (Pickering-Iazzi 106)

Camilla Del Soldato's 1929 *Il focolare* provides an interesting look at the life of a single mother, at the dawn of Fascism and is somewhat of an anomaly in that it appears to be a protest novel. It seems to argue against the commonly accepted idea that women are inferior to men and, therefore, subordinate to them. Through the many strong female characters that appear throughout the pages of the book, Del Soldato seems to want to discredit this claim, virtually accepted as fact during Fascism. It is not simply the presence of strong female characters that leads me to this conclusion; rather, the independence the author affords them and the decisions they make. Further rendering this novel unique is the presence of a positive female American character at a time when American culture was derided as detrimental to the Italian race. This novel is clearly written for and meant to appeal to a young female audience. In fact, it is from a series of novels specifically for young girls: "biblioteca delle giovani," published by Felice Le Monnier, therefore, it intends to propose female role models for young girls and women. It is significant, however, that the strong women of this novel do not greatly disrupt the "natural"

order of things under Fascism and also that the novel takes place in 1919, three years before the March on Rome. The novel seems to reinforce the importance of the family unit, thus, in this regard, it is perfectly in line with fascist ideology. However, the details of the novel seem to maintain a fine balance with regard to its adherence to fascist ideology and the outright rebuttal of it. Perhaps the pre-Fascist setting of the novel allowed the author more leeway in her representation of the characters.

The novel portrays a strong woman whose husband, Carlo, after an argument over the family's finances, abruptly leaves for America without telling his wife or children, effectively abandoning his family. The family's hardships are exacerbated when the mother becomes gravely ill and the children, Francesco (15) and Elisa (13), must care for their mother and maintain the household. The American baroness is the one who discovers that Carlo has fled to New York, and she functions as a fairy godmother to the unlucky family; indeed, she is referred to as *la fata*. A strong sense of female solidarity is established between the baroness, Elisa and her mother, who remains nameless—perhaps so young women might more easily identify with her. The baroness plans to open a school for girls, highlighting not only the role of female magnanimity and support in the novel, but also the importance of education for girls, which is significant regarding the plot of the novel. Instead, the men in the novel are portrayed as thoughtless and self-centered. Throughout the discussion of this novel it is important to remember that the author is writing about Italy in 1919 from the perspective of Fascist Italy in 1929.⁸¹

⁸¹ Both dates are significant: Mussolini founded the *Fasci di Combattimento* in 1919 (23 March). Since America, and specifically New York are relevant to this story, it is worth noting that 1929 (October) was the year the American market crashed.

This formation novel is told by an omniscient narrator and is unique for a number of reasons, not least among them the gender of its author, the empowerment of the female characters, as well as its critical portrayal of male characters. The adult characters depicted in this novel exhibit behavior contrary to those models idealized by Fascism, where wives are always subordinate to their husbands, and consequently the “father knows best” idiom is edict. Only the children, Francesco and Elisa, are positive characters by fascist standards. The narrative is most concerned with the details of the formation of the young siblings, from children to young adults and the effects their father’s abandonment has on them. The unstable conditions at home—an absentee father and a sick mother—force the children to grow up quickly. Indeed, at the beginning of the novel the narrator describes Elisa as she plays with her dolls. This activity can be interpreted as training to be a mother. In the absence of both her parents, she will find herself reluctantly performing this role much earlier than she may have anticipated.

Although Del Soldato’s novel is not blatantly critical of fascist culture—it does take place three years prior to the advent of Fascism—it is certainly not accepting of the regime’s prescribed gender roles, in full effect by 1929. Mussolini’s sexual politics and issues regarding gender inequality are continuously raised in this novel. The female characters all resent their alleged inferior status to the men in their lives: the mother and Carlo, Elisa and her brother, and the American baroness and Enrico, Carlo’s close friend and confidant. At different points in the novel, each woman stands up to her male counterpart, or in some way or another makes him understand that despite the social mores surrounding gender, they are indeed equals. Despite the characters’ growth throughout the novel, by the end, they have returned to the status quo: Elisa is more than content to become engaged to her neighbor, Alberto, and Carlo is welcomed home by his family with open arms, even though the novel is highly critical of him and his decision to run

off to America. However, Carlo is described as a changed man after his experiences in the new world, suggesting that he has undergone a conversion.

Both the positive effects of Carlo's time in America, as well as the glowing portrayal of the American baroness are curious in a 1929 novel when anti-American sentiment in Fascist Italy was strong. The question of emigration is directly tied to the regime's demographic campaign, launched in Mussolini's 1927 "Discorso dell'Ascensione," in which he addresses the importance of a large Italian population to a strong nation: "Se si diminuisce, signori, non si fa l'impero, si diventa una colonia!" (qtd. in Susmel 22: 367). Although the novel reflects an earlier time (1919) when Italian emigrants arrived in droves in New York, Del Soldato was certainly aware of the regime's emigration policy in 1929. Therefore, it is interesting that upon his return from New York, at the end of the novel, Carlo appears to have transformed into a new man. That is, his experience in New York was a positive one regarding his responsibilities and capabilities as *capofamiglia*.

Non è ancora un anno, da che egli aveva lasciato casa, famiglia, patria; eppure quel poco di tempo passato...in un paese dove non esistono sentimentalismi,...dove ognuno punta allegramente i gomiti nello stomaco dell'altro per farsi innanzi, ne ha fatto un altr'uomo. Meno orgoglioso, eppure più sicuro di sè; meno sentimentale, eppure pronto ad ogni fatica, ad ogni sacrificio per il più santo dei sentimenti umani: la famiglia. (263)

Carlo's overall positive experience in New York is striking, given the politics of the time in which the novel was written. However, his experience is viewed as positive from the female perspective, since he comes back committed to his family. Ostensibly, the inherent dangers of immigrant life described in the novel reflect "a general cultural climate" that privileged "the exaltation of the thrilling and 'dangerous life' as opposed to the debilitating monotony of the petty bourgeois existence..." (Bellassai, "Mystique" 316). Generally speaking, this kind of "therapy for masculinity," to use Bellassai's term, is achieved through the experience of Italy's

African colonies. For Carlo, perhaps it is the brush with death that triggers his conversion, allowing him to realize the importance of his family and the error of his ways.

The author's perhaps intentional ambiguity regarding these delicate issues may also account for the following contradictory reviews. Emilia Formìggini Santamaria's 1929 review of this novel in *L'Italia che scrive*, does not think the novel goes far enough in terms of its reproach of established gender roles:

Troppe disgrazie assommano... L'A[utrice] ha voluto anche insegnare che alla donna spetta il compito di sopportare con rassegnazione, in silenzio, gli errori maschili, di trovare la pace e la serenità dovunque l'amore legittimo la conduce... troppo invero. O almeno, bisognerebbe, accanto a questo libro per giovanette, vederne un altro che insegnasse molti altri doveri ai coetani maschi. (7: 95)

Formìggini Santamaria's comments clearly refer to the fact that notwithstanding the self-absorbed characterization of the male characters in the novel, in the end their "sins" are forgiven. Her sentiments appear to be remnants of the short-lived women's liberation movement of the late teens and early twenties, expecting the female author to openly portray uncompromised liberated women.⁸² Her review overlooks the important fact that this novel, published during a period in time when the role of men at home was aggrandized in order to confirm their dominant masculinity, stands out precisely for its criticism of men, especially a father whose actions are indefensible. Indeed, Bellassai verifies that "la diminuzione dell'autorità maschile all'interno della famiglia" was problematic for the regime who sought "la piena restaurazione della figura dell'uomo come capofamiglia" (*La mascolinità* 94). This novel does not present the father figure as the strong, virile head-of-family that the regime demanded; rather, the mother and her children collectively, yet competently, fill this role.

⁸² "From the turn of the century to the mid-1920s, the lay-emancipationist current dominated Italian feminism, not least of all because its projects were similar in many ways to those of the emancipationist movements hegemonic elsewhere" (De Grazia 23).

Adolfo Scotto Di Luzio, who has the advantage of historical perspective, judges this a positive book for young women because of its depiction of strong, capable women: “una storia di donne nella quale le donne possono identificarsi...Sola, con due figli da mantenere, la donna si mostra molto più forte del marito, che incapace di rispondere alle difficoltà finanziarie... abbandona sdegnato la famiglia” (163). Significantly, in his assessment that the young female audience can identify with the strong women depicted in the novel, Scotto Di Luzio confirms that these women are meant to be models for the book’s audience. Presenting women who are neither entirely dependent on men nor subordinate to them is nothing short of revolutionary, considering the reality of Mussolini’s sexual politics. At its core, the novel is about the resourcefulness, competence and fortitude of the modern Italian woman.

Scotto Di Luzio’s comments allude to the family’s financial trouble, at the root of Carlo’s abrupt departure. However, it is not simply the financial situation, but his inability to effectively rule his own household that emasculates him to the point of self-exile. The culmination of the danger of losing the family home, his wife’s knowledge of his mistakes and, moreover, his wife’s justified anger and accusations push him to emigrate. Carlo’s fragile masculinity crumbles in the face of his wife’s simple act of speaking her mind:

Ti ho mai detto niente? [...] Ti ho mai negata una firma, un consenso? Ho mai mostrato di dubitare delle ragioni tue? Mi sono mai lamentata delle ristrettezze a cui abbiamo dovuto adattarci? Ho mai, con una sola parola, rivelato a nessuno i miei timori, e la mia mortificazione? [...] Io non ho detto a loro [i figli], che questo: che tu avevi gravi difficoltà nei tuoi affari, e che noi dovevamo cercare di fare solamente due cose: spendere il meno possibile, e non darti mai ragioni, in casa, d’inquietudine. [...] Ed ho adoperate le mie mani dove potevo, più che potevo, per farti risparmiare, per non chiederti che il denaro indispensabile alla vita d’ogni giorno...Non posso dire addio a questa nostra casa, dove hanno vissuto i miei vecchi, dove son nati i nostri bambini.... (38)

Her strong words indicate that her resentment and anger toward Carlo are cumulative; the years of apparent submission to her husband, supporting his every endeavor without question and

performing her duties exemplarily as mother and wife have evidently left her frustrated with the family's current situation. Indeed, her outburst seems out of character from her behavior over the years, which is undoubtedly included to justify her actions. Furthermore, her accusations disregard the submissive behavior the regime expected women to show their husbands.

Fascism's societal subordination of women served to establish man's virile superiority: "The image of women, in order to fully confirm male superiority, not only had to be subordinate, but also express the immutable nature of that subordination...the woman had to confirm that she was the inferior companion of man..." (Bellassai, "Masculine" 326). Carlo abandons his family because his masculinity is jeopardized when his wife confronts him, refusing to be subordinate to him any longer. Her accusations detail that she has done everything asked and expected of her even according to fascist cultural mores, and at the same time she details where he has failed to live up to the standards of the "new man" and to what is expected of him as a father and husband. Indeed, in a correspondence with his close friend and confidant, Enrico, Carlo admits his failures, confessing: "Cedo un compito per cui sono stato apertamente giudicato incapace. E vado lontano. L'avvenire decidera" [sic] (65-6). Throughout the novel, *Del Soldato* is careful to include as many details as possible regarding Carlo's failures and his wife's commitment to him and their family, underscoring that the only time she ever let her emotions get the better of her was during that fateful argument, and again that the outburst is the culmination of years of frustration and subordination.

To put Carlo's disgraceful act in perspective, the narrator compares his absence to that of a man who gave his life for the Patria. For Alberto, the 15-year-old neighbor and Elisa's future husband, the actions of Elisa and Francesco's deadbeat dad are inconceivable when he thinks of his own father's heroic sacrifice during World War I. Reading between the lines, this comparison

suggests that Carlo did not participate in World War I.⁸³ More importantly, it further underscores Carlo's cowardice for abandoning his family:

Vi sono cose troppo difficili da dire, specialmente per un ragazzo sui quindici anni; egli sente, confusamente, che è più amaro avere perduto il babbo a quel modo, che saperlo nella pace di Dio. Per lui, dopo quasi cinque anni da che la guerra gliel'ha portato via, il babbo è solamente un bel ricordo, che li dà fierezza, non dolore....Ma un babbo che se ne va deliberatamente lontano, e nemmeno dice dove va!... (72-3)

Alberto inherently believes that, though his father is dead, he is the lucky one of the three fatherless children because he can be proud of his father's sacrifice for the good of the nation. Interestingly, Alberto's reflections on the reality of growing up without a father reinforce the cult of the martyr celebrated by Fascism. In the context of fascist rhetoric, Carlo's ignoble actions stand in stark contrast to the selflessness of Alberto's father.

Much later in the novel, the American baroness, upon discovering Carlo's whereabouts, and the fact that Enrico has lost communication with him, condemns his ill-conceived self-exile. Referencing the numerous missing (Italian) persons cases, she questions Enrico's efforts, or lack thereof, to locate Carlo, while simultaneously belittling Carlo's selfish decision to run off to New York. Furthermore, her argument evinces the desperation and the reality of the first post-war period and what awaited Italian immigrants upon their arrival in the New World. Here, she tells Enrico exactly what she thinks of Carlo's rash decision:

Avete mai veduto, nei nostri giornali, alla rubrica delle ricerche, i casi frequenti, e disperati, di sparizione di persone? Moglie con tre bambini chiede notizie di Giovanni o Enrico o Giacomo dei Tali, che ha lasciato casa da tre mesi: è alto magro, rosso di capelli [...] E le mamme? Quante che hanno perduto i loro piccoli e ne chiedono!... Dunque, che avete fatto, in questo mese, voi, per sapere? [...] Mettetemi qui, subito, per disteso, nome cognome e connotati di questo... di quest'imbecille, scusate la franchezza. Non aveva altro da fare di meglio, che andare in America? (148)

⁸³ See chapter 1 for the significance of World War I and the construction of Italian masculinity under Fascism.

Here, I would like to draw attention to the tone that the baroness takes with Enrico and with regard to Carlo's precarious situation. The baroness is a celebrated figure in this novel, coming to the rescue of women and girls in need; therefore, the rather harsh tone of her conversation with Enrico is very telling of the author's own point of view. She clearly deems these two non-virile men, Carlo and Enrico, entirely useless. Significantly, the baroness is a married woman, though it is unclear if her husband is American or Italian. The only information the reader receives about her husband is that he is in the colonies. The baroness's strong personality, intelligence and fortitude combined with the absence of her husband, reinforce the general theme of the novel that women are capable independent of men. Indeed, each episode of the novel seems to show just how dispensable the men of the story are.

Francesco, perhaps because he is still an adolescent, is the only male figure who has any redeeming qualities. The morning after the infamous argument, he immediately acts responsibly by going into the city in search of his father. Upset over his father's spontaneous and irrational decision, he feels disrespected and condemns his father's cowardly act as non-virile: "Non sono un bambino [...] Sono un uomo, l'unico suo figlio, la prima persona a cui doveva dire... Non si lascia così una famiglia..." (56). Interestingly, Francesco, because he is a man, believes that his father owed him an explanation, even more so than he owed one to his own wife. Francesco clearly belongs to the patriarchal, hierarchical system that Fascism embraced. What we further infer from Francesco's statement is that a "real" (virile) man does not abandon his family. Aware of the responsibilities of *capofamiglia* that will fall on him, Francesco welcomes this newfound sense of duty and the respect that comes along with it. He asks to be kept informed of the family's finances, including his father's debts that threatened the family's financial stability. In fact, "Francesco, trattato così da uomo, si è dimostrato uomo davvero" (62). Throughout the

novel, Francesco is indirectly contrasted with his father, demonstrating that he possesses the necessary qualities of the “new man.” Though we receive little information about Carlo, other than his docile reaction to his wife’s castigation and his brief letters to Enrico, it is clear to the reader that Carlo was not “man enough” to handle the pressures associated with being *capofamiglia*. Francesco, instead, seems to embrace the role: “il sentirsi capo di famiglia non è poca soddisfazione per lui. Gira per la casa, armato di martello e chiodi, che va conficcando allegramente un po’ dappertutto, secondo i desideri della mamma...ed il capriccio suo” (79). In every way possible, Francesco is depicted as a more capable man than his father, and the experience of running the household matures him. However, it is the news of his father’s grave injuries resulting from an accident in the factory where he works in New York that truly transforms Francesco into a man: “È possibile maturare d’anni in pochi minuti? Quando Francesco rialzò il viso, l’espressione fanciullesca della sua fisionomia era sparita, e per sempre. Si poteva dargli dieci anni di più...Un uomo, egli era ormai” (209). The realization that his role as *capofamiglia* may not be as temporary as he once thought causes this instant transformation in Francesco.

Their mother’s illness, instead, forces Elisa and Francesco to share the domestic duties, which fall strictly along gender lines. The everyday running of the household, performed by the siblings, sheds light on their relationship and the expectations of a young girl forced into a pre-fabricated mold, one that the regime upheld and demanded from women throughout the *ventennio*. However, Elisa does not embrace her new role; she is a much different figure than Delfina of *Mammetta fascista*. I would argue that Elisa is a much more realistic representation of a young girl thrust into this role. The narrator clearly pities, if not identifies directly with Elisa, at

one point reporting that she compares herself to Cinderella (119). Indeed, the narrator details the particularly difficult duties Elisa must take on for someone her age:

Il peso più grave è toccato a lei, di tutta la fatica che un malato prova nella famiglia... Francesco ha sempre trovata la tavola pronta, il letto rifatto, la sua stanzetta in ordine per mettersi coi suoi libri e sprofondarsi nelle ricerche dei vocaboli latini e nessuno e lui meno degli altri, ha messo in dubbio il suo diritto, tutto maschile, di continuare indisturbato il suo lavoro. Egli è l'uomo di casa.... (124)

Carlo's selfish departure indirectly causes his wife to fall ill, which results in Elisa being forced into a role of *angelo del focolare*. She must care for her older brother as if he were her child or her husband. As the "man of the house," Francesco is entitled to carry on with his life as usual and is portrayed as a selfish, egotistical male in this regard, as the narrator observes: "Francesco non pensa a domandarsi se Lisa rimpiange la scuola...e se tutto quello che sua sorella fa, è veramente proporzionato alle sue forze quasi di bimba" (125). Francesco is proud to take on the "executive" and "manly" duties of the house, in the absence of his father and while his mother is ill. The author's tone regarding the dynamics between these siblings is clearly critical. The description and commentary surrounding these scenes condemns the presumptive role that Francesco assumes with regard to his sister. As the story progresses, the author's critical tone regarding the male characters of the novel only becomes more apparent.

The gross gender inequality emphasized between the siblings is, in part, defined and encouraged by the authoritative adult male characters. Significantly, the mother neither condones nor condemns this behavior. In perhaps the most misogynistic moment of the novel, the male doctor commands Elisa into the kitchen: "'Via subito in cucina, tu, Elisa,' ingiunse il medico più col gesto, che con la voce" (112), literally sending her into the female space so that he and Francesco can speak man to man. He then informs Francesco of the severity of his mother's sickness, pulling him aside to deliver the news and imploring him to keep it from his fragile

sister: “Non bisogna impressionare Lisetta [...] Ma tu, che sei uomo, devi sapere la verità... La mamma è in pericolo!” (112). The doctor’s recommendation highlights the inequality of the genders, specifically, the popular belief that women were allegedly the weaker of the sexes. His comments suggest that Francesco is innately better equipped to handle the reality of a gravely sick mother, simply because he is a man. Furthermore, there is the paradox of Elisa’s situation: she is expected to take on the responsibilities of an adult, yet she is treated like a child by the men around her. Instead, Francesco’s *diritto maschile* is entirely encouraged by those same adult males (Enrico and the doctor). Further encouraging the disparity between the siblings, the doctor informs Francesco: “E niente scuola per questa bambina, siamo intesi? Quando ne sarà tempo darò io il permesso” (137). The doctor’s instructions to Francesco are significant because they effectively relegate Elisa to a subordinate position to men both within the family and also on a societal level, by denying her an education. To this last point, it is relevant that on more than one occasion Elisa laments not being able to go to school. At one point she even questions her brother’s alleged superiority, significantly, while he boasts of his high marks in Greek and Latin: “E credi che se avessi potuto andare a scuola, non avrei avuto anch’io dei bei voti?” mormora la povera bambina col pianto nella voce” (129). This exchange is noteworthy because it demonstrates that Elisa is aware of the absurdity of her alleged inferior status, based exclusively on her gender. Indeed, she continues to push the issue; in a letter to her father—which she entrusts to Enrico—she expresses her desire to attend school: “Mi dispiace che il dottore non mi vuole mandare a scuola, e se ci penso troppo divento sgarbata e permalosa” (145). Her reaction to his decision expresses the injustice of her situation. She seems to understand, on some level, that she is being pigeonholed into a role because of a societal gender bias. This entire episode serves as the author’s thinly veiled critique of the status quo of gender relations in Fascist Italy.

Indeed, this story functions as a protest novel against the status quo and the subordinate position that women were relegated to during Fascism. Further evidence is the fact that the narrator does not back down from the mother's right to have confronted her husband and his inability to provide for his family, regardless of the consequences of her actions. The omniscient narrator communicates the mother's confidence in her right to assert her thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, the narrator denies her any culpability for her husband's reaction:

[R]ipensando i giorni del loro grande affetto, sempre meno riusciva a persuadersi che un solo momento d'impazienza sua, un solo sfogo dopo tanto tacere, lo avesse offeso al punto di allontanarlo da lei. Le pareva, ogni giorno più, che il castigo fosse troppo sproporzionato alla colpa, se la colpa era. (64)

Her unwillingness to accept blame for her actions is telling of the author's own point of view. From a woman's perspective, the mother acted completely within her rights. The American baroness, perhaps the mouthpiece of the author, confirms this. In solidarity with the single mother, she places the blame entirely on Carlo: "se non era così stupidamente suscettibile, si lasciava dire tutto quanto la povera donna aveva ben diritto di dirgli..." (149). This novel most likely would not have been published after 1929, due to the increasing censorship throughout the *ventennio*. Furthermore, I would argue that a male author writing in 1929 Fascist Italy, would not only not have allowed for scenarios in which women rebel against their subordinate positions, but certainly would have placed the blame on the wife/mother figure for, in effect, threatening her husband's masculinity and shaming him into exile. It was not unheard of in Fascist Italy for women to be forced to take the blame for male inadequacy. After all, Mussolini ruled by questionable logic: here, I refer to Mussolini's attempt to empower men and re-instate their virile

dominance by reducing the number of women in the workforce, since their mere presence threatened to emasculate men.⁸⁴

Midway through the novel there is a blatant message for young women from the author regarding their place in society, in their families and in the hearts of the men in their lives:

Le giovani damigelle un poco infatuate di loro stesse, non meditano abbastanza su questo argomento; ed è molto male per loro. Se potessero, fin dai primi anni della loro giovinezza, persuadersi che la donna, per l'uomo non è mai *tutto*, nella vita, e che il migliore degli uomini amerà sempre vivamente qualche cosa, oltre la propria donna, e talora di quest'altro amore seguirà il prepotente richiamo anche se questo possa allontanarlo da lei, le giovani imparerebbero più presto e con meno dolore quale sia la vera parte della donna, nella vita dell'uomo. (102)

While all along the novel seems to subtly critique the state of women in Italy, this appears to be an open message to young girls. What is striking about this passage, first and foremost, is that the author is actually concerned with women's happiness and sense of fulfillment. We can infer that the message means to encourage women, contrary to fascist ideology, to find happiness and meaning in their lives that does not come from simply caring for their husbands and children, which supports the novel's apparent objective of empowering women. The message addresses a significant problem from the female perspective regarding her rights and happiness; that is, while women's lives are supposed to revolve around their husbands and children, women are never the center of their husbands' universe. This message is an indication of the author's own politics and appears to be a remnant of the short-lived women's emancipation movement in Italy that ended in the 1920s. Her message is a means of preparing young girls for the harsh realities and injustices that women must endure in fascist society.

⁸⁴ See introduction to chapter 3.

The female solidarity, the presence of strong, capable women, the lack of positive male characters and the pro-American sentiment of the novel are all questionable aspects with regard to fascist culture and ideology. The most striking and interesting aspect of this novel is certainly the support it seems to lend to young women regarding the reality of growing up in Fascist Italy and the subordinate role women are expected to play, all the while lamenting the injustices of this reality. Thus, the novel's function as a protest novel imparts an important lesson to the young reader, specifically, providing her with strong female role models to imitate.

4.4 Conclusion

The novels analyzed in this chapter are as important for what they do not say as they are for the messages that they explicitly convey to young girls. For example, with the exception of Elisa, the authors give no indication whether these girls go on to fulfill their "fascist" destiny and become wives and mothers, but nor is it a foregone conclusion. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, these novels are unique because even though they all feature female protagonists, none promotes the fascist ideal that women must be mothers to fulfill their destiny. The female authors of these novels afford great liberties to their young heroines: Lalla sails the seas with her brothers and the all male crew of *Il Falco*, while Marilena enjoys a carefree existence in which she is permitted to pursue her athletic interests. In *Il focolare*, Elisa, her mother and the baroness are all given space to confront the male authorities in their lives. In this way, these protagonists represent non-traditional models of comportment. Any critique of fascist culture in these novels is subtle enough to not appear at odds with fascist ideology or to have been censored.

Although Lalla and Marilena do not represent the typical female model, many of their attributes are consistent with fascist ideology. In Lalla's case, she quickly learns that her attempts

to adopt foreign and modern trends consistently meet negative reactions from Roberto, the only person whose opinion really counts. Ultimately, she realizes that by remaining true to her traditional Italian roots she will win Roberto's affection. Marilena's transformation from an urbane, ultra-modern and, consequently, obnoxious young girl is achieved through her exposure to humble families and the benefits of outdoor sports. Lalla and Marilena are clearly meant to serve as models for young women because they ultimately make the right choices. They are both strong-willed young women, but in Lalla's decision to do what makes Roberto happy (which ultimately gets her what she wants—Roberto) and Marilena's decision to let Raffaele win the downhill ski race they demonstrate that they understand fascist cultural mores.

In *Il focolare*, potentially problematic plot lines with regard to fascist culture and the female protagonists are also resolved. The American baroness is not subject to Italian standards, simply because she is not Italian. Elisa, even though she objects to her subordinate position to her brother simply based on gender, becomes engaged to Alberto and will presumably start a family. Even the most polemical character of the novel, Elisa's mother, accepts her husband's return with open arms, despite the fact that he walked out on his family and was absent for nearly a year, causing undo hardships on his family. Elisa and her mother accept their respective partners, in part, because it is what society expects of them. This is significant because it assures the reader that they are not a threat to the family unit, and therefore fascist values; nor do they represent a "danger" to Italian masculinity, a critique that was made of the crisis woman and the *maschietta*—both born out of the women's emancipation movement. At the novel's end, order is restored to the family because Elisa and her mother accept their roles as wives and mothers, and significantly, because Carlo accepts his role as husband and father.

Of the very few children's novels specifically intended, or simply geared toward a young female audience from this period that I encountered in my research, these three novels were particularly striking in the different kinds of female models they propose. I argue that the differences between the female models proposed in the novels analyzed in chapter three and the above-discussed novels stems from the gender of the authors. The single-minded, sexist viewpoint of the male authors (Berutti and Nuccio) is incapable of seeing girls/women as anything but mothers and caregivers, highlighting that a woman's main function in society remains in the domestic sphere. What Fehr, Visentini and Del Soldato accomplish in their novels is the depiction of female protagonists with which young girls may actually identify. Lalla, Marilena and Elisa (and even her mother) are good, reasonable and authentic role models for young women.



Figure 7. Marilena holding court. (*La conquista di Albanara* 25).

Conclusion

Children's literature was co-opted by the regime as a means of reaching its ultimate goal of forming the "new" Italian. Authors were urged to use realism in their novels in the hopes that real life settings and situations would encourage the young reader to follow his/her natural inclination to imitate the actions of the hero or heroine of the novel. This was made abundantly clear by the proceedings of the 1938 National Children's Literature Convention. The realist aesthetic is significant for all of the novels included in this study. The emphasis on historical events, military ventures, and details of everyday life under Fascism are attributes that render these novels realistic and, thus, make the role models presented in the stories more attainable. Even the narratives that do not include historical events are meant to evoke the zeitgeist. Throughout this study we have seen how novels for children reflect the cultural mores of 1930s Fascist Italy.

I would like to briefly discuss an entirely different kind of narrative for children, Annie Vivanti's *Il viaggio incantato* (1934),⁸⁵ to demonstrate the importance of the realist aesthetic with regard to children's literature and the regime's appropriation of it in their attempts to mold the "new" Italian. In Vivanti's case, we will see what happens to the novel's message as well as the probability that the reader will believe he can imitate the actions of the protagonist—precisely the regime's pedagogical goals of children's literature—when reality is suspended. Much of story takes place in a fantastical realm: inside a painting, where the young protagonists,

⁸⁵ This is an edited and illustrated version, published in Mondadori's "Il romanzo dei ragazzi" series, of Vivanti's *Sua Altezza* (1923). Truglio notes: "The editorial changes made to the 1933 edition demonstrate the importance of promulgating the history of Italy as a heroic, martial narrative. The later Mondadori edition deleted the entire dedication to the little Nordic Prince and in its place added a biographical sketch of the author. This new preface emphasizes her family's ties to Garibaldi.... Thus the revised edition infuses into Vivanti's tale some of the myth of heroic Italy so prevalent in other children's books of the period" (134).

Tina and Bobby are in search of the *anima dell'artista*. The novel's departure from reality and the protagonists' noble quest appear to render Vivanti's novel less "fascist" than those analyzed up until this point, since it seems to celebrate creativity in the search for the *anima dell'artista* as well as fantasy, given the magical world in which the story takes place.⁸⁶ However, Maria Truglio argues:

While the *topos* of the fantastic voyage may appeal to the child reader's frustrations and allow her to indulge in escape fantasies, stories that adhere to this model often convey a conservative rather than subversive message. The wandering child-protagonists often find that the utopian world holds more threats than pleasures and ultimately long to return to the security and familiarity of home and parents. (126)

Truglio later notes that both Bobby and Tina grow as a result of this fantastic experience (126), but it is Bobby who changes significantly, gaining many qualities of the "new man" in order to rescue his sister and bring her back to reality with him. Not only does Bobby's character mature, but he transforms physically into an eagle, one of the most iconic representations of Fascism. What causes Bobby's transformation is education. Again, while in the other novels analyzed in this study it is the journey to find a father, or the war experience that matures the young male protagonists, here, Vivanti's message is entirely different. Within the painting, Bobby finds its artist who opens up his library to him. As Bobby reads Ovid, Cicero and Dante, he begins to grow feathers and wings. The simultaneous completion of Bobby's education and transformation symbolize that he has matured and possesses the qualities—courage, *ardimento*, and ultimately, *l'anima dell'artista*—necessary to rescue his sister.

While many aspects of Vivanti's *Il viaggio incantato* lend it to a fascist interpretation, there are also some rather ambiguous points. Truglio observes that the novel's:

⁸⁶ We remember that speakers at the 1938 convention on children's literature argued for the importance of realism in novel's for children, see Introduction. Similarly, the preface to *Guerra!* includes a diatribe against the presence of fantasy in children's literature, see section 1.2.

[...] attention to the female child, its encouragement of exploration and meraviglia rather than restraint and obedience...and its depiction of a culturally heterogeneous and timeless wonderland rather than a racially exclusive, martial history of Italy may all have contributed to the text's status as "non gratis" and to its continued relative obscurity. (140)

The novel's "non gratis" status, did not occur until 1939, when Vivanti's name was added to the list of Jewish authors whose books were subsequently taken out of circulation as a result of the 1938 racial laws (Truglio 140). Vivanti's treatment of Tina and her curiosity that lead her and her brother into the magical land of the painting, could be attributed to the author's gender. That is, I contend that a female author is more likely to afford her female protagonists liberties usually reserved for male characters. However, as Truglio also notes, gender hierarchy is restored by the end of the novel with Bobby rescuing his sister (139). Although Truglio argues that the fantasyland can be used to drive home a conservative message, the novel's insistence on the importance of imagination and education stands in stark contrast to the message the regime wanted to instill in Italy's youth. Overall, the novel seems to be an interesting hybrid: of realism and fantasy, conformity and ambiguity.

Although Vivanti's novel seems to impart mixed messages regarding fascist culture, like each of the novels analyzed in this study, it does provide positive role models for the young reader. Both protagonists mature throughout the narrative and Bobby's transformation from a young boy who is scared to follow his sister into the painting—and who at several times has to remind himself not to cry—into his sister's rescuer is nothing short of miraculous. But therein lies the problem: Bobby is not an imitable role model. Time is suspended in the realm of the painting, and no child reading the book would actually think he could imitate Bobby by transforming into an eagle. Therefore, from a fascist perspective, Vivanti's story is rather ineffective. If we compare Bobby's heroic actions to those of Cibanti (*Guerra!*) or Raoul (*Alza*

bandiera!), it is clear that the novels that have history or the present-day (1930s Fascist Italy) as a backdrop for the protagonist's adventure provide clearer and more reasonable goals and characteristics for the reader to emulate.

The World War I narratives discussed in chapter one convey an important message to the reader by detailing the formation of the "new man." *Guerra!* and *La grande diana* bring World War I to life for young boys because they see the war through the eyes of someone with whom they can identify and ultimately imitate. The emphasis on military readiness was echoed throughout the ventennio. Therefore, glorifying war and military culture was a significant part of fascist culture, and this is reflected in these novels. Further, both World War I novels hypothesize the consequences of inaction and suggest that had Italy not participated in the Great War, the country would have once again been under foreign rule. This hypothetical outcome reaffirms the significance of World War I to Fascism and the formation of the "new man."

Life under Fascism as portrayed in *Alza bandiera!*, *I bambini diverranno grandi* and *Soldatini d'ogni giorno* stands in contrast to the familial situations represented in the novels discussed in chapter one. The novels analyzed in chapter two are meant to demonstrate all the good that Mussolini has brought to Italy, and that ultimately, the sacrifices made during the Great War were not in vain. Fascist youth organizations, *ONB* and the summer *colonie* are touted as fun and essential for the formation of the "new" Italian. Moreover, the activities promoted by these organizations are depicted as effective means of curing deviances and sicknesses. The protagonists of these novels serve a dual function. While they are meant to be role models for the reader, these characters also demonstrate the importance of identifying proper role models. In each novel there is an adult male who serves as a role model for the protagonist, and in each

case, the role model is a veteran of World War I. This message reinforces the fascist cult of the hero.

Novels depicting proper modes of comportment for young girls and women, discussed in chapter three, include *Mammetta fascista* and *Il richiamo dei fratelli*. The heroines of these narratives are the embodiment of the perfect *massaia rurale*, and the male authors of these stories celebrate their entirely selfless acts. Indeed, the behavior exhibited by Delfina, Mamma Alba and Maria Rosa is meant to be an example of women's function in society. The regime's "new woman" was dedicated simultaneously to her family, the state and Mussolini. These stories teach boys and girls alike what is expected of their mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers and, of course, what is expected of the young female reader.

A refreshing contrast to the female characters depicted in the novels analyzed in chapter three, are the strong female protagonists examined in chapter four. Alternative models to the *angelo del focolare* are proposed by the female authors of *La via del Falco* and *La conquista di Albanara*. Celebrating sports, outdoor activities and healthy adventures, while denouncing the dangers of modernity, these narratives present far more realistic, and therefore, attainable models for young girls. As discussed in chapter four, the regime's goals for creating the "new woman" were far from effective, since young girls' interests were simply not what the regime desired. *Il focolare* picks up on this disconnect and is a careful protest of the status quo. Del Soldato's novel presents a brave portrayal of strong women who refuse their subordinate status in society, however, the reinstatement of gender balance and hierarchies by the end of the narrative ensures that the novel does not represent a real threat to the "new" Italian man's fragile masculinity or Mussolini's sexual politics.

Mussolini is an important presence in many of the novels under study. Even if he does not appear directly in the novel, his presence is felt indirectly. His incredible feats as a *bersagliere* in World War I are recounted in *Il richiamo dei fratelli*, where, although it is not explicitly stated, we are made to understand that it is Mussolini who sends help to the Vulture region after the earthquake. Further, his efforts in organizing the *squadristi*, recognized as the prototype of the “new man,” are glorified in *Guerra!* Mussolini’s “new” Italy and its social and welfare organizations are advertized in *Alza bandiera!*, *I piccoli diverranno grandi*, *Mammetta fascista* and *Il richiamo dei fratelli*. The image of the Duce is nothing short of worshipped in *Soldatini d’ogni giorno*. Zio Federico is as happy to see Mussolini’s face as he is to no longer be blind. Moreover, in both *I piccoli diverranno grandi* and *Mammetta fascista*, characters in the novel venerate the mere image of the Duce: Delfina’s younger brothers salute his image upon entering the home, while Silvio seeks inspiration from a signed photo of Mussolini that hangs in his room. Proxies for Mussolini are also common in these novels, Silvio’s father functions as one as does the veteran, Dalmi, in *Soldatini d’ogni giorno*. The retelling of Dalmi’s youthful heroics are similar to descriptions of Mussolini’s own personal history of bravery and physical toughness, while Silvio’s father, is directly compared to Mussolini; this is made clear by the fact that pictures of Mussolini and his father hang next to each other. Mussolini figures more prominently in the stories for young boys because he is the embodiment of the “new” Italian man, and thus, the ultimate role model to emulate.

Mussolini’s goal of forming the “new” Italian, along with the entire “totalitarian experiment,” to quote Gentile, ultimately failed. The regime systematically attempted to crush individuality while privileging a single type of Italian man (that reflected Mussolini) and Italian woman (that reflected Mussolini’s mother). While the novels included in this dissertation and

children's literature from the fascist period, in general, were undoubtedly used as tools by the regime in its failed attempt to create the "new" Italian, my dissertation does not aim to evaluate whether these specific children's novels were effective in inculcating Italian youth into fascist culture. Rather, this study hopes to shed light on an otherwise little studied area of Italian Fascism and further explore how the regime implemented the anthropological revolution. I hope this study contributes in a meaningful way to the well-established argument that Mussolini's sexual politics and the formation of the "new" Italian were at the center of the "totalitarian experiment." My dissertation attempts to demonstrate how children's literature reflected the values of Italian Fascism, presented role models for proper comportment in fascist culture, and ultimately, how it was appropriated by the regime as an instrument to mold the "new" Italian.

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