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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2q18j8mh>

### Journal

California Italian Studies, 10(2)

### Author

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### Publication Date

2020

### DOI

10.5070/C3102048888

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# ***Bare Life: Space and the Maternal in Laura Pugno's La ragazza selvaggia***

**Nina Bjekovic**

## **Introduction**

In the introduction to *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés observes that “it is no accident that the pristine wilderness of our planet disappears as the understanding of our inner wild nature fades.”<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, the contemporary Italian author Laura Pugno identifies the human body as the “primo luogo del selvaggio” (“the first place of the wild”).<sup>2</sup> But what is, in essence, that which Estés deems “our inner wild nature” and that which Pugno calls *selvaggio*? This question, which lies at the forefront of modern biopolitical debates, animates the bipartite biopolitical concern with *bios* and *zoe*, which finds its roots in Foucault, but continues to garner increasing attention in contemporary theory. In *Bíos: Biopolitica e filosofia (Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy)*, originally published in 2004 Roberto Esposito reconstructs the ontological history of biopolitical discourse to contend that none of the categories of modern political thought adequately captures the essence of biopolitics.<sup>3</sup> Calling for a reevaluation that could endorse an affirmative biopolitics as opposed to one of mastery and negation of life, Esposito begins by challenging the conceivability of a purely natural life (*zoe*), which a number of theorists take for granted. In her study on biopolitical conceptions beginning with Foucault and extending to Antonio Negri, Catherine Mills considers the implications of sexual difference for biopolitics as a rationality of power, asking “is sexual difference an inherent feature of life that becomes entangled with politics, or does biopolitics itself produce sexual difference?”<sup>4</sup> With this query, Mills underscores a lacuna—the question of sex—in the field of biopolitics.

Biopolitical accounts have, indeed, centered so purely around the figure of the *homo sacer* that they have wholly overlooked the presence of the *femina (sacra* or otherwise). Moreover, the exclusive interest of biopolitics in the emblematic theoretical (*symbolic*) figure of the exile, the camp internee, has failed to account for the operations of the unconscious (*semiotic*) drives of both sexes. It is here where psychoanalysis emerges as an inextricable constituent of biopolitics and an originating influence in the disruption of normative plurality that has historically rejected the feminine as a subject. Julia Kristeva, peering from under the wings of Freud and Lacan, locates the seditious power of the unconscious in the transformability of the feminine to underscore sexual difference as a vital instrument for the biopolitical regulation of bodies. It is in this convergence of psychoanalytic, biopolitical and feminist thought, that Pugno asserts her authentic contribution to ongoing contemporary biopolitical debates. The Roman writer inaugurated her literary career with the publication of her first novel *Sirene* (2007), a gripping post-apocalyptic experience in which a pervasive black cancer (*cancro*

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<sup>1</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Pugno, *In territorio selvaggio* (Milan: Nottetempo, 2018), 16. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Pugno’s works are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Esposito, Roberto. *Bíos: Biopolitica e filosofia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004); *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Mills, *Biopolitics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 172.

*nero*) roams free, threatening the already precarious conditions of the enigmatic, part-human part-siren female creatures that are subject to exploitation by the Yakuza.<sup>5</sup> In addition to *Sirene*, Pugno has authored five other novels, including *La caccia*, *La ragazza selvaggia*, *Antartide* and *La metà di bosco*, as well as a collection of short stories entitled *Sleepwalking* and several books of poetry, such as *Tennis*, *Il colore oro*, *L'Alea*, and *I legni*.<sup>6</sup>

In *La ragazza selvaggia*, Pugno implements a predominantly female cast of characters, placing the feminine question at the center of biopolitics. This circular *Bildungsroman* centers on the formative experiences of Dasha and Nina, twin sisters adopted by Giorgio and Agnese Held whose struggles with conception lead them to seek alternative methods to expand their family.<sup>7</sup> Another central female figure of the novel is Tessa, the biologist who oversees the nature reserve of Stellanova and the first character we meet in the novel when she discovers Dasha in the reserve. The novel's temporal oscillation moves the narrative back and forth in time and space, gradually supplying the reader with new details about the Held family. Dasha and Nina's contrasting natures are consistently reinforced and dialogically constructed throughout the novel; the "selvatichezza" ("wildness") of the former hinges on the heteronormativity of the latter. Nina's eager integration into her new family and sociocultural surroundings is contrasted by Dasha's quiet rejection of assimilation and her self-imposed isolation. We learn that not long after deserting Dasha in the integral reserve of Stellaria, Nina becomes engrossed in her desire to become pregnant. After learning that she is sterile, she ends up in a coma from which she never reawakens. In a complex system of parallels, Agnese is linked to Nina by way of their respective reproductive challenges, as well as their similar treatment of Dasha. In a symbolic turn of events wherein Nina's death coincides with Dasha's "revival," Pugno employs a Kristevan allegory of signification that uncovers the nexus of sex and biopower and destabilizes the binary distinctions between *bios* and *zoe*, nature and culture, human and animal, immanence and transcendence, and the public and private spheres.

The theoretical framework outlined herein will support the present examination of *La ragazza selvaggia*. Specifically, I will explore the author's sophisticated engagement with biopolitics through questions of space, primal desire and maternity. The first section of this study will examine the interplay between *bios* and *zoe* in the spatial dimensions that inform the novel. Drawing on the theoretical conceptions of Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Gilles Clément, we will investigate the biopolitical tensions embedded in the spaces that occupy the novel. In the second section, a Kristevan reading of Dasha and Nina's relationship vis-à-vis their female Czechoslovakian wolfdog puppies Astrid and Ysild, will present their complex dynamic as an allegorical representation of the signification process, identifying Dasha as the incarnation

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<sup>5</sup> *Sirene* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007) has generated interest in the posthumanistic question in Pugno's narrative. Roberta Tabanelli has explored the posthuman components of the novel through physiological elements such as tattoos, bodily mutilations, and mutations of species. Robert Rushing has examined *Sirene* through the futuristic, arguing for a reading of the novel as a fitting example of the New Italian Epic. See Roberta Tabanelli, "Al di là del corpo: La narrativa (postumana) di Laura Pugno," in *Italian Culture* 28, no. 1 (2013); Robert Rushing, "Sirens without Us: The Future after Humanity," in *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001) <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0cc3b56b>.

<sup>6</sup> *La caccia* (Rome: Perrone, 2019); *La ragazza selvaggia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2016); *Antartide* (Rome: Minimum fax, 2011); *La metà di bosco* (Venice: Marsilio, 2018); *Sleepwalking* (Milan: Sironi, 2002); *Tennis* (Varese: NEM, Nuova editrice Magenta, 2001); *Il colore oro* (Florence: Le lettere, 2007); *L'Alea* (Rome: Perrone, 2019); *I legni* (Faloppio: LietoColle, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Held's business partner Mauro Guadi informs him that Nina and Dasha's parents were engineers who worked on the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant grounds. After surviving the accident of 1986, they allegedly died in a mysterious fire that struck their home. We later learn, however, that Guadi was one of the founders of the lucrative adoption agency that the Pripjat Institute of Minors turned out to be.

of the *semiotic* and Nina as the *symbolic*, which are associated with *zoe* and *bios*, respectively. Furthermore, an analysis of Dasha's vocal expression through Adriana Cavarero's *For More Than One Voice* will underscore Pugno's call for new conceptions of relationality to loosen the grip of Western logocentrism.<sup>8</sup> Turning our attention to the corporeal, which figures strongly in the novel, we will examine how the *selvaggio* is expressed through the body and simultaneously challenged by it. Contextualizing Pugno's concept of the *selvaggio* within the Kristevan *chora*, we will explore the place of primordial drives vis-à-vis *zoe*. Finally, the third section will focus on the reproductive and maternal question in relation to Agnese and Nina through the Kristevan theory of abjection. Drawing on the theoretical conception of the Kristevan signifying process elaborated in the previous section, I will argue that Agnese and Nina's internal discord, stemming from their unrealized desire to reproduce, underscores the central, yet neglected role of the unconscious in biopolitical conceptions of political power and natural life.

### ***The Woods Within the Garden: Zones of Indistinction***

The epigraph of Pugno's *In territorio selvaggio* outlines the thematic question that Daniele Giglioli and the editor of the Nottetempo publishing house, Andrea Gessner, proposed to the author for their co-edited 2017 series of essays *Trovare le parole*, which featured intimate reflections of authors on a topic that figures prominently in their works. In their thematic proposition to Pugno, they write: "Pareva all'editore che l'autrice avesse in sé da sempre un territorio selvaggio che generava via via le figure i miti i ritmi da cui sono scanditi i suoi libri di versi e i suoi romanzi. Un territorio tutto suo, e insieme di tutti, o meglio di nessuno. I veri boschi non sono di nessuno" ("It appeared to the editor that the author has always possessed within herself? a wild territory, which has steadily generated the figures, myths, and rhythms that carve out her works of poetry and prose. A territory entirely her own, and simultaneously of everyone, or better yet of no one. The real woods belong to no one").<sup>9</sup> The editors call attention to a biopolitical question firmly embedded in Pugno's literary settings in their astute use of the terms *territorio* and *bosco*, which underscores the nuanced implications of these often-overlapping spatial conceptions with respect to the question of sovereignty. Where *territory* tends to invoke the political (i.e. a geographic area under the jurisdiction of a governmental authority), the *woods* are generally conceived of as a "natural" and apolitical space. Pugno's *territorio selvaggio* may best be described by her own notion of the hypothetical "giardino che [ha] in sé il bosco" ("a garden that contains the woods within it"), a site of contention between *bios* and *zoe*, which she references in the first few pages of the essay.

The first setting of *La ragazza selvaggia*, the integral reserve of Stellaria, embodies this tension as a manufactured "natural" site created and surveilled by Techsa, Giorgio Held's agency which he later co-owns with his young associate, Nicola Varriale. Through Tessa, the biologist who oversees the evolution of the reserve from her camper, we learn Techsa's original intention to transform Stellaria into "una riserva integrale, [...] uno spazio protetto da cui l'uomo e i segni del suo passaggio sarebbero stati banditi, destinato a rinselvaticare fino a un ipotetico, immaginario stato di natura, ammesso che mai fosse possibile" ("a nature reserve, a protected space from which man and the traces of his presence would be banished, destined to revert to

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<sup>8</sup> Cavarero, Adriana. *A più voci* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003); *For More Than One Voice*. trans. Paul A. Kottman, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Daniele Giglioli and Andrea Gessner, Foreword to *In territorio selvaggio*, by Laura Pugno (Milan: Nottetempo, 2018), 8.

wilderness until it reached a hypothetical, imaginary state of nature, if this were ever possible”).<sup>10</sup> Techsa’s aim is thus to curate an impenetrable “natural” space, wholly inaccessible to humanity and at once controlled by a select group of government authorities. Over time, Stellaria evolves into “una zona d’ombra, un territorio cancellato dalle mappe” (“a shadow zone, a territory erased from the map”).<sup>11</sup> The central interest of Techsa’s ecological experiment lies in exploring how life is politicized and politics are biologized. In Agambenian biopolitical theory, this would designate the process whereby “the realm of bare life [...] gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion, inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction” which “at once exclud[es] bare life from and captur[es] it within the political order.”<sup>12</sup>

Simultaneously, however, the aims of Techsa raise important questions about problematic implications of the notion of, and the very term *zoe*, which Esposito raises in *Bios: Biopolitica e filosofia*. In his introduction to the work, Esposito challenges the conceivability of a purely natural life, free of any formal feature, through the increasing power of *techne* (Greek: τέχνη, *tékhnē*, “craft, art”) over the human body. He maintains that politics directly infiltrates life, while in the meantime life has already become something other than itself. If for Esposito, *zoe* is always simultaneously linked to *techne*, an exclusive relation between *bios* and *zoe* is hypothetically unsound without *techne*. Esposito’s emphasis on *techne* resonates not only in the name of the government-funded agency behind the nature reserve (Techsa), but also in the methodological aspects of its inception. This conception of *zoe* also applies to the theoretical conception of the Third Landscape put forth by the French landscape architect and theorist Gilles Clément, who defines it as “an undetermined fragment of the Planetary Garden [which] designates the sum of the space left over by man to landscape evolution—to nature alone.”<sup>13</sup> Clément further describes the Third Landscape as “a biological necessity, conditioning the future of living things, [which] modifies the interpretation of territory and enhances areas usually looked upon as negligible.” He adds that “it is up to the political body to organize ground division in such a manner as to assume responsibility for these undetermined areas, tantamount to concern for the future.”<sup>14</sup> Clément’s conception of landscape evolution as a progressive politico-environmental strategy resounds in the case of Stellaria, which was “un paese morente” (“a dying village”) with “case spopolate” (“uninhabited homes”) before its transformation into a nature reserve.<sup>15</sup> As the narrative voice intimates, a stark decrease in political and scientific interest in the experimental reserve soon transforms it into what Clément describes as a designated space of land, an “unattended” area left to “to nature alone,” which, “compared to the territories submitted to the control and exploitation by man [...] forms a privileged area of receptivity to biological diversity.”<sup>16</sup> Despite the divergence of Techsa from the nature reserve, the political imprint of the government agency remains ingrained in the

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<sup>10</sup> Pugno, Laura. *La ragazza selvaggia*, (Venice: Marsilio, 2016), 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Gilles Clément, “The Third Landscape,” last modified 2012, <http://www.gillesclement.com/art-454-tit-The-Third-Landscape>. There is currently no English translation of the original French *Manifeste du Tiers-Paysage* (Paris: Sens et Tonka, 2014). All excerpts derive from Clément’s official website, which includes an English overview of the theory of the Third Landscape.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Clément, “The Third Landscape.”

identity of the reserve: the implied figurative scission of *bios* and *zoe* only reinforces their indissolubility, whilst also invoking the role of *techne*.

Similarly, the glass terrarium in the Villa Held recreates a natural environment to accommodate Dasha after her ten-year disappearance. As another plausible example of Agamben's zone of indistinction which recreates an outside natural *space* in the private *place*, the terrarium also directly invokes Esposito's *techne*. Approaching the spacious hallway containing vast aquariums and terraria, Tessa presumes that "dovevano essere stati costruiti per ospitare animali esotici o rettili, anche di grandi dimensioni" ("They must have been constructed to host exotic animals or reptiles, even large ones at that").<sup>17</sup> Pugno's apathetic narrative voice also foreshadows the unconventional function of the terrarium in its reference to a doctor named Saverio Baldacci, who is said to have authored a book on "i ragazzi selvaggi" ("savage youth") who were treated as autistic cases *ante litteram*. Thus, this enclosure, and the telling reference to Baldacci, vividly encapsulate the active tensions that animate the field of biopolitics. The terrarium, described as a "grande territorio" ("large territory"), shows signs of damage caused by the removal of the rocks that previously occupied it. The nuanced description of Dasha's environment and appearance recalls that of a domestic(ated) animal:

I capelli biondi erano stati rasati a zero quel pomeriggio, con l'aiuto delle infermiere [...] In due ciotole a terra c'erano acqua fresca e resti di carne cruda. Dentro, lo spazio era riscaldato al massimo, in considerazione dello stato di shock della ragazza. Ora Dasha era sotto sedativi, continuò Held, ma dall'indomani sarebbe iniziato il suo programma di rieducazione, con l'aiuto degli specialisti li presenti. Avrebbero esaminato quotidianamente le sue feci e le avrebbero introdotto un sondino nello stomaco per studiare l'alimentazione ed eventuali problemi di malassorbimento. (53)

(Her blond hair had been shaved down to zero that afternoon, with the help of the nurses [...] In two bowls on the ground, there was fresh water and raw meat. The inside, the space was heated to the maximum temperature, given the girl's state of shock. Now Dasha was under sedation, Held continued, but her reeducation program would begin the next day with the help of the specialists in attendance. They would examine her feces daily and insert a tube into her stomach to monitor her nutrition and any malabsorption problems.)

At the sight of Dasha reduced to this state of a confined animal, Tessa asks Giorgio Held, "Perché la tenete così? [...] Cos'è questo, uno zoo?" ("Why do you keep her in these conditions? [...] What is this, a zoo?").<sup>18</sup> The redolent parallel between the terrarium and the zoo evokes Le Vau's Menagerie in Versailles, for the former parallels the voyeuristic function of the latter by way of the glass partitions, which enable the transformation of the object of the human gaze into an exotic "other."<sup>19</sup> Devised to accommodate Dasha's non-conformist and wild nature, the terrarium instead underscores her effective exclusion from her adoptive family and, by extension, society while simultaneously constructing her "otherness" and accentuating her "animality."

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<sup>17</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Erected in 1664 in the park of the Versailles Palace, Le Vau's Baroque-style menagerie featured exotic wild animals in glass enclosures.

The corrective and surveillant functions of the terrarium also closely associate it with the Foucauldian Panopticon, “a privileged place for experiments on men, and for analyzing with complete certainty the transformation that may be obtained from them.”<sup>20</sup> Held echoes this in his response to Tessa's caustic question when he notes, “Dobbiamo poter sorvegliare Dasha, e allo stesso tempo permetterle una transizione lenta, dalle sue abitudini animali a quello che potrà recuperare del comportamento umano. Il terrario non è stato costruito a questo scopo ma ci permette tutto questo” (“We must be able to surveil Dasha, and at the same time ensure her a slow transition, from her animal habits to what she can recover of human behavior. The terrarium was not constructed for this purpose, but it allows us all of this”).<sup>21</sup> Held's justification for selecting Dasha's alternative dwelling and Nina's hospital environment, which he simulates inside the Villa to help Nina reawaken from her coma, is in line with the logic of surveillance inherent to Foucauldian Panopticism.

Pugno's creative spatial vision consistently explores the boundaries between inside/outside, private/public, and natural/political, to uncover the grey zones in which mechanisms of power are most elusive and thus also strongest. Her inquisitive and wide-reaching contemporary gaze dialogues with current ecological and biopolitical debates on the increasing role of technological advancements in our understanding of the natural, or the *selvaggio*, which is consistently revisited and rethought. The spatial dimension of *La ragazza selvaggia*, as that of most of Pugno's novels, is a direct extension of the questions that plague biopolitical discourses. Like a skilled landscape architect, Pugno envisions and generates spaces that problematize *zoe* through the question of performativity, inherent to the *territorio selvaggio* of Pugno's literary page.

### ***The Call of the Chora: Between the Primal and the Political***

In a number of her works, Kristeva identifies poetry as a distinct constituent of the *semiotic chora*, or the realm of infinite potential for the creation of signifying movements. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, she expounds her theory of “The Subject in Process” vis-à-vis the question of language. The *chora*, a kind of “dancing body” in a perpetual state of flux, is “not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e., it is not a sign); nor is it a *position* that represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not a signifier, either) [...] [it] precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization [...] [N]ourishing and maternal, [it is] not yet unified in an ordered whole.”<sup>22</sup> Kristeva further describes the *chora* as “indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; [...] musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax.”<sup>23</sup> Bound in a perceptible hybridity that dances along genre lines, Pugno's *romanzo di ricerca* (“research novel”) is in and of itself a locus of the signifying process where the tension between essence and form is continually contested and reimagined.

Reflecting on the poetic space in *In territorio selvaggio*, Pugno writes, “Il pensiero che cerca la sua materia, la sua forma, la lingua che forma una parola. Nella poesia, c'è sempre un tu. Anche quando è segreto, in qualche modo. E anche qui” (“The thought that seeks its matter, its form, the language that forms a word. In poetry, there is always a 'you' even when it is secret,

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<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (New York: Random House Inc., 1995), 204.

<sup>21</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Julia Kristeva, “The Semiotic and the Symbolic,” in *The Kristeva Portable Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 35.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

somehow. And here, too”).<sup>24</sup> The recurring leitmotif of unyielding nature in perpetual flux emerges in glimpses through vivid hues, piercing scents, and the density of sounds in the author’s oeuvre. The same can be said of human “nature.” Lurking within Pugno’s prose is the same sensible poetic gaze that navigates the space between what is and what appears, what transcends expression, and that which moves it. Pugno locates the *selvaggio* in that which resists comfortable signification. Contextualized within this theoretical framework, *La ragazza selvaggia* reveals itself as an intricate allegory of the Kristevan signifying process, which is constructed through Nina and Dasha’s contrasting natures and their volatile relationship. Their respective subjectivities are dialogically negotiated between alternating present, recent, and past events, and as new aspects of their history emerge, the reader is called upon to recontextualize and redefine the girls’ respective identities. Upon their adoption, Nina keenly forms a connection with Giorgio Held, while Dasha reacts with palpable apprehension. Furthermore, where Nina eagerly assimilates to her new family and cultural surroundings, making substantial strides in her acquisition of the Italian language, Dasha silently retreats into her isolation. Refusing any form of linguistic expression, Dasha spends most of her time with Astrid, the female Czechoslovakian wolfdog puppy that Giorgio and Agnese Held acquire to help the twins assimilate after the adoption.<sup>25</sup>

Here we establish an early correlation between Dasha and the Kristevan *chora*, which is also reiterated in Tessa’s observation that, “C’era qualcosa di disarticolato in Dasha, come se ogni parte del corpo visse da sola, separata dalle altre, come se avesse dentro molte vite e non una. Non è così con gli animali” (“There was something disjointed in Dasha, as if each part of the body lived alone, separate from the others as if she had many lives inside and not just one. It is not so with animals”).<sup>26</sup> Dasha’s “disarticulation” is emblematic of the *semiotic*, the realm of the pulsating primordial drives. The speech therapist called upon to diagnose Dasha’s speech further strengthens this correlation when she asserts, “Credo che capisca molto più di quanto a noi non sembri [...] Semplicemente ha deciso di non aprire bocca, di non mescolarsi con noi” (“I believe that she understands much more than we think. She has simply decided not to utter a word, not to mix in with us”).<sup>27</sup> In her deliberate use of “capire” (“understand”) and “decidere” (“decide”), the therapist attributes a conscious agency and non-conformism to Dasha’s willful muteness, while the expression “non mescolarsi con noi” (“not to mix in with us”) underscores her rejection of Held’s prescribed *bios*. Dasha’s primary form of phonetic expression manifests itself in her occasional singing, which Agnese sometimes overhears late at night, and her “risata infine, improvvisa, di gola e violenta” (“her final, sudden, throaty and violent laughter”), which is described as “la cosa più umana e meno umana di Dasha” [“the most human and the least human thing about Dasha”].<sup>28</sup> Dasha’s sole forms of vocal expression are rooted in the Kristevan *chora*, an “essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral states,” which precedes signification.<sup>29</sup>

Dasha’s partial aporia can also fruitfully be examined through Adriana Cavarero’s *A più voci (For More Than One Voice)*, which rethinks the relation between speech and politics through a “politics of voices” that privileges the *semiotic* to accentuate the exceptionality of each

<sup>24</sup> Pugno, *In territorio selvaggio*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Astrid accompanies Dasha on the day of her disappearance. Yet, whereas Tessa recovers a severely wounded Dasha in the reserve of Stellanova, Astrid is never seen again.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>29</sup> Kristeva, “The Semiotic and the Symbolic,” 39.



voice in its phonetic expression.<sup>30</sup> Building on Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* and Italo Calvino's vocal phenomenology of uniqueness,<sup>31</sup> Cavarero expounds what she defines as "an ontology that concerns "the incarnate singularity of every existence insofar as she or he manifests her- or himself vocally."<sup>32</sup> In her critique of the methodological logocentric negation of the primacy of the voice over speech in philosophy, Cavarero observes, "[T]his inability to listen [...] [makes] it so that even those philosophies that value 'dialogue' and 'communication' remain imprisoned in a linguistic register that ignores the relationality already put in action by the simple reciprocal communication of voices."<sup>33</sup> Like Kristeva, Cavarero identifies poetry as the locus wherein "the semantic, not yet subservient to the congealed rules of writing, bends itself to the musicality of the vocal," whereas psychoanalytic theories of the voice have a tendency to "'rediscover,' in a positive sense, the musical and seductive power of the voice that the metaphysical tradition—starting from Plato's famous hostility toward Homer—has constantly tried to neutralize."<sup>34</sup> Pugno reiterates this logocentric suppression in Agnese and Giorgio Held's inability to grasp the singularity of Dasha's existence in her vocal expression. Furthermore, Dasha's unyielding expressivity supports Pugno's alignment with Cavarero's call for the primacy of the voice with respect to speech to open "new directions for a perspective that not only focuses on a primary and radical form of relation that is not yet captured in the order of language, but that is moreover able to specify this relation as a relation among uniquenesses."<sup>35</sup>

Pugno further constructs Nina and Dasha's differences in relation to the physical and behavioral changes that follow their transition into adolescence. This dissonance causes a sudden rupture in the dynamic that was previously grounded in solidarity and affection. Nina and Dasha gradually grow distant, and the tension between them palpable:

Nina era cambiata, tutti lo vedevano. Nel corpo, certamente. Si era alzata e irrobustita, aveva avuto, di colpo, insieme a Dasha, lo stesso giorno, alla stessa ora quasi, il menarca, i capelli da filacce di lino erano diventati una chioma folta e spessa, ma c'era qualcos'altro. Non era solo la pubertà che irrompeva in Nina, e quando gli Held lo avevano capito, era troppo tardi. Il guscio trasparente che racchiudeva le due sorelle e ne faceva una cosa sola si era spezzato. Non era stata un'incrinatura subito visibile, si era allargata poco a poco. (85)

(Nina had changed; everyone noticed it. Physically, certainly. She had grown taller and fuller, she had suddenly gotten her period, on the same day and almost at the same time as Dasha, her threadlike fringe of hair turned into full, thick tresses, but there was something else. It was not just puberty gushing inside of Nina, and by the time the Helds understood, it was too late. The transparent shell that had enclosed the two sisters and made them one was broken. This was not an immediately visible crack, but one that revealed itself gradually.)

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<sup>30</sup> Cavarero, "Introduction," *For More Than One Voice*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Cavarero (1-16) makes explicit reference to Calvino's short story "Un re in ascolto," in *Sotto il sole giaguaro* (Milan: Garzanti, 1986), 59-93; "A King Listens," in *Under the Jaguar Sun*. trans. William Weaver, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1988), 31-63. Arendt's *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) also serves as a firm point of reference throughout Cavarero's work.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

The use of “guscio trasparente” (“transparent shell”) which recalls the maternal womb, once again invokes the Kristevan *chora*, or the locus of heterogeneity where the *semiotic* precedes the *symbolic* which refuses any signifying position. The rupture of the shell that previously united Nina and Dasha foreshadows the thetic phase of the Kristevan signifying process, or the entry into the “realm of signification, which is always that of a proposition or judgment, in other words, a realm of positions.”<sup>36</sup> The latter also prefigures Nina’s entry into the *symbolic*, reflected in her desertion of Dasha in the woods, which she initially justifies as Dasha’s request to help her return “a casa” (“home”). If we consider Dasha as an incarnation of the *chora* and contemplate her association with the woods, which Nina ambiguously calls her “home,” we can identify the *bosco* as a *semiotic* space. Conversely, Nina, who is more closely associated with the *symbolic*, acts as an embodiment of the political realm of positions.

This is implied in the fate that follows Nina after Dasha’s disappearance, as we learn that “Allora Nina aveva vent’anni, era ossessionata dall’idea di restare incinta e andava con chiunque, con lui, Nicola, e con tutti quelli che le capitavano. Voleva una figlia, una bambina come Dasha, voleva che in quel modo Dasha tornasse” (“Nina was twenty years old by then, she was obsessed with the idea of getting pregnant and slept with anyone, with him, Nicola, and with everyone with whom she crossed paths. She wanted a daughter, a little girl like Dasha. She wanted to bring Dasha back in that way”).<sup>37</sup> After discovering that she is sterile, Nina “era uscita dallo studio medico, era salita in auto ed era andata a schiantarsi sul Muro Torto, sotto Villa Borghese. Adesso, adesso che Dasha era tornata, era in coma” (“she had left the doctor’s office, gotten into the car and crashed it into the Muro Torto, under Villa Borghese. Now, now that Dasha was back, she was in a coma”).<sup>38</sup> While the characters in the novel (with the exception of Tessa) perceive Nina as the more rational and “evolved” of the two sisters, she is far more psychologically rooted in her biological and corporeal identity, as her sterility ostensibly leads her to take her own life. Unlike Dasha, who resists the patriarchal order, Nina ascribes to a femininity that is contingent on the female ability to reproduce (the *symbolic*).<sup>39</sup>

Nina’s entry into the thetic also resounds in the assertion that, “Entrando in coma Nina si era imprigionata nel suo corpo perché essendo anche il corpo di Dasha era già una prigioniera per lei. Per questo, ora che Dasha era tornata, sarebbe potuta uscirne” (“In falling into a coma, Nina had imprisoned herself in her body because, being also Dasha’s body, it was already a prison for her. For this reason, now that Dasha was back, she could have awakened from it”).<sup>40</sup> Because Dasha and Nina are figuratively described as a single entity—not merely as identical physical bodies, but also as one *being*—they are integral organs of the signification process. Nina’s vegetative state and Dasha’s infirmity reiterate Kristeva’s theory of signification. The latter is only achievable through the interplay between the *semiotic* (Dasha) and the *symbolic* (Nina). Kristeva illustrates this concept through poetry as “unique in that it displays the process through which signification is possible. Like poetic language, all signification is the result of a dialectical movement between semiotic and symbolic elements.”<sup>41</sup> Dasha’s presence does not help Nina to reawaken from her coma; on the contrary, as Nina perishes, Dasha’s breathing becomes steady, her bruises appear lighter, and she clasps her belly with her hands. The causal relation between

<sup>36</sup> Kristeva, “The Semiotic and the Symbolic,” 39.

<sup>37</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 101.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> We will explore the maternal and reproductive questions in more detail in the next section, where we will examine Nina’s sterility in comparison with her adoptive mother Agnese’s.

<sup>40</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Kristeva, “The Semiotic and the Symbolic,” 35.

Nina's passing and Dasha's rejuvenation aligns with the Kristevan theory that "only the subject for whom the thetic is not a repression of the semiotic *chora* but instead a position either taken on or undergone, can call into question the thetic so that a new disposition may be articulated."<sup>42</sup>

If we interpret Nina's abuse of Dasha, as well as the act of abandoning her sister in the woods as a repression of the *semiotic chora*, we can read Nina's comatose state as an impasse whereby a return to the *semiotic* is no longer possible. If Nina's presumed suicidal gesture is motivated by her sterility, it upholds her inability to overcome the Oedipus complex without repressing the *semiotic*. Nina's coma and eventual death are therefore an expression of her state as a "pure signifier," as well as symbolic markers of Dasha's mimesis, "a transgression of the thetic when truth is no longer a reference to an object that is identifiable outside of language; [...] an object that can be constructed through the semiotic network but is nevertheless posited in the symbolic and is, from then on, always verisimilar."<sup>43</sup> After Nina's passing, Tessa observes Nicola's new attitude towards Dasha, whom he begins to view as a person and not as the "cosa selvaggia che era ritornata dal bosco di Stellaria" ("wild thing that had come back from the woods of Stellaria").<sup>44</sup> She posits that this may have something to do with Nina's absence, thus upholding the Kristevan theory of thetic transgressions; while a thetic transgression resulting from *semiotic* repression yields a "pure signifier," a thetic transgression whereby truth is no longer a reference to an object that is identifiable beyond language results in a verisimilar object. The signification process is perhaps captured most poetically in Tessa's reflections on the palpable exchange of energy between the corporeal entities of the two sisters and the indirect parallel between Nina and Ysild, the female Czechoslovakian Wolfdog which Tessa gives to Dasha to support her recovery after the disappearance of Astrid in the woods. Bearing witness to Nina's cessation and Dasha's simultaneous reinvigoration, Tessa observes that this development is:

come una trasmissione di vita tra le due sorelle, una possibilità per Nina di ridare quanto aveva tolto. Tessa immaginò onde radio perfette tra le menti delle due ragazze, che prendevano e toglievano energie dal corpo, fino a restituirne uno e condannare l'altro. Nina era quasi identica nel coma e nella morte, solo aveva dissipato calore, quel calore che adesso Dasha era tornata a emanare [...] Ysild, pensò Tessa, aveva attirato la morte al posto suo. Ysild e Nina si erano offerte al posto di Dasha, che era tornata viva.<sup>45</sup>

(like a transmission of life between the two sisters, a chance for Nina to give back what she had taken away. Tessa imagined perfect radio waves between the minds of the two girls, who took and deprived energy from the body until they restored one and condemned the other. Nina was almost identical in coma and death, she had only lost heat, that heat that now Dasha began to give off again [...] Ysild, Tessa thought, had attracted death in her place. Ysild and Nina had sacrificed themselves in place of Dasha, who had come back alive.)

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>45</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 161.

Whereas Astrid's body is never found, when Dasha disappears for the second time, the police find Ysild's dead body on the street near the woods, where Nicola and Tessa discover an injured Dasha. The intimation that Ysild and Nina sacrificed themselves for Dasha positions them as "pure signifiers" of Astrid and Dasha, for Ysild serves as a replacement or stand-in for the former, whereas Nina acts as the embodiment of the *symbolic* vis-à-vis the *semiotic* (Dasha).

The deaths of Nina and Giorgio Held, and Dasha's return to the synthetic woods of Stellaria, represent the intrinsic centrality of sexual difference within biopolitical discourse, which must be understood, as Catherine Mills suggests, "as both a fundamental feature of life, and an effect of the biopolitical constitution and management of it."<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the undeniable influence of Western feminist psychoanalytic theory on Pugno's engagement with the biopolitical endorses Mills' belief that "it would be a mistake to assume from the start that sexual difference will provide a key to unlock the patriarchal foundations of Western biopolitics; we may find instead that it is one of its central motors."<sup>47</sup> Pugno's multilayered negotiation of difference, especially as it pertains to the figure of Dasha, exposes the general apparatus of exclusion that operates within biopolitics through a perceptive engagement with the overlooked figure of the *femina* in biopolitical thought to call for a rethinking of *zoe* as a trans-historical motor of power inextricably grounded in *bios*.

### ***The Abjection of Self: The Unrealized Reproductive Desires of Agnese and Nina***

Agnese, Giorgio Held's enigmatic younger wife and the adoptive mother of Nina and Dasha, is an elusive yet vital presence in the novel. Described exclusively in the context of the maternal and the corporeal, she remains a somewhat passive and marginal figure until Dasha's second disappearance.<sup>48</sup> Her striking resemblance to Nina, both in terms of her physiognomy and her reproductive challenges, acquires an integral function in the latter part of the novel. Agnese and Nina's respective inability to satisfy their personal and reproductive desires generates what Kristeva coins the abjection of self, a dissonance between the subject's innermost wants (*semiotic*) and its external conception of self (*symbolic*), which hinges on the fulfillment of the former.

In "Powers of Horror," Kristeva writes, "one always passes too quickly over this word, 'want,' and today psychoanalysts are finally taking into account only its more or less fetishized product, the 'object of want.'"<sup>49</sup> Written four decades ago, the essay underscores the question of *zoe* as a persistent lacuna in biopolitical thought, a lacuna that could be addressed by feminist theory. Kristeva's poignant insight frames Pugno's sophisticated engagement with the feminine corporeal, which places *zoe* at center stage to uncover the political vein pulsating within it. By contextualizing *zoe* exclusively within the female, Pugno brings psychoanalysis to the forefront of the biopolitical question, reinforcing Catherine Mills' supposition that "in order to understand (and, if necessary, free ourselves from the grasp of) modern biopolitics, an account of the ways

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<sup>46</sup> Mills, Catherine. *Biopolitics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 172.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>48</sup> The reproductive function also features prominently in *Sirene* where the part-human, part-animal sirens must reproduce with the male sirens in an eerie panoptic breeding rank before being discarded and killed. The "sirena mezzaalbina" with whom the human protagonist Samuel engages in sexual intercourse, conceives a hybrid female siren despite the general belief that the sirens could not become pregnant through intercourse with human men.

<sup>49</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror," in Oliver, ed., *The Kristeva Portable Reader*, 231.

in which gender and sexual difference is intimately related to the political management of life is required.”<sup>50</sup>

In her signature phlegmatic tone, Pugno reveals the complex interiority bursting inside deceptively simple characters. Her unflinching narrative nonchalance seamlessly dissolves the boundaries between *bios* and *zoe*, particularly in relation to the reproductive question. This is notably true of Agnese, whose internal conflicts are gradually constructed against the backdrop of her complex relationship with her daughters, as well as in relation to her physical eminence. Upon Tessa’s first encounter with Agnese, the narrative voice intimates, “allora Tessa capì perché Held aveva sempre parlato di sua moglie come di un’apparizione. Agnese ne aveva la qualità: la bellezza, l’alone, la superficie impenetrabile. Tutto era così perfettamente compatto in lei, senza scalfitture, come per dire, guardarmi dentro è inutile” (“Then Tessa understood why Held had always spoken of his wife as an apparition. Agnese had the quality of one: the beauty, the halo, the impervious surface. Everything was so perfectly compact in her, without scratches, as if to say, looking inside me is useless”).<sup>51</sup> Pugno’s use of “apparenza” (“apparition”) and “la superficie impenetrabile” (“impenetrable surface”) reduces Agnese to her physical reality, ascribing her to the realm of the *symbolic* of Nina who is similarly “imprigionata nel suo stesso corpo” (“imprisoned in her own body”).<sup>52</sup> Yet, it is only when we learn of Agnese’s trauma that Pugno’s deliberate attention to her languid physicality acquires significance, becoming an external reflection of her inner abjection.

When the diegesis flashes to the life of the Helds prior to their adoption of Nina and Dasha, we learn that Agnese’s inability to conceive drives Giorgio to seek alternative possibilities to expand his family with his then twenty-five-year-old wife. After two miscarriages within the first months, Agnese becomes pregnant once again; however, she winds up miscarrying in the sixth month and has to undergo a caesarian section due to the late stage of the pregnancy. Medical specialists attribute her struggle to her inability to carry the pregnancy to term. The trauma of Agnese’s difficult reproductive past is further problematized by a detail from her infancy, which the narrator reveals when Agnese firmly rejects Giorgio Held's proposition to adopt only Nina:

quando Giorgio si azzardò a tirare fuori l’idea di adottare la sola Nina, si scontrò con una resistenza feroce da parte di Agnese. Insieme alla madre di sua moglie, Giorgio Held era uno dei pochi a sapere che Agnese era frutto di una gravidanza gemellare mai iniziata. Appena concepita, Agnese aveva assorbito nel suo corpo la gemella potenziale, e ne aveva scoperto l’esistenza solo venticinque anni dopo, quando a causa di un’improvvisa infezione avevano dovuto estrarle dal fianco un ammasso in cui erano contenute cellule staminali. Da allora Agnese, che era stata una ragazza bellissima e viziata, si era convinta che il senso di solitudine che l’accompagnava da sempre fosse legato, nel profondo del suo corpo, a quel remoto evento prenatale, e a nulla erano serviti gli sforzi di Giorgio per dissuaderla. (79)

(when Giorgio dared to propose the idea of adopting Nina alone, he faced fierce resistance from Agnese. Along with his wife's mother, Giorgio Held was one of the few who knew that Agnese was the result of a twin pregnancy that never

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<sup>50</sup> Mills, 172.

<sup>51</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 140.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

started. Barely conceived, Agnese had absorbed the potential twin in her body and discovered its existence only twenty-five years later. Due to an unexpected infection, they had to extract a mass from her hip that contained stem cells. Since then, Agnese, who had been a beautiful and spoiled girl, had convinced herself that the sense of solitude that had always accompanied her was linked, deep in her body, to that distant prenatal event. Giorgio's efforts had been of no use to dissuade her.)

This rebuttal to her husband's proposition is directly tied to the guilt and solitude originating from the death that she preconsciously inflicted upon her twin. The consequences of her failed pregnancies and that difficult prenatal event constitute in Agnese a sense of abjection, which "calls into question borders and threatens identity" and suggests that "the subject is identified with the maternal body since the uncertain boundary between maternal body and infant provides the primary experience of both horror and fascination."<sup>53</sup> As in the case of Nina, who attempts to take her life after learning that she is sterile, Agnese's inability to reproduce, and her preconscious role in the disrupted twin pregnancy of her own mother, motivate her profoundly destabilized sense of self. In both cases, the inability to fulfill a subjective desire leads to the abjection of self. Nina's stems from her sterility, the biological inability (*zoe*) to fulfill the reproductive function ascribed to women in a patriarchal society (*bios*). Similarly, Agnese's rejection of self finds root in the dislocation of and disruption within her reproductive, maternal, and fraternal conception of self. The abject, notes Kristeva, reaches its pinnacle point when the subject, as the product of futile efforts to relate to something outwardly, discovers an irresolvable discord within. The abjection of self thus bares the inherently political face of *zoe*, since "all abjection is, in fact, recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded."<sup>54</sup>

The novel explores this notion in Agnese's relationship with her adoptive daughters. When Dasha and Nina first move to the Villa Held in Rome, the narrative voice describes Agnese as a doting mother, joyfully immersed in her motherly duties. She is said to have returned to "il suo antico sé indolente, come se fosse guarita dal dolore" ("her distant indolent self, as though she had recovered from the pain").<sup>55</sup> Nina and Dasha thus assume the role of "object of want," which temporarily permits Agnese to carry out her unrealized maternal identity until Dasha's disappearance, but fails to satisfy her permanent internal discord. Nina's sterility serves, for Agnese, as a reminder of her own procreative challenges, and thus also her inability to achieve her generative "want." Her unwillingness to engage with Nina derives from her own sense of abjection, which she perhaps subconsciously projects onto Nina.

Whereas Nina thus acts as a figurative mirror of Agnese's unrealized reproductive and maternal desires, Dasha's disappearance reawakens the sense of solitude produced by the prenatal death of her twin and the self-reproach triggered by her preconscious role in it. Agnese's and Nina's implicit attempts to remove Dasha are symbolic of a "violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost [and which] shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death."<sup>56</sup> Upon

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<sup>53</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror," 231.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 86.

<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, "Powers of Horror," 241.

Dasha's first return from the woods, Agnese firmly affirms, “Quella non è Dasha [...] Dasha è morta quando aveva dodici anni” (“That is not Dasha [...] Dasha died when she was twelve years old”).<sup>57</sup> She subsequently asserts that she does not believe in Dasha’s “new life.” For Agnese and Nina, Dasha thus stands as a silhouette of their *bios*, which finds root in their displaced reproductive function, but is in misalignment with *zoe*. This produces what Kristeva describes as “conflicts of drives [that] muddle [the subject’s] bed, cloud its water, and bring forth everything that, by not becoming integrated with a system of signs, is abjection for it.”<sup>58</sup> While Agnese and Nina manifest their misplaced self-abjection in their subjugation of Dasha, *La ragazza selvaggia* symbolizes a new conception of female *zoe* that rejects the *bios* prescribed by patriarchal society, to discover its distinctiveness in the *semiotic*.

## Conclusion

Analyzed through this theoretical lens, *La ragazza selvaggia* emerges as an allegorical critique of the biopolitical insistence on the symbolic figure of the exile, which neglects the historically marginalized figure of the *femina* (sacra or otherwise). Pugno frames the biopolitical question around the feminine to reveal the trans-historic phallogocentric grip on *zoe*, which suppresses the operations of the unconscious (*semiotic*) that drive its transformability and thus its inherent singularity. The intricacy of Pugno’s literary settings, both in her works of poetry and prose, is fruit of an ecological sensibility that recognizes the environment as an extension of the human—a mirror that reflects back to us the tensions of the contemporary biopolitical malaise. Pugno’s treatment of the reproductive and corporeal questions in the novel marks a point convergence between biopolitics and psychoanalytic thought, which calls for a renegotiation of the former through the drives of the unconscious, or that which escapes signification and is home to the *territorio selvaggio*.

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<sup>57</sup> Pugno, *La ragazza selvaggia*, 120

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.