Perhaps the best-known motif in the work of Giovanni Pascoli is that of the “nido,” the family nest as a site of refuge to be vigilantly protected and nostalgically mourned. Every nest, of course, has a mother who keeps it intact and cares for the offspring that inhabits it. Consequently, Pascoli’s deceased mother is a continual presence-absence in his writings; he celebrates her and laments her death with a rhythm that, at times, becomes the very lifeblood of his poetry.

Many critics have noted that maternal imagery imbued with death connotations is crucial to Pascoli’s poetics. Giorgio Bàrberi-Squarotti emphasizes the ubiquity of the maternal in the author’s work, and adds, “...discende da questa centralità del personaggio materno nel discorso pascoliano sul “nido” quell’affermazione più volte ripetuta di non amore della vita, di tentazione dell’annullamento...” (17). Similarly, Mario Pazzaglia observes that in Pascoli’s poetry, “una posizione centrale ha la madre...Essa diviene emblema della vita e della morte, proprio come datrice d’una vita che continuamente si cancella...e declina verso il nulla.” ² Citing one example, Pazzaglia remarks that “la madre che nella lirica I due fanciulli [in Primi Poemetti] va a sincerarsi, con la lampada in mano, che i due bimbi dormano rappacificati e sereni, è parificata, analogicamente, alla fine della lirica, con la Morte, anch’essa rappresentata con la lampada accesa” (N-79).³ Most significant is Pascoli’s own characterization, in the 1894 preface to Myricae, of nature as a “madre dolcissima, che anche nello spegnerci sembra che ci culli e addormenti.” ⁴

One manifestation of the death-bearing maternal in Pascoli’s production that remains to be illuminated fully is the poet’s unorthodox use of the figure of the Virgin Mary. In the poem “Ceppo,” first published in the fourth edition of Myricae (1897), and the critically neglected novella “Il ceppo” (1896), from the collection Befana e altri racconti, Pascoli casts a dark shadow upon a popular Tuscan legend in which the Madonna walks from house to house on Christmas Eve looking for a Yule fire at which to warm her newborn child.⁵ In both of Pascoli’s compositions, the joyous advent of the Madonna’s arrival is offset by a
tragedy in the homes she visits: the poem depicts the death of a mother as the holy pair appears, and the novella features the servant Marietta (a diminutive of the Virgin’s name), who secretly gives birth to her illegitimate child, buries him in the snow, and after seeing the Madonna tries unsuccessfully to recover him. These compositions reveal an uncanny\textsuperscript{6} coupling of motherhood and death in the most excessive terms. As Elizabeth Bronfen has shown, “The mother assumes the status of trope for death because she recalls the position anterior to life so immediately connected with her body” (32). If the Madonna, as universal mother, signifies a conquest over death by being a figure of wholeness and immortality,\textsuperscript{7} then Pascoli’s “Ceppo” and “Il ceppo” uncover the dark reality that the Virgin’s symbology tends to veil, namely, that of death as inevitably concomitant with the bringing forth of life.\textsuperscript{8}

This brings the reader’s attention to Pascoli’s notion of a “religion of mortality”, as expressed in his speech “L’era nuova,” delivered in December 1899 at Messina.\textsuperscript{9} In this discorso Pascoli declares that science’s only real benefit is that it has brought humanity into a head-on confrontation with the inexorableness of human mortality, by virtue of the fact that, whatever other potency scientific inquiry may possess, it cannot conquer death. He expounds, “La scienza ha ricondotto le nostre menti alla tristezza del momento tragico dell’uomo; del momento in cui, acquistando la coscienza d’essere mortale, differì istantaneamente dalla sua muta greggia che non sapeva di dover morire” (27).\textsuperscript{10} However, the poet claims, at some point this awareness of death’s preeminence was lost with the result that “l’uomo non temé di contristare il suo simile…perché non sentì più l’irreparabile” (127-8). Pascoli proposes that in order to undo this turn for the worse and to use the renewed affirmation of mortality provided by science to humanity’s advantage, poets must make of death’s invincibility a sort of spiritual precept: “Dovete riuscire voi, o poeti della nuova èra,” he intones, “E per questo fine voi dovete prendere l’infula e lo scettro di sacerdoti [… ]” (127). This religious reference is not haphazard, since Pascoli asserts that concepts of eternal life, such as those essential to Christian dogma, are perniciously comforting.\textsuperscript{11} He proposes a new “religion” of mortality: “E sarà dunque una religione… non… quella in cui il terrore dell’infinito sia o consolato o temperato… ma la religione prima e ultima, cioè il riconoscimento e la venerazione del nostro destino” (130). Pascoli reiterates the notion of a religion of death in contexts other than “L’era nuova”: for instance, in the 1903 preface to Canti di Castelvecchio, he
La religione della morte declares that “la vita senza il pensier della morte, senza, cioè, religione [...] è un delirio [...] o stolido o tragico” (Poesie, ed. Pazzaglia 233).

I have paused to consider these pronouncements because they elucidate Pascoli’s conjoining of death with the image of the Virgin Mary in the Yule log compositions. For it is she, above all, who is believed to temper the fear of the infinite; Marina Warner notes that “her greatest function in the Catholic scheme of salvation is to reprieve the suffering of sinners after death” (315-6). Moreover, in terms of Mary’s own death, Bronfen observes that “in her mythic Assumption Mary is reanimated immediately after her death and transferred to heaven in the company of angels [...] which completely circumvents the dissolution [...] of the body” (68). Pascoli’s call for a religion of mortality in “L’era nuova” coincides with the artistic choice to resist the Madonna’s traditionally consoling symbology by overriding it with the real misfortune and death of everyday persons, whose misery rings as the final truth of “Ceppo” and “Il ceppo.”

The poem “Ceppo” is the second in a cycle of five poems which, in the later editions of Myricae, are grouped under the rubric Creature. According to Mario Pazzaglia, these “creatures” are “madri e bimbi [...] che muoiono nella miseria e nell’abbandono, senza luce di provvidenzialità” (Poesie 61). The first stanza of “Ceppo” sets the scene at midnight on a snowy Christmas Eve; bells are heard ringing from the ‘pieve’ or rustic church; and then the serene vignette is disrupted by the smell of medicine in the domicile the Madonna enters. The meaning of this discomforting sensory cue is then revealed:

col vento, or s’avvicina, or s’allontana.
La Madonna, con una mano al cuore,
geme: Una mamma, figlio mio, che muore!
E piano piano, col suo bimbo fiso
nel ceppo, torna all’uscio, apre, s’avvia.
Il ceppo sbracia e crepita improvviso,
il bricco versa e sfrigola via via:
quel rantolo…è finito. O Maria stanca!
bianca tu passi tra la neve bianca.
Suona d’intorno il doppio dell’entrata:
voce velata, malata, sognata.

We never hear the mother’s voice, but only hear “about” it, particularly in the moment that both the voice and the poem expire. The liquid in the *bricco*, or carafe, which spills over sizzling and hissing upon the hearth seems to signal the mother’s death, in an example of what T. S. Eliot would call an objective correlative, that is, the displacement of the principal emotion of a work of art into an image that corresponds to it. In fact, the carafe, but not the dying mother, is visible to the reader, and to the Madonna, who demonstrates immediate comprehension of the somber event taking place in the house. In accordance with her believed supreme knowledge of earthly creatures and her role as *Mater Dolorosa*, the Virgin identifies the inarticulate sounds made by another anguished mother and attaches meaning to them. For, certainly, the *rantolo…fievole e…roco* falls into the category—identified by Giorgio Agamben in keeping with Gianfranco Contini’s analysis of Pascoli’s poetic language—of “la sola *vox* come insignificante volontà di significare” (10).

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory clarifies that it is this kind of vocalization, in which signification is willed but unclear, that the mother in her role as primordial Other interprets for the infant. Lacan uses the term “punctuation” to refer to this process of interpreting and establishing the meaning of speech and texts, asserting that it “can be plainly seen in the study of the manuscripts of symbolic writings, whether it is a question of the Bible or of the Chinese canonicals, that the absence of punctuation in them is a source of ambiguity. The punctuation, once inserted fixes the meaning [...]]” (98-9). Lacanian theorists Dylan Evans (119) and Charles Shepherdson (67-8) both emphasize that the mother initiates the child into the symbolic order by punctuating his speech and
thus introducing him to the realm of signification. In this schema, it is the child whose voice is punctuated, yet in Pascoli’s poem the dying mother assumes this position, and her child is missing.

A possible allusion to the child’s absence or death comes from examining the crucial placement of orthographic punctuation in the poem. Giuseppe Nava (*Myricae* 79) points out the tripartite cadence of many of the poem’s lines (for example, “È mezzanotte. Nevica. Alla pieve [...]” and “Un gran silenzio. Sono a messa? Bene,” which open the first and second octaves, respectively). Such a structure depends on the precise placement of punctuation marks; otherwise, the meaning of the lines would be ambiguous. In fact, it could change radically with the punctuation omitted, especially in the phrase “Una mamma, figlio mio, che muore!” Without the second comma, we would have instead the phrase “figlio mio che muore” (my dying son). Read in this way, without punctuation, the phrase becomes a cryptic allusion to the absence or killing off of the son—both the Christ child in the future Crucifixion, and, more subtly, the unnamed mother’s conspicuously absent child. However, just as the Madonna punctuates the mother’s cries by determining their meaning, so the poet punctuates the text of the poem and suppresses the annulment of the child, allowing it to be absorbed by the death of the mother. The autobiographical allusion to the poet’s own mother’s death that likely underlies the composition puts the poet in the position of the annulled child, which accords with Pascoli’s characterization of the poet-as-child in the essay “Il fanciullino.” Following this line of thinking, a reader discovers an affirmation of Bàrberi-Squarotti’s observation that in Pascoli, “la dichiarazione di autoannullamento è collegata costantemente con la presenza della madre...” (18)

Furthermore, the Madonna in this poem takes on the position of the symbolic mother in relation to the dying mother; she discerns and fixes the meaning of the unknown woman’s moans, determining from them both that she is a mother and that she is dying. In this light, one may say that the Madonna, as supreme mother, put the unnamed mother into the world, where she inevitably dies. A reader will recall Pazzaglia’s characterization of the Pascolian mother as the giver of a life that continually declines into nothingness. This observation, combined with the poet’s proposal of a religion of mortality in “L’era nuova,” makes it possible to view the Virgin Mary in this poem as a harbinger of death: not only does her arrival coincide with the mother’s expiration, but she
is also, in a sense, responsible for having brought this mother into a world of foreseeable mortality.

Indeed, the Madonna seems subtly to betoken the mother’s death in several ways. This is first indicated by her whiteness, emphasized in lines 3 and 22. The association of white with death in Pascoli’s poetry has been well noted by Giuseppe Nava, and in the composition under discussion, a reader discovers an uncanny duplicity in the hue’s valance. Whiteness seems to signal here, on the one hand, a sanctified atmosphere of purity and beginning (the freshness of the snow, the virgin birth, the stroke of midnight marking a new day), and, on the other hand, a subtly frightening tone of impending demise. This latter connotation is underscored in the phrase “fiso nel ceppo” (which refers to the gaze of the Christ child, fixed upon the glowing fire), in which Pazzaglia sees an allusion to “una fissità di destino” (Poesie 63). At the end of the poem, the mother’s disembodied voice mingles with sound of the “double” church bells, which, already ringing at the poem’s opening, continue ringing, in a way that is unchanging (or “fisso” like Christ’s gaze).

In this way, Pascoli emphasizes the inexorableness of mortal destiny and correspondingly highlights Mary’s earthly attributes: the Madonna here is not the ethereal being configured in the parable of the Assumption, but is instead a lowly attendant upon a death scene with no reference to an afterlife. She is said to be “stanca” or tired, like a mortal being, and is situated “below” the place where the mother dies: “ecco un suono, un rantolo che viene di su […]” This lowly placement, while contradicting popular envisagement of the Virgin as ethereal and transcendent, is canonical in the context of Mary’s function as Mater Dolorosa; thus Dante proclaims in his homage to St. Francis in Paradiso XI: “Maria rimase giuso, ella con Cristo pianse in su la croce” (69, ll. 71-2). By calling attention to Mary’s earthly mourning as she is holding the newborn Christ child, the poem establishes an understated nexus between the Nativity and the Crucifixion, birth and death. Along these lines, the poem subtly displaces the veneer of immortality contained in the Christian parable of the Assumption, thereby uncovering the conjunction of motherhood and annihilation, womb and tomb—‘nest’ and gravesite, one might say—which the parable refuses to acknowledge.

This convergence of motherhood and death in a sacred context may be further elucidated by considering, once again, Pascoli’s notion of a
religion of mortality. Elio Gioanola surmises that the agnostic Pascoli decided to employ Christian imagery in his poetry “perché ha sentito il cristianesimo come la religione della madre del nido.” Still, Pascoli is unable to go so far as to accept the dogma of eternal life that lies at the heart of Christian tradition. On this score, Fiorenza Weinapple, in her study of the figure of chiasmus in Pascoli’s lyric, finds that the shape of the cross thus repeatedly formed constitutes a sort of camposanto on the page; she notes, however, that “non [è] una croce che rimandi ad un aldilà, a un luogo oltre la morte: i morti per Pascoli sono sempre qui su questa terra [...]” (292). To synthesize, the poet sees Christianity as the “religione della madre” and he rejects the idea of an afterlife; he also constructs a mournful shrine to his mother’s death through his poetics and, in his prose, overtly proposes a religion of death. Following the logical implications of these elements of Pascolian poetics, one can say that, in poems such as “Ceppo”, the religion of the mother-nest and the religion of death become one.

If this conjunction is conjured somewhat subtly in the poem “Ceppo,” then the novella “Il ceppo” brings it out in more vigorous and alarming terms. Like the poem, the story is set in a small village on a snowy Christmas Eve. The characters first introduced are a couple preparing to go out for the evening’s festivities. They communicate a litany of orders to their servant, Marietta, their main demand being that she keep the Yule log burning in case the Madonna and holy child should arrive. As Marietta waits for the padroni to leave, she recites the Ave Maria fervently and repeatedly. Once the couple is out of sight, she rushes to her modest sleeping quarter and, alone in the dark, experiences an agonizing parturition:

…E poi tutte le sue membra misero un urlo disperato di spasimo. E non se ne udí niente: solo lo sgretolio dei denti e lo scricchiolio delle ossa. Le pupille sparirono…e dentro le occhiaie larghe comparve un biancore cieco: la bocca si aprí spalancata e il petto ansimando ne spingeva fuori degli oh! oh! senza voce, involti in sospiri…andò nello sgabuzzino dove era la sua branda…Era al buio. E sola...come una bestia. (35).

The fact that Marietta, or “little Maria,” gives birth alone in a shed, “like an animal,” on Christmas Eve, makes it possible to see Marietta’s story as a dark parody of the virgin birth. Despite the stated similarities between the two births, Marietta’s experience of motherhood is
distinct from Mary’s, first of all, by virtue of being so physically painful, since doctrinally, as the so-called “second Eve,” Mary is exempt from the curse of labor pains incurred by Eve’s primordial transgression. A second difference is that Marietta’s parturition is implicitly tinged with sexuality—a reader would assume that her child is the product of an illicit amorous relation rather than of parthenogenesis. Finally, perhaps the most remarkable element of the above passage is the deathly imagery surrounding Marietta’s labor: the grinding and creaking of teeth and bones are unmistakably skeletal in essence, the vanished eyes replaced by a blind whiteness reinforces this, and the voiceless silence against which these cues are set again alludes to expiration.

To be sure, Marietta’s voice, like that of the mother in “Ceppo,” is muffled and inarticulate, manifesting as “sospiri soffocati,” “un grido acutissimo,” “gemiti,” “pianti,” and only one recognizable word: “mamma.” It is as if Marietta assumes the position of the pre-verbal child whose speech must be interpreted by the symbolic mother and affirmed through a demonstrated comprehension of its meaning. However, neither her natural mother nor the Madonna is there and her voice remains an amorphous will toward signification. Indeed, a chain of thwarted signification underlies the entire episode: the Madonna arrives after Marietta’s muffled sighs have ceased, leaving Marietta’s voice trapped between meaning and empty sound; in turn, Marietta initially disregards the infant’s will to signify and interprets his voice only when it is too late.

The newborn’s voice is heard only once, as “una vocina fioca, un qualcosa di nuovo e di meraviglioso?” The interrogative form established here underlines the tenuous status of this voice. Marietta ignores its possible meanings (hunger, cold, fear, etc.) and proceeds to the snowy riverbank where she buries the child alive. As Agamben has pointed out, in “Il fanciullino” Pascoli characterizes the child primarily in terms of the voice. In the first paragraph of the essay, the poet says of the child: “Quando la nostra età è tuttavia tenera, egli confonde la sua voce con la nostra [...] Ma quindi noi [...] ingrossiamo e arrugginiamo la voce, ed egli fa sentire tuttavia e sempre il suo tinuilo squillo come di campanello” (25). Yet, in the novella under discussion, the child’s voice is abruptly silenced. Since the ‘fanciullino’ is a projection of the poet’s identity, and in this mother-centered work the child is annulled, one can reaffirm Bàrberi-Squarotti’s suggestion that Pascoli’s representations of the maternal coincide with some form of self-annulment.
Further, in the context of Pascoli’s poem “La tessitrice” (which, like the composition under discussion, features a death-bearing female figure), Agamben makes the following observation: “La tessitrice dice la verità che il fanciullino ancora teneva velata: che il fanciullino non c’è, che la voce infantile che detta la poesia è una voce morta…” (9).

In fact, it is only after the child’s voice has been silenced that Marietta assigns meaning to it. After burying the infant, she returns to the house and sees the Madonna and Christ Child approach the Yule fire. Suddenly Marietta recalls her baby’s cries and comprehends their significance: “Aveva freddo e io l’ho seppellito! Piangeva e io l’ho soffocato!” she exclaims (38). She runs outside, hoping to find her baby in time to save its life. The next morning a neighbor finds Marietta unconscious in the snow and discovers the dead infant nearby. The story ends with the infanticide trial two months later. The last words of the novella come from the nun suor Anna, who in remarking on Marietta’s tragedy says: “Dio…voi siete buono: fate la morire! Povera madre che ha dovuto uccidere la sua creatura!” (41, emphasis in original).

It is hard to imagine a more complete conflation of nativity and death than that constituted by infanticide. As shocking as the crime may seem to a contemporary reader, historically there appears to be a disconnect between official reaction to infanticide (generally harsh) and popular opinion surrounding it (often more sympathetic to the plight of the mother, who would face bitter penalties for openly bearing an illegitimate child).

In seeming sympathy with the popular view, in Pascoli’s novella Marietta is last seen in prison, unjustly so according to suor Anna’s declaration, which seems to inculpate the larger societal framework. This secular allusion, with its position as the final word of “Il ceppo,” returns the reader’s attention to the poet’s condemnation in “L’era nuova” of dogmas of immortality that, he believed, obliterated one’s sense of the “irreparable” consequences of social injustice.

Moreover, the idea of a religion of mortality is woven into the depiction of the jailed Marietta. She imagines warming the absent child (whom she calls Cecchino) and pretends to teach him nursery rhymes and catechisms: “Siccome nel carcere non c’è il fuoco, non c’è il ceppo di quercia, per riscaldarlo, essa sta accovacciata in un angolo con le ginocchia bene alzate, con le braccia bene unite, perché non patisca il freddo, nel grembo di mamma. E lo dondola pianamente…E gli insegna la devozione…Ma poi si ricorda. Cecchino non c’è più” (41). One is reminded of Gioanola’s assertion that Pascoli utilizes Christian motifs
because of their association with the mother-nest, as well as Bàrberi-Squarotti’s linking of the maternal with the poet’s impetus toward self-annulment. Marietta’s teaching of catechisms to her dead child is an exemplary illustration of these aspects of Pascolian poetics: the ordinarily vignette of a mother teaching prayers to her child becomes instead an occasion for underlining the death of the (poet)-son. In this way, a religion traditionally based in the notion of immortality serves instead as a religion of death, becoming a vehicle for expressing, as Agamben puts it, “che il fanciullino non c’è, che la voce infantile che detta la poesia è una voce morta…”

In conclusion, Pascoli’s two related Yule-log compositions feature folk legendry surrounding the Madonna used as a backdrop for macabre events that put the immanence of human suffering center stage, unmitigated by any promise of otherworldly reprieve. Revealing the concomitance of maternity and death that the Madonna’s symbology tends to veil, Pascoli makes an implicit gesture toward bringing his notion of a religion of mortality to the foreground: a gesture he believed to be the crucial mission of poets at the dawn of the twentieth century.

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ENDNOTES

1. See Giorgio Bàrberi-Squarotti: “L’immagine che ritorno più frequentemente entro la poesia familiare del Pascoli è quella della casa come «nido», caldo, chiuso, segreto, raccolto in una sua esistenza senza rapporti con l’esterno, ma brulicante di complici intimità…” [Simboli e strutture della poesia del Pascoli. (Messina-Firenze: G. D’Anna, 1966) 9]. Maria Rosa Truglio argues that the inside/outside dichotomy evoked by the Pascolian “nest” is ultimately untenable, since the nest and its contents are always suffused with an ambivalent emotional charge; they are comforting on the one hand, and threatening on the other, giving rise to what Truglio sees as the uncanny maternal as a central theme in Pascoli’s poetry [Beyond the Family Romance: The Uncanny Poetry of Giovanni Pascoli (Yale University, 2001) 5].


3. In addition, Fiorenza Weinapple discovers that in the poem “Orfano,” for example, “la culla dovrebbe essere il rifugio caldo e sicuro, che ci protegge maternamente, quasi sostituito dello spazio uterino, ma in questo caso, mentre
La religione della morte a una prima lettura sembrerebbe cullare il sonno del bambino... essa si apre per fare sprofondare nel giardino/cimitero, altro spazio uterino agognato e irraggiungibile al di là della morte” [“La «via crucis» del Pascoli.” Lingua e stile XXVIII, n. 2 (giugno 1993): 295]. See also Patrizio Rossi, who observes that, through a chain of increasingly regressive associations, the Pascolian “nidò” comes to represent the cradle and, finally, the womb. Rossi concludes that these images transport the reader into a “pre-existent” world in which life and death become indistinguishable from one another (“I fiori del male: Giovanni Pascoli.” Purdue University Conference on Romance Languages, 1992: 348).

5. Maria Pascoli reports, “La leggenda che la Madonna vada in quella notte a scaldare al ceppo delle case il suo Gesù, è molto diffusa in Toscana, e credo sia di tutto il mondo cristiano” (qtd. in Myricae, ed. Giuseppe Nava (Roma: Salerno, 1991) 78]. In his folkloric archives Giuseppe Pitrè, with co-author Gennaro Finamore, makes note of the belief as well: “Suonata l’avemmaria della vigilia [di Natale], il primo solenne atto della festa è di mettere al focolare il ceppo... perché «si ha da scaldare il Bambino» -; e non si smorza il lume” (Credenze, usi e costumi abruzzesi (Palermo: Clausen, 1890) 64]. In Giuseppe Nava’s analysis, this type of belief is considered under the category of folklore, since “il folklore non è costituito soltanto da documenti letterari (canti, proverbi, fiabe, novelle): ne fanno parte a pieno titolo anche le cosiddette tradizioni oggettive (superstizioni, credenze, usi e costumi, feste, spettacoli) (“Pascoli e il folklore.” Giornale storico della letteratura italiana, 1984: 527).

6. For a Freudian interpretation of the uncanny maternal in Pascoli, see Truglio, 67-97. Truglio examines the appearance of the poet’s mother in “La voce,” and the symbolic “good” and “bad” mothers in “La buona novella” and “L’Etèra.”

7. According to Julia Kristeva, Mary is conceived of as a figure immune to decay and the passing of time, so that the idea of her becomes a “paranoid fantasy of being excluded from time and death through the very flattering representation of Dormition [eternal sleep] or Assumption”; that is, the idea of Dormition or Assumption removes the notion of time and death from the system of the self [“Stabat Mater,” The Kristeva Reader (New York: Columbia U Press, 1986) 181]. Marina Warner notes the lack of historical records regarding Mary’s death: “there was no knowledge of her grave—no body to venerate, no relics to touch...the disappearance of Mary’s body...inspired the most fertile imaginings...For the symbol of purity itself could not rot in
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the grave” [All Alone of Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Knopf, 1976) 82].

8. Even the title word of the compositions, ceppo, may contain an oblique allusion to this concomitance of nativity and death. Fiorenza Weinapple proposes a play between the word ceppo, which stands metonymically for Natale and thus for birth, and cippo, or tombstone (F. Weinapple, personal interview. Rutgers University: Oct. 22, 2005). For the metonymical equation ceppo-Natale, see the Vocabolario della Crusca: “Ceppo, e pasqua di ceppo, dicesi familiarmente la Festa di Natale; dal costume antico di ardere nella vigilia di Natale un tronco di albero…” (760).


12. Although the belief in Mary’s Assumption is canonized in the writings of Church fathers such as Augustine and Thomas of Aquinas, there is no explicit reference to it in the Bible. It was not established as official dogma until Nov. 1, 1950, when Pope Pius XII declared it an article of faith in the apostolic constitution Munificentissimus Deus.

13. The last poem in the Creature section, “Abbandonato,” is related to “Ceppo”: it uses a popular meter (ottave siciliane) and features the Madonna attendant upon a death, this time of an abandoned child. Nava hints at sources for “Abbandonato” in Pitrè and the Brothers Grimm (“Folklore” 526); he is likely referring to the Tuscan novella “Il cito che va a cercare il paradiso” and the Grimm tale, “The Virgin Mary’s Child.” Pascoli wrote his own amalgamated adaptation of these stories, entitled “In Paradiso,” which is included in the volume Fior da fiore. In all of the tales I have mentioned here, the
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Madonna (or Jesus in the case of the Pitrè tale) takes poor children with her to heaven; it remains unclear whether this is a merciful action, since, on the one hand, the children's suffering is said to end, but the fact remains that the Virgin is responsible for taking their lives, and their mothers mourn the loss. In any case, in “Abbandonato” the Madonna appears aloof, as do the other holy personages presented; Giampaolo Borghello remarks that “la presenza del Santo, dell’Angelo e della Madonna, che intervengono uno dopo l’altro, quasi ritualmente, risulta esterna, sostanzialmente fredda, non riuscendo a scalfire o a modificare la tesa realtà dell’interno” [G. Pascoli, Myricae, ed. Giampaolo Borghello (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1996) 162 n3].

14. Eliot thusly defines the concept: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” [“Hamlet and His Problems,” Selected Essays, 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932) 124-5].

15. Privy to the beatific vision since the time of her Assumption, Mary is believed to have superior knowledge of mortal creatures, since “those enjoying the beatific vision see in it the events in the lives of those who in some way pertain to them. Since all are related to Mary, the spiritual mother of men, Mary’s knowledge of man is universal” [Mahoney, P. J. “Mary, Blessed Virgin, II. Knowledge of Mary,” The New Catholic Encyclopedia IX (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1967) 351].

16. Contini distinguishes both pre- and post- grammatical categories in Pascoli’s poetic idiom: “…se si tratta di linguaggio fono-simbolico, per esempio onomatopoea, abbiamo a che fare con un linguaggio pre-grammaticale…e ci sono eccezioni le quali si situano dopo la grammatica, perché, quando Pascoli estende il limite dell’italiano aggregando delle lingue speciali…che sono intessute di nomi propri, realmente ci troviamo in un luogo post-grammaticale” [“Il linguaggio di Pascoli,” Varianti e altra linguistica (Torino: Einaudi, 1970) 224]. Following in the footsteps of Contini’s study, Agamben preserves these categories and adds to them the notion of the “death” of language. For Agamben, Pascoli’s onomatopoetic (pre-grammatical) terms ‘die’ from pure sound into speech when they are placed in the text and, conversely, the technical and foreign words used by the poet (post-grammatical) ‘die’ from speech into pure sound [“Pascoli e il pensiero della voce,” Il fanciullino by G. Pascoli (Milano: Feltrinelli 1992) 13-17].


19. Maria Pascoli identifies in “Ceppo” an allusion to the death of the poet’s mother in December of 1868: “A noi fu sempre detto che la nostra madre morì la vigilia di Natale. Da ciò la poesia” (qtd. in Nava ed., *Myricae* 78). However, Nava suggests that this explanation “va accolta non senza cautela” because, for example, “la mamma del Pascoli morì il 18 dicembre 1868, e quindi non alla vigilia di Natale” (Ibid). In any case, a completely autobiographical reading is unnecessarily limiting. However, it seems clear that, as in so many of Pascoli’s works, the death of his mother is to some extent a motivation for this poem.


22. Weinapple’s analysis focuses on the poem “Orfano,” contained in the “Creature” section of *Myricae* along with “Ceppo.”

23. One might suppose the shocking nature of the novella to be the reason for the critical neglect in which it has remained; in 1938 Giuseppe Lesca declared, “La novella *[Il ceppo]* è tanto sconosciuta da non trovarsi neppure menzione negli ormai innumerevoli biografici, critici, e…simili, di Lui [del Pascoli]” [“Una novella del Pascoli,” *Convivium* XVI (1938): 121]. Virtually the same could be said of the almost seventy years since Lesca made this remark. Truglio mentions “Il ceppo” in passing is (7-8), and her reference to the novella and the lack of scholarship on it first brought it to my attention. Also, Giovanni Capecchi has edited an annotated edition of *La Befana e altri racconti* (Roma: Salerno, 1999). While Capecchi’s notes to “Il ceppo” are helpful in other regards, his interpretation largely ignores the central position of maternity in the story. Consequently, there is still a need for a detailed feminist reading of the novella that takes the specific symbolic valences of the Virgin Mary into account.
24. Capecchi identifies references to proper names that show the novel-la’s setting to be the town of Castelvecchio (106-8 passim).

25. Prompted by this identification of the husband as a poet, Capecchi undertakes an allegorical reading in which Ines is a stand-in for Pascoli’s recently married sister Ida, the author himself is projected into the character of Ines’ husband, and Marietta is a representation the author’s other sister, Maria. In this schema, Capecchi sees Pascoli yearning to recompose the family nest disrupted by Ida’s departure, putting himself incestuously in the place of her legitimate husband and treating ‘Mariuccia’ like a “serva trascurata” (11-12). While potentially fruitful, this analysis does not account for the specific images evoked: for instance, why the Virgin Mary? Why an infanticide? These and other questions remain inadequately treated. Also, Capecchi refers to “Il ceppo” as “la novella dell’uomo sterile…che…sogna la fecondità…” (11). Although Pascoli’s anxiety about the integrity and perpetuation of the family nest plays some role in virtually all his works, it is not clear why, in this case, Capecchi establishes an androcentric nucleus for a story in which female fecundity and childbirth are conspicuously central.

26. Truglio refers to Marietta as a “shadowy double of the Blessed Mother” and posits, “she is, perhaps, the Cursed Mother” (8).

27. Genesis 3.16 contains the curse imparted as punishment for Eve’s sin: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.” St. Thomas of Aquinas affirms Mary’s sinlessness and exemption from pain: “In her sanctification she was cleared of original sin; then, in the conception of the Son of God, she was entirely cleared of sin’s indisposition; and lastly, in her glorification she was liberated from every sort of suffering” (“Nam primo, in sua sanctificatione fuit liberata a culpa originali; secundo, in conceptione Filii Dei fuit totalitier mundata a fomite; tertio vero, in sua glorificatione fuit liberata etiam ab omni miseria”) [Summa Theologiae 51, ed. and trans. Thomas R. Heath (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969) 3a.27, 6. p. 28-9]. Aquinas also insists upon Mary’s virginity both in conceiving and in giving birth. On the first point he states, “We must confess without any qualifications that the mother of Christ was a virgin in conceiving” (“Dicendum quod simpliciter confitendum est matrem Christi virginem concepisse”) (3a.28, 1. p. 36-7); and on the second point, “That the mother of Christ was a virgin while giving birth is beyond all doubt” (Dicendum quod absque omni dubio asserendum est matrem Christi etiam in partu virginem fuisse”) (3a.28, 2. p. 42-3). J. W. Langlinais summarizes, “From the earliest times the Fathers defended her perpetual virginity…as evidence of her exemption from painful parturition, which is the punishment for sin” (J. W.
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28. A connection may be posited between this deathly imagery and the fact that, differently from Mary’s, Marietta’s pregnancy is implicitly the product of sexual relations. Kristeva notes that the main formula employed in early attempts to rationalize the Immaculate Conception postulate was “the intertwining of sexuality and death. Since they are mutually implicated with each other, one cannot avoid one without fleeing the other” (Kristeva 165-6). For example, in his treatise *On Virginity* John Chrysostom proclaimed, “where there is death there is also sexual copulation, and where there is no death there is no sexual copulation either” (qtd. in Kristeva 165-6). In short, just as the Assumption provides Mary with a preternatural relationship to death, her virginity in conceiving renders her pregnancy in preternatural terms.

29. Lesca comments on this closing line of the novella: “Pietosa Suor Anna, ma anche severa: chi colpisce quel suo «ha dovuto?». L’ignoto responsabile, o la legge non tutelatrice dell’abbandonata? Domande...gravi di non facile risposta, elementi però umani, sociali della novella d’un Pascoli pensatore vario e acuto, più di quel che si creda” (129-30). Conversely, Capecchi dismisses the nun’s indictment as an attempt by Pascoli to conceal the novella’s true allegorical import (see my note 21).

30. Tom Cheesman notes, “A large gulf yawns between the official view of infanticide, and the popular view—the view of working people with little formal education and wealth, and especially the view of many women who drew their own conclusions from the hazards of being female.” [The Shocking Ballad Picture Show: German Popular Literature and Cultural History (Oxford: Berg, 1994) 25].

31. There is a sizable body of eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature that “set out to defend infanticidal women as victims of sexual and moral double standards,” the episode of the character Gretchen in Goethe’s *Faust* being the most famous example (Cheesman 133). A careful reading discloses notable similarities between Gretchen and Marietta: both pray to the Madonna and then are seen languishing in jail in a state of terrified delusion, believing that their defunct infants are still with them. An example of a literary infanticide in the Italian tradition is found in Gabriele D’Annunzio’s novel *L’innocente* (1892); although in this case it is a father who occasions the death of the infant boy produced by his wife’s adulterous affair. The publication of D’Annunzio’s novel predates that of Pascoli’s novella by several years; I will leave the possibility of influence for a future study. However, it is worth noting that both infanticides take place in a snowy setting amid Christmas celebrations. Also, some lexicon frequent
in Pascoli’s lyric is conspicuous in D’Annunzio’s chapters treating of the infanticide: in D’Annunzio’s text the snow falls in “fiocchi lenti” (368), and the words fioco, rantolo and vagito are used again and again in rendering the dying infant’s voice. (See especially: “Il rantolo fioco di tratto in tratto cessava” (378); and “…il morente riapriva gli occhi…[e] metteva un vagito fioco” (379).) [Gabriele D’Annunzio, *L’innocente*, ed. Maria Teresa Giannelli. (Milano: Mondadori, 1969)].

**WORKS CITED**


