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Jamaica Kincaid’s *Autobiografia di mia madre*: Voices from the Abyss

5.1 Introduction: Gloom and Doom in Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*

Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* was published in February 1996. It immediately attracted international attention and was translated into Italian in April 1997 with the title *Autobiografia di mia madre* for the Italian publishing house Adelphi. Unlike the previous works by this prominent Caribbean author (*At the Bottom of the River*, 1983, and *Annie John*, 1985), *Autobiography* drew a mixed critical response. The book, according to American reviewers, was saturated with death imagery and offered little or no escape from a desperate life of misery, doom and subordination. The *New York Times Book Review* praised its ‘unrelenting rhythmic message’, but it also highlighted its all-embracing ‘willed nihilism’ (quoted by Paravisini-Gebert 1999: 143), colouring the plot and the characterization of Xuela Claudette Potter Richardson, the female protagonist, with gloom and negativity.

Darkness and negativity are indeed leitmotifs of the novel and take alternatively the shape of loss, abandonment, rejection, submission and, last but not least, death. Xuela’s first source of grief, which sets the tone of the book, is the death of her mother in childbirth. This traumatic experience leaves her alone in the world, a world defined as a ‘black room’ (*Autobiography*: 3). After that, Xuela leads an
extremely sad life punctuated with sorrow, grief, repudiation and subjugation. Her misfortunes increase, as in a climax, through abuse of her body and soul at the hands of a number of men and women. After her father’s rejection, depicted as ‘part of a whole way of life on the island which perpetuated pain’ (Autobiography: 39), she is mistreated by Ma Eunice. At the age of seven, her stepmother tries to poison her with some obeah witchcraft. Monsieur LaBatte uses Xuela for sexual pleasure and never shows her any emotional attraction or attachment. She then becomes pregnant. Horrified and disenchanted by the evil she perceives in him, Xuela has an abortion. Wherever she goes, she seems to be surrounded by hatred and cruelty to the point of embodying them herself. This slow, but steady, process of introjection and (almost) cannibalization of evil is foreshadowed and marked by the inscription of the flaws of Mother Nature into Xuela’s heart: ‘the harsh heat eventually became part of me’ (Autobiography: 17) and by her attempt to poison her future husband’s wife. Nature itself is depicted as harsh and brutal and, in its turn, emblematizes the mercilessness and heartlessness of human kind. It even predicts death by assuming ‘the colors of an ending, the colors of a funeral, gray, mauve, black’ (Autobiography: 26). The reader is led to discover that wickedness and malignity are all-encompassing features characterizing both the inward and outward world of the colonial subject, be it colonizer or colonized. The autobiography’s depress ing tones and cosmic pessimism seem to leave little hope for change and improvement and depict the colonizer’s logic as pervasive and infecting. Xuela’s evil deeds do not leave much scope for identification with the heroine, despite her heartbreaking cries for love, a maternal, unconditional, noble and selfless love. Negativity, embracing destruction, harm, sorrow, misfortune and death, is devastating and all-inclusive, bringing together all ‘the hatred and isolation in which we all lived’ (Autobiography: 50).

Negativity, the reason why the book received a mixed (if not negative) response by reviewers and scholars (Rody 2001: 128), is also the main trait of the Italian translation: the blurb speaks of a series of ‘tonalità cupe’, ‘infelicità’, ‘durezze del mondo’, echoing the phrases ‘la stanza nera del mondo’ and ‘il vento nero e
desolato’ of Xuela’s world (Autobiografia: 9), cited in the early pages of the book. Xuela is not presented to the Italian reader as an anti-heroine, but the goodness of her character is not mentioned either. The blurb rightly describes her temperament as ‘roccioso, torvo e visionario’ and Xuela’s vivid desire to overcome her predicament. Unlike the English blurb, the Italian one situates Kincaid’s work within a larger body of literature born at the margins of the Empire and endowed with ‘nuova linfa’: ‘Jamaica Kincaid appartiene alla schiera degli autori che, nati alla periferia dell’impero’ (nel suo caso ad Antigua, nei Caraibi), hanno immesso nuova linfa nella letteratura di lingua inglese’. The blurb then explains that the lymph that nourishes Kincaid’s text comes from various echoes and intertextual resonances: ‘ma con l’Autobiografia di mia madre si è [Kincaid’s voice] d’improvviso arricchita di tonalità cupe e vaste risonanze’. Thus the Italian reader is invited to be receptive to the various reverberations and links of the text with other literary productions. The thriving feminist production constantly nourished by Diotima, the Verona-based feminist philosophical group, is part of this web of links and reverberations. As we have seen in Chapter Three, Diotima has worked extensively on the mother-daughter relationship which, as the blurb also stresses, is the main theme of Autobiografia: ‘e a ogni passo la vita di Xuela si intreccia con quella di un fantasma, la madre non conosciuta, colei che non ha potuto raccontare la sua vita e l’ha attraversata come «fossile vivente» del popolo caribo’. Moreover, in their most recent work, the members of Diotima have broached issues that are relevant to the literary output of women writers from postcolonial areas. Finally, Luisa Muraro has written extensively on negativity, hardship and unhappiness concerning Italian women’s lives. This hardship and unhappiness also mark Xuela’s life and fate in the Italian text, elegantly presented by the blurb to the reader as: ‘un variegato itinerario nell’infelicità’.

In this chapter, I have chosen to read Autobiografia as a polyphonic text in dialogue with the feminist literary margins of the target culture. Like the Italian translations of ‘Sugar’ and ‘Cold’ by A.S. Byatt, the Italian version of Autobiography strengthens echoes and resonances with Diotima’s theoretical output. I will specifically apply Diotima’s work on negativity and that of some of
the major European philosophical thinkers who inform Diotima’s work, amongst whom Julia Kristeva. The duet ‘Diotima – Kristeva’ is both intriguing and fruitful for a number of reasons. Scholars tend to underline that Diotima has always found a fertile source of inspiration in the work of Luce Irigaray rather than Julia Kristeva (Holub 1994: 233-60), and indeed this cross-cultural fertility was useful when exploring differences and similarities between Byatt’s short stories in English and their translations in Italian in Chapter Three. Scholars also tend to highlight the distinctive critical attitude towards Kristeva adopted, for example, by the distinguished leader of the group, Muraro (Minelli 2007a: 264). Although the latter has drawn upon Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic (which I have applied to the analysis of the French translation of Byatt’s autobiographical short story in Chapter Four in a productive way), her approach to the French philosopher has generally been read as more critical than appreciative (Muraro 1991: 44-45). Her dissatisfaction emerges, for instance, when ‘she [Muraro] criticizes Kristeva’s dismissal of the importance of (re)constructing female identity through family histories and female genealogies’ (Minelli 2007a: 264). On the whole, Muraro seems to turn to other thinkers as more inspiring and/or promising. Scholars have, therefore, always focused on the dissonances between Diotima and Kristeva, and in so doing they have neglected the assonances between the two.

These assonances emerge in one of Diotima’s latest works, *La magica forza del negativo* (2005), which already anticipates a series of parallels between the ‘thought of sexual difference’ outlined by Diotima, and Kristeva’s work on negativity. In addition, *La magica forza* represents an Italian rereading of Kristeva’s theory of negativity which goes beyond ‘the negative and negativity’ in a practical sense, and reinterprets it in the light of the Italian context of sexual difference.\(^2\) I have found these territorial relocations and remapping of Kristeva’s theories both interesting *per se* and beneficial for my reading of the Italian *Autobiografia*. Both Kristeva and Diotima (Muraro 2005: 3) in fact draw upon

\(^2\) Here Diotima’s work (2005) will be referred to as *La magica forza.*
Hegel’s concept of Negativität (negativity) and go on to radicalize and gender it. For the three of them, ‘negativity’ is a concept, an agent and a process with destabilizing and disruptive powers. While Kristeva employs this notion to illustrate theoretically how the semiotic operates within the symbolic, Diotima attempts to identify pragmatically what is ‘negative’ in society and what, if approached appropriately or ‘ethically’, as Chiara Zamboni – a member of Diotima – claims (2005: 104), can become ‘negativity’, namely an agent with destabilizing powers. Both Kristeva’s and Diotima’s conceptualizations of the negative and the intersections between the two can be used to cast light on how the protagonist has been recharacterized in the Italian translation and what political message this characterization carries with it.

In particular, my aim is to explore the significance and implications of the destructive and homicidal nature of the female protagonist and what relation this might have with the mother and the maternal (given its prominent status in the title). In addition, this chapter will try to assess whether the Italian translation enhances, tones down or justifies the (apparently) negative/evil aspect of the female protagonist. The cross-cultural reading that I will now present has been conducted according to the same strategies and techniques described in the previous chapters. This chapter will thus continue to look at horizontal and vertical reverberations which in the previous chapters have helped me to single out the specificities of the Italian and French translations of Winterson’s and Byatt’s autobiographies. These reverberations consist mainly of lexical and thematic repetitions within the Target Text and between the Target Text and the literary output of the Italian culture. They will now help to explore key images and concepts and to situate the Italian version of Autobiography in relation to/within the Italian receiving cultural context. At the same time, they will help me determine whether the ST supports or challenges the Italian philosophical literature on the mother-daughter dyad. It will be useful to start with Diotima’s conceptualizations of the negative because it will enable us to both trace some initial parallels between Autobiografia and La magica forza and explain the negative within the Italian context. I will consequently avail myself of some
psychoanalytical notions of the negative (which have been inspired by Kristeva) to elucidate how and when it can become negativity, namely a destabilizing agent with transgressive social potential or, using Diotima’s words, a driving force empowered with magical connotations.

5.2 Definitions of the Negative and Its Significance in Kincaid and Diotima

As the word suggests, the meaning of ‘negative’ embraces the opposite of positive and places it at the far end of a spectrum whose oppositional dynamics (typical of Western thought, starting from Greek philosophy) loads the negative with bad, destructive, harmful, pessimistic and generally off-putting traits. According to this positive-negative dualism, whose standpoint is pre-conceptually positive- and affirmative-oriented, the negative ends up being identified with what is NOT, namely what is not positive, affirmative, optimistic, upbeat and generally good. Hence, according to this oppositional logic, the apparently equal distribution of power governing this logic is not actually equivalent or fair. The two poles are not interchangeable, if taken face-to-face. The pre-conceptual standpoint of this dichotomous logic dictates the inferior, low-grade and second-rate status of the negative in relation to the positive. What has to be advocated and implemented in society is bound to carry, therefore, positive, good and, consequently, superior trademarks. What should be rejected is, inevitably, the negative, seen constantly as inferior, low-quality, unwanted, and even demonized. This is how the negative has always been seen by Western society and, additionally, why it bears connotations of alterity and otherness, connotations which have rightly attracted the attention of such feminists as Kristeva and Diotima. Despite its pervasive presence in society, the negative is generally considered as other, marginal and

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3 This was also Muraro’s approach to the negative before understanding the dangers of the logic that discards its potential. She states that ‘in passato io ho creduto necessario postulare la precedenza del positivo sul negativo, dell’essere sul non essere, della presenza sull’assenza’ (2005: 6-7). Muraro’s view on ‘la presenza non distruttiva del negativo’ (2005: 7-8) changes after the 2003 seminar which inspired the publication of La magica forza in 2005.

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peripheral, with, paradoxically, no positive traits. According to Diotima and Kristeva, however, its qualities should be socially and politically revalued because its subordinate position could, in actual fact, hide underestimated and unexpected elements. Their work presents an innovative and courageous approach to the negative both because they go against the grain of historically sedimented positioning and positions which deny its positive or constructive status and because they help us appreciate works by women writers who have attempted to approach the negative from unconventional and unorthodox perspectives.

In terms of specific definitions, the negative generally resists ascriptions, as political and social theorist Diana Coole (2000) states. In her chronological study of the philosophical meaning of negativity from Kant to poststructuralism, Coole highlights that the word ‘negative’ has usually been used as an umbrella term, a permeable signifier with many referents, all apparently inimical to politically-transformative processes and sound cultural progress. Despite most philosophers’ reluctance to offer specific definitions of the negative, as this would go against its ‘resistance to positive formulations’ (Coole 2000: 3), Diotima has avoided any sort of circumspection in their approach to it. In La magica forza, identifications with the negative appear to be literal as well as metaphorical, concrete as well as abstract. Here, the negative is associated with hell and demons, with evil and misfortunes, with errors and hatred, with physical pain and inner suffering, with decaying flesh and cancer, with war, deportations and subjugations. Luisa Muraro provides the reader with a fairly allusive and figurative definition of the negative in her introduction to La magica forza claiming that ‘del negativo possiamo dire che separa, taglia, sopprime, rimuove, nega e ri-nega, esclude, isola ...’ (2005: 2). She claims to be speaking ‘a tentoni’ and ‘con formule non di rado allusive o ambigue’ (2005: 1). However, despite this abstract opening, Muraro invites the contributors to the book to accompany and support explanations and explorations of the negative with concrete examples, fruitfully grounded in Italian/Western culture and society.

4 This excursus on the perception of the negative in Western thought has also been discussed briefly by Zamboni (2005: 100-01).

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In line with this methodological approach, Annarosa Buttarelli insists that ‘possiamo imparare a riconoscere, nella condizione umana, non un male metafisico, sfuggente, assoluto, eterno, ma qualcosa che chiamo male contingente, anche se mobile e imprendibile nella sua alterità’ (2005: 37, author’s italics). To this end, she quotes Flannery O’Connor’s words: ‘a garanzia del nostro senso di mistero [per aprire le porte al possibile, all’imprevisto, alla grazia] occorre un senso del male che veda il diavolo come uno spirito reale’ (quoted in Buttarelli 2005: 37, my italics). Demons and monsters are recurrent images in La magica forza. The repetition of these images, together with their cumulative effects, is also strengthened by depictions of unimaginable cruelty, separation and suppression, translated into tangible scenes of slapping, hitting and blood shedding. Each chapter is devoted to single aspects of the negative which articulate and enrich its wide range of connotations and brutalities. There are many other descriptions of iniquity and hatred in La magica forza which can be used to cast light on Xuela’s world. Buttarelli, for instance, completes and complements Diana· Sartori’s essay (2005) by focusing on the pain and wickedness that women have had to suffer. Eleonora Graziani speaks about women’s mystical experiences. Daniela Riboli articulates her experience as a nurse dealing with psychosis, a delicate mental and physical state ‘in balia della sua propria selvaggia potenza (ri)vendicativa’ (Riboli 2005: 73). Delfina Lusiardi reflects very courageously upon her experience as a patient affected by breast cancer and her day-to-day co-habitation with scars, pains, corporeal changes and accrued meditative skills. Wanda Tommasi’s chapter analyzes her evident aphasia, silence and lack of productive work, which resulted from a state of melancholia.

This articulated enumeration of adversities recalls and reflects the Italian Xuela’s thorny life, ‘un modo di vivere dell’isola che perpetuava la sofferenza’ (Autobiografia: 39), and strengthens the link between La magica forza and the Italian version of Autobiography. Despite the fact that the Italian readers cannot specifically identify Xuela’s island with Italy, they can, however, trace between
the lines an attitude similar to Diotima’s stubborn attempts to define and describe
the nature of evil in relation to Italian women’s social and political condition. In
*Autobiografia* numerous are the descriptions of emotional and physical pain,
abuses and punishments inflicted upon Xuela by men as well as women (in
positions of power privately or publicly). Monsieur LaBatte’s sexual abuse of
Xuela fictionalizes Sartori’s critical accounts of the ‘miseria femminile’ that
characterizes the condition of women in Italy, a condition marked by ‘quella
negatività patita senza nome nelle forme del disagio, del sintomo, della sofferenza
femminile [...] e [...] di una differenza femminile schiacciata e umiliata’ (Sartori
2005: 11). The fierce punishment inflicted by Ma Eunice upon Xuela for breaking
an apparently precious English vase or the stepmother’s attempts to poison Xuela
by means of obeah witchcraft are indicative of ‘l’emergere di forme di negatività
nelle relazioni tra donne spesso ancor più difficili da affrontare di quelle che si
incontravano con gli uomini e nella nostra vita nel mondo’ (Sartori 2005: 12). The
teacher’s unjust attempts to belittle Xuela’s abilities bring to mind the
humiliations and mortifications exercised by the British colonizer upon the
indigenous population, and generally by patriarchal institutions upon women. Her
dictatorial and unquestionable attitude is evocative, within the Italian context, of
‘il perdurare nella [...] vita [...] di molte donne di un negativo e di una sofferenza
cui era difficile dare nome ed elaborare’ (Sartori 2005: 12). Xuela’s stern attitude
is also indicative of a traditional way of thinking and seeing the world in a
Manichean way: ‘educata a pensare solo in termini di bene e male’
(*Autobiografia*: 19). This inflexible division of reality into impenetrable units,
complemented by attempts to implement the good at all costs, exemplifies the
colonizer’s politics and the logic of the positive-negative dualism mentioned
above. This is a stale approach to reality which is not approved by Xuela (or by
Diotima) who regards the teacher’s judgement as ‘sempre sbagliato’
(*Autobiografia*: 19).

If Xuela’s problematization of the negative makes this postcolonial narrative
culture- and gender-specific, its resonances with Diotima’s work justify why the
account of her misfortunes can be considered as universal, translatable and

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applicable to Italian women’s subordinated condition. As a consequence, we can ask whether Xuela, like Diotima, succeeds in thinking of possible ways of coping with the negative and using it to her own advantage. In order to answer this question, I will continue to highlight the common traits between Xuela and the Verona group. To this end, the first part of my analysis will exclusively focus on Autobiografia, as if this were an original Italian text, and will quote sections of it vis-à-vis Diotima’s work. The Italian version will therefore be treated as a text in its own right displaying qualities, originality and creativity even more than the translations that have been analyzed in my previous chapters. This reflects my overall approach, as explained in the Introduction, according to which translation (as a text and as a professional activity) is not secondary or minor or derivative but an original activity with a proper status in the literary institutions. It should also be noted that the Italian version of Autobiography represents a successful translation and that it departs very little from the original. Differences are minor and they mainly concern style. This raises a further methodological issue, namely whether it is worth analyzing a translation when it does not depart in striking ways from its original. I believe it is a worthwhile operation. Similarities between Source Text and Target Text can be approached in a fruitful way with fascinating results. In this case, a comparative analysis of the correspondences between Autobiography and Autobiografia, even though closer to literary criticism than to Translation Studies, is useful both in locating the text within the Italian receiving culture and in understanding how effective Kincaid’s postcolonial narrative is in Italian. Diotima’s thought on negativity turns out to be especially beneficial in that it also contemplates wider discourses on women’s marginality, beyond the Italian context and across transnational areas of female subordination. Sartori (2005: 13), for example, reminds the reader that Africa (and what lives at the margins of the Empire) has often been perceived as negative and written about in pejorative terms. She invites her readers to explore its ‘negativity’ in a more productive, multilayered and unconventional way, away from colonial stereotypes and closer to its heart and critical discourse. In view of these considerations, the following section of this chapter will refer to the English original only when the Italian text presents considerable differences whereas the remaining sections will
be devoted to a more detailed and comprehensive analysis of the assonances and dissonances between the two texts.

5.3 The Political Significance of Chiasmus and Litote in *Autobiografía*

At the very beginning of the narrative, Xuela laments the death of her mother and her difficult and ill-omened existence, marked by ‘un vento nero e desolato’ (*Autobiografía*: 9). This desperate and heartbreaking picture is followed by a specular inversion of adverbs: ‘mi resi conto che avevo meno di certe cose che prima avevo in abbondanza, e più di quelle cose che non avevo avuto quasi affatto’ (*Autobiografía*: 9). At first, such a declaration might sound cryptic and in need of further explanation but, if contextually explained, it reveals Xuela’s real intention and approach. The sentence preceding this chiasmus,⁵ the figure of speech defining the diagonal rearrangement of words or clauses in a sentence, clarifies that the Italian narrator is not referring to some material overturning and that she now has more things than she used to have as a teenager: ‘alle mie spalle soffiava sempre un vento nero e desolato’ (*Autobiografía*: 9). The use of the adverb ‘sempre’, which translates faithfully its equivalent ‘always’ of the original text, brings to the Italian reader’s attention the fact that Xuela’s life is still now accompanied by a bleak and unkind wind. What has changed is that however the wind’s connotations become radically and progressively positive. From being initially an obstacle and a restriction, the wind is, subsequently, reassessed and contemplated as an incentive and a drive.

The aforementioned chiastic structure makes us wonder whether Xuela’s approach to the negative revolves around the same reversible logic as that advocated by Diotima. In her introduction to *La magica forza*, for example, Muraro expresses her similar initial fascination for the negative in contradictory terms: ‘tutto ciò che ho è quello che non ho’ (Winnicott quoted by Muraro 2005: 6). This oxymoron, borrowed from the British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott, is used by Muraro

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⁵ This chiasmus is constructed along the following opposition: not to have (less of some things) versus to have (more of some things).

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to illustrate rhetorically her changed perspective on the negative: ‘il negativo era il solo positivo’ (Winnicott quoted in Muraro 2005: 6). Her theoretical readings and the 2003 seminar from which the volume La magica forza ensued led Muraro to think that the negative might embody a reality with positive connotations. In addition to this, the negative is not an abstract concept which should be avoided or removed. It is more real than the positive itself and marks our lives inexorably. It represents, in view of its physicality, what we really possess and what we have. A similar overturning of perspective is evident in Xuela’s words: ‘qualsiasi cosa mi si dicesse di odiare io la amavo e la amavo più di tutto’ (Autobiografia: 32, my italics). Hatred becomes love and its positivity is embraced by the protagonist with intensity and passion. And even more so in Italian where the subject pronoun (which, unlike in English, is not normally expressed) is made explicit. The English equivalent ‘whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most’ (Autobiography: 32) does not appear as strong and effective. By dislocating it to the left, both sentences emphasize the direct object (‘qualsiasi cosa mi si dicesse di odiare’ / ‘whatever I was told to hate’) together with its negative load. In addition, in Italian the subject ‘io’ shifts the focal point onto a contrast. This places the speaking subject in opposition to the rest of the world or whoever imposes preconceived stances on her. Here, Muraro’s words ‘il negativo era il solo positivo’ reverberate loud and clear.

The recuperation of the negative, as a concept that should not be rejected a priori but rethought, seems to characterize Xuela’s narrative design. These first analytical results encourage us to hypothesize that Xuela, like Diotima, is also keen to reconceptualize the signification of the negative. This design is syntactically and stylistically evident in the use of the negative ‘not’ employed to describe people and situations throughout the Italian text. An ordinary day is, in Chapter 1, described as being ‘per niente speciale’ (Autobiografia: 30). The room where Xuela is sexually abused is presented in terms of what it is not: ‘la stanza non era né fredda né calda né soffocante, ma non era nemmeno perfetta’ (Autobiografia: 78). Xuela’s feelings in that room are also negatively expressed: ‘non volevo passarvi il resto della mia vita. Non volevo passare il resto della mia
vita con una persona che aveva una stanza come quella' (Autobiografia: 78). Even Moira, another woman for whom Xuela works, introduced to the reader by means of the description of her image in a mirror, is depicted in negative terms, paradoxically as a reflection what Xuela cannot see:

per quel che potevo vedere: non aveva la bocca aperta, le gambe non erano leggermente allargate [...] Io ero sempre molto interessata a guardarle il viso, non lo facevo con piacere ma per curiosità, e ogni volta restavo sorpresa al vedere che non conteneva nulla di nuovo: nessun ammorbidimento, niente lacrime, niente rimpianti, niente giustificazioni. (Autobiografia: 156)

The insistent repetition of litotes, a periphrastic figure of speech which negates its contrary, is not a specificity of the Italian translation, because, as I have stressed in my previous section, the original text presents exactly the same rhetorical features. Hence, what can be inferred from such instances of syntactical and rhetorical adherence of the translation to the original is the significance that these litotes acquire in Kincaid. Not only do they represent a stylistic construction, they also reveal a way of reading an inward and outward reality grounded in the negative. The negative is therefore not rejected a priori. It is considered as part of our fallible human nature and, as such, it has to be recognized and acknowledged as intrinsic and essential.

These instances bring ‘negativity into the heart of identity, denying the latter any simple and unmediated unity of closure’ (Coole 2000: 47). Identity is seen as an expanding concept whose boundaries are constantly redesigned in order to embrace what is traditionally considered as other and exterior to it. It is complete (and complex) only when it embraces difference, as Judith Butler (1999, orig. 1990) teaches us. This also echoes Diotima’s attempt to define the negative in practical terms and to identify it within contingency. The litote, in fact, does not negate ‘some random not-ness’ (Coole 2000: 47). It negates what is ‘specific to a particular A’ (Coole 2000: 47) by creating, at the same time, interconnections with real objects and situations. If this approach to identity makes this text quite
feminine, in the sense that femininity is the marker of difference, it also suggests alternative readings of the female protagonist (and narrator) as a relational human being in constant contact with the negative. In this light, Xuela no longer appears as extremely self-centred or selfish (as some American reviewers claimed). She is, instead, inclined to appreciate otherness as part of sameness (I shall further expand on Xuela’s use of alterity in my discussion of the French translation in Chapter Six). Alterity is a Butlerian democratic criterion that Xuela employs to define her self in all versions of the text.

Faithful repetition of litotes becomes crucial in Italian and discloses the narrator’s viewpoint and constructive approach to the negative. They also set the tone of a text which attempts to describe by not describing, to explain by not explaining and to reveal by not revealing. Paradoxes, oppositions and contradictions represent the architecture of the text and, at the same time, its shaky ground because they offer the reader neither certainty nor reassurance. What dominates is a logic founded on an almost arithmetic process of double negations which, by attenuating, enhances. This is clearly explained by Lausberg who defines litotes as ‘ironia di dissimulazione con valore perifrastico che consiste nell’ottenere un grado superlativo con la negazione del contrario’ (quoted by Ghiazza and Napoli 2007: 280). Formal attenuation and substantial enhancement disclose Xuela’s (and Kincaid’s) political agenda both in the original autobiography and, especially, in its translation. In Italian, they continue to strengthen the dialogue between *Autobiografia* and *La magica forza*. Like Diotima, the female protagonist tries to problematize speculative thinking, positive-negative dualisms and, consequently, the negative’s taken-for-granted second-rate status.

In this light, we can claim that Xuela’s political agenda embraces greater plans. This agenda also appears to problematize literature and, specifically, autobiography which, as a Western genre (referred to in Chapter Four), is intended as the depository of the writer’s factual truth, relating events (what has happened) as opposed to non-events (what has not happened). Like Diotima, moreover, Xuela intends to denounce subjugations by employing the colonizers’
tools but on a different level of reality. Violence is not used practically but linguistically, because the litotes, by definition, enact a procedure similar to a semantic suppression, namely a repression of what is in favour of what is not. Finally, by speaking in reverse format and by negating antonyms, Xuela sides with the other, the weak, the marginal and the black. She sides with those who, like herself, have been defined in negative terms for centuries, as ‘una popolazione di ombre’ (*Autobiografia*: 130-31) and in opposition to somebody else, always positive, good and generally better. In Chapter 4 of her narrative, Xuela claims authority as a colonized woman and as a black woman, with a series of negations:

\begin{quote}
\textit{tutto intorno a noi è sospeso nel dubbio e siamo noi, gli sconfitti, a definire tutto ciò che è irreale, tutto ciò che non è umano, tutto ciò che è senza amore, tutto ciò che è senza pietà. La nostra esperienza non può essere interpretata da noi; noi non possiamo sapere se è vera. Il nostro Dio non era quello giusto, la nostra idea del cielo e dell’inferno non era rispettabile. (Autobiografia: 37)}\end{quote}

The margins of the Empire as well as of society include, for Xuela, women too. Her plan is also to give voice to their castrations and lacks: ‘io non posseggo nulla, io non sono un uomo’ (*Autobiografia*: 104) and ‘io non potevo farlo. Io non ero un uomo’ (*Autobiografia*: 93).

As the narrator’s viewpoint has now been clarified, her goal is even clearer. The analysis of some vertical reverberations (litotes) has confirmed her agenda (anticipated by the initial chiasmus) and the fact that by faithfully reproducing those intratexual references the Italian text seems to be sensitive to the political significance of the narrator’s rhetoric. This makes the dialogue with *La magica forza* more audible and Xuela’s characterization less harsh than originally predicted. Xuela is not intrinsically evil. She does not respond to the negative with

\begin{footnote}{It is useful to observe that the Target Text is faithful to the Source Text. As in the ST, here all the negative adverbs are reproduced in order to recreate thematic redundancy and relevance is given to the grammatical subject ‘gli sconfitti’. In the TT, however, the inversion verb-pronominal subject, strengthened by a dislocation to the right of ‘gli sconfitti’, confers prominence upon the colonial subject.}

\end{footnote}
negative weapons. To negate the negative, Diotima claims, is to celebrate the positive, and therefore this is not a way forward. Xuela tries instead to deconstruct the negative and to destabilize/overthrow critical categories based on a rigid dichotomous logic relegating the other to inferior positioning. I now have to explain how Xuela succeeds in challenging ‘normal’ political stances both in Source Text and Target Text from a gendered perspective and why the maternal is so important in Kincaid’s message. In order to do this, I will continue to look at rhetorical and lexical reverberations because they are sound indicators of the main themes of the original text. Additionally, the analysis of the cumulative effects of some key thematic recurrences will be useful in investigating the grade of sensitivity of the Italian translation to such controversial and delicate issues (so dear to the author/narrator) as the negative. In the following section, I will also concentrate on horizontal reverberations, namely repetitions which occur in the same sentence. To this end, I will now compare Italian and English to continue to show the former’s technical adherence to the original and its semantic creativity. It will also be fruitful to note where the Italian version departs from its Source Text and why.

5.4 *Mises-en-ahyme* and Patterns of Redundancy in Source Text and Target Text

One recurring image in *Autobiografia*, which encompasses pain, violence and subjugation, or, in one word, the negative, rotates around the notion of death, both physical and emotional. This is the most powerful image both in *Autobiografia* and *La magica forza*. Both Diotima and Kincaid (and to a certain extent Kristeva) symbolize death through a series of metaphorical images ranging from a black hole to a void, a well and, ultimately, the abyss. In the introduction to *La magica forza*, Muraro speaks of ‘l’*abissale* distanza fra la de-creazione e la distruzione’ (2005: 5, my italics). In ‘Quando il reale si crepa’, Zamboni echoes and expands Muraro’s words by speaking about ‘la ferita della realtà’ (2005: 99), ‘le Tenebre’ (2005: 101) and, ultimately, ‘morire’ (2005: 104) in terms of ‘lacerazione’ (2005: 99), ‘baratro’ (2005: 99, 103 and 104), ‘baratro del non essere’ (2005: 106),

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Chapter Five


In her work, Kincaid speaks about death in terms of precipices (metaphorical and literal) and other images which, although they are not abysses stricto sensu, appear to be related to the abyss. These images, contributing to the gloomy and sinister tone of the book, are: black holes, black rooms, cages made of Xuela’s own silence, dark rooms of history, dollhouses at the bottom of a hole, holes dug in the ground where abortions are performed, and so on. In Chapter 1, when Xuela is still a teenager, she digs a small hole where she puts some turtles and watches them die of hunger and thirst. In Chapter 2, she spends eight days in a hole in a dirt floor which she fills with menstrual blood. In Chapter 3, she takes on a new job which consists of digging holes and filling them with water taken from other holes in the ground. In Chapter 4, a number of other characters are involved with holes: Xuela’s sister falls into a large precipice and, as a result, remains crippled forever; Lazarus, a person whose name was meant to wish for hope and a divine second chance, digs holes in a cemetery which are going to become graves for the defeated. Holes expand and shrink in the text to the point of embracing history, equated to a large, dark and silent room. The only hole which, despite its deadly connotations, is not depicted in depressing and miserable tones, is the one visited in Xuela’s dreams by her dead mother.

It will be fruitful to see how these holes have been depicted, the rhetorical techniques used to describe them in both texts, their meaning and, finally, their connections with the maternal.

Example 1
Parts of my life, incidents in my life then, seem, when I remember them now, as if they were happening in a very small, dark place, a place the size of a dollhouse,

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and the dollhouse is at the bottom of a hole, and I am way up at the top of the hole, peering down into this little house, trying to make out exactly what it is that happened down there. And sometimes when I look down at this scene, certain things are not in the same place they were in the last time I looked: different things are in the shadows at different times, different things are in the light. (Autobiography: 33)

Certe parti, certi episodi della mia vita di allora mi appaiono, a ricordarli oggi, come se accadessero in un luogo molto piccolo, buio, un luogo della grandezza di una casa di bambola, e la casa di bambola è nel fondo di una buca, e io sono in cima alla buca e spio dentro questa casetta, cercando di scoprire che cosa succedeva esattamente laggiù. E a volte, quando guardo in questo modo la scena, certi oggetti non sono allo stesso posto dell’ultima volta che ho guardato: in momenti diversi, cose differenti sono in ombra, cose differenti sono in luce. (Autobiografia: 32)

Kincaid not only intersperses her narrative with single holes, but she also complicates them by staging one within the other ad infinitum. This mise-en-abyme, namely the small dollhouse contained by the small hole contained by the small place outside Ma Eunice’s house, has extremely powerful iconic and performative values, which reveal the qualities and function of this specific mise-en-abyme and, par excellence, of all the holes depicted in the book. As Marie Maclean explains, ‘a situation of self-reflexivity, such as a play within a play, will juxtapose two negatives and thereby reveal a positive, the truth of the fiction’ (Maclean 1988: 76). In this example, the small hole represents the first negative level of reality which embraces and embeds a second negative level of reality, the dollhouse, reflecting the same paradigms as the first, its intrinsic value and performative function, as Lucien Dällenbach (1989, orig. 1977) would claim. The role played by such a self-reflexive device is in fact to stage the image of the hole not only as a narrative point of attraction but also as a symbolic language shared by narrator and reader. By duplicating en abyme the ‘abyme’, the narrator reveals that the language used to address the reader is also the message contained and framed by her communicative code. Énoncé and énonciation, therefore, converge, overlap and proliferate in order to strengthen the pervasively negative sign system, multirefractive set-up, and, in view of the leitmotif of the hole, architecture of the book. This architecture is complicated and articulated by Xuela’s repeated statements about the symbolic significance of reflected, negative
holes in her life. At the beginning, for instance, she states that she felt as if she were standing on a precipice, an image which recalls Example 1 where Xuela is standing at the top of the hole looking down into her dollhouse. The numerous holes within holes and precipices within precipices serve, therefore, to mirror Xuela’s life as a whole and, at the same time, to enhance the overall negative attraction of the book.

At this point, a comparison between English and Italian at the level of the sentence would not be sufficient to bring to light how faithful the latter is to the original and how sensitive the translator is to specific linguistic aspects. If this comparison were not further articulated, its results would be limited and incomplete. The only conclusion would be that code and message (as mentioned above) appear to be effectively rendered in Italian. This is because the *mise-en-abyme* in Example 1, together with all the other figures of speech employed in the original text (chiasmus and litotes), are in fact reproduced accurately. In order to refine my analysis, I have to adopt an approach that is capable of reflecting the double nature of the *mise-en-abyme* together with its infinite negative refractions. As the latter are produced by endless encapsulations, my analysis of such self-reflexive devices should not only cast light on the specificity of some scenes, miniaturized and contained within the intimacy of their selves. It should also attempt to trace back the infinite chain of reflections produced by cross-references and anaphoric repetitions. As a result, because of the multilayered aspects of the image of the hole in Kincaid’s work, Example 1 will be discussed in relation to other *mises-en-abyme*. This approach is not only suggested by replications of images, such as the narrating eye looking down into the dollhouse and mirroring the narrating I standing on a precipice. It is also fostered by the linguistic construction of Example 1 in Italian which seems to reflect the syntax of the following Examples 2 and 3:

**Example 2**
Inside me there was nothing; inside me there was a vault made of a substance so heavy I could find nothing to compare it to; and inside the vault was an ache of such intensity that each night as I lay alone in my house all my exhalations were
long, low wails, like a lanced boil, with a small line of pus trickling out. (Autobiography: 99)

Dentro di me non c’era niente; dentro di me c’era una cripta fatta di una sostanza così pesante che non riuscivo a paragonarla a nulla; e dentro la cripta c’era un dolore di tale intensità che ogni notte, mentre giacevo da sola in casa, espiravo solo lamenti lunghi e sommessi, come un foruncolo che viene inciso e ne esce pian piano un sottile filo di pus. (Autobiografia: 79)

Example 3
My father had taken the world as he found it and made it subject to his whims, even as other men had made him subject to their whims in the world as they had found it. He had never questioned these worlds within worlds, not as far as I knew. (Autobiography: 124)

Mio padre aveva preso il mondo così come l’aveva trovato e l’aveva assoggettato ai suoi capricci, né più né meno come altri uomini, prendendo il mondo così come l’avevano trovato, avevano assoggettato lui ai loro capricci. Che io sappia, mio padre non aveva mai messo in discussione l’esistenza di questi mondi dentro altri mondi. (Autobiografia: 98)

Examples 1, 2 and 3 are transversally pervaded by a series of resonances and repetitions holding together the constructive principle of the *mise-en-abyme*, whose existence depends on a succession of duplications ad infinitum. The scene-within-the-scene depicted in Example 1 is repeated in Examples 2 and 3 in a more sophisticated way. While the first describes an external situation, the second and third describe an internal and more metaphorical condition. In these two, in fact, Xuela is not kneeling down to look into a hole containing another hole. The holes portrayed here, instead, are abstract and less tangible, but more powerful and extreme. In Example 2, the hole embedded within Xuela’s heart encloses ‘nothing’, the absolute negation which takes the form of a vault and a heavy substance absorbing the intensity of pain. In Example 3, the figure of the abyme acquires even more symbolic and postcolonial overtones as it stages worlds within worlds which, to be embedded, have to be subjugated and dominated. It is interesting to note that these three examples offer a mutual internalized stage that the reader sees *en abyme*, serving as ‘microcosm to the macrocosm of the text’ (Maclean 1988: 12). What Xuela performs repetitively here is the negative for which she finds a suitable ‘negative’ frame, namely the *mise-en-abyme*.

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How do these *mises-en-abyme* relate to one another, linguistically speaking, then? Example 1 starts in English with an epiphora and in Italian with an anaphora. The effect of these different rhetorical constructions is substantial if we compare the first two examples. The phrasal splitting ‘certe parti, certi episodi’ (in Example 1), created by the repetition of ‘certe’, mirrors exactly the sentence ‘dentro di me non c’era niente; dentro di me c’era una cripta’ (in Example 2) constructed around the repetition of the circumstantial of space ‘dentro di me’ placed, just as its counterpart ‘certe’, at the beginning of the sentence. What the Italian provides in Example 1 is not just a semantic and dynamic translation whose minor rewording results from inevitable grammatical transpositions. The epiphoric repetition of the complement of specification ‘of my life’ of Example 1 is replaced by the anaphoric duplication of the adjective ‘certe’ so as to reflect the rhetorical and lexical fragmentation of Example 2. This way, the Italian adjective ‘certe’ qualifies ‘parti’ and ‘episodi’ just like the complement of place ‘dentro di me’ introduces and situates Xuela’s discovery that ‘non c’era niente’ and ‘c’era una cripta’. This anaphoric construction is mechanically repeated at the end of Example 1 where the complement of time ‘in momenti diversi’ is shifted to the front of the sentence so as to leave space for the duality: ‘cose differenti sono in ombra, cose differenti sono in luce’. It should also be observed that in order to enhance such anaphoric (and antithetical) construction, the Italian version translates ‘different times’ with ‘momenti diversi’ so as not to employ ‘differenti’, an attribute which is repeated only twice to qualify ‘cose’ and recreate parallel syntactical expressions (such as the one just mentioned).

Such twofold constructions based on anaphora are part of a greater authorial design characterizing Kincaid’s narrative mode. They do not introduce anything particularly revolutionary, but they recuperate and revalue an important linguistic attitude identifiable elsewhere in the English text. For instance, the description of the hole where Xuela buries the turtles is accompanied by the duplication of verbs of will, namely ‘I wanted’ (*Autobiography*: 11), and complements of place, namely ‘the place where they lived’ and ‘the place where I had left them’ (*Autobiography*: 12). The narration of Xuela’s abortion in a small hole in a dirt
floor is paced by the anaphoric repetition of the complement of time ‘for four days’ (Autobiography: 82). The mother’s visit to Xuela, while she is asleep on a stone bed, is hailed by almost rhythmical and lyrical reiterations of adverbs of place, ‘down and down’ and time, ‘over and over’ (Autobiography: 18; 19).

 Needless to say, the Italian recreates such repetitive constructions and, wherever possible, rearranges syntax and rhetorical effects so as to generate dual repetitions. Example 3 provides further evidence not only of ‘semantic’ adherence, or aesthetic adherence as Peter Newmark intends it (1981: 39), but also of lexical/technical creativity which enriches the Italian version. Here, for instance, the English repeats only in part the first part of the sentence containing the polyptoton7 ‘as he found it’ and ‘as they have found it’. In Italian, such figure of speech is recreated with ‘cosi come l’aveva trovato’ and ‘cosi come l’avevano trovato’. In addition, the translation provides another repetition which does not appear in the original version: ‘aveva preso il mondo’ and ‘prendendo il mondo’. Apart from creating a second polyptoton (which is not present in English), the Italian text is keen to comply with the narrative regime of the original which gives space and voice to repetitions, but it further expands it, by enacting a horizontal and vertical amplification scheme. Words appear, therefore, to be repeated twice, quasi obsessively, like in children’s songs, folk tales, ballads or simple refrains. In this light, we can also claim that the Italian linguistic duplications reflect, at a syntagmatic level, the mirroring effect of the mise-en-abyme and, at a paradigmatic level, the structure of the greater whole (the book), revolving around multiple recurrences. Both levels are interwoven, because repetitions of words at the level of the sentence (syntagma) contribute to the creation of cumulative effects amplified by thematic reverberations throughout the text. The interconnection between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic level of repetition is also evident if, in other words, we claim that the Italian version uses narration to repeat mises-en-abymes and mises-en-abyme to repeat narration, namely what

7 The polyptoton consists of a repetition of the same word but with variations of its syntactical and/or grammatical form. Its lexical meaning does not change. It can then involve the repetition of the same verb conjugated in different tenses and/or persons (Ghiazza and Napoli 2007: 50-51).
has already been narrated. The chiasmus inherent in such an explanation clarifies the complexity and intricacy of Kincaid’s text whose delicate sophistication is reproduced and promoted by the Italian translation.

There are other benefits inherent in the semantic approach at work in the Italian translation. We can maintain for instance that the Italian contributes to the overturning of traditional dichotomies around positive-negative oppositions. Such an innovative task is not carried out solely because of syntactical rearrangements of anaphora or introductions of polyptotons. Such a goal is achieved as a combined effect of syntagmatic and paradigmatic constructions. In view of their inherent juxtaposition along with dual syntax, the *mises-en-abyme* embrace and, at the same time, disclose the truth of the exterior world. For this, they can be equated to Lacan’s neologism, “‘extimacy’ (*extimité*) – ‘external intimacy’” (quoted by Bendle 2001: 231, author’s italics), problematizing the distinction between interiority and exteriority, extending the centre to the outside (like the litotes) and upsetting pre-established roles of container and contained.  

To summarize, such a winning combination in Italian succeeds in casting light on the all-encompassing aspects of the negative as a driving force operating on different narrative levels: linguistic, structural, figurative, thematic and psychoanalytical. This driving force turns out to be an over-arching theme affecting different textual elements of Source Text and Target Text. Finally, the prominence attributed to it will help further explore Xuela’s political agenda in the remaining part of this section and the following one and how the maternal fits into it in the final section.

If we examine the semantic function of repetition, we realize that the Italian never introduces invariable duplications, namely identical expressions which repeat themselves perpetually without undergoing syntactical and/or semantic change.  

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8 The neologism ‘*extimité*’ was employed by Lacan to illustrate the contradictory mechanism of the Real (Bendle: 2001).

In this respect the three instances of polyptoton in Examples 2 and 3 are not exceptional. In Chapter 1, another polyptoton is introduced into Italian ex novo. If we consider the following English sentence: ‘night after night I saw her heels, only her heels coming down to meet me, coming down to meet me forever’ (*Autobiography*: 19), we notice the invariable duplication of ‘coming down to meet me, coming down to meet me’. In Italian, on the contrary, the second verb ‘coming down’ undergoes a grammatical transposition which is responsible for the creation of a new polyptoton: ‘una notte dopo l’altra vedevo i suoi calcagni, solo i suoi calcagni che scendendo mi venivano incontro, scendevano e mi venivano incontro per sempre’ (*Autobiografia*: 21). Here, the subordinate ‘scendendo’ is morpho-syntactically different from ‘scendevano’, forming therefore a variable type of repetition in Italian, which is absent in English.

Examples of polyptotons in the Italian text are innumerable. I will only report one more instance because of space constraints. In ‘un’ape solitaria continuava a entrare e a uscire da questi fiori, entrava e usciva’ (*Autobiografia*: 83), the infinitives in the first clause become finite forms in the second one. In English the verbs are repeated verbatim: ‘a single bee kept going in and coming out, going in and coming out’ (*Autobiography*: 104).

Similarly to this figure of speech, all other iterations in the first three Italian examples are performed to introduce new elements, either opposing or complementing one another (semantically and/or morpho-syntactically). In Example 2, for instance, the circumstantial of space ‘dentro di me’ is repeated twice to present new pieces of information each time: firstly ‘niente’ and then ‘cripta’. The anaphoric repetition of the temporal expression ‘for four days’ (to describe Xuela’s abortion) is applied in the original and reapplied in the translation to introduce conflicting information: ‘per quattro giorni, con il corpo ridotto dal dolore a un vulcano di dolore; non successe nulla, e poi per i quattro giorni successivi prese a scorrermi il sangue di fra le gambe, lentamente e

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10 Example 2 in Italian also presents a polyptoton contained in the repetition of ‘casa’ and the slightly modified ‘casetta’.
incessantemente come da una sorgente eterna' (*Autobiografia*: 68). Even the most simple duplications, such as when Xuela describes the visions of her mother coming 'down and down' a ladder (*Autobiography*: 18), are used to add new information, movement and change of status/position. They in fact point out that the mother is getting closer and closer to the bottom of the ladder and to Xuela who is lying next to it. In Example 1 the repetition of 'certe' in 'certe parti, certi episodi' also serves to introduce new elements each time which, even if they could be considered as synonyms, do not have exactly the same meaning and, consequently, the same referent.

This is also the case of the rhetoric (faithfully reproduced from the English) that the Italian Xuela employs to write a letter to her father to complain about the brutal teaching methods adopted in the school she has been sent to: ‘mio caro Papà, […] mi picchiano con le parole, mi picchiano con le bacchette, mi picchiano con le pietre’ (*Autobiografia*: 21). As in Example 1, the verb ‘mi picchiano’ is repeated three times to introduce three different elements which could be considered contextually interchangeable but which, in actual fact, complement one another. All these variable types of repetition are, therefore, crucial, because the parallel syntactical structures they create engender changes and variations within stasis. As Bennison Gray confirms, ‘repetition [...] is the handmaiden of both permanence and change’ (1971: 291) which, as we shall now see, is the mark of negativity.

The consequence of such a composite and sophisticated structure in Italian is twofold, because it produces immediate and long term effects on the text and on the reader. First of all, iterations, traceable in oral literature as a key device in emphasis production, contribute to the progression of the narrative and, at the same time, to the delivery of its message. Their setting has a visual and cognitive impact on the reader and aids their understanding of the text. This means that repetitions do not make narration stale or dry. They create a natural cycle where new pieces of information are introduced once others have subsequently become well established, and have been processed by the reader. Tradition and innovation
are interlaced within consolidated syntactical and lexical patterns that move the story forward without erasing or denying the old in favour of the new. If communication is clear in English where variable repetitions abound, it is even clearer in Italian where such repetitions are both recreated out of existing ones and produced ex novo. The Italian version’s semantic approach to the original text proves to be successful, therefore, from both a rhetorical and a linguistic point of view.

In addition to these immediate consequences, there are also long term effects on the principal message and leitmotif of the book, namely the negative. Ontologically, double repetitions problematize dual thinking and invite the reader to reconceptualize dichotomies from a different angle. This is because such repetitions are not only based on rigid oppositions, but also on duplications of complementing elements. The oscillations and alternations between these two types of rhetorical constructions show Xuela’s intention to complicate/overthrow dual thinking and perception centred on/around fake priorities and first-class quality ‘good’ versus second-class quality ‘bad’. Modulations of epiphora into anaphora and recreations of parallel structures sharing the same morphological relations become politically loaded in Italian. They set patterns of representations which are incessantly renewed by variable criteria granting prominence alternatively to either end of the spectrum regardless of whether they are negative or positive. In addition, because all elements contribute to the development of the plot, those which are presented as negative (such as Xuela’s blood that did not flow for four days) can only be seen as temporarily negative. Like all other elements, they represent valuable pieces of the jigsaw holding the bigger picture together and contributing to its complexity and density. In other words, this is what Xuela finds in the hole within the hole in Example 1: ‘in momenti diversi, cose differenti sono in ombra, cose differenti sono in luce’. The things that she can find in the dollhouse en abyme are the same every time she puts her head into it. They never change. What changes is the way she sees them, a way that evokes Muraro’s ‘opposizione partecipativa’ (2005: 7). Double repetitions, the content of the mises-en-abyme and Muraro’s conceptualization of...
the negative appear to be strictly interrelated in the Italian text. These interconnections weave all textual elements together in this text and they also expand homogeneously the rhythms of negativity.

5.5 Muraro’s ‘compleso’ and Autobiografia

In La magica forza, Muraro invites her readers to refine their perceptive skills in order to be able to appreciate the negative. For the Italian philosopher, perception implies the ability to see what others might not be able to see, namely ‘il complesso che consente lo stabilirsi dell’opposizione partecipativa’ (2005: 7, author’s italics). This type of opposition is not ‘opposizione contraddittoria (bianco/non bianco, A/non A)’ or ‘opposizione contraria (bianco/nero, A/Z)’. It is instead a participative opposition which embraces complexity, namely what is ‘sia positivo sia negativo’. Both Autobiografia and La magica forza set a twofold target which invites their reader to develop sophisticated skills in order to live by the negative in a constructive way and appreciate participative oppositions. It seems therefore appropriate to continue to read Autobiografia alongside Diotima’s work in order to cast light specifically on how these kinds of oppositions are articulated in Italian and how they relate to the mises-en-abyme. Following this analysis, I will explore how Diotima and Xuela succeed in living in close proximity to the negative.

Muraro’s notion of ‘opposizione partecipativa’ is complex, based on one element, ‘il complesso’ (2005: 7, author’s italics), that is neither exclusively positive nor exclusively negative, but with traits of both. In Autobiografia, ‘il complesso’ can be traced on three different levels which reflect Muraro’s conceptualization. First, apart from being ‘sia positivo sia negativo’, ‘il complesso’ is for Muraro ‘una politica capace di tenere praticamente insieme quello che, logicamente e naturalmente, non potrebbe starci’ (2005: 7). In Autobiografia, this political practice emerges from the way the Italian Xuela perceives the world as a composite reality where positive and negative coexist peacefully. Nature should
be emulated because it represents a good role model where aporias and oppositions live together in harmonious cohabitation:

 quella mattina era una mattina come tutte le altre, tanto comune da essere profonda: c’era il sole in certi punti e non in altri, e le due cose (il sereno, il nuvoloso) occupavano con tutto agio parti differenti del cielo. (Autobiografia: 16)

Secondly, ‘il complesso’ exemplifies for Muraro ‘[una] pratica della relazione strumentale e del conflitto che modifica e non distrugge – un significato che non esclude quello corrente’ (2005: 7). Hence, the linguistic practice of variable repetitions, already identified in Autobiografia, can be considered as a manifestation of a modus operandi which does not erase the old but which revises and supplements it with newly-introduced narrative elements. Thirdly, because the complex is ‘sia positivo sia negativo’ (2005: 7), it can be located wherever one or more radical changes of status emerge, when connotations are completely overthrown and the significance attributed to things and people is turned upside down. See this example: ‘il mare azzurro, il grigio oceano lo accoglieranno insieme con tutto ciò che rappresenta la sua felicità terrena (la nave piena di gente) e tutto ciò che rappresenta la sua infelicità (la nave piena di gente)’ (Autobiografia: 108). Here we can identify a radical change of status from positive to negative of the crowded boat, shipping slaves to America, simultaneously seen as an element of happiness and unhappiness. This observation is not a sign of insensitivity on behalf of the female protagonist. On the contrary, Xuela shows invaluable perceptive skills which allow her to go beyond the intrinsic (negative) sadness of this scene and to appreciate the complesso.

Participative oppositions, moreover, emerge when reality is overturned by a series of radical changes ad infinitum. Like in the dollhouse, things become negative and then positive and then negative again, along a continuum responsible for their permanent instability. This is evident, as I have already pointed out, at the beginning of the book when Xuela claims that at some point in her life she has
more of some things she had never had and less of other things she had previously
had in abundance. Alterations, transformations of status and connotations affect
also Ma Eunice's dress: 'il vestito: una volta era stato nuovo e pulito, e la
sporcizia l'aveva rinnovato un'altra volta dandogli toni che prima non aveva, e la
sporcizia l'avrebbe finalmente disintegrato del tutto' (*Autobiografia*: 10). Here,
the transfer from new and clean to old and shabby to new again mirrors the
displacements of light and shadow over the dollhouse's microcosm *en abyme*.

It seems therefore that participative oppositions also characterize the abyss *en
abyme*. Consequently, it is appropriate to analyze the description of a real abyss to
find out whether there is correspondence between this and the theoretical notions
of complexity allegorized in Example 1. A comparative analysis of Source Text
and Target Text will be useful here to demonstrate a series of consistencies in the
Target Text enhancing echoes and reverberations between microcosm and
macrocasm.

**Example 4**
Around each bend was the familiar dark green of the trees [...], a green so
unrelenting that it attained great beauty and great ugliness and yet great humility
all at once; it was itself: nothing could be added to it; nothing could be taken away
from it. Each precipice along the road was steep and dangerous, and a fall down
one of them would have resulted in death or a lasting injury. And each climb up
was followed by a slope down, at the bottom of which was the same choke of
flowering plants, each with a purpose not yet known to me. And each curve that
ran left would soon give way to a curve that ran right. (*Autobiography*: 26)

A ogni curva c'era il solito verde scuro degli alberi [...], un verde così implacabile
che raggiungeva nello stesso tempo una grande bellezza e una grande bruttezza e
ciò nonostante una grande umiltà; era semplicemente se stesso: nulla vi si poteva
aggiungere; nulla gli si poteva togliere. E ogni precipizio lungo la strada era
ripido e pericoloso, e cadervi avrebbe significato morire o restare storti. E a ogni
tratto in salita seguiva un tratto in discesa, in fondo al quale c'era sempre la stessa
soffocante profusione di piante in fiore, ciascuna con un effetto che ancora mi era
sconosciuto. E ogni curva che girava a sinistra cedeva ben presto il posto a una
curva che girava a destra. (*Autobiografia*: 26-27)

If we compare Source Text and Target Text, we can see that the Italian syntax and
rhetorical architecture have been restructured so as to embrace complexity and
specularity. The Italian describes the metaphorical mapping of this real precipice (observed by Xuela with fascination and horror from its edge) by the use of repetition: ‘E a ogni tratto in salita seguiva un tratto in discesa’. ‘Tratto’ (added in Italian) is repeated twice to introduce opposite features (‘salita’ and ‘discesa’) which are antithetical and, at the same time, equivalent. They happen to be the same thing but different, in reverse format. This bipolar rhetorical construction is not simply one of the many variable repetitions that we have encountered in Italian so far. This bipolar construction mirrors and strengthens Muraro’s notation of participative opposition embracing negative as well as positive traits. These traits constantly change sign, moving from positive (‘bellezza’) to negative (‘bruttezza’) and from left to right or vice versa. This movement, as a consequence, prevents the real abyss from being a static and motionless space. On the contrary, its vertiginous oscillations embody alternatively and/or simultaneously opposite traits, ambivalence, symmetry and specularity. This is a fascinating but extremely dangerous place (as we shall see in the next section) which attracts Xuela who observes it with concentration and fear. When she first sees this abyss, she is only a teenager but mature enough to keep at a safe distance from it even though she is attracted to it. We could argue, together with Muraro, that Xuela has been gifted with and pervaded by Hegel’s spirit, a spirit which accompanies her forever: ‘È lo spirito di Hegel [Muraro claims] che ha la capacità di stare in presenza del negativo, consentendo così che l’opposizione sviluppi la sua negatività senza diventare distruzione, e da ciò la nascita del significato’ (Muraro 2005: 6-7). Meaning and sense, therefore, emerge from visual and tactile proximity to the negative paradoxically loaded with positive connotations.

Before concluding this section, I need to highlight one last correspondence between the third meaning that Muraro attributes to negativity, the *mise-en-abyme* in Example 1 and further textual evidence. This is not specific to the Italian translation, because it is evident in the original too. Nevertheless, it is useful to point it out because it clarifies and completes the meaning attributed to negativity; it puts Xuela’s negative characterization into proportion and perspective; and it encourages the reader to be receptive towards another realm of negativity which
territorializes the maternal. According to Muraro, negativity is Hegel’s spirit responsible for radical changes of status which intermittently guarantee subversion and integration (together with repetition and fragmentation, traits which negativity has also in common with the structuring principles of the Italian mises-en-abyrne). To complement this, Buttarelli maintains that ‘il lavoro del negativo può lottare con noi per estinguere qualche cosa che siamo costretti dalla lingua a chiamare male anche quando non si tratta soltanto di dolore e, a volte, nemmeno di quello’ (2005: 35, author’s italics). In other words, negativity is a practice acknowledging not only the complexity of reality but also its fluctuations, which at times do not deserve to be named as either negative or bad. This happens when negativity engenders transformations which retain in their core the seeds of revolution and tradition as well as of harmonious negotiation between the two. This is the reason why Muraro mentions Hegel’s dialectical negativity. Hegel speaks of dynamic unity, where ‘being and nothing are the same’ (Coole 2000: 46) and where this sameness is achieved by a transition. Coole explains this as follows: ‘becoming, the (logical rather than temporal) transition of being and nothing, is a ‘movement’ wherein they are distinguished but by a difference that immediately resolves itself’ (2000: 46).

In Source Text and Target Text, this movement is recreated in Example 1 (with alternations of light and shade), in Example 4 (with curves to the left and to the right) and by chiastic structures (as examined in the first section of this chapter) or, to be precise, double repetitions of identical aporias in reverse format. Examples are also taken from nature: ‘il cielo che passava da nero ad azzurro e da azzurro a nero’ (Autobiografia: 20). Here the chiastic structure is not simply the rhetorical device used in oral literature to attract and entertain the audience. It is also a linguistic means that shows some crucial traits identified by Xuela in nature. By reproducing verbatim this construction, the Italian text enhances Hegel’s dialectical negativity. The constant fluctuation of status from A (‘nero’) to B (‘azzurro’) passes through sameness, repetition and difference and, in so doing, highlights relationality and intersubjectivity. According to Hegel and Muraro (and, as we shall see shortly, Kristeva), negativity’s potentials can be
identified whenever oppositions (‘azzurro’ and ‘nero’) are set into motion, a motion usually initiated by the negative. This proximity does not erase its contradiction, but it increases ‘the differentiated and mobile web of relations wherein parts are attracted and repelled’ (Coole 2000: 50). Consequently, the chiastic structures in both texts are charged with additional connotations other than those observed in my earlier discussion. Not only do they aim to overthrow dichotomies, they also aim to show that oppositions can ‘become active and lively towards one another’ (Coole 2000: 50). There is no need for violence, antagonism or war. Oppositions can/should enter into a dialogue with each other while maintaining their unique sense of self-ness as a warranty for autonomy and freedom. Chiastic constructions are the stylistic means the narrator employs to advocate peace in an ideal world devoid of colonialism or subjugations. They also prepare the reader to appreciate the sui generis relationship that the protagonist develops with the mother and the maternal.

To conclude this section, we can state that our reading of the Italian textual strategies vis-à-vis Diotima’s work helps us appreciate that the negative is not simply what appears thematically and superficially (colonialism, abuses and murders). The negative transcends violence and subjugation and becomes a political practice that perceives the world in non-binary ways. While Muraro refers to it as ‘il complesso’, Kristeva refers to it as ‘oppositions non exclusives’ (Kristeva 1967: 453). Despite these differences in naming, the negative is for both a destabilizing agent with a clear political goal, entirely traceable in both Source Text and Target Text, but with a difference. Both texts offer a multilevelled reading of negativity through their language. This is explained in the first section of this chapter which focused on chiasmus and litotes as rhetorical as well as political devices. That section, however, did not deal with discrepancies between the two texts. They have been more specifically addressed in Sections 2 and 3. The divergent strategies mentioned here, however, do not betray textual adherence. On the contrary, they prove the translator’s sensitivity towards such crucial political nuances and, at the same time, the admirable (and well-thought) linguistic architecture of the translated text. At the same time, while casting light
on its semantic approach to the original, which recreates and enhances the aesthetics of the Source Text, the analysis has elucidated the political connotations and implications of negativity permeating, as an over-arching theme, every level of the text implicitly and/or explicitly. These clarifications have been possible thanks to the analysis of the multilevelled correspondences between Italian morpho-syntactical constructions and content/message. Detecting the most significant aspect of the negative without focussing on the framing structures (and linguistic reverberations) embedding it would otherwise have been challenging (if not impossible). An effective linguistic architecture facilitates communication from different angles and this is the main success of the Italian version which, in virtue of its linguistic sensitivity and responsive attitude to the author, manages to keep the dialogue open intratextually between mises-en-abyme and intertextually between Diotima and Kincaid.

5.6 The Magical Powers of the Abyss

While the previous two sections have focused on rhetorical devices (litotes, chiasmus and mises-en-abyme) to show how the negative operates within the two texts, this section will focus on the portrayal of one abyss to reveal what actually happens within it.

Example 5

I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them. I would bear them in abundance; they would emerge from my head, from my armpits, from between my legs; I would bear children, they would hang from me like fruit from a vine, but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god. I would bear children in the morning, I would bathe them at noon in a water that came from myself, and I would eat them at night, swallowing them whole, all at once. They would live and then they would not live. In their day of life, I would walk them to the edge of a precipice. I would not push them over; I would not have to; the sweet voices of unusual pleasures would call to them from its bottom; they would not rest until they became one with these sounds. I would cover their bodies with diseases; embellish skins with thinly crusted sores, the sores sometimes oozing a thick pus for which they would thirst, a thirst that could never be quenched. I would condemn them to live in an empty space frozen in the same posture in which they had been born. I would throw them from a great height; every bone in their body would be broken and the bones would never be properly set, healing in the way
they were broken, healing never at all. I would decorate them when they were only corpses and set each corpse in a polished wooden box, and place the polished wooden box in the earth and forget the part of the earth where I had buried the box. It is in this way that I did not become a mother; it is in this way that I bore my children. In that house [...] I sat, I stood, I lay down at night, and so sealed the doom of the children I would never have. (Autobiography: 97-98)

Io avrei avuto dei bambini, ma non sarei mai stata una madre per loro. Ne avrei partoriti in abbondanza; mi sarebbero usciti dalla testa, dalle ascelle, di fra le gambe; avrei partorito dei bambini, mi sarebbero rimasti appesi addosso come grappoli sulla vite, ma io li avrei uccisi con l’indifferenza di un dio. Avrei partorito bambini al mattino, a mezzogiorno avrei fatto loro il bagno in un’acqua che sgorgava da me stessa, e a sera li avrei inghiottiti interi, tutti in una volta. Sarebbero vissuti, e poi non sarebbero vissuti più. In quel giorno che durava la loro vita li avrei portati sull’orlo di un precipizio. Non li avrei spinti io; non ce ne sarebbe stato bisogno; a chiamarli dal fondo sarebbero state le dolci voci di piaceri inusitati; i bambini non si sarebbero placati finché non fossero divenuti tutti uno con quei suoni. Avrei coperto i loro corpi di malattie, avrei ornato la loro pelle con piaghe dalle croste sottili, piaghe che a volte avrebbero trasudato un pus denso del quale avrebbero avuto una gran sete, una sete che non si sarebbe mai potuta spegnere. Li avrei condannati a vivere in uno spazio aperto, irrigiditi nella stessa posizione in cui erano nati. Li avrei gettati da una grande altezza; ogni osso del loro corpo si sarebbe rotto e non si sarebbe mai aggiustato bene, si sarebbe saldato così come si era rotto, non sarebbe mai guarito. Quando fossero stati solo dei cadaveri li avrei adornati e avrei sistemato ogni cadavere in una cassetta di legno lucidato, e avrei messo la cassetta di legno lucidato nella terra, e avrei dimenticato la parte della terra dove l’avevo sotterrata. È in questo modo che non sono diventata una madre; è in questo modo che ho partorito i miei figli. In quella casa [...] io sedeva, stavo in piedi, mi sdraiavo la notte, suggellando così il fato dei bambini che non avrei mai avuto. (Autobiografia: 77-78)

This is the most surreal and, in a way, cruel scene which may be read from a literal and allegorical point of view. First of all, the experience of the precipice seems to be specifically a female experience in Kincaid’s work. Whereas Xuela depicts herself on a few occasions on the verge of a precipice without, however, falling into it, her sister is described as the victim of a bad fall into it. This leaves her lame, barren and with multiple injuries which mark her destiny forever and associates her with Xuela’s injured children in Example 5. In this excerpt Xuela tells her reader how she would kill the children if she ever became a mother. She depicts herself as a merciless god that would either swallow them or bring them to the edge of a precipice so that they could fall into it (the fact that this scene is not followed – apparently – by any justification or plea for forgiveness increases the
unethical aspect of Xuela’s character). The kind of injuries that this fall would produce would be inconceivably awful to the point of turning them into deformed monsters. No actual depiction is offered of this precipice, but the catastrophic effects on the children’s bodies are indicative of its negative and evil traits. Zamboni, on the contrary, offers a thorough account of the figure of the precipice whose entropic force is metonymically related to the horrors caused by Xuela’s precipices. In Zamboni’s work, the precipice (allegorizing the negative) is characterised by a catastrophic nature which tears the real apart and cuts it wide open. Such a laceration is the outcome of a circular telluric movement which sucks in what lies along the edges of the abyss referred to as ‘baratro’ (Zamboni 2005: 99). Bodies, towns, houses and things of all sorts, forced down into it, are deformed and permanently damaged: ‘cose, case, ponti, animi e corpi ne sono deformati’ (2005: 112, my italics). Deformation and physical destruction are common traits which emerge in Zamboni’s work with the use of the adjective ‘deformati’ and in Autobiografia with ‘storpio’ and ‘sciancato’, employed to evoke the horror of falling into a precipice.

The parallel between Autobiografia and Zamboni’s work on the use of these attributes confirms once more the Italian translation’s linguistic sophistication and the intratextual and intertextual thematic echoes throughout the text and between Autobiografia and La magica forza. The analysis of such reverberations will lead us to discover the importance of the precipice as a female experience. For this reason, before explaining Example 5 in detail, some other linguistic recurrences in the translation starting with ‘storpio’ will be evaluated. This adjective is employed at the beginning of the book, when Xuela is being carried on horseback by her father to his new house and wife. The road leading to them has a number of precipices on both sides which are painstakingly observed by Xuela. Along the way, she imagines the mortal outcome of a fall: ‘a fall down one of them would have resulted in death or a lasting injury’ (Example 4). In Italian, ‘injury’ is metonymically translated into ‘storpio’. While ‘injury’ is ‘an example of physical
harm or damage done to a living thing’, 11 ‘storpio’ (meaning: ‘chi ha braccia o gambe mal conformate, distorte; in modo anormale, deformi; sciancato’)12 is the horrible consequence of that physical harm or damage. This semantic translation which is both metonymic and hyponymic (since the denotative meaning of ‘storpio’ is included but is narrower and more specific than a general ‘injury’) is symptomatic of Diotima’s more pragmatic and down-to-earth approach to the negative (as explained earlier). At the same time, it anticipates a more detailed description of an injury which Xuela’s sister suffers as a consequence of a bad fall into a precipice. This fall leaves the woman ‘lame and barren’. In Italian the first of this nominal pair is rendered with ‘sciancato’ which, unlike ‘lame’, is not normally employed for animals. ‘Sciancato’ is a synonym for ‘storpio’ and is used in Italian to describe somebody who has a problem with their hips or legs and who, as a consequence, limps. Hence, as more emphasis is placed on the body, more support is offered to strengthen the link between the Italian images of the precipice/abyss and the female body. Is there such a need to highlight the physical (or physiognomic) effect of the precipice upon the female body in Italian?

According to Kristeva and Diotima the figure of the abyss represents death but also birth. It encapsulates both extremities (death and birth) and epitomizes the coming out of the womb. The abyss, Kristeva maintains, is a space ‘qui s’ouvre entre ce corps et ce qui a été dedans: il y a l’abîme entre la mère et l’enfant’ (Kristeva 1983: 318). The womb is the most privileged space of the pre-verbal fusion between mother and child and the coming out of it (described in terms of separation and laceration) causes a fall into the abyss which, even if it is the consequence of birth, can be equated to death (or non-Being). 13 In this light,


12 Dizionario Garzanti Della Lingua Italiana Online (http://garzantilinguistica.sapere.it/it/dizionario/it/ cerca?q=sciancato) [accessed on 15 May 2009].

13 The same explanation is offered in a footnote by Zamboni quoting the French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto (rather than Kristeva), but the concept is the same: ‘La fase dello specchio crea una scissione dolorosa e incolmabile dalla madre – io direi qui che provoca del non essere – a cui si può rispondere con un rilancio della relazione linguistica con gli altri’ (2005: 107).

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Xuela is not really a merciless god or a particularly unmotherly mother. The mother’s naturally/inherently evil traits are illustrated by Kristeva herself who identifies them in the act of removing and giving the breast or, before that, in the act of rejection (which, therefore, is not unique to the symbolic). In addition, rejection works both ways because the child, in order to acquire its personality is forced to reject (or ‘abject’) the mother in a violent way that recalls birth. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva explains that in order to reject, abject and negate the mother (and define the borders between her self and other), the child has to employ a certain degree of violence, which is a legacy of birth: ‘abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be’ (Kristeva 1982: 10). Violence and aggression are, therefore, natural traits characterizing the most important interpersonal relationship idealized by Xuela, who has grown up without the presence of a compassionate mother.

Why does Xuela, therefore, evoke such a violent scene in her narrative? Does the narrating I distance herself from the desires of the narrated self? Does the narrator want to show that at the time of writing she is disenchanted and no longer nurtures the desire of the past, when she was young, naïve and inexperienced and cried for a mother love which she imagined as perfect, sympathetic and kind-hearted? This could be a valid explanation for the inclusion of such a violent scene whose negative charge is increased by the vivid description of injuries. However, if this were the only reason, it would overthrow the horrific results of my previous analysis, because Xuela’s negative traits would be outnumbered by her positive and good qualities. However, this is not supported by the text, because the narrator’s intention goes beyond these superficial motives in order to carry out her more insidious (if not apparent) political agenda. The first warning is Xuela’s cannibalistic act, when she is depicted in the process of eating her own children. In some non-Western cultures, cannibalism, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (1999: 1) explain, is not a pure act of violence against other human beings or the satisfaction of instinctual needs. It is an act of homage paid to one’s enemy, who is considered as skilled and powerful. The consequent incorporation of your
enemies’ bodies is an act of submission and, at the same time, of under-standing (in its double meaning). Standing under your enemies and trying to understand their negative, evil and powerful violence is a compulsory stage preceding the incorporation and acquisition of their soul and nature. Under-standing the fall into the abyss, therefore, represents for Xuela an act of humble and proactive submission when translated into a Western logic, namely the expression of a desire satisfied through the acquisition of knowledge. Knowing the world and reality (charged with negativity and wickedness) requires either falling into the abyss or ‘sostare presso la crepa’ (Zamboni 2005: 104).\textsuperscript{14} It implies following an ethical path which makes us see and touch the suffering that the abyss inevitably produces. This is a common goal shared also by all the contributors to \textit{La magica forza} and effectively illustrated by Buttarelli and Zamboni. While the former maintains that ‘passare attraverso il dolore accettando di patirlo aiuta a raggiungere una conoscenza della realtà e di sè a un grado più alto’ (Buttarelli 2005: 38), the latter claims that one must ‘accettare la sofferenza di ciò che avviene, rendendosi conto che, quanto più l’accoglie, tanto più la sua anima si allarga fino ad aprirsi e sentire tutti i fatti, buoni o cattivi che siano’ (Zamboni 2005: 103).

The act of cannibalism is therefore inevitably followed by the fall into the abyss which is as powerful as it is unavoidable and trying to imagine this fall is ‘as hallucinatory as it is vertiginous’ (Kristeva quoted in Anne-Marie Smith 1998: 31). Xuela, therefore, is not imagining the real death of her children. She is hallucinating and reliving the separation from the archaic mother, the laceration of the real and the fall into the abyss of the world. She wants to understand its horror and fascination and, at the same time, the role played by the mother in the vertiginous explorations of the potentials of the negative. Zamboni, for instance, claims: ‘la paura di stare presso le lacerazioni del reale [...] mi ha spinto ad interrogarmi sull’orrore e il fascino che ha per me il negativo’ (2005: 99, my italics). In Example 5, horror and fascination are juxtaposed in the description of

\textsuperscript{14} For Zamboni, ‘sostare presso la crepa’ is almost like falling into the abyss, which is as dangerous and frightening as being sucked into it.

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the fall. Fascination is what attracts Xuela’s imaginary children to the abyss, the locus generating ‘sweet voices of unusual pleasures’ which, like the enchanting singing of a siren, drags them into the abyss. Horror is part of Xuela’s reaction to her children’s injuries after the fall, a horrified reaction which is shared by the English and the Italian reader.

By comparing these texts, the lexical precision of such terms as ‘sgorgava’, ‘placati’ and ‘inusitati’ translating respectively ‘came’, ‘rest’ and ‘unusual’ can be appreciated. While the latter belongs to a high register, the first and the second represent more than a self-reflexive exercise in style (emerging also from ‘inusitato’). These two attributes increase the semantic potential of the Italian text and contribute to the accuracy of characterization. ‘Placati’ normally collocates with wrath and rage in Italian (such as ‘placare l’ira’) and has biblical overtones evoking the wrath of the Old Testament God. Such implications are absent from the English ‘rest’ which, unlike its Italian counterpart, does not depict the children as particularly wrathful or revengeful. However, apart from this semantic addition, the Italian past participle implicitly hints at a possible mother-child relationship in Kristevan terms. Not only do they appear as the victims of their mother’s violence, but they also respond to her in an emotionally aggressive manner in order to reject, abject and negate her body and voice (despite being attracted by them). ‘Placati’ is not the only Italian term hinting at a mother versus child antagonistic relationship. In Chapter 1, the Italian employs the adjective ‘abietto’ in ‘per sempre abietto’ (Autobiografia: 30) to translate ‘the forever low’ (Autobiography: 31), an expression which appears to be used to characterize the outcast. In Example 5 the verb ‘sgorgava’ is also representative, because, apart from referring to the water coming out of Xuela, it foregrounds the impetus characterizing the mother during childbirth and the abjection stage: ‘sgorgare’

15 This is a very powerful translation loaded with socio-cultural implications. In Chapter 1, the term ‘abietto’ characterizes the colonized and therefore it is used broadly speaking in order to define ‘what an identity rejects because it instills horror’ (Lechte 2003: 10). The point of view is the colonizer’s who feels revulsion towards what is unclean and inferior, namely the indigenous population. In view of the scene of the abyss in Example 5, the term ‘abietto’ in Italian is also charged with psychoanalytical overtones characterizing the slave that has to get rid of her/his master and the subordination that ties the former to the latter.

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means: ‘uscir fuori a fiotti e con un certo impeto’.\textsuperscript{16} To sum up, the accurate lexical choice of the Italian translation enhances the Kristevan reading of the scene and its political implications.

It seems useful to continue to read the Italian text against its original to bring to light other crucial aspects of Xuela’s political message. For instance, if we check the second, transitive, meaning of the verb ‘sgorgare’ offered by Dizionario Garzanti Della Lingua Italiana Online (‘sturare, liberare da un ingorgo’),\textsuperscript{17} we can be led to think that other implications are concealed in this cannibalistic scene. If the verb had been chosen also for its transitive meaning, the water, and metonymically its source (the mother), would disguise a transgressive message of freedom and liberation. And if so, from what? This question could be answered by looking again at the power of repetition. As we have already seen, repetition is not only used for anaphoric constructions introducing opposing and/or complementing elements.\textsuperscript{18} It is also used as a cohesive construction, in ‘pelle con piaghe dalle croste sottili, piaghe che a volte avrebbero trasudato un pus denso’ or in ‘una gran sete, una sete che non si sarebbe mai potuta spegnere’. The faithful repetition of ‘piaghe’ and ‘sete’ not only introduces complementing elements, it also functions as a cohesive device establishing appropriate connectors in order to complete the discourse. In other words, this is the same linguistic construction that was found in Example 1 where the repetition of the last word of the clause engenders a chain interweaving the discourse: ‘in un luogo molto piccolo, buio, un luogo della grandezza di una casa di bambola, e la casa di bambola è nel fondo di una buca, e io sono in cima alla buca’.

\textsuperscript{16} Dizionario Garzanti Della Lingua Italiana Online (http://garzantilinguistica.sapere.it/it/dizionario/it/ cerca?q=sgorgare) [accessed on 15 May 2009].

\textsuperscript{17} Dizionario Garzanti Della Lingua Italiana Online (http://garzantilinguistica.sapere.it/it/dizionario/it/ cerca?q=sgorgare) [accessed on 15 May 2009].

\textsuperscript{18} See also the following instances taken from Example 5 where an anaphoric construction introduces opposing elements: ‘It is in this way that I did not become a mother; it is in this way that I bore my children’; ‘E in questo modo che non sono diventata una madre; è in questo modo che ho partorito i miei figli’.

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It may seem that the image of the chain is not compatible with Xuela’s political message of freedom. However, if we remember that she likes to speak in contradictory terms we can attempt to appreciate its ambiguity. Apart from replicating a clear and well-built chain of signifiers, Xuela iterates ad infinitum, and in other contexts, the formula that would guarantee recognition, self-affirmation, autonomy and independence within loving intersubjective relations. The abyss is, in this sense, the privileged locus to set such a chain into motion. In ‘Death, the Abyss and the Real’, Mervyn Bendle explains this contradiction by quoting Kojève’s reading of Hegel’s Master-Slave theory. According to Hegel, non-Being (epitomized here by the image of the abyss) is not only death, it is also ‘another desire, another greedy emptiness, another I’ (Kojève quoted in Bendle 2001: 227) which, in virtue of its emptiness, stimulates the desire to be filled, producing therefore a sense of satisfaction. If such desire is satisfied by Being, rather than by another non-Being, this causes self-enslavement. Hence ‘to fill oneself with this given Being [is] to enslave oneself to it’ while ‘to desire non-Being is to liberate oneself from Being, to realize one’s autonomy, one’s Freedom’ (Kojève quoted by Bendle 2001: 227). This means that in order to avoid the Master-Slave entrapment in love relations, one should not desire the other, but rather the desire of the other for oneself, namely one should desire to be loved more than desire to possess or to be possessed by the other.

That is the reason why a negative non-Being should desire another negative non-Being. And that is allegorized by the incorporation of a negative element (the wrathful children) into another negative element (the evil mother and merciless goddess), an embodiment that unmistakably happens in hell (death, the abyss).19

In other words, one should aim for the desire to be desired to be desired ad infinitum if one wants to be loved, achieve satisfaction and, at the same time, be

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19 It should be remembered that incorporation/cannibalization is a positive act that pays homage to the ‘victim’. There is no pure evil to the detriment of the victim and therefore the latter cannot blame the victor for the production of extra malevolence. If we understand this, we also understand that the victim cannot ask the victor the question: why are you hurting me? This is the question that confirms the status of the victim as subjugated loser. See Buttarelli for a more detailed explanation: ‘La domanda [perché mi fai male] incita il male a dilagare perché cerca di suscitare senso di colpa, rabbia e dà statuto alla vittima di essere tale per sempre, perché dice che la vittima è disposta a redimere, perché stabilisce il riconoscimento di una dipendenza infernale’ (2005: 49).

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recognized by the other as a non-subjugated human being. Such a message is linguistically and rhetorically evoked by the duplicating construction of the *mise-en-abyme* and by the chain of repetitions of the same words (providing syntactical links). While the *mise-en-abyme* permits the inclusion of the exclusion, the internalization of the external and the incorporation of nothing/lack/desire within nothing/lack/desire, the chain of repetitions evokes the concatenation of desires which make love possible. In this light, the Italian does not introduce additional meanings, but its semantic/aesthetic approach to the original (at the cost of going against well-known Italian rules and regulations of good writing – namely avoiding repetition by means of synonyms) helps us understand the most complex allegorical scene of the text and clarify Xuela’s message. The syntax and figures of speech that she uses aim to shake her readers and make them think in terms of peaceful coexistence of people and races through and beyond violence and conflict.

However, if Xuela aims to put forward messages of peace in her text, does it not seem contradictory to do so in terms of violence? This is really when her readers (be they English or Italian) are invited to think of negativity in unorthodox ways. The negative is not (only) pure violence, revulsion and horror. It is what drives the self to question and renegotiate participative oppositions, lack, desire, ambition and the relationship with the mother. It is, therefore, a formative experience leading the ego to deal with ambiguities and violation of corporeal borders (what is neither wholly inside nor outside). The mother-child relationship and the mirror stage represent the peak of Xuela’s allegorical message. It is only by reliving the traumatic experience of abjection that Xuela can ‘under-stand’ pain and violence. Xuela intends to appreciate the complexity of reality and, at the same time, sends out messages of peace by encouraging her reader to rid themselves of self-enslavements and subjugations. This is a powerful invitation aimed at overcoming the ‘slavish I’ (Kojève quoted by Bendle 2001: 228) and pursued in the name of the mother. The mother is not only an idealized being, devoid of negativity and filled with compassionate love. She is a concept charged with ethical and political implications because she challenges dual thinking and the Ma(s)ter-Slave logic. In
the end, the mother is not only a physical and discursive construct, she is also an omnipresent feeling and a pervasive abstraction in both texts.

In this light, is it the maternal that dictates the linguistic construction of Example 5 in Italian? As we have seen, the duplicating principle governing the construction of the *mise-en-abyme* affects the linguistic depiction in Italian of its embedding frame. We could therefore wonder whether it is the same here. This can be explained if we reassess, a final time, the significance of lexical repetition. However, because repetition characterizes both texts, we have to bear in mind that the following conclusions concern both the Target Text and the Source Text. Repetition is indicative of excess, fragmentation and lack which are typical traits of the maternal. First, iteration produces lyricism which, with its enchanting lullaby, evokes the rhythmic and prosodic oscillations of the semiotic. Secondly, it generates a sense of excess which is the cause of abjection. As Kristeva maintains, it is not castration that dictates revulsion and rejection (contrary to Lacan’s claim). Excess (as in pregnancy) is the main reason why the whole disintegrates and splits in half. Thirdly, the repeated word fragments the sentence and creates a temporary link which paradoxically uncovers a lack, the lack of the missing bond *par excellence*. Repetitions, therefore, fill up a text in search of a unity whose lack produces melancholia and the nostalgic remembrance of the original state of plenitude. Finally, because lexical repetition, by definition, avoids pronouns, they produce ‘the perfect illusion of presence’ (Maclean 1988: 66). Pronouns would only reinforce that lack and death of Being. Therefore, and because they are ‘the most terrifying masks man has invented’ (Stanzel quoted in Maclean 1988: 66) they are avoided even when the English text contemplates them (see in Example 5 the introduction of ‘bambini’).

Finally repetitions are the metaphor of writing *en abyme* both in Source Text and Target Text. Repetition is extensively explained by Kristeva in ‘Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman’ when she illustrates the potential of polyphony and

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20 Xuela’s taste buds disintegrating in Example 5 are a metaphor of this other splitting.
intertextuality defined as ‘pluralité d’éléments linguistiques en rapport dialogique’ (Kristeva 1967: 459). According to Kristeva, writing goes through the same creative process of repetition as identity formation. Writing is being in dialogue with the Other (= the Mother, the source of inspiration) and thus the writer confronts Alterity by repeating the Other (= the mirror effect during the mirror stage) before being able to formulate her own discourse (and define her own identity). In order to do this, Kristeva claims, the writer and writing ‘passent par le vide’ (1967: 451), they traverse a void which resembles the abyss described previously. In a polyphonic text, the writer negates herself, reflects/repeats and cannibalizes the other and then develops her own argument. Repetition embraces what Kristeva defines as ‘oppositions non-exclusives’ (1967: 453), namely oppositions whose antithetical/oppositional elements do not exclude or annihilate one another, but coexist and enrich discourse. Kristeva claims: ‘les répétitions [...] les oppositions non-exclusives qui fonctionnent comme des ensembles vides ou des sommes disjonctives [...] traduisent un dialogisme qu’aucun autre discours ne connaît d’une manière aussi flagrante’ (1967: 453). The choice of faithful recreation and introduction ex novo of repetition accompanying opposing elements is ideologically loaded. They set the architectural organization of ST and TT and convey postcolonial and psychoanalytical discourses.

The question that remains to be answered is whether the plot reveals the magical strength of negativity and whether Xuela’s actions are affected progressively by it. The answer is yes if we see passivity in positive terms. Passivity, as a transitional state, has also been praised by Diotima in *La magica forza* and has been adopted by her members as a political act of rebellion and contestation (Buttarelli 2005: 38 and Riboli 2005: 82 in *La magica forza*). In Kincaid’s work this approach is part of Xuela’s éducation sentimentale and this is to be taken on board when we read her text. Xuela is neglected and mistreated by society. She is always in a corner. She lives in the extension of her father’s house, or in a shed built by the families that she serves. Despite that, she never rebels actively but she uses her condition (of sexual and colonial subordination) and her desire for her dead mother to understand her body, her sexuality, women’s right to abortion, the rewarding
power of sisterhood among women in the village, the rebellious potential of motherhood and dialogic writing. The Italian translation invites the reader to appreciate all this and to understand what could otherwise be simply seen as the homicidal nature of the protagonist. Passivity (in opposition to aggression and violence) is put forward in Kincaid’s text as a possible response to the colonial brutality inflicted upon men and women.

5.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, what can be seen in the Italian text is a woman who, like the members of Diotima, invites the reader to ‘sostare presso la crepa’, namely to live by the abyss in order to learn its magical strength even if this means coexisting with the negative, death and evil. The negative takes different forms in the text: chiasmus, aporia, litotes, participative oppositions, holes, abysses and *mises-en-abyme*. These plays-within-the-play open a gap, a hole, a laceration in the text and invite the reader to listen carefully to/for the enticing chanting of the abyss unearthing ‘the sublime, repressed forces which return through the fissures of the order’ (Kristeva 1986: 150, my italics). Reading the Italian text in dialogue with Diotima’s *La magica forza del negativo*, a theoretical work heavily informed by Hegel and Kristeva, has provided an opportunity to explore the paradoxical connotations with which negativity is loaded. Such a reading enhances Kincaid’s final message, Xuela’s polyphonic and dialogic narrative and the cultural background of David Mezzacapa, the Italian translator who, as my analysis shows, partakes in a cultural context sensitive to the issues with which the texts engage. Although it cannot be proven that he is acquainted with Diotima’s work, it can be maintained that he is familiar with the Italian feminist discussions around the figurative meaning of the abyss in women’s lives.

On 8 March 1993, four years before the appearance of the Italian translation of *Autobiography*, four major publishers released a series of volumes by Italian women writers to celebrate International Women’s Day. Giunti, one of the publishing houses, launched the volume *Il pozzo segreto* which contains essays...
and short stories by women writers and collaborators of feminist journals and magazines, among which Tuttestorie, Leggendaria, Donna/Woman/Femme and Leggere Donna. The collection also contains the correspondence between Italian writers Natalia Ginzburg and Alba De Céspedes around ‘un continuo pericolo di cascare in un pozzo oscuro, qualcosa che proviene proprio dal temperamento femminile e forse da una secolare tradizione di soggezione e di schiavitù’ (Ginzburg 1993: 28, my italics).\(^{21}\) Whereas Ginzburg laments men’s inability to understand women’s suffering or even their impossibility to descend into the well of pain, De Céspedes demonstrates a more positive attitude. First of all she claims that ‘questi pozzi sono la nostra forza’ (De Céspedes 1993: 33) and, as a consequence, she anticipates Diotima’s *La forza del negativo*. Secondly, she does not only address women but also men. Despite the fact that she blames them for women’s suffering – ‘sono proprio gli uomini a spingerci nel pozzo. I figli pure sono uomini, e i fratelli, i padri; ed essi tutti con le loro parole, e più ancora con i loro silenzi, ci incoraggiano a cadere nel pozzo’ (De Céspedes 1993: 35-36) –, she hopes that men too will read Ginzburg’s words with interest and empathy. The opening of De Céspedes’s letter expresses this wish clearly: ‘ho pensato che gli uomini dovrebbero infine tentare di capire tutti i problemi delle donne’ (1993: 33). There is no presumptuousness in this wish which originates instead in the humble certainty that, by talking about women’s (mis)fortunes and their falls into the well of pain, Ginzburg reveals the secret of their compassion and strength: ‘perché ogni volta che cadiamo nel pozzo noi scendiamo alle più profonde radici del nostro essere umano’ (De Céspedes 1993: 33).

David Mezzacapa’s sophisticated and empathic translation suggests that he has taken on board De Céspedes’s advice and that he has made a real effort in valuing women’s fall into the realms of the abyss. The Italian translation’s linguistic sophistication and semantic approach to the original do not reveal particular discrepancies which alter the content. Modulations of epiphora into anaphora or

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\(^{21}\) At the time of the publication of the volume Ginzburg was dead (she died in 1991) while De Céspedes died in 1997. The correspondence between the two included in *Il pozzo segreto* is not dated.

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additions of polyptotons do not radically modify Kincaid's rhetoric. On the contrary, they reveal faithfulness and consistency in reproducing some key aesthetic aspects of the original text (even against well-established target cultural rules in essay writing), which are both ideologically and politically loaded. The magical strength and potential of negativity appear to be phenomenal in the Italian text. They challenge dual thinking and the Master-Slave logic presiding over colonial territories. Finally, they confer value and significance on the figure of the mother who, even if dead, exercises appeal and fascination over Xuela and, ultimately, the reader. In the next chapter, I will broach the postcolonial dimension of the text, to which I have only alluded during the course of this chapter, in relation to linguistic and bodily performativity and maternal loss, as brought to light by the comparison with the French translation.