

# Death-in-life: Staging Trauma and Loss in Goliarda Sapienza's *Destino coatto*

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Article abstract

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# DEATH-IN-LIFE: STAGING TRAUMA AND LOSS IN GOLIARDA SAPIENZA'S *DESTINO COATTO*

ALBERICA BAZZONI

*Abstract:* This essay investigates the representation of traumatic loss in Goliarda Sapienza's *Destino coatto*, a collection of short narrative fragments published posthumously in 2002. I explore these texts by focusing on the original representation they offer of temporality in relation to trauma and loss, refracting a condition of death-in-life into temporal and spatial images. In particular, the night, accompanied by images of immobility and enclosed spaces, is a key signifier that represents a protective shield from the destructive force of life. Reflecting the liminal state of a subject in crisis, several texts are set on the threshold between day and night, and between indoor and outdoor spaces. Against the endless re-enactment of trauma, Sapienza stages a quest for immobility, a state of death-in-life that at the same time rejects and protects life.

## Introduction

This essay investigates the representation of traumatic loss in Goliarda Sapienza's *Destino coatto* (*Compulsory Destiny*), a collection of short narrative fragments published posthumously in 2002. While interest in Sapienza's work is rapidly growing, fuelled by the international success of her major novel, *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*), and extending to her numerous autofictional works, the short pieces collected in *Destino coatto* have not yet been the subject of specific study.<sup>1</sup> In dialogue with psychoanalysis and trauma theory, this essay sets out to explore these texts by focusing on the original representation they offer of trauma and loss. It analyzes in depth the ways in which an unspeakable state of crisis can be

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<sup>1</sup> After long oblivion, Sapienza studies are now a rapidly growing field. Major contributions to date include four monographs (Rizzarelli 2018; Bazzoni 2018; Scarfone 2018; Trevisan 2016), four edited volumes (Rimini and Rizzarelli 2018; Bazzoni et al. 2016; Providenti 2012; Farnetti 2012), as well as numerous articles and book chapters in various languages.

given representation without recomposing the fracturing of time and self into a coherent discourse.

In particular, this essay explores the use and semantic subversion of images usually associated with death and life, such as darkness/sunlight, immobility/movement, and enclosure/openness. It argues that such a displaced imagery conveys a liminal state between life and death that is linked to an unspeakable loss and that represents the symbolic death of the subject. Themes of death, mourning, and trauma, albeit conspicuous in Sapienza's work, have thus far been only tangentially investigated by criticism. This essay begins an analysis in this direction, taking its cue from the highly experimental texts of *Destino coatto*, which constitutes both a unicum in Sapienza's production and a laboratory of several themes and images she developed further in later writings.<sup>2</sup> As *Destino coatto* has not yet been translated into English, this essay also offers a first entry point into the collection for an English-speaking readership, making a selection of passages available in translation.<sup>3</sup>

*Destino coatto* is a collection of ninety-six prose fragments, ranging from a few lines to a few pages each. The collection was first published as a volume posthumously in 2002, while some pieces had appeared in *Nuovi Argomenti* in 1970 (131–48). In the introduction to the volume, Angelo Pellegrino situates the composition of the collection between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, after the death of Sapienza's mother, Maria Giudice, and the writing of *Ancestrale* (Sapienza's poetic collection, which represents her first steps in writing, also published posthumously in 2013),<sup>4</sup> at the threshold of the personal crisis underwent by the author in the first half of the 1960s (Pellegrino 5–7). Such a crisis, intimately connected to her experiences of Maria Giudice's death, two suicide attempts, the interruption of her career as an actress, an enforced electroshock therapy that caused her to partially lose her memory, and an ambivalent experience of psychoanalytic treatment, is also the starting point of her engagement with literary writing (Providenti, *La porta è aperta*). Much of Sapienza's literary production

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<sup>2</sup> This aspect is also pointed out by Trevisan, who highlights several connections between *Destino coatto* and Sapienza's later works.

<sup>3</sup> I wish to thank Adrián I. P-Flores for the precious collaboration on the translation of Sapienza's texts.

<sup>4</sup> Poems in *Ancestrale* also engage extensively with loss and death, employing a similar imagery to that featured in *Destino coatto*.

is tightly interlaced with her autobiographical experience and informed by an existential search *in* and *through* writing.

The composition of *Destino coatto* would precede the disruptive surfacing of Sapienza's traumatic wounds and her endeavour of self-reconstruction through psychoanalysis and writing in her early works *Lettera aperta* (*Open Letter*) and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (*Midday Thread*). If we accept this timeframe, *Destino coatto* would be placed in a delicate transitional phase between the death of Sapienza's mother and the early attempts to elaborate that loss through poetry, and her devastating psychological breakdown and slow recovery of the 1960s. However, the short stories of *Destino coatto* appear to speak of a crisis in the middle of its unfolding, including recurring references to sleep deprivation and suicide—a significant element considering that Sapienza was hospitalized in 1962 after an overdose of sleeping pills. Furthermore, texts in the collection are constructed through widespread references to psychoanalytic *topoi*, and some even exhibit the narrative form of accounts of dreams, with the characteristic use of the imperfect tense and oneiric oscillations in settings and characters. These features suggest that the pieces included in the collection may have been written over a longer period of time in the course of Sapienza's breakdown and in the initial stages of her psychoanalytic therapy, rather than before. Aside from the exact collocation of composition and the current impossibility of establishing a certain timeframe, what is striking about *Destino coatto* is the original way in which it voices a state of crisis: a liminal condition between death and life before meaning, subjectivity, and temporality are restored.

### **Compulsory destinies: the iterative force of trauma**

Texts in *Destino coatto* represent a multiplicity of voices and characters, all having in common some form of traumatic experience that manifests in obsessions, hallucinations, and the breakdown of cognition. Some pieces adopt a first-person narration, others speak in the third-person, while others oscillate between the two, blurring the identity of the speaking subject(s). While proper names, objects, themes, and situations recur throughout the collection, there is no narrative development nor any identifiable connection among the different pieces, which represent a uniquely original experiment in prose form. The resulting effect is that of a fractured mosaic, held together by the repetition and displacement of recurring patterns which nonetheless do not compose any clearly identifiable picture.

Many pieces share a similar structure, involving a character who is stuck in an obsession, a repeated gesture, a state of suspension, or a confrontation with an inexplicable event that cannot be overcome: a man cannot help spying on his wife as she sleeps; a woman's hands begin to sweat blood, and she waits, wondering if it will ever stop; a woman smiles all the time, including when she is informed that her mother died; someone falls in love with their reflection in a mirror; someone else finds that her reflection is a skull with a wig. The structuring force behind these enigmatic fragments is that of an iteration of trauma that condenses into a compulsory destiny, the notion that gives the collection its title. Destiny is here an inescapable force within the subject that suspends the development of their personal story in a single iterative act. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud marvels at the phenomenon of repetition, identifying the compulsion to repeat as "the manifestation of the power of the repressed" (Freud 27):

What psycho-analysis reveals in the transference phenomena of neurotics can also be observed in the lives of some normal people. The impression they give is of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some 'daemonic' power; but psycho-analysis has always taken the view that their fate is for the most part arranged by themselves and determined by early infantile influences. (29)

What Freud then terms "destiny neurosis" manifests as "an essential character-trait which remains always the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experience" (*Beyond* 25). The subject "is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of [...] *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (*Beyond* 25). Freud's passage on destiny neurosis fittingly captures the lives of "common people" represented in *Destino coatto*, as Sapienza gives voice to the "tragedies and mistakes, destined to keep repeating themselves, which mark everyone's life" as Pellegrino remarks (5).<sup>5</sup> Freud's observations on destiny neurosis are also the starting point of Cathy Caruth's fundamental reflections on trauma, narrative, and temporality developed in *Unclaimed Experience*. Caruth looks at narrative renderings of the specific nexus between trauma and time, characterized by inescapable iterations. If the flow of temporality is what allows for a narrative to develop and thereby make change possible, its interruption traps characters in an overwhelming paralysis. In *Destino*

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<sup>5</sup> Translations into English are always mine, unless otherwise indicated.

*coatto* we find a profound and original exploration of such a state of paralysis and iteration, and of destiny and trauma, which is given representation through the breaking down of identity, temporality, space, and narrative form.

Among the multiple and intricate threads that interweave in the texts of *Destino coatto*, the theme of loss stands out, surfacing over and over again as a specific theme, and runs underneath the whole collection as the general condition with which Sapienza contends. Here “loss” means both object-loss, referring in particular to the death of the mother, Maria, and the corresponding death of the self, referring to someone who is trapped in a melancholic state. Instead of meeting “the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists” (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia* 255), the subject takes the lost object of love into herself, “so by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction” (257). In *Destino coatto*, subjects’ lives are almost entirely invaded by loss, as “the ego is overwhelmed by the object” (252)—they cannot understand and they cannot let go, they continue to identify with the lost object and in this way keep re-experiencing death. Death does not refer here to biological death, but—in Lacanian terms—to the symbolic death of the subject, “the radical annihilation of the symbolic order through which reality is constituted” (Kim 105).

### **The mortal danger of daylight**

In giving representation to the paralyzed temporality of loss, Sapienza sets up a series of contrasting images, such as night and day, dark and light, indoor and outdoor spaces, cold and warmth, stasis and movement, subverting their usual connotations. In opposition to daylight, the night is a key signifier that represents a protective shield against the destructive force of life that ultimately poses a mortal threat to the subject. The night, accompanied by images of immobility and enclosed spaces, represents a regressive state where temporality stops flowing. Night and day, death and life, stasis and movement, and enclosed and open spaces are inverted: since living means reliving a loss (that of the mother and of the self), the subject seeks a form of protective immobility, a withdrawal from life as the only way to preserve life itself.

In the following fragment, for example, the light of the sun represents both an attractive force and a deadly danger for the subject:

Oggi ho fatto un errore. Sono uscita a mezzogiorno. [...] È un errore, solo la sera devo uscire. La sera, truccata, vestita di colori chiari. Ma non questa sera. Forse domani. Il mio viso è rimasto lì, appiccicato a quei vetri dal sole. Sto qui al buio e mi tocco. Ma non trovo la fronte, le guance, il collo. È tutto molle, impastato, sciolto dal sole. (Sapienza, *Destino coatto* 50)

Today, I made a mistake. I went out at noon. [...] It's a mistake; I must only go out in the evening. In the evening, with makeup, dressed in light colours. But not tonight. Maybe tomorrow. My face remained there, squashed against that window by the force of the sun. I'm here in the dark and I touch my body. But I can't find my forehead, my cheeks, my neck. Everything is soft like dough, melted by the sun.

This is one of many texts that refer to the peril posed by the sun, recalling or possibly anticipating the title of Sapienza's autobiographical recollection of her psychoanalysis, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*. Going out in the sun, venturing outside the protected and dark space of the home, is an irresistible temptation—the temptation to give in to life—which nonetheless threatens the very survival of the subject. Under the sun, the subject loses her identity, a process portrayed as physical disintegration: her face gets stuck to a window, her features melt to the point of becoming indistinguishable. Outside the boundaries of the home, exposed to the demanding light of the sun, the crushing force of life, the subject physically disintegrates.

A similar pattern occurs in the following story, which explicitly brings death to the fore:

Sono uscita alle due del pomeriggio. Ora sono le cinque e sono già morta all'angolo della strada. Parlano intorno a me, discutono perché è avvenuto, di chi è la colpa. La colpa non è di nessuno.

Io lo sapevo e sono uscita lo stesso. Dovevo stare a casa e sono uscita alle due. *È alle due che Maria è cascata dal muricciolo mentre giocavamo a nascondino e si è spezzata la spina dorsale. È alle due che sono nata.* (*Destino coatto* 55)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Italics in the original.

I went out at 2 p.m. Now it's 5 p.m. and I already died in a street corner. They are speaking around me, discussing why it happened, who is responsible for it. Nobody is to blame.

I knew it, and yet I went out nonetheless. I should have stayed home, and I went out at 2 p.m. instead. *It was 2 p.m. when Maria fell from the wall and broke her spine while we were playing hide-and-seek.* I was born at 2 p.m.

Here, the subject leaves the house in the daylight at her own risk. While in the previous fragment, the sunlight causes her to lose her identity, represented through the physical melting of the body, in this piece she actually dies and tells the story from a place after her own death. She observes other people wondering about her death, interrogating it, looking for an explanation, for someone to blame. However, in the characteristic form of the opacity of trauma and its condensation into a “compulsory destiny,” death is inexplicable, as much as it is inexpiable: “la colpa non è di nessuno” (55). She knew it was dangerous, but she went out in the sun anyway, thus meeting her own fate. Significantly, this scene recalls Sapienza’s framing of the impossibility for her to explain her own suicide attempts, recounted in *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* and depicted as inextricably intentional and accidental at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

In the second part of this short story, Sapienza connects the death of the subject to that of another character, Maria—the name of her own mother, which recurs in many pieces throughout the collection. The link is provided by means of the number two: the subject left her house at two, the same time of Maria’s death, and the same time of the subject’s own birth. The marking and repetition of numbers is a distinctive feature of the collection, which serves to convey both a sense of free analogical association, as in dreams, and patterns of iteration. The fragment remains mysterious, tracing multiple connections between the subject and Maria, their respective deaths, and between life and death. This is a typical example of the way in which Sapienza constructs an identification between subject and object,

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<sup>7</sup> Sapienza attempted suicide overdosing with sleeping pills, and it was never clear whether or not she intended to actually kill herself. This specific topic also features explicitly in another piece in *Destino coatto*, in which the speaking voice laments: “Io, veramente, volevo solo dormire e invece sono morta” (“Actually I just wanted to sleep, instead I died. They didn’t understand it”; 35). For a more extensive reflection on Sapienza’s representation of undecipherable motivations, see Bazzoni’s “Pirandello’s Legacy in the Narrative Writings of Goliarda Sapienza,” 14–17.



self and other, in connection with death. The symbolic death of the subject replicates the loss of the object; the loss of the object is brought inside the subject, as a loss of the self. The death of Maria is, in fact, also the death of the subject, and that event keeps repeating anytime she leaves the home, exposing herself to the sun and giving in to the temptation of starting to live again.

### **Seeking immobility**

The passages above set up a clear opposition between the protection offered by darkness and the mortal force of the sun. Linked to these images is an opposition between movement and stasis and between outdoor and indoor spaces. The dynamic instituted between these images manifests a semantic subversion whereby movement and outdoor spaces, like the light of the sun, are associated with death, while stasis and indoor spaces are sought by the subject as a shield —albeit itself deadly—from death.

The rejection of movement is expressed for example through recurring references to liquids. In the passage cited before, we have seen the threat to identity depicted as the melting of the body. In the following piece, the subject refuses all liquids, including drinking water, as these represent the danger of movement and, therefore, of death:

Non posso soffrire i liquidi. Tutti i liquidi. Mi fa schifo quel movimento continuo. Le cose ferme sì, le posso mangiare ma l'acqua nel bicchiere che si muove non posso e per fortuna che me ne sono accorto altrimenti sarei morto allora, là, alla Playa in mezzo a tutta quell'acqua che si muoveva. Me ne sono accorto in tempo. Glielo spieghi che è stata una fortuna, ma loro niente, sono tutti uguali. [...] come faccio a spiegargli che da quando mi sono accorto che l'acqua si muove non ho più sete? (*Destino coatto* 104)

I can't stand liquids. All liquids. That continuous movement disgusts me. I can eat things that stay still, yes; but the water that moves in the glass, I can't. And I was lucky to notice, otherwise I would have died then on the Playa beach in the centre of all that moving water. I realized in time. I keep explaining it to them that it was luck, but they don't listen, they're all the same. [...] How can I explain to them that since I noticed that water moves I'm not thirsty anymore?

This passage is centred on the association between water, movement, and death. Water is at the same time the necessary nourishment for survival and an image of death—the threatening water of the sea where the subject could drown. We can read here an implicit reference to another episode that marked Sapienza's life and that returns in *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*: namely, the death of her brother Goliardo, who drowned at sea by the playa in Catania at age fourteen before Sapienza was born (Providenti, *La porta è aperta*). Sapienza inherited his name, so that since her birth her life was always intimately connected to her brother's death. The water of the sea is associated with the water in a glass, and its movement is, for the speaking voice, a mortal threat. The subject's response is one that gives shape to the collection as a whole, that is, the need to reject life (“non ho più sete”) in order to protect it from death—which is the death of loved ones, and at the same time, the death of the subject herself, thus stuck in a melancholic paralysis.

In another story, the danger of movement is traced back to an original traumatic choice, that of leaving the native place which initiated a condition of restlessness that haunts the subject:

Non so chi, ma qualcuno me l'aveva detto: non muoversi, avevano detto, non fare neanche un passo. Io allora, forse anche perché ero tanto giovane, non ho ascoltato e mi sono mossa, non che sia andata lontano, ma mi sono mossa e così quel piccolo passo da Catania a Roma, figuratevi, mi costringe, adesso, e sono passati tanti anni, a muovermi sempre, spostarmi. Anche nel sonno, sì, non lo crederete, anche nel sonno. (*Destino coatto* 67)

I don't know who but somebody had told me “don't move”—they said to me, “don't take a single step.” Back then I didn't listen, perhaps because I was so young, and I moved—not that I went very far, but I moved, and that small step from Catania to Rome, you can imagine, now forces me to keep moving; it's been many years now, I have to keep moving, all the time. Even when I sleep—yes, you won't believe it—even when I sleep.

This passage, pointedly autobiographical—Sapienza left her native Catania and moved to Rome at the age of seventeen to study acting at the Accademia d'Arte Drammatica (Providenti, *La porta è aperta*)—reiterates the notion of an

inescapable destiny, which is carried out in the act of moving—that is, the act of living—itself. She should not have moved, yet she did, and now she is doomed to repeat the same cycle, knowing no peace. Immobility, renouncing desire, and pushing life outside is the only alternative available:

Devo stendermi sul letto, staccare il telefono e cercare di non pensare.  
Non pensare e non desiderare niente, che non sia un vestito, un paio  
di calze. (*Destino coatto* 98)

I must lay on the bed, unplug the phone and try not to think. I  
mustn't think and I mustn't desire anything that is not just a dress, a  
pair of socks.

Non devo più toccare niente e stare qui seduta davanti alla finestra.  
Potrò guardare fuori, e attenta alle mani che non si spostino dalle  
ginocchia. Starò qui a guardare e non mi muoverò più. Non toccherò  
più niente. (101)

I must not touch anything anymore, and sit here by the window  
instead. I will look outside, and I'll be careful with my hands, checking  
that they don't move from my knees. I'll stay here, looking, and I'll  
never move again. I'll never touch anything ever again.

The latter passage concludes a brief story in which the subject recounts that she always drops and breaks things, and had recently broke a set of glasses belonging to her mother, who had died not long before. Once again, movement is associated with death. Moving is breaking, it is a re-enactment of the experience of loss, to which the subject responds by retreating into a state of passive immobility. This passage also exemplifies the attraction that life keeps exerting on the subject, which she must resist, contenting herself with sitting by the window, looking outside, and guarding her hands, so that they do not move and break more things. Significantly, the future tense adopted by the speaking voice (“starò qui e non mi muoverò più”) is pre-empted of any actual futurity, as the only time to come that she can envision is one of negation: refusing life is the only way to escape the traumatic iteration.

### Liminality and ambivalence

In their positioning between temptation to live and protective immobility, characters inhabit a liminal space, embodied in several images of threshold—such as doors and windows—that recur in the collection. In the essay “Finestre, porte, luoghi reali e spazi immaginari nell’opera di Goliarda Sapienza,” Anna Carta points out the importance of liminal objects in the collection, “objects in which the twofold semantic possibility of movement and stasis is implied” (45). In addition to the spatial liminality represented by doors and windows, which mark the threshold between inside and outside, several stories take place at sunset—that is, on the threshold between day and night. Such temporal and spatial imagery of suspension reflects the liminal state of a subject in crisis, who inhabits an ambivalent condition of death-in-life.

Dalle sei alle sette, in questa stagione, qui in via Denza non c’è abbastanza buio per accendere la luce e non è abbastanza chiaro per vederci. Potrei chiudere due persiane e accendere almeno una lampada. Ma come si fa a dimenticare che fuori ancora si vede?  
(*Destino coatto* 45)

From 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. in this season—here in Via Denza—it’s not dark enough to turn on the light and it’s not bright enough to see. I could close the blinds and turn on at least one light. But how can I forget that outside there’s still light?

In this passage, also openly autobiographical as Via Denza was Sapienza’s address in Rome, the subject is in a state of suspension, between day and night, inside and outside, and life and death. She seeks the protection of the indoor space but cannot forget the attraction of the light and life pulsating outside. Giving voice to a deep sense of ambivalence, the outside space is often portrayed as attractive, but at the same time, as crushingly demanding. It’s a space from which the subject wants to protect herself and to which she reacts with a block in her expressive faculties, such as not being able to move or speak. The telephone rings (*Destino coatto* 98), people ask questions incessantly (51; 56–58), someone is expecting a theatrical performance but the actress cannot move and turns into a wax statue (25–26). In contrast to the overwhelming demands of social life, characters voice

a desperate need for quietness and especially sleep, one of the very protagonists of the collection.

Caruth's reflections on trauma offer useful insights into the state of liminality represented in the collection. Caruth describes the twofold dimension of trauma as "the encounter with death" and "the ongoing experience of having survived it" (7). Narratives of trauma, Caruth remarks, engage in "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (7). Stories in *Destino coatto* complement Caruth's understanding of the twofold feature of trauma narratives by staging a condition of ambivalence that refuses life in the name of life and pursues death against death itself—the death of the other that has taken the subject with it.

In such an oscillation between the "crisis of death" and the "crisis of life," several pieces stage the subject's inability to distinguish different states, spaces, times, and identities. Liminality becomes the marker of ambivalence, the impossibility of discerning life and death. This happens, for example, to a woman who is terrified of falling asleep because she is convinced that if she sleeps she will die, and significantly, she decides to escape her fear of death by killing herself by jumping from the window—another threshold image between inside and outside: "Così non dormirò e nessuno mi sveglierà: quando [la morte] verrà mi troverà stecchita e non sarà stata lei a sorprendermi nel sonno" ("So I won't sleep, and nobody will wake me up. When death comes, he'll find me already dead, and it won't have been him who killed me"; *Destino coatto* 14). Similarly, another character can no longer distinguish between being awake and sleeping, invoking the alternate state as a relief: "Per anni ho sperato di poter dormire. Ora dormo da anni e spero di svegliarmi, almeno un po', almeno per qualche secondo" ("For many years I hoped to be able to sleep. Now I've been sleeping for many years and I hope to wake up, at least for a little bit, at least for a few seconds"; 127).

Such a blurring of life and death is exemplified powerfully in a short piece, centred on the image of the dying of a stone:

Mi è successa una cosa strana. In agosto ho raccolto una pietra fra gli scogli di Nerano. Sembrava una cosa viva. Oggi mettendo in ordine qui sul comodino, dove l'ho tenuta questi mesi, l'ho trovata morta. Ho avuto paura di toccarla. E sta lì, morta, senza luce. Tremo e non so come fare a toccarla. Non riesco a non guardarla. (69)

Something strange happened. In August, I picked up a stone from Nerano. It seemed alive. Today, as I was tidying up the bedside table, where I kept the stone all these months, I found it dead. I got scared of touching it. It lies there, dead, with no light. I shiver and don't know how to touch it. I can't stop looking at it.

The subject picks up a stone, imagining or perceiving it as a living being; yet, months later, she finds that it is dead. It is not the perception that the stone was always an inanimate object that shocks her, but in fact its death. This piece, lapidary in its brevity and lucidity, poetically conveys the ambivalence between death and life, linked to a traumatized experience of loss that haunts the collection of *Destino coatto*.

In response to the threat of disintegration that comes from being alive, and therefore, reliving the loss of the loved object, Sapienza pursues a process of complete de-subjectivation, which is expressed as a regressive drive towards a protective immobility:

Avete mai avuto l'impressione che la vostra carne si scioglia nell'aria? [...] Ebbene appena esco dalle lenzuola alla luce vedo che la mia carne si sfalda nell'aria e va vagando in brandelli. [...] Ora, se anche voi avete quest'impressione, ed è per questo che scrivo queste cose, perché altrimenti tacerei, ho trovato un rimedio: mettetevi nell'acqua calda. Così la luce non vi tocca e le vostre carni restano ferme. È così che vi scrivo, immersa nell'acqua calda e vi prego credetemi: se avete questo disturbo seguite questo consiglio: state immersi nell'acqua calda, nell'acqua calda e fermi se è possibile, fermi il più che vi sia possibile. (70)

Have you ever had the impression that your flesh dissolves into the air? [...] Well, as soon as I get out of the bedsheets into the light, I see my flesh flaking off in the air and floating in shreds. [...] Now, if you too have this impression—and that's why I'm writing these things, otherwise I wouldn't say anything—I found a remedy: immerse yourselves in hot water. In this way the light doesn't touch you and your flesh stays still. That's how I'm writing to you, immersed in hot water, and please believe me: if you also suffer from this problem,

follow my advice. Stay immersed in hot water, in hot water and completely still, if it's possible, as still as you can.

Movement, linked to light, threatens the very integrity of the subject, whose body dismembers and disperses in the air as soon as it is not contained by an external, uterine boundary—the bedsheets, the hot water. The only “remedy” to the destruction of the self that comes with movement and light is to pursue a condition of absolute stasis, which is at the same self-annihilation and self-preservation. Carta rightly points out how “the condition sought for by Sapienza in these short stories resembles and recalls a pre-natal amniotic state” (265), as the writer would be accessing “a pre-nominal, pre-cognitive world” (261).

Such a regressive, amniotic condition is also illustrated in a piece that mentions Sapienza's native place in Catania, specifically Via Pistone, where she lived with her family as a child. She is walking through the city at night and needs to return home before dawn:

Sapevo di dover tornare. Camminavo in fretta, perché sapevo che dovevo tornare prima dell'alba [...] Lì dove il vicolo si restringe in un budello scuro e senza aria. Lì anche se sarà venuto il giorno non avrà più importanza: la luce non arriva mai. (*Destino coatto* 112)

I knew I had to go back. I walked fast, because I knew I had to be back before dawn. There, where the street narrows into a dark and airless alley. There, even if the day will have come, it won't matter: the light never arrives there.

The journey home is depicted as a deadly regression towards her family home, her childhood, her point of origin, which will end in a dark and enclosed space. The future tense becomes future perfect (“anche se sarà venuto il giorno”), a future that is already past: there is no light at the end of the regressive journey into the small street in Catania, no movement, no time.

### **A warm winter night**

While there is no escape from the paralyzed temporality of trauma in the collection, one piece presents an intriguing exception. In this text, set in an oneiric warm winter night, the subject walks outside in the moonlight, while the alive and the

dead sleep. As she walks, she loses all markers of her identity into the embrace of a snowy yet tepid earth, completing a process of total de-subjectivation which, in fact, prepares her for the possibility of slowly beginning to live again.

Andavo per strade bianche. Era la luna o aveva nevicato, non so. [...] Questo prato coperto di luna o di neve ha delle dune, forse sono tombe. E le persone dormono. Questo caldo è forse l'abbraccio della terra, la terra non fa domande. [...] Posso camminare per questo prato o strada, non c'è nessuno e non c'è freddo. I morti sono lì e riposano. Imparano a non domandare, io cammino e comincio anch'io a non farmi domande. Forse tutto questo freddo che ho sempre non è che una domanda. Forse comincio anch'io in questa passeggiata a capire che ci sono strade, o prati, dove non ti viene chiesto niente. Né come ti chiami né qual è il tuo indirizzo. (51)

I walked on white roads. It was the moonlight or perhaps it had snowed, I don't know. [...] This field, covered in moonlight or snow, forms some dunes, maybe they're tombs. And people are sleeping. Perhaps this warmth I feel is the embrace of the earth, the earth asks no questions. [...] I can walk on this field or road, there's nobody around and it's not cold. The dead are there and are resting. They're learning not to ask questions, and I walked and I also begin not to ask myself any questions. Maybe this cold I feel all the time is nothing but a question. Maybe as I walk, I too begin to understand that there are roads or fields where nobody asks you anything, not what your name is, or where you live.

This passage encompasses several characteristics that define the collection as a whole, and at the same time, represents a significant exception to the web of images of paralysis analyzed so far. The subject is here immersed in a restful and safe space, but this is an open, desert space that is not the enclosed walls of the home, or the dark end of a childhood alley, or the uterine space of water. In this lunar, white, and silent landscape, the subject is completely alone, as even the dead finally sleep in their tombs and do not demand anything. Warmth does not come from the crushing force of the sun, but from the safe embrace of the earth. Instead of the sun, a delicate moonlight illuminates the scene.



The subject is performing here a process of complete de-subjectification, which includes achieving disidentification from the dead, the living, and herself. In this oneiric yet comforting nocturnal space, she can release her identity—nobody asks for your name or where you live. And it is precisely this process of disidentification that makes space for a new re-semanticization of life: here the subject does not seek a protective immobility, instead she walks in an outdoor space (“io cammino”), releases her old questions (“comincio anch’io a non farmi domande”), and begins to understand something new (“comincio a capire”). While pieces in the collection are dominated by the stuck immobility of regression and the paralysis of traumatic iteration, this lunar scene hints at the possibility for movement, change, temporality—ultimately, life—to be slowly reintegrated. The warm winter night, with its contrasting features, represents an extreme limit of self-annihilation which also enables the subject to put the dead to rest and to learn to walk new paths, new landscapes. As in Lacan’s reflections on the symbolic death of the subject, “[t]he event of symbolic death, paradoxically, is a time of true awakening, providing life energy for the subject. Simultaneously, the fact that a subject experiences a temporary status of de-subjectification ensures that she gains the creative power to reorganize the symbolic order and intersubjectivity” (Kim 114). Bringing together the warmth of life and the coldness of death, the darkness of night and the white moonlight, the image of the warm winter night expresses contradictory sensations that compose a state of death-in-life. The warm winter night is thus both the static time of traumatic loss and the regenerative potential inscribed within the undoing of the self, the relinquishing of previous identifications, and the beginning of the process of mourning. It is an ambivalent image that captures that liminal state, suspended between life and death, characterizing the whole collection and also hinting at the possibility of a new, different process to begin. The paralysis of time and the potentially restorative stasis of the warm winter night are two sides of the same experience of loss, which is not processed in the collection but finds here a possibility of expression.

### **Conclusion: performing trauma**

The pieces that compose *Destino coatto* offer an original way to experiment with the possibility of conveying trauma. As we have seen, characters are fixed in forces that remain obscure to them and, at the same time, determine them, rising to a properly tragic status from which there is no escape. And yet these characters “speak” in that they articulate an experience of suffering at the same time as they

cannot explain and put to rest the unknown pulsating forces that move them. As Caruth explains, this painful truth that can be “cried out” but not known constitutes the core of trauma narratives:

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.  
(4)

In this sense, the truth of the traumas haunting the characters of *Destino coatto* is not a singular and precise event that can be unearthed by decrypting its subsequent manifestations. The way in which Sapienza constructs the collection, by refracting autobiographical experiences into a multiplicity of voices and situations, effectively works against an investigative approach that would aspire to disclose a deeper pre-existing truth. At the same time, frequent appeals in the plural to the readers/audience, such as “pensate” (“think”; *Destino coatto* 11); “vi capisco” (“I understand you”; 12); “Sapete” (“You know”; 52); “vi prego credetemi” (“please believe me”; 70); among countless others, are markers of all Sapienza’s writings that project a solitary excavation into a shared setting, a performative space where the narrating personae can effectively communicate their drama. In “Telling Time: Literature, Temporality and Trauma,” Wendy O’Brian asks:

[h]ow can trauma be written? In giving words to trauma and its after effects, aren’t all those aspects of such overwhelming encounters with unmediated life lost? The very act of writing requires one to structure and temporalize events. (211)

Texts in *Destino coatto* offer a distinctive answer to the question of how trauma can be written. They fragment subjectivity into several characters, which voice their traumatic experiences without restoring any narrative temporalization and without achieving any comprehension of their own trajectories. Instead of narrative development, we have the fleeting apparition of characters fixed and fixated in a moment, a trait, or a gesture. Through a series of contrasting images and semantic subversions, Sapienza conveys an experience of melancholic paralysis

that accompanies the trauma of loss. The image of the night, in particular, serves to convey the subverted relationship to life experienced by a subject who is stuck in loss: the night is at the same time the absence of life and a protection from death. Furthermore, in the scene of the warm winter night, Sapienza offers an original figuration of the extreme condition of symbolic death—where annihilation comes to fruition and hints at the possibility of a new beginning. These short texts do not seek explanations nor recompose the subjects' destinies into meaningful narratives; they are rather theatrical monologues that perform a traumatic state through the subversion and re-semanticization of images of life and death.

Pellegrino highlights the theatrical quality of these pieces, which, on the one hand, reconnects *Destino coatto* to the essentially performative feature of all Sapienza's writings,<sup>8</sup> and, on the other hand, to the question of the representability of what escapes comprehension:

In the work of Goliarda Sapienza, who went beyond her analytic experience, the unconscious, this phantasm of the twentieth century, becomes a character refracted into many characters, who are no longer the neurosis of Pirandello's reason, which were often purely logical and mental forms, but figures of flesh and bones, that is, living bodies. (Pellegrino 7)

Characters in *Destino coatto* are poetic voices crying out a traumatic loss that, escaping comprehension, keeps repeating itself. Their compulsion to repeat is condensed into a tragic role, as they "participate in a highly tragic dimension, also in a theatrical sense, which was proper of Sapienza" (Pellegrino 5–6). Against the endless re-enactment of trauma, Sapienza stages a quest for immobility, a state of death-in-life that at the same time rejects and protects life.

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<sup>8</sup> On the performative element of Sapienza's writings, see Rimini and Rizzarelli's *Un estratto di vita: Goliarda Sapienza fra teatro e cinema* and Bazzoni's "The Performative Power of Narrative in Goliarda Sapienza's *Lettera aperta*, *L'arte della gioia* and *Io, Jean Gabin*".

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