

Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women's Writing

edited by

Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi



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In copertina | *Cover image: Cover image by Franca Rovigatti, La Dura Madre, 2003 [Dura Mater]*

*To the women writers
discussed in this book,
To their female protagonists
– real even when fictional –
and to their narratives of trauma.*

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Trauma and Women Writers: A Transnational and Italian Perspective

Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi

PART ONE

Introduction: A Theoretical Framework on Trauma

Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi

I.1. Trauma, the spectre and history (*Tiziana de Rogatis*)

I.1.1. Deferred action and the traumatic forms of time

The word trauma is etymologically derived from the Greek word for «wound» or «injury» and its first use in a psychic key dates back to 1878 (van der Hart and Brown: 1990, 1691).¹ According to late nineteenth-century neurological scholars, the psycho-physical interweaving of trauma is based on the fact that an experience of extreme and vehement emotion can produce an injury, although not a physical one (Moskowitz et al: 2019, 15). Over the first few decades of the twentieth century, these emotions would quickly be related to three consistent and even tragic effects of modern reality and history on bodies and subjectivities: the «railway spine»,² the hysterical symptoms observed among women, and then the traumatic neurosis of soldiers who survived the First World War (Herman: 1992, 7-51).

¹ In 1878, the German neurologist Albert Eulenbuerg argued that the existing concept of «psychic shock» was better conceptualized as «psychic trauma» (VAN DER HART AND BROWN: 1990, 1691).

² A medico-legal formula used in England starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, to define the psychic trauma caused by accidents on the railways, a new transportation system emblematic of modernity. The monitoring of this trauma was initiated by an article that appeared in 1862 in “The Lancet”, the journal of the British Medical Association (LUCKHURST: 2008, 20-26).

From the very beginning, trauma is therefore named and studied as a «biopsychosocial injury related to a particular dynamic and historical configuration of brain, body and environment» (NIJENHUIS: 2015, 271).

Psychic trauma occurs when an event cannot be processed or integrated into the pre-existing functioning of the fabric of psychic, social and therefore linguistic life. Failure to integrate the memory generates removal and/or dissociation and, only later, a more or less severe and scattered series of symptoms, which cluster around three main areas: «hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction» (HERMAN: 1992, 35). Since the event is repressed or dissociated, it cannot be integrated into memory and language. Consequently, post-traumatic symptoms cannot be associated by the experiencer with either the single traumatic event, or the atmosphere in which such event occurs. As early as 1893, Breuer and Freud defined this lack of integration as «a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work» (BREUER AND FREUD: 1955, 6).

Over the following years, Freud would describe the trauma as a *Nachträglichkeit*: a «deferred action» (FREUD: 1990, 356), that continually returns forcing the individual or a community to constantly relive the countless symptoms and manifestations of that fear, helplessness, coercion, disorientation – through itself or through others. Trauma consists therefore of two different moments: the first is the «implantation of something coming from outside», whereas only after this can «the internal reviviscence of this memory» occur (LAPLANCHE: 2001, 1). Coined by The American Psychiatric Association in 1980, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) definitively highlights this nucleus of belated and dislocated temporalities that drive trauma. This «afterwardsness» (CAMPO: 2018, 23-33) – another translation of the Freudian term *Nachträglichkeit* – becomes the non-regulating principle of a human identity that is inherently posthumous to itself (CAMPO: 2019, 183).³

Its objective and subjective intensity projects the trauma outside linear temporal logic (LAUB: 1992, 69), thus grafting itself deeply within the timeless functioning of the unconscious. At a later and iterative stage, however, it resettles within the chronology as a deferred action, i.e. as progressive and «disruptive physical reactions in the present». Through the hormonal and nervous system, this «embodied expression of trauma» (VAN DER KOLK: 2014, 204, 184) exerts a fragmenting and

³ The references to Italian secondary sources have been translated into English by the translator of this essay.

disruptive effect upon the logical-causal parameters managed by the left hemisphere of the brain. The «traumatic memory» (VAN DER KOLK: 2014, 174-199) is therefore both timeless and diachronic, as it simultaneously positions itself outside and inside time, by moving without mediation from an extreme to an ordinary dimension.

This double dynamic frame engenders three paradigms, which also correspond to three specific qualities of traumatic representations.

1. As a matter of fact, the extreme objective and subjective intensity of the trauma, as well as its resulting initial escape from chronology, elicit a «multidirectional» quality of traumatic memory. According to this multidirectional perspective, the «contemporality» of trauma can be defined as a «filtered system» that «also simultaneously refilters the system through which it is percolating» (CONNOR: 1999, 31).
2. On the one hand, the «contemporality» may express itself in a «dynamic transfer that takes place between different places and times during the act of remembrance» (ROTHBERG: 2009, 11), whereas on the other hand it may overlap with the timeless dimension of classical and contemporary ritual performances, of liminal and initiatory passages (KARANIKI AND PANOUSI: 2020).
3. However, while the trauma is structurally «contemporal» (CONNOR: 1999, 31), it actually coincides with a belated event from a phenomenological perspective. Within the dynamics of the deferred action, «every event is in progress, as it is being achieved rather than already achieved» (CAMPO: 2019, 186): this results in a constant retrospective refraction of meaning. Nevertheless, still from this perspective of belatedness, since trauma is «fully evident only in connection with another place» (CARUTH: 1995, 8; LUCKHURST: 2008, 218), it generates a spatial, as well as a temporal dislocation.

I.1.2. Survivance, cryptonyms and postmemory

Not only do these intertwined dynamics of timelessness, diachrony and contemporality affect the perception of time, but also the very quality of the symptoms as well as the way these are narratively described, i.e. the traces of trauma imprinted in the body and mind.

Trauma cannot indeed express itself until it finds something that can represent it, something that will in any case reveal itself each time in partial, obscure forms and ways. During this temporal and cognitive shift between what has happened and what will then manifest itself,

trauma characterises itself as an allegorical device. The self perceives something that refers to something else, to what in itself will never be entirely communicable or reconstructible in its entirety, yet is only conceivable as being made up of fragments. From this perspective, the trace of trauma is a sign bordered by emptiness, a «lacuna»: «something remains, something that is not the thing, but a scrap of its resemblance» (DIDI-HUBERMAN: 2008b, 167). As a «footprint», the trace expresses an ambiguous «survivance»: «something that speaks to us both of contact (the foot sinking into the sand) and of loss (the absence of the foot in its impression; something that expresses both the contact of loss both the loss of contact» (DIDI-HUBERMAN: 2008a, 18).⁴

The imprint of trauma is an extension of the «unthought known» (BOLLAS: 1987): «the dispositional knowledge of the true self», «a knowledge which has obviously not been thought, even though it is 'there' already at work in the neonate who brings this knowledge with him as he perceives, organises, remembers and uses his object world» (BOLLAS: 1989, 9). Precisely because of this enigmatic bond with an invisible, yet extremely structuring architecture of the self, the imprints of trauma fall into the register of the uncanny. They are extraneous presences that somehow call for a remote intimacy: «[they are] familiar because they are known archaically, they are unknown because they dwell outside any representation» (CAMPO: 2019, 176).

The more or less incandescent, more or less uncanny traces of trauma are symptoms that are disconnected from their origin, removed or dissociated from it, self-powered and multiplied by their own repetition compulsion (FOSTER: 1996, 132). If the trace of trauma is that which returns in fragmented, lacunar, enigmatic, uncanny, but also persecutory, nagging forms, one that cannot be inscribed inside language and its logos, then the trace of trauma is a phantom. Indeed, according to Abraham and Torok, «the phantoms of folklore merely objectify a metaphor active within the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact within the love-object». From this perspective, «what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others» (ABRAHAM AND TOROK: 1995, 172, 171). At the core of what the two psychoanalysts argue for, dwells the idea of an elective space in

⁴ Translation from the original French, still unpublished in English. «Qui nous dit aussi bien le contact (le pied qui s'enfonce dans la sable) que la perte (l'absence du pied dans son empreinte); quelque chose qui nous dit aussi bien le contact de la perte que la perte de contact» (DIDI-HUBERMAN: 2008a, 18).

which the intergenerational traumatic and persecutory phantom finds itself: the crypt within the ego, «constructed only when the shameful secret is the love object's doing and when that object also functions for the object as an ego ideal». It is important to emphasise that the secret poorly buried in the crypt cannot be associated with the return of the repressed, but with the «incorporation», something much more archaic and less elaborated. «Incorporation» is openly connected to the Freudian metaphors of trauma as incorporated stranger (see I.1.1.): «it works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography» (ABRAHAM AND TOROK: 1995, 131, 11-115, 173). The processes leading to the burial of a given persecutory phantom can be defined through the linguistic repertoire of «*cryptonyms*»: «words that hide», «because of their allusion to a foreign and arcane meaning» (ABRAHAM AND TOROK: 1986, 18).

In the wake of Abraham and Torok, much research has used the tools of intergenerational trauma to narrate the traumatic and not explicitly verbalised legacy passed on by Jewish survivors of the Nazi camps and of the *Shoah* to their children, i.e. the second generations. Among this research, it is Hirsch's work, which is associated with her central category of «postmemory», that particularly stands out. It is a «structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience». The relationship between the «generation after», «those who came before» and their «personal, collective and cultural trauma» is embodied in experiences that the second generation «remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up» (HIRSCH: 2012, 5-6).

I.1.3. Hauntology and history

The intergenerational dynamics of the spectre places trauma within a historical framework, which in 1993 explicitly becomes the focus of Derrida's *Spectres de Marx*. Although deeply influenced by the research of Abraham and Torok, Derrida distances himself from their idea of an incorporation of the spectre to be healed by psychoanalytic therapy. Inside its positive spectrality, the revenant of Great History may be given value precisely because of its haunting temporality, which destabilises the neo-liberal ideological horizons of the late twentieth-century.

Derrida's «politico-logic of trauma» establishes the «hauntology»: «a logic of haunting» (DERRIDA: 1994, 121, 10), where in French *hantologie*

plays with and reverses the word *ontologie* and its absoluteness. The spectre at the heart of Derrida's interest concerns Marxism. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union – which ended in 1991 – and the eclipse of its geo-political power, Marxism was indeed hastily declared extinct. However, having been badly buried by the rhetoric of triumphant capitalism,⁵ it returns as «*revenant*» (specially preserved in this French variant in the English translation, literally «that which comes back»), spectre of «a mourning in fact and by right interminable» (DERRIDA: 1994, 121, 221). As a matter of fact, Marxism persistently and obsessively involves and proposes itself across the many blind spots of contemporary history, in the «wearing in expansion, in the growth itself, which is to say in the becoming worldwide of the world» (DERRIDA: 1994, 96).

The spectre of Marxism thus corresponds to an «anachrony», which manifests itself as «the disjointure in the very presence of the present», in «this sort of non-contemporaneity of present time with itself», in «this radical untimeliness» (DERRIDA: 1994, 27). As he retrieves Benjamin, with the latter's anti-historicist interpretation of historical materialism, Derrida argues for a «spectropolitique». From this perspective, the recurrent energy of this «*revenant*» unsettles the one-dimensional time of neoliberalism, thus questioning the latter's self-reliance and, consequently, its hegemony (DERRIDA: 1994, 2, 133). The revenant's «legacy» redirects the present towards the future: that which «can come only from that which has not yet arrived – from the *arrivant* itself» (DERRIDA: 1994, 247).

This «nagging memory» (DERRIDA: 1994, 222) is the engine of a traumatic and aporetic philosophy of History. It allows for projects that, starting from the trauma, know how to call on submerged subjectivities, communities that have fallen silent, obscured potentialities. These are the visions of the new millennium that also represent an alternative to those of Derrida's deconstructionism. Among them, as shown by the historical and literary pathway following the present introduction (see II.1.), stands out an «hauntology of feminism» (MUNFORD AND WATERS: 2014, 21), with its specific insertion into literary history and imagery, both reshaped by those Italian women writers whose narratives epitomize trauma and its transnational perspective.

⁵ Derrida particularly criticises the neoliberal teleology of Francis Fukuyama and his *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992 (DERRIDA: 1993, 64, 70-93).

I.1.4. Hauntology and spectral archives

In an attempt to further focus on this traumatic, contemporary philosophy of history, Derrida returns to hauntology and spectrality in his *Archive Fever* (*Mal d'archive*, 1995a). This time, they are both associated with the archive, a crucial emblem of individual and collective memory, as well as with the archive's intermittent capacity to elaborate «the disasters that mark the end of the millennium».⁶

According to Derrida, «the archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 12), thus manifesting a threefold profound vocation to self-cancellation in the very act of perpetuating itself. This threefold vocation is hereby explained.

First of all, in modern times, archives emerge as historical symbols of preservation, but also as legal and political emblems of omission. In fact, «there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 4n). From an etymological point of view, the archive is indeed «the *commencement*» and «the *commandment*», «*there* where authority, social order are exercised» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 1), because its goal is to exercise «a power on the document, on its detention, its retention or interpretation».⁷ As an institutional and political form, the archive potentially runs the risk of exhausting itself in the normative dimension of its etymon.

Secondly, even as an historical form of preservation, the archive risks losing the very thing it wishes to preserve. Being structurally «hypomnesic» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 11), it is based on memorization, repetition, reproduction, reimpression. However, when duplication, inventory and catalogue become actions performed for their own sake, the magmatic and singular force of the stored traces is extinguished, and amnesia takes over.

The third and final convergent movement of deactivation of the archive then derives from traumatic memory and its death drive. As stressed by Caruth (2013, 77), psychoanalysis and history share a similar drive towards the «archival figure». In history, like in traumatic memory, not only does the archive encompass events that

⁶ Translation by Caruth (2013, 76) from the original French of *Mal d'archive* (DERRIDA: 1995a), not included in the English translation. Here is the original text: «les désastres qui marquent cette fin de millénaire» (DERRIDA: 1995a, 1).

⁷ This page was not inserted in the English translation. Here is the version from the original French: «un pouvoir sur le document, sur sa détention, sa rétention ou son interprétation» (DERRIDA: 1995a, 1).

are useful to preserve their own memory; it also comprises events that, because they are so traumatic, are destroyed and/or destroy that very memory. According to Caruth, «these memories, in other words, in repeating and erasing did not *represent* but rather *enacted* history: they *made* history by also erasing it». The deferred action is «something that returns but also returns to erase its past, returns as something other than what one could ever recognize» (CARUTH: 2013, 78, 87). According to Laub, there is indeed a very strong link between «the death drive» and the erasure of knowledge: «not knowing is rather an active, persistent, violent refusal; an erasure, a destruction of form and of representation» (LAUB: 1991, 79).

However, whereas traumatic memory collaborates in the process of destroying the archive, the traces of trauma go in the opposite direction: they reactivate its deepest meaning. They are «a more archaic *imprint*», «an imprint that is singular each time» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 97): that «uniqueness of the printer-printed, of the impression and the imprint, of the pressure and its trace in the unique *instant* where they are not yet distinguished the one from the other» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 99). Such traces correspond to traumatic materials that are «dissimulated or destroyed, prohibited, diverted, repressed»⁸ stored inside «*archives of evil*» («archives du mal»),⁹ metaphorical and liminal vessels of historical truths in a latent state. The potential survival of traces as well as of their traumatic truth makes any archive a «*spectral*» one: «[t]he structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent «in the flesh», neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 84).

Once it is buried and silenced, the «spectral truth» is, as a matter of fact, a latent truth that manifests itself under specific and new circumstances affecting both the individual and the historical spheres: it is a creative hauntology that is able to retrieve what the «material truth», stored in the hypomnesic archive, may have deactivated or repressed (DERRIDA: 1995b, 87).¹⁰

⁸ Translation by Caruth (2013, 76) from the original French version of *Mal d'archive* (DERRIDA: 1995a), not included in the English translation. Here follows the original text: «dissimulées ou détruites, interdites, détournées, 'refoulées'» (DERRIDA: 1995a, 1).

⁹ Translation by Caruth (2013, 76) from the original French version of *Mal d'archive* (DERRIDA: 1995a, 1), not included in the English translation.

¹⁰ Derrida's distinction between these two forms of truths refers to the Freudian distinction between «historical truth» and «material truth», explained in *Moses and Monotheism*.

The «*archives du mal*» are a latency that matures and manifests itself through the «*mal d'archive*» («archive fever»; DERRIDA: 1995b, 12, 91): «a symptom, a suffering, a passion».¹¹ The *mal d'archive* manifests itself in two tendencies that are opposite and complementary: demarcation and dispersion. If, on the one hand, hypomnesic archives express the first tendency to demarcation, thus cataloguing, duplicating and ultimately locking up the traces inside some technological supporting device, on the other hand the archives of evil comply with the second tendency, the one to dispersion, because they bring to light and disseminate traumatic traces. When the two tendencies complement and alternate, the *mal d'archive* potentially inserts the «spectral truth» of the *archives du mal* within the «material truth» of hypomnesic archives, thus forcing the latter to perform continuous adjustments and reformulations.

Such insertion ensures the «politics of archive», i.e. «the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 4n): a true, actual validation of the institutional powers, as well as of the democratic reserves of a political system. Collective memory is thus based on a dual regime encompassing the two kinds of archives: the hypomnesic ones, and the *archives du mal* (archives of evil). Only with the grafting between the first and the second archive, between the institution positioned on the surface and the underground and/or obliterated traces, can collective memory be granted a continuous renewal of its own significance, as well as of its own aggregating power.

I.1.5. Cultural trauma and modernity

A philosophy of history and a historiographical method that want to intercept and include the spectral truth will therefore have to be rethought by grafting the two complementary tendencies of the *mal d'archive*. However, the grafting between the two archives is still a very precarious achievement of historical paradigms. In this sense, the reconstructions of some historical junctures of trauma proposed by Herman, van der Kolk and Alexander are extremely enlightening, though they adopt methods and perspectives that may differ much from each other. The contributions by Herman and van der Kolk – both

¹¹ This page was not inserted in the English translation. Here is the version from the original French: «un symptôme, un souffrance, une passion» (DERRIDA: 1995a, 3).

originated in a clinical setting, and informed by decades of therapy and exchanges with patients – converge in the reconstruction of four great «archives of evil»: late nineteenth-century female hysteria, the neuroses of the First World War and the American War in Vietnam, and the violence against women problematized during the 1970s thanks to the Women's Liberation Movements. According to Herman (1992, 7), these four traumatic phases constitute a «forgotten history» of «episodic amnesia»: a collective multiplication of individual traumatic memory and its destructive processes. This «forgotten history» cyclically breaks out and withdraws itself from the scene of the world, according to a viral dynamic of surfacing and disappearance ultimately reaching the social practice of «backlash [...] against acknowledging the reality of trauma» (VAN DER KOLK: 2014, 188). On the one hand, Herman stresses that «repeatedly in the past century similar lines of inquiry have been taken up and abruptly abandoned, only to be rediscovered much later» (1992, 8). On the other hand, van der Kolk argues that the collective removal of the traumatic neuroses experienced by the German soldiers who survived the First World War has been an important contributing factor to the rise of Nazism (2014, 185-186). In this way, the psychiatrist has implicitly pinpointed the spectrality of an absence of recognition that subsequently triggered the occurrence of a historical catastrophe.

From a sociological perspective, Alexander rather insisted on the resoundingly posthumous construction of the historical trauma of the *Shoah*. The latter stands out as an exemplary case of «cultural trauma»: a recognition that takes place only when «social groups, national societies, and sometimes entire civilizations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but may also take on board some significant responsibility for it». Once identified as a violence suffered by a specific social group, only since the Sixties has the *Shoah* actually turned into a «generalized symbol of human suffering and moral evil» (ALEXANDER: 2012, 6, 31). Prior to this recognition, to which the Israeli trial of Eichmann in 1961 made a significant contribution, for more than two decades the persecution and extermination of the Jews had been considered secondary components of a larger historical picture. Moreover, over the years immediately following the Second World War, individual survivors were often conformed «as a mess, a petrified, degrading and smelly one», in a manner that depersonalized their humanity, already deeply anonymized by their experiences in the lagers (ALEXANDER: 2012, 34).

The grafting between the two archives thus assumes «an interpretative grid through which all ‘facts’ about trauma are mediated, emotionally, cognitively, and morally» (ALEXANDER: 2012, 34, 35). The variability of these grids depends first of all on the mobility and heterogeneity of collective memories generated by different national cultures (LANDSBERG: 2004, 3). However, the national variability of collective memories is also balanced by their potential transnational homogeneity, which is produced by visual and medial languages and by their strongly empathic power. The translation of trauma into images (see I.2.4.) and/or into a cinematic narrative can thus create a «prosthetic memory»: a repertoire of «implanted» and «sensuous memories produced by an *experience* of mass-mediated representations» (LANDSBERG: 2004, 20).

Another factor of variability in the codification of cultural trauma lies in the fact that it is «responsive to and constitutive of modernity» (MICALE AND LERNER: 2001, 10). As I have in fact already highlighted at the beginning of this introduction, the word trauma underwent a shift from the physical to the psychical only in the nineteenth century and it is therefore deeply connected to the shock of modernity. This traumatic dimension is indeed marked by two revolutions, discontinuities and «disembedding»: «the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local context of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space» (GIDDENS: 1990, 21). This last part of human history «have been disproportionately marked by experiences destructive of individual and collective selfhood» (MICALE AND LERNER: 2001, 26). To reconstruct the history of modernity therefore means to a large extent to recreate the history of certain major traumas that spill over from their national spheres into colonial, postcolonial and transnational dimensions. However, since the very status of modernity is still extremely open and debated, this epistemological uncertainty also affects the position of trauma within the historical consciousness of modernity and contemporaneity.

I.1.6. Insidious trauma

Both the macro-traumas or cultural traumas associated with the great historical frameworks – civil wars, ethnic cleansing, genocides, colonial and postcolonial destruction of cultural communities, world wars, war rapes, pandemics, nuclear and ecological catastrophes –, as well as the

micro-traumas, hidden and camouflaged in the folds of ordinary life, brood in a latent state inside the archives of evil.

Micro-trauma has its origins in the traumatic primacy of social events that also includes less extreme negative relational experiences. Psychoanalytic, psychiatric and neuro-cognitive studies converge on the fact that, for instance, «emotional losses», such as «the ending of an important relationship or the loss of one's home» (MOSKOWITZ ET AL.: 2019, 17) may possess a considerable traumatic potential. More generally, the «events that are not literally life-threatening but which include loss and betrayal by an important attachment person also increase the risk of traumatization» (MOSKOWITZ ET AL.: 2019, 15).

Thanks to the category of the «insidious trauma», elaborated from a feminist perspective, this large area of relational micro-trauma has more adequately been examined. Trauma is «insidious» when related to «traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit» (ROOT, in BROWN: 1995, 107). It is an inclusive category because it reconsiders «how our images of trauma have been narrow and constructed within the experiences and realities of dominant groups in cultures» (BROWN: 1995, 102). From a phenomenological point of view, the insidious trauma is grafted onto cumulative dynamics, namely those fractures that occur «silently and invisibly over the course of development [...], gradually get embedded in the specific traits of a character structure [...] and achieve the value of trauma only cumulatively and in retrospect» (KAHN: 1974, 47). Since, «as a rule, insidious trauma's effects are cumulative and directed towards a community of people» (ROOT: 1992, 240), they also express a gendered, sociopolitical and intergenerational quality of suffering. The dynamics of the «insidious trauma» actually extends from the individual person to a historical network of individuals, materially connected by an ethnic, racial or gender affiliation, and/or by a history of marginality and discrimination:

Insidious trauma is usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power, for example gender, colour, sexual orientation, physical ability (Root: 1992, 240).

As Craps (2013, 2) underlined, the cross-cultural and postcolonial perspective is therefore seminal in order to deuniversalize the category

of trauma, and to broaden the visibility of traumatized subjects as non-Western others. From the totality of these perspectives, macro-trauma and micro-trauma are historically intertwined.

Both in clinical reconnaissance and in the imagination, their interdependence also destabilizes the binary system that opposes public and private spheres, external world and inwardness, male and female dimensions. For instance, from a clinical point of view there is a strong convergence between the symptoms shown by raped women and those manifested by Vietnam War veterans. These two very different traumatic typologies are actually connected by a pathological analogy, which refers to a gendered contamination of trauma (HERMAN: 1992, 31-32). Another typical instance of the complementarity of trauma lies in the two original nuclei of its emergence throughout modernity (see I.1.5.). The intimate world dramatized by hysterical women at the end of the Nineteenth century and the overexposed world of First World War trenches are actually complementary. As soon as hysterical pathologies enact patriarchal violence, the historically introflexed and hyper-subjective achrony of female destinies becomes entangled in the gears of modern history. At the opposite pole, the traumatic neuroses of the veterans transmit the unconscious time of the War, a time that is apparently solely extroverted and hyper-objective. Such complementarity also coincides with a short circuit, since «hysteria is the combat neurosis of the sex war» (HERMAN: 1992, 32).

The intersectionality of the «insidious trauma», along with the entanglement of macro-trauma and micro-trauma, are pivotal elements in order to avoid the infinite dilution of trauma, and to distinguish between «loss» as historical phenomenon and «absence» as a transhistorical form of lack (LACAPRA: 2001, 64). Indeed, an event becomes traumatic depending on the overall contemporary and intergenerational historical framework, the psychic structure and the economic, social and cultural conditions of each individual. Therefore, not everything produces a trauma in everyone's lives.

Then again, the intersectionality of «insidious trauma» and the interweaving of macro-trauma and micro-trauma are also crucial to question the flattening of trauma to merely external and exceptional data. In the five editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) between 1952 and 2013, the definition of psychic trauma has been continuously and necessarily varying, precisely

because the two poles – subjective and objective, psychic and social – incessantly change their focalization. However, in the context of this significant and necessary transformation, the presence of subjective data (the «emotional response») appears reduced over the last decade, as much as there seems to be a decreased tendency to identify the trauma as an incontrovertibly and exceptionally violent event (Moskowitz et al.: 2019, 16-17). According to the fifth and latest edition of the DSM, dating from 2013, only the following occurrences fall into the category of trauma: «actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence», whether these are experienced or witnessed (APA: 2013, 271). This current neo-positivist tendency of the DSM consequently risks obscuring the majority and socially relevant share of «insidious trauma».

[Translation by Serena Todesco]

I.2. Towards a new aesthetics of trauma (*Katrin Wehling-Giorgi*)

The above focus on the trauma of history and the latency of trauma at the macro and micro scales of experience (see I.1.6.) establishes the extensive scope of trauma in its socio-political, gendered and intergenerational reach. Trauma studies as a whole is in fact increasingly moving towards a more broadly conceived, pluralistic conceptualization that acknowledges the centrality of trauma in a number of evolving interdisciplinary and interconnected discourses. But let us for a moment go back to its genealogical beginnings to trace the evolution of trauma studies from the punctual model of the 1990s to the latest developments that seek to move beyond the aporetic paradigm of trauma. As we shall see, pluralistic conceptualizations of trauma that explore new potentialities of expression provide a productive interpretive lens to the case studies presented in this volume, providing fresh critical perspectives on female-authored trauma narratives in the Italian literary tradition of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

I.2.1. From a punctual to a pluralistic notion of trauma

Spearheaded by Caruth's fundamental work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) that is modelled on a

psychoanalytical framework and the Freudian notion of non-linear, deferred temporality (*Nachträglichkeit*) of trauma (see I.1.1.), the first generation of theorists from the 1990s has prevalently defined trauma as a singular or punctual event that overwhelms the individual's psychic defences. Due to its blunt emotional impact, according to Caruth, trauma is not only «never fully experienced as it occurred» (CARUTH: 1995, 151), but it furthermore «cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge» (153). Therefore, the traumatic event is not registered in our memory according to conventional spatio-temporal coordinates; instead, trauma emerges as a representational *aporia*, an irresolvable paradox that makes trauma unrepresentable.

The experience of the Holocaust has been foundational for trauma studies (KURTZ: 2018; HUNTER: 2018), and it features heavily not only in Caruth's work, but also in the work of other pioneering theorists who have constructed their notions of trauma on the aporetic paradigm. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's seminal work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), similarly rooted in deconstructionist principles and informed by psychoanalysis, forms a fundamental part of the first generation of trauma theory. The focus on the encounter with the «*strangeness*» and unfamiliarity of trauma and testimony in their work (FELMAN AND LAUB: 1992, 7) similarly emphasizes the difficulties of grasping, or representing, this phenomenon. Other thinkers who read trauma through the lens of unrepresentability include Michael S. Roth, who theorizes trauma as a negative utopia of the twentieth and twenty-first century in its designation of «phenomena that cannot be properly represented, but [are] characterized by radical intensity» (ROTH: 2011, 90). The historian Dominick LaCapra, on the other hand, draws on the parallel between trauma and the sublime, in which «the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy» (LACAPRA: 2001, 23).

In its insistence on anti-representational abstraction or voids (LUCKHURST: 2016, 27) and ellipses that emerge from the focus on the unrepresentable, trauma finds specific ways of expression in the textual form, as for instance in the disarticulation of narrative linearity, or in the gaps, lapsus and ellipses that characterize some texts. In fact, trauma theory has always borne a specific affinity with the literary genre in its attempts to conceptualize and translate an essentially unfathomable reality. To the first generation of trauma theorists, the aesthetics of trauma seemed to be specifically congenial

to the poststructuralist paradigm and the deconstructionist ethos that undergirds it. In the literary field, in fact, «trauma fiction emerges out of postmodernist fiction and shares its tendency to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit» (WHITEHEAD: 2004, 82), borrowing postmodern fiction's self-conscious deployment of stylistic devices as modes of reflection or critique. The first wave of trauma theory emphasizes the centrality of the three tropes of absence, indirection and repetition (PEDERSON: 2018, 101). The collapse of temporality and chronology, as well as structural repetition and indirection in fact «mimick [...] [trauma's] forms and symptoms» (WHITEHEAD: 2004, 3). In its exploration of modes of referentiality, fiction can present a significant opportunity to think through the hiatuses and dislocations that convey the distorting impact of trauma (WHITEHEAD: 2004, 5). This holds true for both individuals and collectives: since cultural traumas often displace the established foundations of collective identity (EYERMAN: 2019, 5), literature and the arts are particularly well suited to re-narrate the myths and beliefs which ground that collective.

Whilst acknowledging the enormous debt to the aporetic and overwhelmingly poststructuralist model of trauma in the 1990s, more recent scholarship on trauma has taken issue with some of its basic tenets. One of the central points of criticism is its problematic emergence in the culturally specific context of twentieth-century, industrialized Western Europe (as we can see in the initial emphasis on railway spine and industrial warfare, as well as the emergence of scholarship and trauma from an engagement with Holocaust testimony; see also I.1.6.), thereby largely ignoring other non-Western or minority cultures whose collective or individual experience of trauma lies outside the coordinates and cultural backdrop outlined by the first generation of trauma studies (CARUTH: 1995; 1996; FELMAN AND LAUB: 1992). In fact, Caruth's interpretation of trauma as aporetic and unrepresentable fails to take into account the historical and material specificity that embeds us in a culturally, temporally and materially specific context, running the risk of «depoliticiz[ing] and universaliz[ing] traumatic experiences» (RODI-RISBERG: 2018, 110). Furthermore, Caruth's aporetic model of trauma inheres a series of paradoxes relating to memory, temporality and representation that have come under close scrutiny in recent years. Firstly, it holds that a violent event is experienced yet remains essentially unknown (CARUTH: 1996, 91-92). Secondly, the traumatic event can only be understood as traumatic after the

event, as theorized in the necessary belatedness of trauma. These two elements result in what is effectively a representational impasse that has been challenged by recent work in trauma studies which tends to foreground the potentialities of traumatic representation and the agency of the traumatized instead, as we will further explore below. Recent research in the medical profession has also highlighted the need for – and the effectiveness of – narratives to articulate and communicate the patient’s pathology. The newly conceptualized notion of «narrative medicine» in fact calls for a new, empathic frame of healthcare in which the medical practitioner adopts the «narrative skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness» (CHARON: 2006, 4; see also CALABRESE: 2020).

The critiques of the first wave of trauma theorists reflect the wider cultural dissatisfaction with textualist, discursive models of culture, with a definitive conceptual shift in the new millennium towards the interlacement between the material and the discursive with new materialism and ecocriticism (BARAD: 2007; IOVINO AND OPPERMAN: 2012). In the cultural-artistic sphere, this is mirrored in a similar shift from the notion of «reality as an effect of representation» or *simulacrum* to a «return of the real» or renewed engagement with the «real thing», as compellingly argued by Foster (FOSTER: 1996, 146, 165).

I.2.2. Towards a pluralistic model of trauma theory

Trauma is increasingly viewed as a defining paradigm of our age (KURTZ: 2018, 1), an all-encompassing model of experience that has become one of the «signal concepts of our time» (LEYS: 2000, 10). The understanding of such a complex notion continues to evolve in a broad range of disciplines that benefit from the insights of trauma studies. In fact, since its inception in the 1990s, trauma has come to be seen as «an exemplary conceptual knot» or a Latourian «tangled object» that has no disciplinary boundaries. As it bridges the mental and the physical, the individual and the collective, the human and the non-human, it provides a productive lens to explore a number of fields including science, law, technology, capitalism, politics and medicine (LUCKHURST: 2008, 14-15), as well as for instance the global scenario of climate change, conceptualised as a site of «knotted and mutually dependent forms of violence» (ROTHBERG: 2014, xv; NIXON: 2009). Trauma cannot be limited to a single disciplinary discourse, and recent developments in the field

have stressed how psychic suffering is necessarily «tangled up» with an array of larger problems of modernity (ROTHBERG: 2014, xi). The capacious nature of the literary field provides an important discursive platform to this new paradigm of our contemporary age, with trauma studies providing a «repertoire of *compelling stories* about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood» that have come to shape Western cultural life and beyond (LUCKHURST: 2008, 80, emphasis mine).

The latest research in trauma studies stresses that the disciplinary field needs recalibrating, not least in the geographical and geocultural dimension (ROTHBERG: 2014; CRAPS: 2013), to overcome the Eurocentric and essentially monocultural origins of its inception in the West. In fact, as specified above, trauma theory emerges from the interlocking areas of «law, psychiatry and industrialised warfare» (LUCKHURST: 2008, 19) that are deeply rooted in a Western European cultural and socio-historical context, hence rendering a transnational opening of trauma theory even more urgent. Akin to Rothberg's seminal notion of multidirectional memory, the hybrid assemblages and conceptual knots that constitute new conceptualizations of trauma are moving towards a dislodgement from exclusive versions of cultural identity, responding to the «dynamic transfers» and exchanges between «diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites» (2009, 11) instead.

Recent work in trauma studies has focused on further exploring areas of the above mentioned «conceptual knots» in which trauma is implicated, with scholars investigating the varied and capacious intersections and tensions between the latter that make trauma «such a powerful force» (BUELENS, DURRANT AND EAGLESTONE: 2014, 1). These have included finding ways of rethinking contemporary phenomena like displacement (HRON: 2008), the postcolonial (CRAPS: 2013; YUSIN: 2008; WHITEHEAD: 2004), climate change (NIXON: 2009; CRAPS: 2020) and feminism (GRIFFITHS: 2018), to name just a few, through the lens of trauma studies. In fact, an increasing number of scholars embrace a pluralistic model of trauma (BALAEV: 2012; BUELENS AND CRAPS: 2008; GIBBS: 2014; LUCKHURST: 2008) that refuses ethnocentric and depoliticized discourses of dominance (RODI-RISBERG: 2018, 122) whilst arguing for a new theory that accepts the multiple contextual factors of trauma and acknowledges its status as a lived experience that is «multiply configured» yet representable. According to Balaev, trauma's meaning is «locatable rather than permanently lost» (BALAEV: 2012, 8). Situated within a larger conceptual framework of social

psychology and neurobiological theories, trauma can be identified to a greater or lesser degree with reference to the larger social, political and economic practices that influence violence. Trauma is hence subject to a variety of individual and cultural factors and, importantly, it can be told: it is no «singular, silent ghost» (BALAEV: 2012, 5). In a specifically postcolonial context, Craps' study of the relevance of trauma studies suggests a «supplementary model of trauma which [...] can account for and respond to collective, ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence» by enabling a «relational understanding of trauma» that provides a more flexible, context-specific way of theorizing the suffering of others. Craps and Buelens further establish a compelling link between postcolonial and insidious trauma, building on the seminal work by feminist psychologists Root and Brown (see I.1.6.), arguing that «the chronic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for» (BUELENS AND CRAPS: 2008, 3-4).

I.2.3. Potentialities of traumatic expression

In recent years, scholars of trauma theory have revised and rethought the original aesthetics of trauma to come up with further explorations of what was deemed an expressive impasse, a representational aporia. Literature remains one place where trauma can productively be represented and examined, and it continues to be a privileged site for the exploration of the multiply entangled knot of the traumatized subject. One scholar who suggests a productive shift from first generation trauma aesthetics to new *narrative possibilities* is Roger Luckhurst:

rather than privileging narrative rupture as the only proper mark of a trauma aesthetic, if the focus is moved to consider narrative *possibility*, the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma in narrative, this opens up the different kinds of cultural work that trauma narratives undertake (LUCKHURST: 2008, 89; see also RODI-RISBERG: 2018, 122-123).

While by no means exhaustive, techniques that allow a productive narrative exploration of trauma include not only the negotiations of the body as a potent focalizer of trauma, as explored in some of the contributions to this volume and further discussed in part 2 of this

introduction, but also tropes that transcend the conventional spatio-temporal coordinates of fiction like magical realism (ARVA: 2008) and post-memory (HIRSCH: 2012), for instance.

Magical realism has a long history of recording the memory of the oppressed – as for instance in Toni Morrison's seminal literary documentation of the traumatic history of slavery, but also in relevant Italian authors like Anna Maria Ortese's portrayal of a Southern Mediterranean imaginary, or indeed in the fantastical imagery of Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet (DE ROGATIS: 2021; WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021) – and in recent years scholars have started highlighting its significant parallels with trauma (see DI IORI SANDÍN AND PEREZ: 2013; ARVA: 2008) and the global novel (DE ROGATIS: 2021). The traumatized subject and magical realism indeed share the same ontological foundations as they address a reality that is often considered as escaping witnessing. Just as magical realism expands the natural boundaries of reality by enhancing its «black holes [...] and inaccessible spaces» (ARVA: 2008, 69), fantastical voices and spaces in fiction serve to open up a new dimension that cannot be apprehended by realistic forms of representation. Drawing upon «cultural systems that are no less 'real' than those upon which traditional literary realism draws» – including myths, legends, rituals, and obsolete collective practices (ZAMORA AND FARIS: 2006, 4) – magical realism can expand the conventional boundaries of the realist mode to represent what was formerly conceived of as unrepresentable. The representation of the lived experience of traumatized subjectivity, according to Luckhurst, «requires fantastical tropes, exploded time schemes and impossible causations» (2008, 97). As Di Iorio Sandín argues, the magical realist code becomes especially productive for «the imaginaries of the formerly enslaved [...] the colonized, and anyone who has experienced psychic trauma» (DI IORI SANDÍN AND PEREZ: 2013, 25).

Post-memory (see also I.1.2.), on the other hand, provides another potent trope of traumatic expression relating to relationship that the «"generation after" bears to the collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before» (HIRSCH: 2012, 5). Hirsch's seminal study departs from the culturally specific study of the Holocaust and her family connections to define a new paradigm of traumatic expression that has been enormously influential. What is particularly interesting in this phenomenon are the 'stories' and 'images' that mediate this passage of memory. Hirsch in fact postulates the positive representation of trauma

through postmemory in the contemplation of photographs, which inhere a unique iconic and symbolic power in the transgenerational transmission of memory (HIRSCH: 1997, 107-108): photographs thereby assume a privileged status as a «medium» (HIRSCH: 2001, 13) or «agent» of postmemory, giving «narrative shape to the surviving fragments of an irretrievable past» (HIRSCH: 1997, 248). Similarly arguing against the negative aesthetics and the unrepresentability of trauma, Didi-Huberman provides an impassioned defence of the potentiality of photographs and images to provide access to a portion of truth (and horror) in his seminal work *Images in Spite of All*, with what he terms the «lacuna image» (see I.1.2.) providing oblique testimony to a disappearance while simultaneously resisting it (DIDI-HUBERMAN: 2008b, 167).

I.2.4. Picturing trauma

It is undeniable that visual images play a key role in bearing witness to historical and personal trauma (KURTZ: 2008; KRUGER: 2008). In its unique claim to an indexical reference or «trace» (HIRSCH: 2001, 14-15),¹² photography in particular continues to play a central role in the transgenerational transmission of testimony and trauma.¹³ This is all the more relevant in the current age of spectacle (DÉBORD: 1967, see also CAVARERO: 2007) in which traumatic images (and their potential to create a transnational ‘homogeneity’, see I.1.5.) can be reproduced and circulated instantaneously and globally. Reflections on the reproducibility of the image were of course already central to Walter Benjamin’s seminal reflections in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), with a specific focus on the unrepresentable dimension of images in the notion of the «optical unconscious» (BENJAMIN: 1931, 512). Similarly, Barthes’ *punctum*, a central element in his study on photography that denominates what lies beyond the frame (a «blind field» on an otherwise «motionless image»; BARTHES: 1993, 57) can be productively linked to the notion of traumatic experience.

It is only in the 1990s, though, that scholars are beginning to systematically investigate the *structural* links between the image and

¹² See also Barthes’ discussion on indexical reference and the notion of «that-has-been» («ça a été»; BARTHES: 1980, 77).

¹³ See LUCKHURST: 2008, 149-150, for a discussion of the potential problems arising from the notion of the photographic index, especially in the digital age.

trauma. Art historian Hal Foster, for instance, suggests a powerful new reading of the distressingly graphic images in Andy Warhol's *Death in America* series through the interpretive key of «traumatic realism». He argues that Warhol's repetitive images mimic the multiple iterations of trauma whilst lacking their restorative function. Instead, repetition here «serves to screen the real understood as traumatic», with the traumatic moment rupturing the screen of repetition (FOSTER: 1996, 132). The notion of «traumatic realism» is subsequently developed further in Rothberg's influential work in the field of memory studies, where he defines the concept as «a realism in which the claims of reference live on, but so does the traumatic extremity that disables realist representation as usual» (ROTHBERG: 2000, 106). Susan Sontag, furthermore, has powerfully reflected not only on the ethical implications of contemplating horror captured in photographs, but also on the sense of rupture that accompanies the contemplation of traumatic images. In fact, her seminal work *On Photography* opens with the very reflection on the psychic breakage initiated by her viewing a Holocaust picture at the age of twelve, which marked a point of no return: «Nothing I have seen [...] ever cut me as sharply, deeply [...] something broke. [...] I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded» (SONTAG: 1976, 20-21). Recent scholarship on trauma and the image includes several studies on the contiguities between photography and trauma (BAER: 2002; BISHOP: 2020; PETIT AND POZORSKI: 2018), as well as broader investigations into trauma and the visual image (KRUGER: 2018) that also draw on the circulation of images in mass-media culture and its potential to «produce a photographically mediated collective trauma» (BISHOP: 2020) or in fact «traumatogenic» imagery that in itself generates trauma (ELSAESSER: 2014, 27).

1.2.4.1. Complex (con)temporalities: the «having-been-there» of the image

One of the structural similarities between trauma and the image lies in their complex temporalities, as corroborated by scholars from the medical discipline. In their seminal essay *The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma* (1996), psychiatrists Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart reflect on the specificity of the engraving of traumatic memory that fails to be translated into a coherent narrative expressed in words, yet it is captured as a visual frame that returns in various belated enactments:

The experience [of trauma] cannot be organised on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organised on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioural reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks (VAN DER KOLK AND VAN DER HART: 1995, 172).

Van der Kolk and van der Hart's notion builds not only on the psychologist Pierre Janet's theories, but it also references Caruth's notion of the verbal inexpressibility of trauma. If trauma cannot be captured in language, it can arguably be registered in a form that is held to be less mediated than linguistic expression,¹⁴ i.e. in an «imagistic way that stands outside normal memory creation». In fact, PTSD is often accompanied by disturbing, often context-free images or flashbacks that compulsively haunt the individual (LUCKHURST: 2008, 148).

The complex temporality of trauma is equally relevant to the (photographic) image. While on the one hand the denotative features of the photograph provide privileged access to the past through their material, indexical connection to the real, on the other the immutability and irreversibility of the photographic image mirror the past traumatic moment that haunts the present like «a ghostly *revenant*» (HIRSCH: 2001, 21), giving rise to the repetitive structure of the trauma. Since unprocessed and un verbalized experience can be fully grasped only in connection with a belated time and place, trauma gives rise to an intricate co-temporality (see I.1.2.) and a crisis of representation that can arguably be given expression in pictures. Photography in particular mirrors the complex temporality in its palimpsestic layering of past and present, with its referent always already in the past, pointing to «the presence, the having-been-there, of the past» (HIRSCH: 2001, 14). All photographs give rise to a dual temporality that captures «both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence» (SONTAG: 1977, 16) that invites associations with death or loss. In fact, while Barthes prominently interprets the contemplation of photographic objects as a «micro-experience of death» (BARTHES: 1993, 14), Sontag refers to photographic images as preannouncing death, or as «memento mori» (SONTAG: 1977, 26).

Coming back to the relevance of images in decoding trauma in literature, there is a specific complexity, as well as a distinct potentiality,

¹⁴ See Luckhurst's (2008, 149) discussion of C. S. Peirce's semiotics, according to which the written sign is an arbitrary symbol assigned meaning by convention, while the image is an index held to carry a physical trace of the object it portrays.

in the ekphrastic portrayal of the traumatic moment. Images provide a productive way of addressing the expressive impasse of trauma as, being less mediated than linguistic expression, they can arguably capture the haunting absence of loss by providing a more accessible, potent semiotic code that structurally and visually mirrors a violent experience. In the visual arts more broadly speaking, images have played a key role providing «the diagnostic terms that shape medical understandings of post-traumatic stress disorder» whilst offering specific visual genres, as for instance film, «in which traumatic experiences can be rendered accessible to larger audiences» (KRUGER: 2018, 258).

Since images, and in particular photographs, constitute a form of duplication of their referent, the ekphrastic textual translation of the image only adds a further layer of repetition that mimics the structural elements of trauma. Constituting a «'black hole' in the verbal structure» (MITCHELL: 1994, 158) that eludes conventionally realist accounts, ekphrastic images have the unique capacity of «[capturing] the shrapnel of traumatic time» (BAER: 2002, 7). Together with stylistic devices like dreams, hallucinations and visions, the photographic or iconic moment works as a structural «analogue of trauma» (IVERSEN: 2017, 1) as it exposes the text's traumatic extremity or a form of traumatic realism that escapes conventional forms of witnessing. One might go as far as arguing that these multiple layers of repetition not merely reproduce but *produce* traumatic effects (FOSTER: 1996, 130) that, in the case of fiction, envelop both the characters and the readers, constituting an act of witnessing that not only documents but also unsettles.

1.2.4.2. Dissociative images and the «spectral punctum»

Photographs, filmic sequences – and indeed images portraying an associative recollection or vision - mirror not only the complex temporality of trauma, but they provide a similarly persuasive interpretive key to dissociative responses to trauma, which can be productively captured by visual imagery. Dissociation involves the automatic removal from the scene of trauma as the individual fails to integrate sensory data at a cognitive or linguistic level. Recent studies on dissociation have foregrounded a more broadly conceived phenomenological approach that sees dissociation «not only as a lack

of integration of psychological functions, but also as a wide range of alterations in attention or consciousness» (Moskowitz: 2019, 19).

Considering the difficulty of organizing traumatic experience into linguistic memory, as established above, traumatic events are often registered in an iconic fashion that captures the moment as it unfolds, without further cognitive processing. While traumatic events are not easily translated into language, they can be powerfully captured as «reality imprints», and hence paralleling the defining structure of photography in «trap[ping] an event in its occurrence» (Baer: 2002, 9). In their imagistic registration, as Baer has shown, the workings of the camera (or any alternative visual lens through which images are contemplated) bear specific resemblance to the structure of traumatic memory (Baer: 2002, 8).

Read through the poetics of trauma, the visual medium, and the ekphrastic image in particular, provide a powerful, alternative and indeed transnational semiotic code to negotiate the horrors that leak through the façade of the text, constituting what Rau terms a «spectral punctum», a «synechdocal, painfully obscure representation» (Rau: 2006, 298) of what is triggered by the picture but lies beyond its frame. As images come to «speak» intimately for the silenced, un verbalized experiences of trauma, the imagistic portrayal of trauma provides a central, productive interpretive key to the mechanisms that underlie the negotiation of an untold tale.

PART TWO

A Historical-Literary Pathway*Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi***II.1. Women writers and the spectral paradigm of trauma from a transnational and comparative perspective** (*Tiziana de Rogatis*)

The level of spectrality of Italian national history is much higher than that of other European nations. As I have already pointed out in the theoretical introduction on trauma in this volume (see I.1.5.), the way in which cultural trauma acquires or lacks recognition varies significantly, depending on the idea of nationhood developed by each individual State, just as it varies according to the forms of refraction, distortion, or metamorphosis played out by the identities that are created by transnational and colonial processes (LANDSBERG: 2004, 3, 20).

In order to define Italy's trauma paradigms, it will therefore be necessary first of all to bear in mind the identity status of this nation. In comparison to almost all other Western European countries, it is much more mobile and open, but also much more precarious and unresolved. This is largely due to the fact that the Italian unification is relatively recent, again in comparison with the Western European landscape. Having only been achieved between 1861 and 1870, unification has also coincided with a late modernization process. As a consequence, Italian unification still appears, for better or worse, as a heterogeneous, diverse and fragmented dimension of regional multiculturalism (MELOTTI: 2004, 180-181).

This regional multiculturalism is factually established as «a hyphenated, in-between space created by multiple crossings that etch its geographical surfaces and cultural depths» (BOND: 2014, 421). But from a symbolic point of view, this heterogeneous reality has not yet been introjected as a positively constitutive resource of national identity. Instead, from the very beginning such identity has incorporated in itself the asymmetries of development between an advanced North and a backward and exploited South, the dynamics of colonialism within the nation, as well as the different stages and variants of a Civil War (FOOT: 2010). If the Italian idea of nationhood has been greatly affected by this geo-symbolic dualism, a parallel antithesis lies at the origin of

the exotic and colonial narratives through which, since the Industrial Revolution and up to the present day, Northern Europe has projected onto the whole of Italy an idea of a barbaric, anarchic Mediterranean South, untied from the normative system of the modern state, and thus embodying itself a subordinate entity (MOE: 2002, 13-31).

The Italian idea of nationhood thus takes shape from this double geo-symbolic fracture; its fragmented development tends to assimilate the functioning of its collective memory to that of a traumatic memory. Within the historical framework of Italian modernity, public history is therefore made up of many unresolved traumatic junctions (COLLEONI: 2012, 425-426; PUGLIA et al.: 2018), as well as of a considerable number of forbidden accesses to public archives. As a consequence, the Italian «archives of evil» are still rather scarcely grafted onto the hypomnesic archives, which – precisely on the basis of the dynamics of erasure highlighted by Derrida – tend to obliterate even the dissimilar aspects and the significant data of what they nevertheless perpetuate (FOOT: 2010, 199).

The narratives of trauma elaborated by Italian writers are all the more valuable precisely for all of the above. From the margins of a creative and fictional universe, these texts have often been adopted to fill the gaps in the imagination for which the institutional centres of historical-political thought should be widely responsible. These narratives also derive their shape from imagining a reversibility between the features of the centre and of the margins. Many writings indeed come from a margin that is first and foremost a spatial, linguistic and a translingual one: a provincial and dialectal provenance opposed to the dimension of Italian cultural capitals. For instance, one may think of the economic boom in Milan as it is described by Grosseto-born writer Luciano Bianciardi in his *It's a Hard Life* (1962).

By taking this perspective into consideration, the present volume – which was also the result of an intense panel at the annual conference of the American Association of Italian Studies (2021) – intends to propose, at the same time, a testimony and an interpretative framework of a specific part of these traces imprinted in the margins. *Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women's Writing* indeed seeks to illuminate a space that has so far been left in the shadows by international research on trauma, i.e. the one inhabited by modern and contemporary Italian and/or Italian-speaking women writers. In several contributions featured in this collection, authors are compared

with women writers coming from different cultures and languages (Svetlana Alexievich, Sally Rooney, Milli Hill, Rebecca Dekker), thus also encouraging a transnational analytical perspective. The group of authors – necessarily selected and listed according to the chronological order of the texts under scrutiny – encompasses the following: Enif Robert, Elsa Morante, Anna Banti, Anna Maria Ortese, Edith Bruck, Elena Ferrante, Goliarda Sapienza, Helena Janeczek, Francesca Marciano, Nadia Terranova, Antonella Gullotta, Isabella Pellizzari Villa, Igiaba Scego.

Due to their status of «Unpredictable Subjects» (LONZI: 1974, 47), these women writers have been brought upon the stage of History through the spectrality of a recurring and persecutory sequence of horrors, ambivalences, progresses and regresses of modernity; this is, for example, dramatized in the novel *History (La Storia)* by Morante thanks to «traumatic realism» (DE ROGATIS AND WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021). Compared with male authors, the marginality of the traces of trauma is even more evident in the texts of these female narrators, because it locates itself inside the context of a literary canon that only with the advent of modernity has it been granted a long overdue mode of expression. Such canon is thus still being shaped by strongly patriarchal dynamics of removal, delegitimization, and distortion of women's writings and their aesthetics. These writers' living heritage is one resulted from obliteration, and it possesses a strong «contemporal» quality (CONNOR: 1999), since it bears upon itself the elliptical and erratic traces of a great collective *revenant*. It is a spectre embodied by that multitude of women who, even during pre-modern centuries, have managed to leave some sort of mark, women whose traces have however been cyclically erased, removed, made invisible by patriarchal supremacy: such is, for instance, the symbolic nucleus described in Anna Banti's *Artemisia*. The most extended and transversal «archive of evil» of human history indeed coincides with the one represented by female creativity.

It is, however, a hegemonic marginality as well as an embodied spectrality. Italian women writers of modern and contemporary times have, in fact, decisively interpreted the traumatic junctures of Italian and transnational history. In an even more extensive way than what occurs with male writers, they intercept and represent the traces of trauma that enable nomadic movements between the margins and the centre of the historical-literary field, and unexpectedly subversions of

those margins into a centrality. In this sense, the most exemplary case is that of Elsa Morante's *History*. This novel shows how women narrating trauma can position themselves at the core of a national narrative – while also obtaining a major public acclaim – by starting from materials and forms that were explicitly delegitimized by a hierarchy of dominant aesthetic values. The intergenerational symptoms, together with the lost and buried documents, the interred spaces, the authorial postures of these women writers, they all rather manifestly intertwine with the dynamics of «*cryptonyms*» (ABRAHAM AND TOROK: 1986, 18). Some instances of the above mentioned intergenerational dimension epitomizing a traumatized and spectralized inner reality may be provided by the mysterious and recurring symptom of epilepsy suffered by Ida and Useppe, the two protagonists of *History*; the original text of Anna Banti's *Artemisia*, which was destroyed by the bombs of Second World War, and constitutes a dismembered and recomposed body-manuscript; the underground spaces narrated by Elena Ferrante, such as the cellar safeguarding lost and revenant dolls, or the caves inhabited by subaltern and silenced mothers, and by daughters who initially present themselves as performers of matricides; and ultimately, the authorial posture of Ferrante herself, self-endowed with a heteronym that embodies a present/absent spectre.

By taking up and interweaving the categories suggested by Abraham and Torok, Derrida (see I.1.2., 3. and 4.), and the recent debate on «Ghost Feminism» (MUNFORD AND WATERS: 2014, 17; HESFORD: 2005), the spectrality that emerges from the present volume is not only a traumatic legacy of pain, subalternity, and collapsing. Inside this «virtual space of spectrality» (DERRIDA: 1994, 12) there is a moving *revenant* whose print incessantly comes back to surface, as it carves a mark that is simultaneously tragic and creative. Not only does the survival of this mark throughout modern and contemporary times determine, in a negative sense, a dynamic of intermittent visibility or, from a complementary point of view, of recurring disappearance that has characterized and still characterizes the destiny of many female artists. The same survival also coincides with a solid consistency that, from the archives of evil, penetrates the hypomnesic archives and ultimately finds its own embodiment through literary forms, poetics, and fully-rounded, vital characters. The survival of trauma engenders a repertoire of destabilizing aesthetic forms, which unfold towards the future, as well as resisting the hegemony of a present time that is over-

simplified by easy apologies of modernity, progress, and emancipation. Within this perspective, we have therefore chosen to dedicate a volume section to women writers from the Mediterranean South, thus giving value to a crucial fault line traversing Italian identity and its national, as well as transnational spectrality – a dimension that is even inscribed in the title of one of the novels taken into consideration, i.e. *Farewell, Ghosts (Addio fantasmi)* by Nadia Terranova. The survival of trauma also encompasses a queer component that distinguishes many of the female characters created by these writers: a gallery of transformative, destabilizing, and unedifying spectrality, of which numerous figures invented by Morante, Ferrante and Sapienza are rightfully part. The genealogy of this gallery is inaugurated by *Lies and Sorcery (Menzogna e sortilegio, 1948)* by Elsa Morante. The novel's protagonist Elisa is the foremother of a Morante-Queer genealogical line. This witch-writer descends from a line of witches camouflaged as characters of a petit-bourgeois epos, and finds her own creativity in a sepulchre-house that is invaded by a choir of dead figures, and in which her body, reflected among mirrors and liquid depths, undergoes a series of oscillating metamorphoses between male, female, non-human animal and prepubescent.

Women writing trauma thus generate a micro-history that is capable of deconstructing the «patriarchive» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 4n, 36) of official histories and canons, as exemplified by a deep anti-rhetorical affinity – examined in this volume – between Morante's *History* and *The Unwomanly Face of War (U vojny ne ženskoe lico, 1985)* by Alexievich. Nonetheless, this deconstruction is also balanced by an «extraordinary need or desire for plots» (BROOKS: 1984, 5): a formal and communicative capacity to create middlebrow narratives endowed with a compact and solid quality, stories in which an inclusive counter-history nimbly moves across both horizontal and vertical directions of pain. As a formal sedimentation of their traumatic narratives, these women writers have elaborated certain stylistic strategies that have often been labelled by the institutionalized literary debate as the symptoms of outdated or unresolved poetics. Their strategies of pathos – often belittled within the Italian literary debate as melodramatic, sentimental, lowbrow – are today redeemed from their original gender prejudice. Women writers indeed find themselves at the centre of a «metamodern» poetics – a new «structure of feeling», «so pervasive to call it structural» (VAN DEN AKKER AND VERMEULEN: 2017, 6-7). Between the end of the

Nineteenth Eighties and up until today, such structure has reactivated three epistemological elements that had been deeply weakened by postmodernism: historicity, depth, and affectivity. These writers adopt specific affective techniques, thus injecting in the readers the same experience of bewilderment and liminality lived by their traumatized characters. Through the «retelling» of trauma, each reading experience proceeds along the tracks of an intense short circuit between fiction and reality, which can ultimately reach a tragic catharsis (CALABRESE: 2020, 1-7). Within this same perspective, Ferrante elaborates a ritualized dimension of trauma by also recurring to re-enactments and reuses of the initiatory repertoire derived from classical mythology and of its trans-historic and a-temporal universe (DE ROGATIS: 2019). Not only does this rituality grant a speakability that gets condensed through gestures and codified repertoires; it also allows the narratives to pour out into the extra-temporal dimension of trauma, into its exceeding the ordinary sphere of the story.

[Translation by Serena Todesco]

II.2. Writing trauma in Italian and transnational women's writing: wounded bodies, translingual spaces and visual imaginaries (*Katrin Wehling-Giorgi*)

Trauma Studies in literature and culture are an established, vibrant field in the Anglo-American, the Postcolonial academic context and beyond, as the first part of the introduction has sought to ascertain. In the Italian context, on the other hand, little work has been done on trauma narratives,¹⁵ and a particular neglect of female-authored texts even in well-established fields of scholarship including *Shoah* testimonies reflect a wider «reticence to accept the word and work of women» in Italian literary criticism (LUCAMANTE: 2014, 4).

Yet, Italian female-authored texts in many ways provide an exemplary case study of the broader historical trajectory of trauma due to the country's complex formation of a national identity and a «particular mobile disposition» (BEN-GHIAT AND HOM: 2016, 4; see

¹⁵ With the notable exception of Calabrese's study on the curative function of narrative in the context of trauma (CALABRESE: 2020). Moreover, Lucamante's work on formerly neglected female-authored *Shoah* testimonies is significant in this context (LUCAMANTE: 2014).

also BURDETT, POLEZZI AND SPADARO: 2020; BOND: 2014) that result in a uniquely regional multiculturalism (see II.1.). At the same time, the texts explored in this volume for the first time through the lens of trauma studies provide a cross-section of how the literary, cultural, medical and historical Italian context is distinctively imbricated in the micro and macro traumas of our recent modernity. The latter include the major collective traumas of Western society, most prominently the atrocities of the Holocaust and the experience of the two World Wars, as well as the by-products of rapid urbanization and industrialization. At the same time, Italy's pronounced cotemporalities of antiquity and modernity in its hybrid urban fabric, its peculiar and often belated position vis-à-vis the feminist movement (MALAGRECA: 2006), its liminal geographical location in Southern Europe and its proneness to natural disasters such as earthquakes make it impossible not to problematize its unique positioning in Western, globalized society. In their historically marginal, subaltern positioning in society, women authors are particularly well placed to intercept spectral (hi)stories and the routinely silenced yet eloquent language of individual and collective traumas.

On the one hand, the narratives explored in this volume remain firmly anchored in the specificity of the Italian cultural, historical, medical and geographical context, as we can see for instance in the exploration of female-centred trauma under the Italian mental healthcare system preceding Franco Basaglia's seminal work¹⁶ on the inefficacy of psychiatric hospitals (see e.g. Sapienza). Other texts are inspired by actual historical events that induced collective and often intergenerational forms of trauma (as for instance the Second World War, the Holocaust and persecution of the Jews, as narrated in Banti, Morante, Bruck, Janeczek and Scego) or natural catastrophes including the devastating earthquake of Messina and Reggio Calabria of 1908 – which remains a (spectral) presence in Terranova's work. Yet other narratives are firmly rooted in the gendered urban or domestic spaces of the peninsula that preserve regional specificities and often complex temporal and linguistic stratifications (Ferrante) that are closely imbricated in actual geographical as well as in imagined spaces (as

¹⁶ Franco Basaglia's influential work in the field of psychiatry was published in 1968 (*L'istituzione negata*), and it was only in 1978 that the reforms bearing his name passed into the so-called *Legge Basaglia*. See Foor: 2015 for a detailed account of Basaglia's reforms.

for instance in the magical realism and affective intensity of Ortese, Morante and Ferrante; see Castaldo and de Rogatis, Rubinacci and Wehling-Giorgi's contribution to this volume).

At the same time, the texts explored provide a powerful testament to the creative power that emanates from a female-focused experience of suffering, hence forging a new language that resists oppression and productively channels trauma. In this process, as explored above (I.2.3.), literature is a space where trauma can be articulated and represented through a number of tropes that bend the conventional realist code to make space for an affective experience of great intensity. One privileged site for the synecdochal channeling of the latter becomes the unruly, multiply porous and wounded female body and the spaces it inhabits (II.1.), as discussed in several contributions to the present volume. The female body not only centers multiple, historical discourses of power, but its exploration as a site of trauma also invites new insights into the co-constitution of material and discursive productions of reality (as for instance in Morante and Terranova's portrayal of the female protagonists' merger with the wounded urban landscape).¹⁷

II.2.1. Wounded bodies and translingual spaces

As explored above, the female body has played a central part in the intricate genealogy of trauma theory and its links to modernity, with male-focalised scholarship and practise in the medical field and a long underrated female-authored cultural production shaping a narrative in which women's bodies and voices are routinely marginalised and overwhelmingly unheard. Central to the linkages between the first studies on trauma and the female body are investigations into hysteria (etymologically linked to the womb), taken to be a uniquely feminine disorder, first undertaken by the neuropsychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot and then by Freud and Breuer in the late nineteenth century (see HERMAN: 1992, 10-20; MICALE AND LERNER, 2009: 115-139; and I.1.5.). Despite the progress made by the feminist movement (see ROOT: 1992 and BROWN: 1995 on insidious trauma) and the MeToo campaign, women remain exposed and vulnerable in a contemporary context that at best subliminally preserves patriarchal power structures that enable

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of the posthuman in Italian literature, see FERRARA: 2020. See Milkova Rousseva and Todesco's as well as Wehling-Giorgi's contribution to this volume for a further discussion of the material-discursive portrayal of the body.

and legitimize gendered violence and ever more stringent controls over the female body.¹⁸

A compelling case study in this volume is provided by the close reading of Enif Robert and F. T. Marinetti's *Un ventre di donna* (1919). As explored in Massucco's contribution to the volume, the latter text's focus on the violent surgical intervention on the female body potently illustrates how women have been routinely subjected to invasive forms of penetration and male control mechanisms well beyond the medical field. The very nominal co-authorship with the prominent futurist Marinetti in this female-centred tale of physical suffering draws attention to the sidelining of female authorship in the articulation of trauma. The suppressed female voice is then further explored in the questionable instruments applied in the treatment of mental disorders, such as electroshock therapy, whose consequences are powerfully narrated by Sapienza's account of mental illness. The latter in fact relates the patriarchal bias in the psychoanalytical tools that often leave the female body wounded and exposed under male analysis. The problematic history of male-centred medicine is yet further exposed in Lazzari's analysis of recent hybrid and transnational narratives of traumatic childbirth. Her essay underscores how outdated medical practices systemically ignore women's and mothers' needs, contributing to widely experienced trauma that lies at the basis of a series of autobiographically inspired texts.

Other contributions to the book explore the repressed maternal presence and indeed the lost mother tongue (see II.1.). Frigeni investigates the latter in a study of multilingualism and its role in the daughter's articulation of traumatic experiences in Marciano's work, hence further foregrounding the submerged mother-daughter plot (HIRSCH: 1989). D'Alessandro discusses translingual authors including Bruck and Janeczek in whose works the maternal language is intimately linked with the ghostly presence of a violent past, directly experienced in the former and evoked in a postmemorial, affective space in the latter. Experiences of trauma and abandonment and its multiple somatic reactions are foregrounded in Bazzoni's analysis of the trauma of female bodily abjection in Sapienza and Ferrante's narrative, examining the effects of dissociative psychic and traumatic

¹⁸ One only has to mention the US Supreme Court's recent overturning of abortion rights in June 2022 in this context. See BETTAGLIO: 2018 for further details on gendered violence and activism in the Italian context.

states and their translation into a disrupted temporality of trauma. The persistence of female-centred trauma into the contemporary context is furthermore investigated in Walker's study into negative femininity as a trauma response in the texts of best-selling authors Ferrante and Rooney, with a specific investigation into the repressive subject positions and the often uneasy coexistence of agency and masochism in the insidiously traumatizing, urban contexts of their young female protagonists.

II.2.2. Visual modes of traumatic expression

A further common language of psychic trauma can be found in the visual dimension, frequently evoked in the works explored in this volume. Particularly compelling in this context is the role played by ekphrastically channelled images, including works of art, photographs and oneiric visions and hallucinations. As explored above, the presumed indexical quality of images plays a specifically important role in the witnessing of trauma. As Hirsch has convincingly shown, photographic documents act as agents of postmemory and hence play an active, and productive, role in the articulation of trauma.

The present volume posits Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel* as a foundational trauma narrative in which the visual negotiation of trauma assumes the role of a universal language that engenders the portrayal of otherwise inaccessible atrocities. As Wehling-Giorgi's contribution to this volume shows, the numerous photographic images, newspaper clippings and prophetic dream visions in Morante's text come to constitute an alternative semiotic code that eloquently speaks trauma through a form of traumatic realism (DE ROGATIS AND WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021). The magical, dreamlike dimension of her works builds on the «bewitched realism» (DE ROGATIS: 2020) of Morante's debut novel *Lies and Sorcery*. Rubinacci's essay furthers this line of enquiry by exploring Morante's poetry with its moments of hallucinatory delirium and magical realism that broaden the boundaries of realist representation to incorporate the otherwise unfathomable experience of trauma.

Another fundamental work that negotiates trauma through ekphrasis and the imagistic dimension is Anna Banti's *Artemisia* (1947), which not only transposes the seventeenth century painter's trauma of rape into a palimpsestic textual collage with a «spectral charge», but which also elaborates the writer's own suffering during the second

world war through the spectral presence of her artist predecessor. Intimately interweaving two parallel stories, the women's traumatic experiences are powerfully conjured up and channelled into a new form of agency in the form of (textual) images, as Bassetti's contribution to this volume shows.

While it has been established that textual images inhere a privileged relationship with narratives of mobility in the context of Italian women's writing (ALÙ: 2019), the current volume shows how they also provide a powerful tool in the female-authored, ekphrastic articulation of trauma. In classic picture theory the image (as an «object» to be passively contemplated) is defined as female and the speaking/seeing subject is identified as male (MITCHELL: 1994, 180), a gendered conception that has long defined also the narrative subject. By becoming the constitutive voice of a silenced narrative, the female voices gathered in this volume often defy gendered hierarchies not only of ekphrastic, but also of literary and historical expression, with the poetics of trauma powerfully engendering formerly untold tales.

As they potently «[cut] across and [bind] together diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites» (ROTHBERG: 2009, 11), textual images come to constitute a universal and indeed multidirectional language of suffering. It is visual language that not only articulates but brings various discourses of trauma into dialogue. We can see for instance in the work of transnational contemporary Italian author Igiaba Scego and her reflections on the transgenerational trauma of racial discrimination and migration, as recently explored in her novel *La linea del colore* (2020) (*The Color Line: A Novel*, 2022) that interweaves the voices of two black women painters in the nineteenth century and the present. Furthermore, her short story *La chat* (2018), the female protagonist's «postmemorial act of looking» (HIRSCH: 2012, 119) is initiated by the contemplation of a family photograph and further facilitated by focalizing the gaze through her grandmother's camera, ultimately leading her to link the human suffering and structural violence of the Holocaust with the current trauma of migration in Italy, as D'Alessandro's contribution to this volume explores.

As critics have come to underscore the importance of dialogue across disciplinary fields and the various conceptual knots implicated in trauma theory, the present volume seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate by focusing on the rich material and discursive entanglements that inhabit the trauma narratives of Italian women's writing from the

twentieth century to the present day. The various contributions to this volume seek to delineate a new landscape of female-authored Italian trauma narratives that shows not only the complex textual negotiation of suffering, but also the intrinsic potentialities of a new aesthetics of traumatic expression as an articulation of female resistance against a dominant cultural and social order.

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PART 1

TRAUMA AND HISTORY

1. «Come un fotogramma spezzato»: Traumatic Images and Multistable Visions in Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel*

Katrin Wehling-Giorgi

Abstract

My essay posits Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel* as one of the foundational trauma narratives of the Italian post-war era. I show how a specific analysis of the abundant ekphrastic imagery in the novel through the lens of trauma studies can provide significant new insights into the structural, temporal, narrative and the ontological dimension of the text. My reading of the visual negotiation of trauma will highlight structural parallels between the temporality of the textual image and the representation of trauma, link the novel's oneiric imagery to the shared spaces of trauma and underscore the iconic negotiation of dissociation in the various visions and mirages, linking the latter to their material situatedness in the novel. Ultimately, I will show how the visually channelled material and discursive productions of reality in the text eloquently co-articulate trauma.

Il mio saggio definisce *La Storia* di Elsa Morante come una delle trauma narratives fondative del secondo dopoguerra italiano. Il contributo dimostra come un'analisi specifica della rappresentazione ecfrastica attraverso la prospettiva della teoria del trauma può fornire nuove intuizioni sulle complessità temporali, strutturali, narrative ed ontologiche del romanzo. La mia lettura delle applicazioni in campo visuale del trauma mette in evidenza i paralleli strutturali fra la temporalità dell'immagine testuale e la rappresentazione del trauma, connette l'immaginario onirico agli spazi condivisi del trauma e sottolinea la negoziazione iconica della dissociazione nelle varie visioni e nei miraggi, collegandoli con la loro collocazione materialistica nel romanzo. Infine, dimostro come la rappresentazione materiale e discorsiva della realtà in chiave visuale fornisce una co-articolazione eloquente del trauma.

As I am writing this chapter images of a senseless and brutal war in Ukraine keep flooding into the media channels I have remained glued to since the start of the Russian assault. The photographs I am forcing myself to view bring to mind only too vividly the words of Susan Sontag, who wrote that «to take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt» (SONTAG: 1977, 15). While this statement holds true of any image taken of a person or object captured in a fleeting moment, there is a heightened sense of finality and horror in the actual contemplation of death and destruction, often accompanied by a sense of «breakage», «grieving» and «wounding» that Sontag so poignantly describes in her life-changing first encounter with a picture portraying the atrocities of the Holocaust: «Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously» (SONTAG: 1977, 20).

Sontag's reflections on the links between photography and horror contain, *in nuce*, the essence of the argument I would like to explore in the present essay: the specific role photographs and visual tropes – focalized through the female gaze – play in the ekphrastic portrayal of trauma, analyzed through key concepts including repetition, doubling, reversal and dissociation. As the images of pulverized bodies, cityscapes and lives once again dominate our daily newsfeed, Elsa Morante's seminal work *History: A Novel (La Storia, 1974)*¹ is newly striking in its timeliness, with its focus on the visual dimension even more relevant when seen from the vantage point of our contemporary «society of spectacle» (CAVARERO: 2008, 55).² Scholars have acknowledged that the novel's very composition in the 1970s is marked by the latent trauma experienced by the half-Jewish author during WWII (LUCAMANTE: 2014, 159), while the characters' fate in *History: A Novel* is inevitably inflected by trauma and a form of dissociative doubling affecting in particular the protagonist Ida (ROSA: 1995, 269). It is only in recent

¹ *La Storia*, henceforth abbreviated as *s*; *History: A Novel* (1977), henceforth abbreviated as *h*.

² While the term 'Society of Spectacle' was of course first coined by Guy Debord in the eponymous book (1967), Cavarero interestingly discusses Sontag and Virginia Woolf's crucial work *Three Guineas*, in which the author reflects on the ethical implications of contemplating photographs depicting atrocities (CAVARERO: 2008, 54-55). See also Foster (1996: 222), who discusses the «psychic collectivity» created by the media images of the Gulf War.

scholarship (VON TRESKOW: 2017; DE ROGATIS AND WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021), however, that the author's text has been reread through the productive lens of trauma studies; in fact, it is surprising that only now, nearing the end of its fifth decade, *History: A Novel* is revalorized as one of the foundational trauma narratives of the Italian post-war literary tradition.

My essay suggests that significant new insights into the structural, temporal, narrative and indeed the ontological (materialist) dimension of the novel can be gained by reading its numerous «textual pictures» (MITCHELL: 1994, 111 ff.) through trauma theory. More specifically, I will argue that the complex trope of trauma can be fruitfully approached through the extraordinarily rich imagistic, ekphrastic dimension of the novel, which includes its photographic *imagetexts* (MITCHELL: 1994, 89), visually focalized hallucinations as well as oneiric and multistable visions that all provide special access to a traumatic experience that remains otherwise silenced. Building on a series of studies in the iconic negotiation of trauma (VAN DER KOLK AND VAN DER HART: 1995; BAER: 2002; DIDI-HUBERMAN: 2003), my analysis will show how the complex temporality and dialectic shifts between repetition and fixity – as well as the repetitive and often sudden shifts between the narrative's surface realism and a multistable «underground horror» (DE ROGATIS: 2021, 176) – define the abundant oneiric and photographic imagery in the novel whilst synecdochally reproducing the structural elements of trauma.

Recent research on Morante provides insightful readings of her texts that move beyond associations with modernism whilst establishing links with the new ontologies that challenge the primacy of the human subject and explore its various forms of entanglement with alterity and materiality instead.³ A rereading of Morante's text through new ontologies including posthumanism and new materialism is relevant to the present discussion as trauma and its visual tropes are closely imbricated with the body and its broader material culture. Ida and Ueseppe provide particularly compelling focalizers of trauma through the porous trans-corporeal «fusion» of their bodies with the war-scarred urban landscape, as well as their creative visualizations of a utopian yet regressive reality rooted in the pre-conceptual sphere. A

³ Recent critical readings in the light of new ontologies include Mecchia and Giménez Cavallo on biopolitics and the post-human; Ziolkowski and D'Angeli on the role of animals in Morante's work, and Walker on a feminist, materialist reading of the novel.

new reading of *History: A Novel*'s rich visual imagery through trauma theory and the insights of new materialism that stipulates the body as a «landscape permeable to the world» (IOVINO AND OPPERMAN: 2012, 459) can hence provide a fresh perspective on the temporal, narrative and material complexities of the novel whilst opening up new lines of enquiry in representing trauma that explore the co-constitution of material and discursive productions of reality (GUNDOGAN IBRISIM: 2020, 238).

The essay will highlight three different aspects pertaining to the visual negotiation of trauma in Morante's text:

1. Firstly, I will focus on photographs and historical documents, highlighting their privileged testimonial function, the focus on their material situatedness and their structural links with the representation of trauma.
2. Secondly, I will discuss the portrayal of dreams in the novel. Evoking links with the visual two-dimensionality of the photograph and the iconic imaginary of characters and readers, I will analyze a series of multistable images and oneiric tableaux to argue that the liminal realm of dreams can be productively linked to the space of trauma and its portrayal of what I refer to as "shared trauma" in the novel.
3. Thirdly, I will discuss the links between notions of dissociation (frequently resulting in instances of doubling) and visions/mirages in the novel. Principally focalized by Ida and Useppe, I will show how these visually channeled episodes show how in Morante's work material and discursive productions of reality eloquently co-articulate trauma.

1. Photographs and historical/material documents

As outlined in the introduction to this volume, it is at least since the 1990s that scholars have highlighted the intimate links between trauma and the image. The relevance of the close relationship between the iconic and trauma is corroborated by the numerous interdisciplinary explorations of the latter in the fields of psychology (VAN DER KOLK AND VAN DER HART: 1995), contemporary art (FOSTER: 1996; DIDI-HUBERMAN: 2003), photography (BAER: 2002; BISHOP: 2020), as well as literature and history (HIRSCH: 1997), to cite just a few. Paralleling recent shifts in trauma theory from the originally presumed unrepresentability

of trauma (CARUTH: 1996), scholars like Hirsch,⁴ Baer and Didi-Huberman explore the positive ethical⁵ and aesthetic potentialities of the photographic image to provide an oblique insight into the traumatic moment.

As Hirsch has compellingly shown in her extensive work on the Holocaust and transgenerational testimony, due to its presumed indexical link to the past and hence its assumed material connection to a prior existence,⁶ photography has long been seen to bear a privileged referential relationship with the past. Rather than assuming a mediating function, photographs are often taken to offer access to the event itself and hence bring back «the past in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability» (HIRSCH: 2001, 21). This tension between past and present mirrors the complex temporality of trauma in its palimpsestic layering of time, with its referent always already in the past, pointing to its «having-been-there» (HIRSCH: 2001, 14). All photographs give rise to a dual temporality that captures «both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence» (SONTAG: 1977, 16).

The vast photographic pantheon that populates the diegetic dimension of the novel, furthermore, features individual portraits ranging from Nora's picture as a young fiancée to Nino's portrait adorning the family flat, blurry pictures of the rapist Gunther and the young soldier Giovannino, the prostitute Santina and the anarchist Davide, as well as the numerous newspaper cuttings portraying the victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust. As I have previously argued (WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021), these pictures all proleptically foreshadow the ultimate demise of the characters throughout the novel, with the specter of death haunting many of the contextual descriptions of the photographs, as for instance the narrator's comment on the publicly released photo of the brutally murdered Santina that underlines her sense of resignation «di animale da macello» («of an animal marked

⁴ Hirsch, for instance, argues for the privileged status of the photograph as a «medium» (HIRSCH: 2001, 13) or «agent» (HIRSCH: 1997, 248) of postmemory, a phenomenon that is closely linked to trauma (see *Introduction* to this volume).

⁵ See also SONTAG: 2003 for an exploration of the ethical potentialities of the photographic image.

⁶ See LUCKHURST: 2008, 149-150 for a discussion of the potential problems arising from the notion of the photographic index, especially in the digital age. The photographs referred to in Morante's work of course precede the digital age.

for slaughter»), marking her dated picture «[come] il segno di una predestinazione» (s 423) («[as] the sign of a predestination», h 475). The latter act of resignation stands in stark contrast to the police picture portraying the murderer «con la fronte bassa e gli occhi da cane rabbioso» (s 423) («with a low forehead and the eyes of a mad dog»; h 476), his violent act dismissed as a «classico» (s 425; h 477) crime by the authorities. While Santina's murder does not make it beyond the local newspaper (s 423; h 475), it is Morante's text that gives prominence to her brutalized body and aligns the assassin with the dominant masculine figures of power Mussolini and D'Annunzio (s 423; h 478).

In the collective dimension, the photographs that populate the novel point towards the contingency and fragile existence of an indistinct mass of nameless victims (WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021, 180). Giovannino's pictures focus on a huddled heap of bodies («in un mucchio e infagottate», s 314; h 350), with the term «mucchio» (pile) taken up subsequently by Davide on several occasions to refer to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, including his own family members (s 583; h 494). The unidentified victims of the Nazi atrocities are further portrayed in a series of magazine photographs that Ueseppe contemplates at several points in the novel. These publicly displayed images depict war casualties who are similarly formless and anonymized («macchie d'ombra», s 371; «patches of shadow», h 415), establishing a direct link between individual and collective destinies: «un cumulo di materie biancastre e stecchite, di cui non si discernono le forme» (s 372-373) («a chaotic heap of whitish, sticklike objects, whose forms cannot be distinguished», h 417).

On the one hand, the denotative features of the photographs provide privileged access to the past through their material, indexical connection to the real, hence fulfilling a testimonial function. The pictures provide a glimpse into the bleak realities of the Holocaust, thereby testifying to a traumatic historical reality that otherwise only surfaces in the texts' «zones of trauma», marked by «cracks, marks, ellipses, metamorphoses, and multiplications» (DE ROGATIS: 2021, 176, 170). Several of the images focalized by Ueseppe (and the medium of the female narrator) further appeal to the readers' collective memory of the horrors of the Second World War, including well-known images of the Nazi atrocities, of Partisan fighters hung in the streets and of the very public display of Mussolini's body in Piazzale Loreto (s 370; h 414).

The text's emphasis on the sensory and contextual quality of the photos (EDWARDS AND HART: 2004, 23) or their various «packaging» (SONTAG: 1977: 4) further roots the images in a specific material reality. In fact, much attention is paid to the delicately handwritten captions adorning meticulously described family photographs;⁷ the specific display/space they occupy in the domestic sphere;⁸ and the poor, material quality of the print and the frequent focus on its discoloration, marking the passing of time.⁹ The multiple uses they are put to further underscore the materiality of these pictures as the newspaper on which the photographs are printed serves to make a hat for Useppe or to wrap up fruit (s 371; h 415), for instance. These multiple factors mark the photographic images as materially embedded in the narrative present, as «objects in a historically marked time» (EDWARDS AND HART: 2004, 12).

On the other hand, in contrast with the material contingency of the photographic print lies the immutability and irreversibility inherent in its referent which mirrors the irretrievability and temporal complexity of the traumatic moment, as discussed above with reference to Hirsch's work (HIRSCH: 2001, 21). The photographic moment in Morante's text therefore provides a way of mirroring the traumatic extremity that escapes a conventionally realist representation. In Baer's words, photographs have the unique capacity of «[capturing] the shrapnel of traumatic time» (BAER: 2002, 7). In the novel, these moments captured in the ekphrastically reproduced photographic image constitute an act of witnessing that not only documents but also unsettles. The disturbing effect of the photographs is in fact repeatedly underlined throughout the text as the images seem to recall an atrocity which lies in the past but is yet to be named. Useppe's contemplation of the pictures in the magazine, for instance, evokes a vague reminiscence (s 371; h 415), an enigma «di natura ambigua e deforme, eppure oscuramente familiare» (s 370) («deformed and ambiguous by nature, and yet obscurely familiar», h 415). The latter effect recalls the Freudian notion of the uncanny and hence something which is familiar and established in the mind and has become alienated from it only through the process

⁷ See e.g. the printed legend and delicate handwriting adorning Nora's engagement photo (s 53; h 55).

⁸ See e.g. the place of honor that Nino's photograph occupies in the domestic sphere (s 65; h 70).

⁹ See e.g. s 53; «un settimanale [...] male stampato in una tinta violacea» (s 371-372) («an illustrated weekly [...], badly printed, in a purplish hue», h 416).

of repression.¹⁰ The heightened emotional response of the characters viewing these pictures is often coupled with the key term «stupore» («stupor») which, as Porcelli has shown, not only signals the novel's various moments of affective intensity but etymologically also refers to a state of cognitive torpor (PORCELLI: 2020, 80). In the medical field, «stupore» can also signify an «indebolimento dell'attività psichica» (a weakening of psychic activity),¹¹ hence further reinforcing the link between the photographs and a psychic response.

Structurally, photographs mimic the act of repetition inherent in the traumatic event, which due to its unprocessed, unassimilated status undergoes endless reiterations. Photographs constitute a form of duplication of their referents, and the ekphrastic «translation» of the visual into the verbal representation (MITCHELL: 1994, 164) – as well as the reader's further duplication or indeed recall of the image only adds a further layer of repetition that synecdochally reproduces the structural elements of trauma.

The abundant photographic imagery in *History: A Novel* hence not only mirrors the palimpsestic temporality of trauma, further complicated by its firm situatedness in a historically specific time, but it also provides a glimpse into an otherwise silenced traumatic reality that haunts the text in periodic intervals, as previously identified in Morante's association with «traumatic realism» (DE ROGATIS AND WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021) as a concept that upholds claims to reference whilst also depicting a «traumatic extremity that disables realist representation» (ROTHBERG: 2009, 106). Furthermore, the repetitive nature of the visual cues that are littered throughout the course of the novel not only reproduces but arguably produces (FOSTER: 1996, 130) the deferral and repetition intrinsic to the traumatic moment.

2. Dreams, oneiric visions and multistable images (*Kippbilder*)

The rich phenomenology of dreams has been amply shown (see PORCIANI 2006; 2019; GAMBARO: 2018) to be a vital trope in Morante's texts from the late 1930s that sits on the threshold between the realist

¹⁰ On Morante's acquaintance with Freudian psychoanalysis, see Rosa: 1995, 11 and PORCIANI: 2006, 17-18 on the specific link between dreams and the uncanny.

¹¹ <https://www.garzantilinguistica.it/ricerca/?q=stupore> (last accessed: 11 July 2022).

mode and the psychological/oneiric/fantastic. I will argue that the liminal realm of dreams can also be productively linked to the novel's «zones of trauma» (DE ROGATIS: 2021, 176), providing an imaginary space to verbalize and indeed often visualize the unfathomable realities encountered by the characters. The oneiric and hallucinatory episodes in the novel are principally focalized through the protagonists Ida and Useppe, and they often include a distinctly visual dimension that makes them central to the current discussion. In what follows, I will trace the links between trauma and dreams through a discussion of

1. the central, recurring thematic trope of the «mucchio» or pile that anchors dreams both to the novels' spaces of horror linked to the Holocaust, as well as providing a compelling illustration of how the interlacement of the material and the discursive (IOVINO AND OPPERMAN: 2012, 459) complements reflections on power in Morante's works;
2. Useppe's returning, multistable visions that provide an extraordinary negotiation of traumatic memory and its various iterations in the novel.

I have previously identified (WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021) the parallels between trauma and the photographic image in one of the key dream scenes in chapter 1944 that follows Ida's vagaries in an empty ghetto after the mass deportation of the Jews. In the oneiric diegesis, she finds herself in front of a fence behind which lies a pile of shoes. The latter vision clearly evokes similarities with a two-dimensional photograph: it is «bianco e nero, e sfocato come una vecchia foto» (s 342) («black and white, and blurred like an old photograph», h 382) and, consisting of a uniquely fixed frame, it lacks a specific plotline (s 343; h 382). The fixed, frozen frame in this oneiric vision is clearly reminiscent of the traumatic moment, and its associations with the otherwise silenced reality of the lager further shows that dreams emerge when Ida lowers her defense mechanisms, «come il crollo di una parete divisoria» (s 128) («as if at the collapse of a partition», h 140), thereby providing access to an otherwise repressed dimension of her mind.

The 'frozen' dream scene dialogues with other central episodes in the novel through the repetition of visual cues. One central leitmotif here are the various «mucchi» of amassed bodies, shoes and other ruinous objects that populate the text. The latter trope emerges at crucial stages of the novel: it appears in the photographs depicting

the indistinguishable victims of war discussed above, establishing a link between the shoes and the amassed bodies as iconic but otherwise unspeakable images of the Holocaust; it is invoked by Davide when reflecting with horror on the death of his parents and the wider victims of the Holocaust (s 583; h 665); and it appears in an interlinked series of oneiric episodes that I will further discuss below.

Centrally featuring in the previously discussed key dream of the novel is the «mucchio» of shoes, this time suggestively located behind a fence, that recalls the various piles of bodies (and indeed of shoes) evoked in the novel's ambiguous and indistinct photographic reproduction of the concentration camp scenes in the poorly printed magazines contemplated by Usepe:

Ci si vede un cumulo caotico di materie biancastre e stecchite, di cui non si discernono le forme, e, altrove, un enorme sfasciume di scarpacce ammonticchiate che, a vista, si lascerebbero scambiare per un cumulo di morti (s 372-373).¹²

The random amassment of organic and inorganic matter not only provides an objective illustration of the lack of plot or «intreccio» (which in the Italian original preserves a specific reference to the interweaving of its individual elements that clearly lacks in an arbitrarily accumulated pile),¹³ but it also points to the transgenerational trauma of the persecution of the Jews that is hinted at in the dream sequence (s 343; h 382).

This central oneiric scene is linked to an earlier chimeric vision in chapter 1942 in which Ida pictures herself amidst a crowd of naked people, all standing in close proximity that leaves them no space to breathe (s 128; h 141), a scene that in its emphasis on the defenseless human body and suffocation alludes to the horrors of the lager. This huddled mass of bodies forms an entanglement of organic matter that is mirrored by the inorganically enmeshed «mucchi di travi e di pietrisco» (s 128) («piles of beams and rubble», h 141). These piles and the atrocities they conceal foreshadow the tragic destinies both in the

¹² «You see there a chaotic heap of whitish, sticklike objects, whose form cannot be distinguished, and, elsewhere, an enormous waste of piled shoes which, at first sight, could be mistaken for a pile of dead bodies» (h 417).

¹³ I am indebted to Tiziana de Rogatis for this perceptive observation. See <https://www.allegoriaonline.it/4400-il-realismo-traumatico-e-la-poetica-del-trauma-nellopera-di-elsa-morante> (last accessed: 10 July 2022).

collective – «sotto quei mucchi si sente un fragore come di migliaia di denti che masticano» (s 128) («beneath those piles a din is heard like thousands of chewing teeth», h 141) – and in the individual sphere – «e sotto a questi il lamento di una creatura» (s 128) («and under it, the whimpering of a child», h 141).

Interestingly, this episode then morphs into an image of Ida standing like a wooden marionette that practically merges with the rest of the amassed debris,¹⁴ with her eerie laughter confounded with the barking of a dog (s 128; h 141). This oneiric scene not only illustrates the centrality of the posthuman, trans-corporeal constitution of the body as a «terrain through which things pass» (ABRAM: 2011, 230),¹⁵ but it also foreshadows the frequent interplay of individual and collective trauma that intimately connects Ida and Useppè's fate with that of the silenced victims of history throughout the text. As Rothberg has shown, Holocaust memories often incorporate individual and collective elements to form a «shared memory» that originates in the individual but is heavily mediated through external factors including social and communicative networks, state institutions, as well as global mediascapes and hence shared images. Importantly, these shared memories also include a mnemonic integration, rather than simply an aggregate, of different perspectives of a remembered episode. The latter notion of memory is yet further complicated by the displacements, contingencies and negotiations of memory that mark the latter as «multidirectional» (ROTHBERG: 2009, 15). While there certainly is a collective historical element in Ida's oneiric visions (PORCIANI: 2019, 239), her dreams also capture and indeed picture what I would call a 'shared trauma' that incorporates culturally mediated, transgenerational elements as well as adopting mechanisms of displacement and condensation that are constitutive of Rothberg's multidirectional memory. At a narrative level, these traumatic moments emerge in the visual documents and oneiric tableaux that point to a shared memory of the horrors that underlie and incessantly puncture the realist surface of the novel.

¹⁴ The skeletal figures of the camp inmates are similarly referred to as «burattini», or puppets (s 373; h 417).

¹⁵ For further discussion on the concept of the trans-corporeal, see Alaimo, who defines the latter a «time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment"» (ALAIMO: 2008, 238). See also WALKER: 2020 for a discussion of the trans-corporeal in Morante.

The above dream sequence proleptically anticipates elements that are central to later episodes: the whimpering creature underneath the rubble mirrors the focus on the tiny shoe that Ida singles out in the pile of the central dream sequence of chapter «1944» (s 343; h 382), both pointing towards the tragic fate of Useppe. The thematic link between Useppe's shoes and the horrors of the Holocaust is further reinforced in the preceding chapter (1943): it is precisely when Ida and her youngest son go out to buy a pair of small shoes (s 240; h 266) that they have a chance encounter with the familiar owner of a pawn shop in the ghetto, Signora Di Segni, which leads them to the discovery of the deportation of the Jews¹⁶ and hence to witness one of the most traumatic moments of the novel. Dreams in Morante's text clearly dialogue with one another, weaving a subterranean web of a traumatic, formerly inaccessible imaginary. What is particularly interesting is how the author consistently explores the co-implication or «intra-action» between matter and meaning, with the central trope of the «mucchio» and its oneiric transfigurations closely interlacing the material landscape with a discursive, and often iconic, reflection on trauma.

A further example will illustrate how the liminal space of trauma is productively translated into an oneiric vision in various iterations in the novel, ultimately resulting in a multistable image that powerfully captures the structural complexities of trauma. In chapter 1943, Useppe and Ida only narrowly escape death during the bombing of San Lorenzo. As they stumble through the debris in the immediate aftermath of the attack, their perception of time has been obliterated (s 169) and their surroundings have been pulverized, with the human literally «intertwined with the more-than-human world» (ALAIMO: 2008, 238). The immense dusty cloud of post-explosion, tar-stained dust penetrates the victims' lungs («faceva tossire col suo sapore di catrame», s 169; «made them cough with its tarry taste», h 186), while a dead horse has turned into an inanimate object. The surrounding cityscape assumes anthropomorphic features and emerges as an equally vulnerable «receptive surface» (WALKER: 2020, 85), with «gli

¹⁶ Once again, the inhumane deportation of the Jews in livestock carriages evokes parallels with the piles of bodies mentioned in various dream episodes and textual images: the victims' cries are compared to «il grido degli animali ammucchiati nei trasporti», and they appear «tutti rimescolati alla rinfusa, come frantumi buttati dentro la stessa macchina» (s 243).

alberi massacrati e anneriti» («massacred and blackened trees») and «cipressi neri e contorti» («black, twisted cypresses», s 170; h 186) as elements of nature are mutilated and stained by war akin to the massacred human bodies. The dry, pungent smoke starkly contrasts with the surprisingly reassuring soft, warm liquid (s 170; h 186) of Ueseppe's urine as he wets himself amongst these scenes of utter destruction.

Much later in the novel, in post-conflict 1947, fragments of Ueseppe's first material encounter with the ruinous force of war resurface in a dream sequence following an epileptic fit. The latter is set in a place similar to the «tenda d'alberi», an idyllic place on the bank of the Tiber that Ueseppe regularly visits with his dog Bella. In the oneiric diegesis, the river has morphed into a circular lake, and the surrounding hills are covered in snow. While the dream includes fragments of the actual snow that he witnessed in Rome as a three-year old in 1945, this formerly peaceful vision transforms into a tormented landscape that is bathed in monochrome colors and set to an eerie silence: «il cielo era nerastro [...] e la neve turbinava, simile a una mitraglia di ghiacci puntuti e micidiali» (s 552) («the sky was blackish [...] and the snow whirled, a machine-gun fire of pointed, murderous bits of ice», h 620). The lexical choices are clearly reminiscent of the weaponry of war, and once again the surrounding landscape is populated by a series of trees with anthropomorphic features that, rendered in their nude fragility, have been contorted and mutilated by an unknown force: «gli alberi si tendevano nudi e neri come corpi scarnificati, forse già morti. [...]» (s 552) («the trees stretched, naked and black, like flayed bodies, perhaps already dead», h 620).

What starkly contrasts with this black and white vision of horror is the pleasantly colorful and warm lake in its midst («di un colore iridato, quieta e luminosa, e di un dolce, meraviglioso tepore», s 552; «an iridescent color, calm and luminous, and of a gentle, wondrous warmth», h 621), which shelters Ueseppe from the horrors of a war-stricken landscape. He is surrounded by countless other tiny heads (s 553) around him swimming in the same waters that remind us of the salvific power of children often evoked in Morante's work (ROSA: 1995, 233). What is extraordinary is that the delightful lake, which recall amniotic liquid (and the reassuring warmth of the urine in the antecedent dream episode) and hence the prominent, semiotic maternal dimension (WEHLING-GIORGI: 2013), transforms the apocalyptic vision

of the outside into an untainted vision of «un giardino sospeso in cielo» (s 553) («a garden hung in the sky», s 621). While the prior image of an apocalyptic scene of urban destruction clearly resurfaces in the condensed oneiric image, it is the pre-conceptual space of the maternal, together with the prelapsarian dimension of childhood, that shields Useppe from the horrors of war, all externalized in a stupendous vision that momentarily contains the dark zones of trauma. All that remains, after the dream, is an «ombra palpitante e colorata» (s 552) («a palpitating, colored shade», h 620), akin to an iconic imprint of traumatic memory.

The latter vision then once again resurfaces in an extraordinary third visually focalized dream episode that even further consolidates associations with the deferred temporality of trauma. Useppe experiences a similar vision during a further visit to the tent of trees, only that this time it is reversed, as it happens when one fixes an image for a long time. Like a multistable figure (*Kippbild*) that suddenly «tilts», *Kippbilder* are particularly suited to conceptualize manifold temporalities that may include the circular, discontinuous or the (ir)reversible (HOLZHEY: 2014, 10). Furthermore, multistable images and the *fort-da* effect they evoke can also be associated with «“liminal” or “threshold”» experiences that destabilize and displace notions of time and space, or subject and object (MITCHELL: 1994, 46), hence evoking associations with the liminal stage of ritual and rites of passage that share the fragmenting psychic space of trauma.

The mirage and its previous iterations focalized by Useppe recall the workings of traumatic memory and the spectral presence of the traumatic event: «siccome lui di quel sogno s'era attualmente dimenticato, lo spettacolo gli dava un doppio stupore: della presenza attuale, e della reminiscenza inconscia» (s 632) («since he had now forgotten that dream, the sight produced in him a double wonder: of the presence now, and of the unconscious reminiscence», h 707-708). The multistable image provides an extraordinary textual visualization of the experience of trauma as an event that remains «unremembered yet [...] not [...] forgotten» (BAER: 2002, 7), an occurrence that continues to haunt the traumatized. The oneiric image not only visualizes the palimpsestic temporal and visual stratifications that constitute the structural complexities of trauma, but trauma is further signaled with the key Morantian word of heightened emotion: «stupore» (PORCELLI). The formerly apocalyptic dream vision has now been superseded by

a marvelous aquatic vegetation (s 632; h 708), with the aquatic image once again recalling material co-instantiation but also the pre-symbolic maternal dimension.¹⁷ The spectacle is then captured in Useppé's last poem, yet a further clue to the pre-conceptual, synesthetic translation of this spectacular vision (s 632; h 708). Vision, together with song, poetry and miming, are all genres that harness the semiotic, pre-symbolic sphere (KRISTEVA: 1974), providing powerful channels of picturing trauma and constituting alternative languages that «dialogue with the notion of loss from a pre-conceptual perspective» (DE ROGATIS: 2021, 177).

3. Doubling, dissociation and daydreams/hallucinations

The phenomenology of the oneiric in Morante's works extends well beyond the realm of sleep to include visions, daydreams and mirages, to the extent that «la (con)fusione fra veglia e sonno diventa programmatica» (PORCIANI: 2019, 242). In this section, I would like to explore some of these altered realities, with a particular focus on the visual focalization of trauma. I will also show how Ida's various «sdoppiamenti» can be productively linked to trauma-related dissociation, whilst at the same time further underscoring the fragile, materially enmeshed makeup of the human body. Dissociation is a complex phenomenon that involves the automatic removal from the scene of trauma as the individual fails to integrate sensory data at a cognitive or linguistic level. Recent studies have shown that the latter response often results in «a division of an individual's personality [...] that determines his or her characteristic mental and behavioural actions» (NIJENHUIS AND VAN DER HART: 2011, 418, in MOSKOWITZ: 2019, 22).¹⁸ There is plenty of evidence in the novel to substantiate the links between dissociation and Ida's response to individual and collective

¹⁷ IOVINO: 2012, 453 in fact highlights the etymological link between the Latin for mother and matter, i.e. «mater» and «materia».

¹⁸ Note that Moskowitz et. al explicitly associate dissociation with amnesia. See also HERMAN: 1997, 43, who underlines the links between a sense of anesthesia and psychic disengagement when exposed to traumatic experiences: «Perceptions may be numbed or distorted, with partial anesthesia or the loss of particular sensations. Time sense may be altered, often with a sense of slow motion, and the experience may lose its quality of ordinary reality. The person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body, or as though the whole experience is a bad dream from which she will shortly awaken» (HERMAN: 2015, 43).

experiences of trauma. In fact, it is often in the aftermath of traumatizing events like Ida's rape, Nino's death and her various oblique encounters with the horrors of war that the protagonist succumbs to a split consciousness that, as I will show below, is accompanied by a sense of material disintegration: «Non si sentiva la stessa Ida di prima; ma un'avventuriera della doppia vita» (s 81) («She didn't feel the same Ida as before, but rather an adventuress, leading a double life», h 90).

As I have previously shown, photographs and images provide a productive interpretive key to the characters' dissociative response to trauma that is often captured in the novel's visual imagery. Considering the difficulty of organizing traumatic experience into linguistic memory, traumatic events are often «registered in a specific, imagistic way that stands outside normal memory creation» (LUCKHURST: 2008, 148). In their imagistic registration, the workings of the camera bear specific resemblance to the structure of traumatic memory, as Baer has argued, with both trauma and photography trapping an event in its occurrence (BAER: 2002, [8-]9).

Together with the visual nature of her dreams, the recall of dissociative states in the novel in fact often features a distinctly visual element, as exemplified in the lucid images of the rape scene haunting Ida: «i fatti del giorno avanti le riattraversarono la coscienza assolutamente lucida in un urto rapido d'ombre taglienti, come un film in bianco e nero» (s 81) («the events of the previous day ran once more through her absolutely lucid mind in a rapid clash of sharp shadows, like a film in black and white», h 90). Trauma is not only narrated in pictures, but dissociative states frequently give rise to an affective imaginative investment into alternative realities that are focalized and visualized through the main characters. When Ida finds out about the death of her first-born child Nino, for instance, she navigates the streets of Rome in a semi-conscious state, failing to preserve any memory of this journey when arriving at the morgue for the identification of the body. This moment of amnesia, or indeed traumatic dissociation, is likened to an interrupted photographic sequence: «di tutto questo percorso la sua coscienza non ha registrato nulla, segnalandole solo il punto d'arrivo, come un fotogramma spezzato» (s 465, emphasis mine) («But of all this journey, her consciousness recorded nothing, marking only the point of arrival, like a torn film frame», h 522, emphasis mine, translation adapted). The dissociative state furthermore affects Ida's vision, distorting and deforming the urban landscape and topography

around her «come da specchi convessi» (s 466) («as if in convex mirrors», h 524): the light is perceived as a «uno zenith accecante», s 465) («blinding zenith», h 523) that bestows all objects an obscene appearance, with even the basilica appearing as distorted (s 466; h 523). On another occasion, following the central dream episode discussed above, Ida finds herself febrile and unable to map the city of Rome, whose topography becomes confused and tilted (s 344; h 384).

It is also the semantic field of vision – and more specifically the eyes – that often provide the first clues to the individual's post-traumatic state. As Fumi has shown, in Morante's works the eyes are central to the portrayal of each character not only in the eighteenth-century conception of them being a mirror of the soul, but above all because the eyes are a diaphragm that links and separates individual and collective history (FUMI: 1994, 238). The eyes similarly provide a window into the traumatized mind of the individual and, by inference, of the collective. When Nino tells the story of his killing of a German soldier, for instance, he assumes an uncharacteristically empty expression which recalls the empty glass of a lens: «D'un tratto il suo occhio, sempre così animato, ebbe una strana fissità corrusca, vuota d'immagini come il vetro d'una lente» (s 211) («suddenly his eyes, always so lively, had a strange, frowning stare, drained of images, like the glass of a lens», h 233). Later in the novel, Ida once again recognizes Nino's «sguardo di lampo fotografico» (s 442) («like a photographer's flash», h 497) when recounting the violence of war, as if the horrors were imagistically captured in his eyes.

Similarly, trauma is pictured in the indecipherable images impressed onto the retinas of the returning Jews after the war:

[N]ei loro occhi infossati, neri o marrone, non parevano rispecchiarsi le immagini presenti d'intorno, ma una qualche ridda di figure allucinatorie, come una lanterna magica di forme assurde girante in perpetuo (s 376).¹⁹

Another visual trope that is linked to traumatic memory is in fact the magic lantern, an early type of image projector that uses various kinds of pictures (photographs, paintings or prints), one or more lenses, and

¹⁹ «[T]heir hollow eyes, black or brown, didn't seem to reflect the images of their present surroundings, but some host of haunting figures, like a magic lantern of constantly changing, absurd forms» (h 422).

a single source of light. The magic lantern provides a particularly vivid description of the hallucinatory perceptions of the traumatized Jews upon their return from the camps.

In the same context, the narrative provides a near-textbook description of the iconic registration of trauma when detailing how the images register in the form of an indelible, indecipherable writing on the retina of the traumatized former inmates:

È curioso come certi occhi serbino visibilmente l'ombra di chi sa quali immagini, già impresse, chi sa quando e dove, nella retina, a modo di una scrittura incancellabile che gli altri non sanno leggere – e spesso non vogliono (s 376).²⁰

Trauma appears illegible both to the traumatized and to the onlooker, who can only sense the shadows left by the exposure to illegible images (s 376; h 422), with the unfathomable experiences of the Jews escaping the coordinates of sensory and cognitive apperception whilst being productively condensed into images.

While the retina of the former inmates of the concentration camps becomes the canvas for the indecipherable imprint of trauma, Morante's traumatic realism harnesses the potentiality of ekphrastic expression to capture these traumatic moments in the novel. Indeed, *History: A Novel* allows us to glimpse these very traumatic fractures through what Didi-Huberman refers to as lacuna-images, which provide an oblique form of insight into horror (of the Holocaust).

The lacuna-image is a trace-image and a disappearance-image at the same time. Something remains that is not the thing, but a scrap of its resemblance. Something – very little, a film – remains of a process of annihilation: that something, therefore, bears witness to a disappearance while simultaneously resisting it, since it becomes the opportunity of its possible remembrance (DIDI-HUBERMAN: 2008, 167).

Images provide fleeting access to moments that otherwise remain unprocessed, to a liminal space that remains otherwise untold.

The latter is further explored in Ida's various moments of doubling, which provide another productive way of accessing a liminal zone that

²⁰ «It's odd how some eyes visibly retain the shadow of who-knows-what images, impressed on them before, no telling when and where, in the retina, like an indelible writing that others cannot read – and often don't want to» (h 422).

remains otherwise silenced. The links between Ida's nocturnal dreams and her daytime altered states of consciousness are in fact underlined by the narrator early in the novel:

le vicende sognate trascorrevano in un doppio fondo cieco della sua immaginazione, inaccessibile alla conoscenza. E questa sorta di sdoppiamento le durava poi nella veglia [...] in quel suo stato di torpore trascinato oltre la notte (s 135).²¹

One episode of «sdoppiamento» that specifically illustrates the close link between traumatic and altered psychological states is the scene following Nino's death, a moment that heralds a profound structural and expressive fracture (Rosa: 1995, 273) in the novel as a whole as it also coincides with Ueseppe's first epileptic attack. As illustrated above, the blunt impact of the event is compared to a ruptured frame. It is not only the psyche that suffers fragmentation as a result, but this episode sees a similar fusion between Ida's porous body and the urban topography of the city with a recurring focus on naturally derived construction materials «gesso» (chalk or plaster) and «calce» (lime) that centrally feature in other close encounters with trauma.²²

Lime is a naturally occurring chemical compound composed of calcium oxide, gained from limestone that in its turn is a sedimentary rock, i.e. formed from the remains of living organisms,²³ and hence further weakening longstanding alleged dichotomies between inert and agentic, human and non-human substances. The interpenetration between body and lime provides a compelling imagery of a deep-seated sense of material fragmentation and altered perception that dominates the entire episode, with the body portrayed as a porous receptacle in which things can settle and sediment (ABRAM, in IOVINO AND OPPERMAN: 2012, 459). Starting with Ida feeling the taste of lime in entering the white room of the mortuary («il sapore polveroso

²¹ «[T]he dreamed events occurred in a blind false bottom of her imagination, inaccessible to her consciousness. And this virtual splitting of her personality continued during her waking hours [...], as that state of torpor dragged on beyond the night» (h 149, translation adapted).

²² As in the reference to the «volti gessosi» of the naked bodies in the first dream sequence referred to above (s 127), or the «faccia bianca come un calco di gesso» that Ida assumes after the death of Ueseppe (s 467).

²³ <https://www.geolosc.org.uk/ks3/gsl/education/resources/rockcycle/page3610.html#:~:text=Limestone%20is%20mainly%20formed%20from,Peak%20District%20and%20the%20Pennines.> (last accessed: 2 September 2022).

della calcina», s 465; «she seemed to taste that dusty lime», h 522), a cement-like substance subsequently fills her throat and prevents her from screaming «come se le avessero colato del cemento» (s 465) («as if they had poured concrete over her», h 523). In the following scene, we can witness her body mirroring the fragility and fragmentation of the war-torn urban architecture of an alien city: «questi paesi sono fatti di calce che si può spaccare e sbriciolare da un momento all'altro. Lei stessa è un pezzo di calce, e rischia di cascare in frantumi e venire spazzata via» (s 466) («These villages are made of plaster, all plaster, which can crack and collapse at any moment. She herself is a piece of plaster, and risks crumbling into fragments and being swept away before she reaches home», h 524). Her body not only disintegrates into the dust and lime akin to a wall («il corpo le si rompeva in polvere e calcinacci, come un muro», s 466; «her body was breaking into dust and rubble, like a wall», h 524), but the wall itself assumes agentic, anthropomorphic features that merge with Ida's in a compelling image of trans-corporeality: «Non solo il proprio corpo, ma le pareti stesse fruscivano e sibilavano riducendosi in polvere» (s 466) («not only her own body, but the walls themselves rustled and hissed, turning to dust», h 524). The detritus of war inscribes itself onto and indeed penetrates the violently inflected urban architecture and the body to articulate a destructive, all-encompassing traumatic moment in history. In its agential intra-actions,²⁴ any ontological dichotomies between human and non-human are levelled as bodies are «literally swallowed up, fatally fused with the rubble» (WALKER: 2020, 86). In this context the porous female body not only becomes a privileged signifier of an all-pervasive state of trauma, but it is also the female voice that harnesses the expressive potentialities of trauma to tell a formerly untold story.

The various visual devices explored in the present essay provide an oblique way of representing trauma, with the female body (in its symbiotic fusion with Useppe) acting as a canvas that bears the imprint of the inaccessible spaces of horror. The various photographic documents, oneiric episodes, multistable images and dissociative doublings that we have considered above show how the iconic dimension provides

²⁴ As Barad defines agential intra-actions: «Agential intra-actions are specific causal material enactments that may or may not involve "humans". [...] The world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which "mattering" itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities» (BARAD: 2008, 135).

Morante with a powerful yet oblique lens through which to articulate a form of reality that cannot be grasped by conventional schemes of knowledge. The latter remains firmly imbricated and is indeed co-extensive with an intra-agential material reality that becomes itself a «site of narrativity [...] [or] corporeal palimpsest on which stories are inscribed» (IOVINO AND OPPERMAN: 2012, 251). It is only through the novel's female voice – and indeed gaze – of the narrator, though, that the primacy of the visual dimension unlocks a new potentiality of expression that defies the presumed unrepresentability of trauma, proposing a new way of focalizing history and its 'shared traumata'.

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Biography

KATRIN WEHLING-GIORGI is Associate Professor of Italian Studies at Durham University, UK. She is the author of *Gadda and Beckett: Storytelling, Subjectivity and Fracture* (Oxford, Legenda, 2014), and she has published widely on European modernism and on female subjectivity in the works of Elsa Morante, Goliarda Sapienza, Alice Sebold and Elena Ferrante in both Italianist and Comparatist Journals. She has furthermore co-edited (with Tiziana de Rogatis and Stiliana Milkova) a special issue on Elena Ferrante (*Elena Ferrante in a Global Context*, "MLN", 136, 1, 2021) and (together with Alberica Bazzoni and Emma Bond) a collection of critical essays on Goliarda Sapienza (*Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016). Her current research focuses on female subjectivity and the maternal figure in the context of Visual Studies and trauma in twentieth-century and contemporary literature.

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2. Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel* and Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War: Traumatic Realism, Archives du Mal* and Female Pathos

Tiziana de Rogatis

Abstract

Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel* (*La Storia*, 1974) and Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War* (*U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, 1985) are two distinctive historical and emotional narratives, that develop around certain traumatic cores directly and indirectly related to the Second World War, as well as articulating themselves through a female universe and its pathos. In this contribution – divided into a foreword, three paragraphs and a conclusion – I will adopt Derridean categories such as «spectrality», «archive fever» and «*archives du mal*». My goal is to show that, despite belonging to different genres, the works by these two writers feature a similar traumatic philosophy of history, and implement comparable ethical and aesthetic choices aimed at formulating experimental and up-to-date forms of narrative realism.

La Storia (1974) e *La guerra non ha un volto di donna* (*U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, 1985) sono due diverse narrazioni storiche ed emozionali, articolate intorno ad alcuni nuclei traumatici connessi direttamente e indirettamente alla Seconda guerra mondiale e visti dalla prospettiva di un universo femminile e del suo pathos. In questo contributo – articolato in una premessa, tre paragrafi e una conclusione – riprendo le categorie derridiane della «spettralità», del «mal d'archivio» e degli «*archives du mal*». Questo saggio vuole dimostrare che le due scrittrici creano due opere diverse nella loro appartenenza di genere ma estremamente affini nella filosofia traumatica della storia e nella opzione etica ed estetica per forme sperimentali e aggiornate di realismo narrativo.

This isn't me speaking, it's my grief speaking.
(Valentina Mikhailovna Ikevich, partisan; ufw 258)

Foreword

*History: A Novel (La Storia: Romanzo, 1974)*¹ and *The Unwomanly Face of War (U vojny ne ženskoe lico, 1985)*² are two distinctive historical and emotional narratives that develop around certain traumatic cores directly and indirectly related to the Second World War, as well as articulating themselves through a female universe and its pathos.

Elsa Morante places at the centre of her novel *History* the years between 1941 and 1947. The text is divided into eight parts, preceded by a historical focus and a final addition, both of them endowing the novel with a paratextual structure organically connected to the main narrative (Jos: 2020). The polyphonic plot of the novel develops in a fictional fashion some crucial historical nuclei of the war that are specifically related to the city of Rome, a topic on which Morante had carefully researched (LUCAMANTE: 2014; ZANARDO: 2015). At the heart of the plot stands out the story of elementary school teacher Ida Ramundo and her family, particularly her son Useppe.

The Unwomanly Face of War by Svetlana Alexievich was published in the Soviet Union in 1985 – the same year of Morante's death, and eleven years after the publication of *History*. In this literary reportage, Belo-Russian novelist Alexievich – who would eventually win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 – selects the oral testimonies of 500 women among former partisans and, in most part, Soviet veterans who enlisted in the armed forces as volunteers between 1941 and 1945. Thematically structured in 16 chapters, the testimonies benefit from an extremely well pondered montage, that is constantly accompanied by a narrating voice.

¹ Morante's in-text citations will be here referred to with h (*History*, 1984) and s (*La Storia*, 1974).

² Alexievich's in-text citations will be here referred to with ufw. Due to some differences in the English translation, this contribution will also refer to specific pages from the 2013 Complete Works Collection (ALEXIEVICH SVETLANA, *U vojny ne ženskoe lico*, in *Sobranie proizvedenij*, Moscow, Vremja), which was based on the reviewed edition 2004 (Moscow, Palmira). The 2004 edition contains significantly expanded sections, which were not originally present in the first edition, published in 1985.

In this essay, I will adopt Derridean categories such as «spectrality», «archive fever» and «*archives du mal*» (see *Introduction*, I.1.3.-I.1.5.). My goal is to show that, despite belonging to different genres, the works by these two writers feature a similar traumatic philosophy of history, and implement comparable ethical and aesthetic choices aimed at formulating experimental and up-to-date forms of narrative realism.

This contribution consists of this foreword, three paragraphs and a conclusion. In the first paragraph, I shall delineate some affinities and converging aspects of both texts. The second and third paragraphs focus on *History* and *The Unwomanly Face of War* respectively, by closely examining their formal nuclei, poetics and epitomization of a traumatic philosophy of history, all of which are succinctly envisaged in the first paragraph. In the second paragraph (distributed in two subparagraphs), I relate the central metaphor of *History* with a title, *The Great Evil (Il Grande Male)*, which was initially considered by Morante for her novel. The metaphorical ramifications of this title display a relationship between epilepsy and racial stigma, as well as suggesting an intersection of epilepsy, racial persecution and rape.

The third paragraph is divided into four sub-sections. In the first two, I shall analyse the dynamics of a female uncanny projected and introjected by Soviet women volunteers during the Second World War and over the following forty years, up to the publication of Alexievich's literary reportage. In the third and fourth sub-paragraphs, I investigate the uncanny quality of the feminine traumatic memory epitomized by the writer.

The conclusions will reintroduce some of the categories from the first paragraph, verify them and rework their features on the basis of the findings featured in the two central paragraphs.

1. *History* and *The Unwomanly Face of War*: affinities and converging aspects

The categories of «spectrality» elaborated by Derrida (see *Introduction*, I.1.3.-I.1.5.) show to which extent both *History* and *The Unwomanly Face of War* realise the grafting of the «*archives du mal*» (DERRIDA: 1995a, 1) – i.e. the metaphorical and liminal receptacles of latent traumatic historical truths – onto the «hypomnesic» archives – i.e. all the external manifestations of psychic memory that are differently stored and catalogued in various forms of public and collective historical

preservation (DERRIDA: 1995b, 11, 12, 91). Such grafting mechanism is made possible by using the dispersed and polysemic tools of microhistory and oral history in order to discern the different traumatic landscapes of the same historical frame – the Second World War – as they are narrated by women and their «*archives du mal*», or «archives of evil», «dissimulées ou détruites, interdites, détournées, «refoulées» (DERRIDA: 1995a, 1). Though originated from two differently creative, linguistic and national perspectives, both narratives possess a communal imaginative mode: a deconstruction of all the rationalizing and defensive forms inherent to historical teleology. Such deconstruction is obtained through a «retelling» and a catharsis of trauma (CALABRESE: 2020, 1-7), together with the enunciation of a historical-emotional narration.

A comparison based on the texts' different genres already shows a first complementarity of this strategy. Right from its title, Morante's fictional work places side by side history and novel (PORCELLI: 2013, 118), document and fictional invention. It exposes them to a pressing and creative tension that is, however, far from any postmodern relativist instances. As Morante herself pointed out to her English-speaking publisher, «from the first threshold of the text, my ambition has been one of entrusting to literary fiction – the novel itself – the testimony of historical truth – history» (MORANTE: 1976).

The Unwomanly Face of War thematises the documentary truth of women's historical testimonies, but at the same time suggests that the objective status of this truth can be destabilized by their memorial and oral qualities. In other words, their documentary truth is granted by their structural «misremembering»: «errors, inventions and myths that lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings» (PORTELLI: 1991, 2). Alexievich favours the anti-scientific truth of testimony, which emerges even when it is somewhat being distorted or reshaped by the primary trauma of wartime experience, or by the subsequent trauma of collective censorship: «Of course, it is not the whole of life and not the whole truth. But it is their truth» (ufw 225). The hybrid quality of this truth is further enhanced by the narrative montage and the highly emotional interpretation of the narrator's voice. Because of all these strategies, this and other Alexievich's literary reportages have been variously defined as «novel-oratorio», «novel-evidence» and «epic chorus» (GAPOVA: 2016, 106).

In her novel *History*, Morante describes the dramatic exposure to war through Ida's receptive and creative vulnerability, also epitomizing

her defenceless subjugation – she is ready to generate a child regardless of him being the fruit of a wartime sexual violence. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, the exposure to war is instead mostly intentional and often shows its martial-like, even consciously homicidal features: not unlike their fellow male soldiers and comrades in arms, many women who volunteered as soldiers, officers and partisans decided that, under those dramatic circumstances, the choice of killing German invaders was not just a necessary one, but also a legitimate, sometimes even a desirable act. Nonetheless, though in opposite and complementary ways, the narrative mechanisms inherent to both texts gravitate around the same disguised, uncertain and non-binary perception of a feminine that is being projected on the stage of Great History. Both authors represent this dimension as «abjection», that is – according to Kristeva (1982, 4) – «what disturbs identity, system, order», «what does not respect borders, positions, rules» «the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite». Morante's protagonist is persistently represented as a doubly hybrid character: she is a half-Jew who camouflages herself in order to comply with Aryan normality; at the same time, Ida is half-epileptic. Since childhood, she has been scarred by the «sacred disease» par excellence (PINKUS: 1992, 26), hence she is only apparently assimilated into the healthy population.

As for Alexievich, in the aftermath of the war, the choice to enlist, fight and kill – expressed by women veterans and former partisans – started being perceived as «forbidden,³ even unnatural» (ufw 202). Still, former female fighters were not the only ones to undergo a collective trial: nurses were too blamed for having taken part in a situation where traditional male and female codes had overlapped (ufw 245).

Because of their experiencing a great historical trauma, these real and fictional women have voluntarily or involuntarily withdrawn from their millennial domestic condition, of which they still bear palpable traces. Forasmuch as women have positioned themselves within a liminal dimension – both ordinary and exceptional – the historical trauma has pushed them to embody the uncanny in its most etymological sense, *Unheimlich* or *unhomely*: «that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar» (FREUD: 2013, 124 [1919]). In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, liminality marks the passage

³ «Forbidden» is an absolute adequate equivalent of the original «zapretnoe» (ALEXIEVICH: 2013, 391).

between before and after, between the warfront and the achieved peace, between the *sestrichka* («little sister») and the adventuress. Indeed, the local epithet *sestrichka* was normally used by Russian soldiers to affectionately address nurses and fellow female combatants (ufw 76, 124, 262). The term was often accompanied by gestures of admiration, protection and deep gratitude (ufw 56, 109, 152, 228).

Trauma thus endows women's universe with exceptional and prosaic traits, intense and abject features, heroic and anti-heroic postures. Thanks to their powerful anti-rhetorical energy, both authors' storytelling unsettles the scientific or mythologized status of the historical narrative, as well as the universality of its locutionary subject. In a simultaneously empathic and cognitive process, the anti-omniscient narrating voices of both texts perform their belonging to the feminine gender. This belonging is being described in the text, and locate themselves within that same liminal space, each time by adopting witnessing or shamanic postures, documentary or psychic perspectives, maternal or filial roles.

The texts converge in the extreme diversity of their female characters. They both show that uncovering women's archives of evil and staging their removed presence from Great History means coming to terms with the uncanny quality of that very presence. This aspect is summarized on 25 April 1945 by a sentence spoken by Palmiro Togliatti, the Italian chief of the Communist Party, who thus explained his intention to exclude female partisans from the Liberation celebrating parades: «people would not understand» (TOGLIATTI in MENAPACE: 2020, 30).

Since their publication, *History* and *The Unwomanly Face of War* have been powerfully demolishing the «patriarchive» (DERRIDA: 1995b, 4n, 36). I adopt this Derridean expression in order to delineate the authoritarian paradigms standing at the core of both national and transnational collective memories connected with the Second World War, the Italian Resistance and – more generally – the teleology of progressive values attached to modernity (see also *Introduction*, II.1.). In this context, the «patriarchive» encompasses a wide and heterogeneous range of postures, discourses, and historical research that, on the one hand, are ascribable to mythologizing and ideological political dimensions, and on the other hand may derive from monological, impersonal and/or hyper-scientific orientations.

Morante and Alexievich indeed choose to thematise some of the repertoires of the «patriarchive», since the constellations of events at

the core of their storytelling have been monumentalized by national and identitarian, geopolitical and/or cultural forms of appropriation. Eloquent examples of this phenomenon are the formation of the Easter Bloc, along with the enormous reinforcement of the Soviet Union, occurred during the post-war period, across both domestic and international territories. These events were also made possible by the death of almost thirty million Soviet people, scattered around various fronts. The example of Italy calls instead for a more distinctly identitarian perspective, not just because the Resistance (one of the historical nuclei of Morante's novel) has represented and still represents an integral part of the Italian Constitution, but also because it stands at the core of the identity expressed by progressive and radical intellectuals who, in a large part, widely and harshly criticized *History* right after its publication.

As both texts stage the refraction of the one and only vast objective actuality represented by the Second World War, they incorporate this event into the subjective space inhabited by female traumatic memory and its refracted use according to a narrative perspective. Traumatic memory can obviously express itself through great variations, connected with individual resources and the infinite heterogeneous nature of historical and cultural contexts; however, it also develops on the basis of similar psychic mechanisms. As I have already explained in the theoretical introduction to this volume (I.1.1.), «traumatic memory» (VAN DER KOLK: 2014, 174-199) concurrently positions itself outside and inside time. It is, all together, a diachronic, atemporal and contemporaneous event. The two texts cover all three levels of traumatic memory. Moreover, in spite of different narrative criteria, these all gravitate around analogous thematic and imaginative spheres. The most prominent of them is the recurrence of the symbolic figure of the mother, and her transgenerational heritage. The goal of both texts is to create an experience of emotional truth whose cognitive intensity may often give readers the impression of trespassing the narrative enclosure. Such immersive experience is obtained through the formal mechanism of «traumatic realism». By being, at the same time, a dual system and an intertwined combination of ordinary and extreme dimensions, traumatic realism takes itself to extremes so much so that it deactivates the very transparency of realism (ROTHBERG: 2000, 106; see also *Introduction* I.2.4.): this deactivation is also affected by the anti-omniscient status of both narrators. In both *History* and *The*

Unwomanly Face of War, traumatic realism is based upon a notion of universalized female vulnerability. As women's exposure to life gets systematically extended to the whole of humanity, a destabilizing form of posthuman compassion is generated. In each text, this can go so far as to comprise both victims and perpetrators, with neither of them ceasing to bear the marks of unforgivable injustice and grave historical guilt respectively. The entangled double bottom of traumatic realism implies a co-presence of ordinary and exceptional horizons that are destined to interweave and pour into each other, as soon as the «zone of trauma» (DE ROGATIS: 2021, 176-177) produces a slippage between the two planes. Moreover, both texts show two opposite and complementary strategies if one observes the narrative hierarchy they establish between ordinary and exceptional horizons, i.e. the way in which each text, from the start, assigns a primary narrative function to one of these two dimensions. In *History*, the humble averageness of Ida – a petit bourgeois elementary school teacher – along with the ordinariness of an entire working class Roman neighbourhood, are gradually demolished by a traumatic double bottom, to which a scattered and analogical universe of traces refers throughout the novel. The opposite occurs in *The Unwomanly Face of War*. The commemoration of the courage shown by women soldiers, officers and nurses – strewn across the vast Soviet territory – along with the reconstruction of their relationship with death, and their pondered choices to take and/or rescue lives, they all pour into an anti-heroic, minute life. It is the space of everyday existence, which women themselves stubbornly place next to a ferociousness first experienced in the trenches, and then witnessed and remembered on a daily basis from the post-war period onwards: bodily symptoms, emotional bonds, prosaic gestures, transversal feelings of compassion and pity.

2. Elsa Morante, *History*

2.1. The Great Evil: epilepsy and racial stigma

Morante initially considered entitling her novel *History* «The Great Evil» («Il Grande Male»; CIVES: 2006, 57). The phrase theoretically defines epilepsy according to its most serious and cyclical manifestation: an acute convulsive seizure followed by a loss of consciousness, in English defined with a French formula as «Le Grand Mal» (SCAMBLER: 1989, 2-3). As such, epilepsy is experienced by Ida first during her

childhood, then when she gets raped by Gunther in 1941, twenty-six years later (s 68-72; h 58-63). From the standpoint of a deep-rooted historical and anthropological dimension, the *morbus caducus*, i.e. the «falling sickness» – the illness of those who violently fall to the ground due to acute and recurrent crises, suddenly losing control on themselves and their physiological functions – has been significantly and insistently perceived as a «sacred disease» (KICHELMACHER AND CAVIGLIA: 1992, 31, 37), as well as a sign of deviance, not only since the Classical period, but also during modern times.

In Morante's plot, this anthropological, sacral and expiatory intersection allows to metaphorically expand the «great evil» from its original clinical context to a historical perspective.

This title reveals the strategy of a microhistory embedded within Great History, one where an archive of evil is grafted onto a hypomnesic archive. The novel compares and interchange two very distant worlds such as epilepsy and racial persecution, i.e. an archive of evil derived from a superstitious tradition removed by modernity, and an hypomnesic archive originated from one of the darkest pages of German and European Twentieth-century history. The bio-anthropological evil of epilepsy thus progressively inscribes the historical crime of racial persecutions within its sacral, expiatory and superstitious spheres.

The symmetry between epilepsy and racial oppression starts from the archaic interpretation of epileptic pathologies. In the novel, this is indirectly represented through the angle of Ida's Calabrian grandparents, and the larger peasant world they embody. From this archaic point of view, the little girl's epilepsy is «la scelta inconsapevole d'una creatura isolata che raccogliesse la tragedia collettiva» (s 30) («the unaware choice of an isolated creature who embodies a collective tragedy»; h 25). According to Mediterranean anthropology, epilepsy is given great symbolic significance, and «first of all constitutes itself as the consequence of a fault, a sin or an exposition to strong negative energies» (PINKUS: 1992, 27-28). In the context of Christian-related folk traditions, the most explicit manifestation of epilepsy, i.e. the convulsive seizure, appertains to the sphere of the sacred, because it is perceived as «the action of ultra-worldly powers, preferably the devil or the forces of evil» (PINKUS: 1992, 29).⁴

⁴ This paragraph chose to specifically refer to Pinkus' scientific edited volume on epilepsy (including quotes from Kichelmacher and Caviglia), rather than to other

The first pages of Morante's novel feature a similarly black soteriology, conveyed by an extraordinary oxymoron in which, over the space of merely one page, Ida's «dolcezza passiva» («passive sweetness») is associated with the «idiozia misteriosa» («mysterious idiocy») of animals and their «senso del sacro» («sense of the sacred»): «il potere universale che può mangiarli e annientarli, per la loro colpa di essere nati» (s 21) («the universal power that can devour them and annihilate them, for their guilt in being born»; h 18). With an updated, technological variant, in the novel's first epigraph, the words of a Hiroshima survivor warn of the inconsolable preverbal despair of «cavie che non sanno il perché della loro morte» (s) («guinea pigs who do not know the reason for their death»; h ix).

Epilepsy thus immediately presents itself as a rhizomatic narrative device, one that is able to recount and aggregate archetypal and posthuman dimensions, along with the scope of a historically incarnated deadly force that looms over all living being, just like some sort of incomprehensible punishment. In the original Italian text, Ida's parents are, in one case, defined as «i maestri Ramundo» (s 28) («the Ramundo teachers»), a term that contextually qualifies them as both schoolteachers and emigrants.⁵ The long flashback (s 21-53; h 17-45) featured in the first part of the novel reconstructs their somewhat typical migration from their places of origin (the far Italian South, for Giuseppe; the city of Padua, in the case of Nora), their moving and settlement to Cosenza, their educational roles, as well as the appearance of a political conscience (Giuseppe is an anarchist). A relative emancipation, together with a tendentious condition of displacement, allows both Giuseppe and Nora to partially face their daughter's illness with a medicalized approach: Ida is, albeit approximately, treated by a doctor who «aveva studiato al nord la scienza moderna» (s 31) («had studied modern medicine in the North»; h 26). Nonetheless, in both parents' mind soon emerge the traces of an

analogous, more recent ones coming from English-speaking areas, because Pinkus works on the anthropological dimension of epilepsy within Mediterranean, as well as Biblical and Jewish contexts. Such an approach is therefore more pertinent to the source materials as well as to the anthropological framework which Morante most likely was drawing from.

⁵ The English translation 1984 by William Weaver has completely eliminated the word *maestri*, as it reads as follows: «Already, at that time, I believe, modern buildings were spreading out from the medieval city that girds the hill. In one of these buildings, in fact, humble and ordinary, there was the Ramundos' cramped apartment» (h 24).

archaic prospect attached to epilepsy. Since when Ida is five years old, her «attacks» (in the original Italian, «insulti», i.e. «insults, offences»), push both Nora and Giuseppe towards a superstitious anguish –«come una menomazione» (s 28) («as if it were some genetic defect»; h 24) – such as to define the phenomenon as «male innominato» (s 28) («an unnamed disease»; h 24), a «male segreto» (s 30) («secret illness»; h 26) to be hidden from the girl's paternal relatives in Calabria.⁶ The will to exorcise a forbidden word is typical of an imagination that is transversally shared by Catholic and Jewish worlds, i.e. the two cultural contexts from which Ida's parents respectively come. In both cultures, epilepsy is a sign of God's wrath, a negative theophany of which humans are guilty for utterly incomprehensible and mysterious reasons (KICHELMACHER AND CAVIGLIA: 1992, 29-30). If, on the one hand, the hypothesis of a «religious stigma» attached to «certain inexplicable maladies» (s 29; h 25) is described as plausible by the female witness narrator, i.e. as a notion that is no longer adequate to the parameters of modernity, on the other hand the same hypothesis progressively seeps into the construction of Morante's plot. The idea of a stigma is ultimately and precisely determined by the dynamics of scapegoating, one that affects an entire ethnicity (the Jews), but also impacts on the great anonymous masses of modernity (as the story of Giovannino reveals). Inside this progressive symmetric spiral of misfortune and guilt, where biological and racial evils are intertwined – as the former naturalises and objectifies the latter – the plot discloses a clump of anachronism inside modernity. Within its deep nucleus, this spiral feeds and engenders an archaic magma of «non-contemporaneity» (BLOCH: 1991, 97-117 [1935]) of the contemporary. As one reads *History* and its plot from the structural angle of microhistory (D'ANGELI: 2014, 94), it is clear that Morante pushes her readers towards a concrete experience of the «great evil» of modernity: she thus stages a cyclical exit from the teleological paths of progress, and the latter's tendency to create and collapse into a double bottom of irrationality, superstitious persecution, and violence.

⁶ The English translation 1984 by Weaver has omitted the adjective «segreto» originally used by Morante, so the translated text reads as follows: «In previous years the family would move, in the warmer months, down towards the tip of Calabria, to the paternal home; but that summer, they didn't leave their stifling little Cosenza apartment, for fear Iduzza might be attacked by her illness in the country, in the presence of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins» (h 26).

The gradual symmetry between the mark of racial difference and the signs of a physiological disease is made possible by a transgenerational mechanism, where it is crucial the way in which Nora – Ida's Jewish mother – perceives her little daughter's illness as «un altro scandalo da tener nascosto al mondo» (s 29) («another scandal to keep hidden from the world»; h 25). In Nora's view, epilepsy is but a variant of the «universal scandal»: the stigma of a guilt that keeps haunting her and is primarily rooted in her Judaism. Forced to live «come soggetta a un dio vendicativo e carcerario» (s 25) («as if subject to a vindictive jailer-God»; h 21), Nora is encircled by a persecutory and cumulative dimension where being a Jew (as is her case), an anarchist (as her husband is), and epileptic (like in Ida's case), are all equally occult evils, and human beings can only let themselves be worn out by them, in the privacy of their homes (s 25; h 21).

Thanks to its insightful weaving, the plot is modelled upon the transmission of the mother's symptoms upon her daughter: Nora's nervous fits and her subsequent relief (s 26; h 22) reappear in an intensified form once little Ida's epilepsy occurs. For Nora, the performativity of shame must remain hidden inside a family's closed domestic space, so much so that she silences both herself and her family (s 25-26; h 21-22); the same performativity of shame is resumed in the tragic scene of Useppe's death, after which Ida hushes the dog Bella and tries to hide the body of her child from the world (s 646-647; h 546-547). In the last, tragic passage, the self-inflicted bruises of Ida, overpowered by grief, find their incunabulum in a much earlier scene, in which a paranoid Nora has already irremediably lost her sanity, and lives her final moments (s 48-49; h 41-42). Another transgenerational parallel is established by the medical parable of Useppe, who is epileptic just like his mother and ultimately becomes a deadly double of Ida's condition.⁷ The epileptic seizure she suffers at the moment of her rape possesses a phonic quality, with «strange echoes of voices and torrents» that recall Useppe's arboreal hut on the bank of river Tiber,

⁷ Both mother and son are taken to a doctor, and both get a sedative prescription; however, Ida's medical examination presents somewhat reassuring aspects (her involuntary tickling and consequent laughing as the doctor visits her; she and her father come back from the appointment «allegri e vispi» (s 31-32) («merry and lively»; h 27-28), and the diagnosis of «fenomeni temporanei di isteria precoce» (s 31) («temporary manifestations of precocious hysteria»; h 26) is circumscribed to her gender and age. On the contrary, Useppe's condition is marked by solitude and shows evident signs of a threatening nature.

surrounded by «voci del silenzio» (s 69, 510) («voices of the silence»; h 58, 432).

In Morante's plot, Italy's 1938 racial laws mark a moment in which the transgenerational passage of paranoia is definitively complete, precisely because a subterranean anguish becomes a reality as soon as the regime adopts a pseudo-scientific system aimed at measuring detectable percentages of Aryan and Jewish blood. This is eloquently marked in the text through the use of capital letters, «FINO ALLA QUARTA GENERAZIONE» (s 61) («FOR FOUR GENERATIONS»; h 52). Since that moment, «fu come se le ossessioni di Nora, sciamando in tumulto alla sua morte, fossero venute a nidificare dentro la figlia» (s 57) («it was as if Nora's obsession, swarming in disorder after her death, had returned to nest inside her daughter»; h 49). Racial trauma is narrated through a series of metamorphic metaphors, indeed inaugurated by the nesting of paranoia. The migratory-like process of paranoia paves the way for images of abjection, with which Morante stages the uncanny of a hybrid, semi-contaminated character such as Ida: «mezzo ebrea», «mezzosangue», «reproba», «impura», «latitante», «abusiva», «falsaria», «rogna», «lebbra» (s 55-61) («half-Jew», «halfbreed», «outcast», «impure», «fugitive», «usurper», «counterfeiter», «scabies», «leprosy»; h 47-52). A prominent element in this list is the phrase «il negro incrociato» (s 63) («black halfbreed»; h 53), embodying the authentic intersection between the archaic superstitions about epilepsy and the modern superstitions about race. Through «postmemory» (HIRSCH: 2012, 5-6), the here and now of Ida, i.e. Rome, modern capital of the Empire, juxtaposes with Calabria, the dark South, from where – as we have seen in the text – the archaic re-emergence of the epileptic as a scapegoat originates. In the excerpt in question, racial laws, with their scientifically inspired biologism, get associated with a Calabrian old wives' tale about the «black halfbreed», one that is imbued with atavistic superstition, just like epilepsy itself:

Troppo variabili e oscure le rimanevano, nel futuro e nello stesso presente, i termini reali della legge. Essa ricordò per esempio di avere udito in Calabria da un emigrante americano che il sangue scuro vince sempre sul sangue pallido. Basta una goccia di sangue nero in un cristiano per riconoscergli che non è bianco ma è negro incrociato (s 63).⁸

⁸ «The real terms of the law, in the future and also in the present, remained too variable

Traumatic realism here acts as a double bottom of the «law», i.e. of History, inside which roams a superstitious, blinded terror of contamination, nested within the living body of life, of blood. Traumatic memory thus engenders «a history that is, in its very events, a kind of inscription of the past; but also a history constituted by the erasure of its traces» (CARUTH: 2013, 79).

2.2. The great evil: rape and History

Ida's camouflaged, hidden, abject character puts her into a traumatic, abuse-driven dynamic based on «double self», such as an introjected image of «abomination» must be concealed by a conformist and zealous identity (HERMAN: 1992, 105-115). After all, even the procedure of racial registration pertains to a more general form of camouflage into petit-bourgeois life, which is why Ida's racial secret revealed to the office worker eventually remains hidden in the «forzieri occulti» (s 55) («secret coffers»; h 47) of the Authority. Ida's camouflage thus forces her to constantly remove her terror, which is destined to come back in a subterranean and obsessive way, in the shape of dreams (see the first contribution to this volume and WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021), as well as epitomized by her constant visits to the Ghetto, one of the «zones of trauma» (DE ROGATIS: 2021, 176-177). Moreover, the «double self» makes the full-blown trauma grow into an apparent «insidious trauma» (ROOT: 1992): «traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit» (ROOT in BROWN: 1995, 107). As such, it is expressly attenuated by the narrator by way of maternalist and rationalist forms of distancing and understatement vis-à-vis Ida's «idiozia» and «preistoria tribale» (s 21) («idiocy» and «tribal prehistory»; h 18).

However, this dual-regime model breaks down as Gunther shows up at Ida's door, in the San Lorenzo neighbourhood, «un giorno di gennaio dell'anno 1941» (s 13, 15) («one January afternoon in the year 1941»; h 11, 13): a chronotope that Morante not coincidentally places both as an epigraph and as the novel's incipit. Due to an utterly casual

and obscure to her. She recalled, for example, having heard in Calabria from an American emigrant that dark blood always wins over pale blood. A single drop of black blood is enough to determine that a man isn't white, but a black halfbreed» (h 53).

passage, the soldier on a break is instead defined by the writer as «apparizione propria e riconoscibile dell'orrore» (s 20) («the true and recognizable face of horror»; h 17). This time, the narrator's tone is not ironic at all, yet absolutely tragic and empathic, as she focuses on the trauma of Ida's generational terror: «i suoi propri equivoci andavano acquistando, col passare dei minuti, un potere allucinante su di lei riducendola al terrore nativo e ingenuo di prima della ragione» (s 67) («her own misconceptions were acquiring an obsessive power over her, reducing her to the native, ingenuous terror of a prerational age»; h 57).

As I have already stressed, the oscillation of the narrator between maternalism and empathy pertains to a conscious strategy of opaque and experimental realism; this results in the reader experiencing an effect of non-transparent, yet rather destabilized reality (see also RE: 1993, 372). This bewilderment of reality further implies an epistemological purpose, because it neutralises readers' intellectual defensive mechanisms vis-à-vis trauma, by turning them into illiterate beings – just like the second and the third epigraphs have foreseen, i.e. deprived of any resources that may allow to distance oneself before the immediacy of suffering.

From Ida's point of view, Gunther incarnates that «*sensu del sacro*» (s 21) («*sense of the sacred*»; h 18) emanated from an abstract and incomprehensible power, and already epitomized by epilepsy as «*passive disease*»: «a fear we all feel when confronted with an event that we cannot face, particularly because it looks utterly meaningless, and its explanation ultimately appears as aloof from the interpretative models of our rationality» (PINKUS: 1992, 21). The incongruous presence of Gunther inside Ida's apartment is due to her absolute certainty that the young soldier is, in fact, an agent of the Nazi Racial Committee. As soon as she sees him, the transgenerational guilt – the stain of her Judaism – and the consequent, unfathomable and incomprehensible punishment of Nazism, both materialise: «[Gunther] era una copia delle migliaia di figure conformi che moltiplicavano all'infinito l'unica figura incomprensibile della sua persecuzione» (s 63) («[Gunther] was a copy of the thousands of similar faces that multiplied to infinity the sole, incomprehensible face of her persecution»; h 54).

Ida's epileptic seizure occurs at the climax of several contextual and linguistic misunderstandings, traumatic and posthuman transits from human to animal, and finally, disconcerting displays

of compassion from the persecuted towards the persecutor (see DE ROGATIS: 2021, 174-175). The entanglement between various elements – such as the series of clumsy misinterpretations between Gunther and Ida, the homesickness of the soldier defined «mammароло» (s 17) («a mamma's boy»; h 15), Ida's racial terror, the epileptic seizure, and the rape – does not only ensue from the plot's level of truth, but it is also crucial on a deeper level of historical truth, according to a dynamic of traumatic realism. In other words, these elements become entangled by virtue of a double bottom, as they exchange the ordinary and the exceptional, the incongruous and the tragic.

Racial trauma provokes the re-emergence of clinical trauma, a disease from which Ida had not acutely suffered since the age of eleven, and that had completely disappeared after her adolescence (s 32; h 27). Both clinical and racial traumas increase and eventually intersect with a third trauma, i.e. rape. This is executed by Gunther with a particular violence that gets triggered by the umpteenth misunderstanding between the two: the soldier believes that Ida opposes penetration, whereas she is actually having an epileptic seizure – «tanto più ci si accaniva per questo, alla maniera della soldataglia ubriaca» (s 69) («he became the more obstinate for this reason, like all drunken soldiery»; h 59). Due to her loss of consciousness, Ida enters a hypnotic and visionary state, which eventually continues during the minutes following the rape, allowing her to read into Gunther's dream (s 71; h 60). The scene shows also how her dissociation from reality, which is typical of epileptic foresight, overlaps with the «dissociative or numbing symptoms» of rape: «the person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body» (HERMAN: 1992, 41).

The representation of epilepsy as vision draws from a Judaic-Mediterranean popular tradition, according to which the sacral quality of the disease also manifests itself as «mystic ecstasy or precognition» (KICHELMACHER AND CAVIGLIA: 1992, 37). The Mediterranean repertoire of pathological and sacral deviance should also be connected with the research carried out by Ernesto De Martino on tarantism and on both peasant and pre-modern forms of trauma defined as «crisis of presence» (DE MARTINO: 1948, 73), all of which had a long-lasting influence on Morante (DI FAZIO: 2017). The magical-traumatic dimension is here carefully adapted to both a plot and a system of characters that are basically attached to realism, and noticeably belong to modern

and urban registers. As such, it is passed down from Ida to her son with a narrative movement that encompasses, at once, clinical, post-memorial and magical aspects. Just like his mother, Useppe suffers from epilepsy, however he is also able to speak with animals, and – during the final parable of his short life – with trees too. Such psychic capabilities have to do with the mode of magical realism, yet there is more: Morante merges them by paying great attention to traumatic realism, as she resolutely aims at obtaining a narrative dynamic based on verisimilitude.

As Caruth underlines, traumatized subjects «carry an impossible history within them or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess» (CARUTH: 1995, 5). If we associate Caruth's observations with Morante's novel, we can notice that, just like epilepsy, racial persecution is indeed a symptom of an unfathomable history: a cyclical and traumatic event which Ida cannot fully possess (i.e. understand, predict, and manage), yet one by which, on the contrary, she is possessed. Not only is possession manifesting itself on a clinical level (that is, a possession triggered by epilepsy), but it is also articulated from the perspectives of both sexuality and epistemology. Along with the violence caused by her convulsions and by a phallic brutal penetration, the violence of History invades her body so much so that Ida loses her reason and causal logic. Morante adopts extreme and unsettling images in order to equally describe the loss of consciousness, and the medianic-visionary condition of a body that is, concurrently, epileptic and violated. A temporary, orgiastic-like deliverance thus gets intertwined with yet another type of vulnerability: «[Gunther] era tutti i centomila animali ragazzi, terrestri e vulnerabili, in un ballo pazzo e allegro, che si ripercuoteva fino nell'interno dei suoi polmoni e fino alle radici dei suoi capelli» (s 70) («[Gunther] was all the hundred thousand young male animals, terrestrial and vulnerable, in a mad and merry dance, which struck into her lungs and to the roots of her hair»; h 59). The context, along with the very mechanics of this rape, narratively decode the other two forms of trauma – the clinical and historical ones –, which are both entwined and otherwise unspeakable, because they are intrapsychic and dissociated by means of camouflaged paranoia. Whereas the contextual maze of misunderstandings and metamorphoses immediately prior to the rape concurrently narrates the liminal space of racial terror and the earliest epileptic symptoms, the rape – due to

its violent quality and its exponentiation, with two consecutive sexual intercourses – intrinsically bends outwards and recounts the intensity of evil and the withdrawal of the self from consciousness. Through the narration of this rape, readers can thus experience an explosion of trauma inside a body – something that would otherwise be impossible to share – as well as inside the History that symbolically inscribes and physically violates that body: the great evil, indeed.

3. Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*

3.1. The title of the literary reportage, the uncanny and the archives of evil

Arise, Great Country (Vstavaj strana ogromnaja) is one of the most popular Soviet patriotic songs. This anthem for the defence of the homeland was composed in 1941,⁹ in the wake of the shock triggered by the German invasion of Soviet territory, and calls for a «people's war», which is at one with a «sacred war», by conveying a pathos demonstrated to this day by the dramatic musicality of its lyrics.

The song title's imperative had found a particularly explicit public response among the Soviet women who had joined the various orders and ranks of the army as volunteers at a very young age (often even before eighteen years old, e.g. ufw 43, 22, 66): the so-called *frontovichki* (MARKWICK AND CARDONA: 2012, 7). As one of Alexievich's interlocutors declares, «to die was too easy; you had to do something. To act. Thousands of people thought the same» (ufw 106). With a total quota of one million volunteers, to which one must add partisan women, this was a unique case in the world history of armies during the Second World War, not only from a quantitative, but also from a capillary point of view, i.e. it was a female army that branched out from the lower ranks up to the higher commanding divisions (MARKWICK AND CARDONA: 2012, 246). Alexievich's literary reportage is the result of a careful and extensive selection from around 500 recorded testimonies of female veterans (and a certain number of female partisans), also chosen and selected on the basis of their different military professions (ufw 71). In this way, the writer was able to reconstruct the choral microcosm of viewpoints on the war, which were also varying according to the type of role held. At the same time, great attention

⁹ Music by Alexander Alexandrov and lyrics by Vasily Ivanovich Lebedev-Kumach.

was paid to the hierarchical level occupied by women, which did not exclude leadership roles even in extremely delicate positions: this was, for instance, the case of Stanislava Petrovna Volkova, commander of a sapper platoon. She was one of the many «young ladies» (this was initially the term used with conceit by male officers; ufw 212) who would aspire to and eventually obtain a frontline leadership role. Another example is provided by navy captain Taissia Petrovna Rudenko-Sheveleva (202-203), who was called to hold a command position on a ship, something that had been historically forbidden to women due to superstitions.

Contrary to what has sometimes been said critically (BRINTLINGER: 2017, 9) or with an apologetic intent,¹⁰ the title of Alexievich's book is not an essentialist one: in other words, it does not claim an inherent extraneousness of generative femininity to war. One should not overlap the ideological and creative orientations of the author: there is, in fact, a gap between the two. If the former may assume a direction that is somewhat related to sexual difference (a standpoint to which Morante herself was not extraneous), the latter embodies a more problematic and polysemous angle. The creative orientation of Alexievich should be observed through the changing and relational positioning of the narrating voice, one that is connected with the polyphony of montage and the witnesses themselves. From a documentary point of view, an essentialist ideological reading would, in fact, have been untenable, since the widespread intention among the volunteers – an intention that is incessantly reported by the choral form of the text – was not only to enlist, but also to go to the front line, in order to be precisely *frontovichki*, «frontline girls» (ufw 5, 71, 103, 329). Furthermore, the necessity, the legitimacy, and the insuppressible desire to kill Germans are epitomized through a whole central chapter (the fifth, significantly entitled *Telephones don't shoot*), as well as in a series of recurring thematic connections (e.g., 10, 104, 134, 197, 253).

Instead, because of three different reasons, the title has an open and destabilizing function, which first of all starts from an acknowledged negation. To begin with, it refers to the fact that the female corporeality of the volunteers could not find any space in the war. Forced to wear oversized shoes (104), extremely big uniforms, and weapons

¹⁰ I refer in particular to a certain widespread and simplified use of Alexievich's text at the beginning of the current Russian invasion of Ukraine.

that outsized their height (119, 155), lacking sanitary pads or their equivalent, women found themselves often exposed to less, not more, freedom of movement for these reasons. Especially among the officers, there was also a ban on singing, even at rest hours (189), and a ban on embroidery and sewing, both activities – as I will eventually illustrate – that were insistently desired by many women for deeply symbolic motivations.

Secondly, that war did not have a womanly face for a long time because the significant presence, as well as the contribution of female volunteers – to be qualified as a noble choice, if only for the fact of being structurally voluntary – have subsequently been removed from the archives of Great History, and from widespread public recognition:

It was later that they began to honor us, thirty years later [...]. Men were victors, heroes, woovers, the war was theirs, but we were looked at with quite different eyes. [...] I'll tell you, they robbed us of the victory. They quietly exchanged it for ordinary women's happiness. Men didn't share the victory with us. It was painful... Incomprehensible (ufw 209).

Forty years later, Alexievich's text is the first research to bring this great collective removal to light, insisting in particular on the process of isolation and persecution suffered for decades by female veterans (MARCKWICK AND CARDONA: 2012, 246-247). They were branded as «abnormal, defective women» (ufw 197); as «Army whores» (248), in other words willing to join the army in order to satisfy low sexual instincts; they were «terribly defenseless» (76), scared to the point of hiding the medals they had received (109); if unmarried, they were forced to live in the most degraded communal apartments (111): after this war, they all indiscriminately «had to fight another war; no less terrible than the one they had returned from» (225, 329).

Thirdly, not only does the title of this literary reportage aim to transfer its archive of evil onto the great hypomnesic archive of history because of a due recognition. It also intends to show that the interconnection between the two archives represents the second vital contribution of these veterans to their nation. Great Soviet History thus becomes «interesting» (951) from a collective standpoint, precisely because of the specificity of female traumatic memory highlighted by the text. It specifies itself as feminine not because of some spontaneous predisposition to generative purposes or sugar-coated tenderness, but rather because of its ability to include biological and social roots that

are both absolute and ordinary, while often being in tension with each other. As a matter of fact, female traumatic memory imposes «its own lighting, and its own range of feelings», it «becomes like ordinary life» (XV-XVI), it adopts multiple perspectives, «from above [...], and from below» (XVII), it intercepts the anguish of those who «suffer without words, which is still more frightening» (XV). Within this posthuman dimension (FERRARA: 2020), compassion is often extended even to Germans (ufw 304, 309). In one of the final sentences of the text, Tamara Stepanovna Umnyagina – a medical assistant – is recalling how she decided to dragged two wounded men to safety, and only halfway through she discovered that one of them was a German soldier. She then decided to rescue both of them, and now she comments: «There can't be one heart for hatred and another for love. We only have one, and I always thought how to save my heart» (331). However, this compassion matures not regardless, but precisely through the awareness of one's murderous determination. The profound grief of the former sniper Klavdia Grigoryevna, who – urged by her comrades – shot a wild colt to ensure everyone's food rations, is in this sense enlightening:

I had no time to think; out of habit I took aim and fired. [...] It seemed to me – maybe it was a hallucination – but it seemed to me that he gave a thin, high whinny. [...] Such a pretty one, and I killed him, I put him into a soup! [...] As if I'm some sort of a butcher, who doesn't mind killing just like that. But I had loved all living creatures since childhood (ufw 13).

This fragment of memory is also significant for a poetics of traumatic realism, because it combines minimal and archetypical aspects, regular and powerful elements: the hunger is paired up with the beauty of the young horse («Such a pretty one, with a fluffy tail» (12), the serial cynicism of the murderous act together with the helpless candour of the animal («Walking about calmly, as if there wasn't any war»; 12); that same candour is by extension associated with all present young soldiers, the light-hearted jokes between comrades and the desperate tears after the execution, the «soup» and the death. In the text, the traumatic uncanny of women is deployed on three interconnected levels, which I will articulate below as follows: the uncanny of women volunteers during the war, the one embodied by female veterans after the war, and the one characterizing female traumatic memory.

3.2. The uncanny of women volunteers during the war

The first uncanny feature concerns the female body injecting its own abjection inside the thousand-year-old male code of war. This abject abolishes – according to Kristeva's definition – the binary distinction between order and disorder (see par. 1). In this sense, an extremely emblematic image is that of menstruating bodies deprived of sanitary pads, or even just cloths for the same purpose, due to the structural emergency but also to evident forms of symbolic resistance on the part of the military hierarchy. During the long marches, the menstruating bodies then give off a bloody smell, stain the trousers of their uniforms and eventually leave red marks on the ground, which the male comrades avoid looking at.

We march, and leave these red spots behind us in the sand [...] The soldiers come after us and pretend that they don't notice anything. [...] Our trousers got dry on us and became sharp as glass. They'd cut us. We had wounds and there was always the smell of blood (ufw 200).

The intensity of the evoked scene multiplies if one considers that blood was a continuous, deadly experience of war (BIZULEANU: 2018, 284). Alexievich devotes the entire seventh chapter to this theme, the title of which significantly refers to a dissociated dimension: *It wasn't me*. At the same time, blood also returns through a transversal network of references to disgust, subsequently experienced by all veterans, men and women, and focused in particular on the colour shade (for instance, ufw 318, 327). The text here features a double dynamic of queer disguise of the feminine. In one respect, many female volunteers allow themselves to feel curious about a masculinity that gets spurred by the necessary short haircut (in compliance with military discipline), as well as by clothes, shoes and the smoking habit – «They couldn't tell we were girls: we had boys' haircuts and wore army uniforms» (191); «Like it or not something masculine appeared in your gait and your movements» (195) – as well as by objective bodily transformations, such as suddenly grown feet: «But my feet were used to size ten boots» (249). In another respect, many women try to exorcise this process of virilization by recurring to forbidden practices, such as needlework and embroidery, so as «to take back your natural image at least for a time» (94), and to prohibited feminine rituals (hanging violets on a bayonet: 52; making collars out of gauze: 185; wasting eggs to polish

boots: 190; wearing earrings during the night: 186). However, even in this case there is a dynamic based on queer practices of disguise: a significant example is the description of a photograph that a woman pilot took of herself, in order to send her portrait to her family. For the occasion, she'd put on female make-up, so to speak, and superimposed a second feminine layer over the first masculine one. Helped by her companions, she got herself ready for the shoot by hiding her male uniform under a kerchief and a blanket, resembling a «dress» (289).

The liminal condition of these female volunteers is not only connected with the trauma of the war and the unprecedented military experience. In fact, it also refers to a more specific laceration suffered by Soviet women during that particular historical period. The young women who volunteered are the by-product of the earliest Socialist campaigns aimed at promoting literacy and emancipation, and embody a clear departure from the centuries-old illiterate subalternity that had so far affected countless generations of women (MARKWICK AND CARDONA: 2012, 10). Their generational pride, however, had to come to terms with a widespread cultural dualism, which prescribed a dynamic role for women outside their home, and a submissive role inside it (NAVAILH: 1992, 295). Indeed, on the eve of the Second World War the Soviet imagination expressed a contradictory ideal of femininity, oscillating between an androgynous and liberated myth – which emerged from the revolutionary experiments of political reforms of the Twenties – and the return to order during the Thirties, culminating with the reinstatement of the ban on abortion in 1936, and with an active state pressure aimed at increasing birth rate (NAVAILH: 1992, 288). Such reactionary vector would have obviously been boosted by an archaic imagination far more sedimented than the revolutionary one. This distinctively Soviet trait is also a transnational magnifying glass – whose focus has adjusted over just two decades – of the global setbacks that modern women, as «Unpredictable Subjects» (LONZI: 1974, 47), will and are cyclically forced to deal with.

3.3. The uncanny of women veterans after the war

These historical coordinates are fundamental to deciphering the fascinating paradox of these testimonies, in which fragments of daring and reckless female courage are associated with recurring compensatory rituals of embroidery and needlework, with the display

of small feminine signs and details, and also with the recurring anguish of mutilations. Whereas death was little or not at all feared by women who were used to having «this endless experience of dying», since death was «as close and as habitual as life itself» (ufw 211), much greater was the fear of having to survive with some kinds of mutilations. These basically embodied the stigma of a male practice that could not have been camouflaged any longer, after the war (152-153, 326). Possessing a much greater impact on women than on their male comrades, mutilations constituted a form of disability that would prevent marriage (187). In a similar way, the text evokes the risk of a temporary disruption to the menstrual cycle, which together with premature hair loss (10, 35, 64, 123), is a recurring traumatic symptom during this war: the tangible sign of a «anesthetized»¹¹ organism (XIX). Neither at the time of young female volunteers nor at the time of women veterans, neither forty years earlier nor forty years later, is this loss relativized by circumscribing it to its actual transience. On the contrary, it is a memory that comes back as something permanent and terrifying. Although almost all of them later became mothers, the veterans dwell exclusively on their past terror: «The body reorganized itself so much during the war that we weren't women» (195), having lost their femininity with their generative capacity («I had no periods, almost no woman's desires»; XIX). The military haircut also has a specific traumatic impact, due to the fact that – after the androgynous metropolitan fashion of the Twenties – women's hair had largely reverted to a traditional long, even very long, style, and gathered in braids. It is no coincidence that Alexievich chooses to start her reportage from a hair-related detail. She thus opens with the testimony of Marija Ivanovna Morozova, a former sniper with eleven combat decorations, and a total of seventy-five killings. At the time of the interview, Morozova had just retired from a less heroic job as senior accountant. The author of this impressive story enters the scene with the incongruous feminine detail of her hairstyle: «with a long braid wound in a girlish crown¹² around her head» (4). This is evidently an

¹¹ The English translation here reads as «dead» (ufw XIX) organism while the Russian adjective is «omertvel» (ALEXIEVICH: 2013, 16): a past tense of the perfective verb *omertvet*. «Omertvel» contains the root *smert* ('death'), however its meaning is not strictly 'dead', but rather corresponds to 'become as dead', so in this case it is to be interpreted as 'made insensible', 'anesthetized'.

¹² In the Russian text the crown-shaped («vencom») braid is defined by the adjective

anachronistic revival of pre-war haircut, eventually sacrificed to military discipline. Yet, the image also speaks of a silent claim of Marija's whole truth. Along with the anachronism of her braid, the legendary aura that would have surrounded the young sniper from forty years earlier is also dialled down through the minimal and dignified features of a freshly retired lady: «a small woman [...] sitting in a big armchair» (4). However, these details are part of a whole stylistic strategy attached to traumatic realism. Although the text insists on a tension between two opposite poles, these are both inscribed within the space of anti-heroic and anti-rhetorical verisimilitude inhabited by the veteran:

The past disappeared, it blinded her with its scorching whirl and vanished, but the human being remained. Remained in the midst of ordinary life. Everything around is ordinary except her memory. And I also become a witness. A witness to what people remember and how they remember, to what they want to talk about and what they try to forget or remove to the furthest corner of memory (ufw 131).

3.4. The uncanny of female traumatic memory narrated in the literary reportage

After forty years, the story is also constituted by what keeps being removed, concealed, buried inside the archive of evil. Alexievich dedicates the whole twelfth chapter of her literary reportage to love in a time of war, among military ranks (*To See Him Just Once*). However, at the very beginning of the text, the narrating voice warns that this topic is subjected to strong self-censorship by veterans, so it only partially emerges in the reportage (besides, there are absolutely no references to homosexual relationships). After the ordeal of delegitimization and persecution, women veterans tacitly agreed to avoid as much as possible mentioning eroticism from their accounts, even more in the case of explicitly libertine or non-heterosexual relations. As I have underlined in the introduction to this volume (I.1.4.), as collective memory structures itself as a hypomnesic archive, and therefore as a public representation, memorial preservation always implies some

«devičij» (ALEXIEVICH: 2013: 60), referring to the noun *devica* ('maid', 'young woman'), but also containing a lyrical deviation towards the semantic field of 'virginal'. The polysemy of the adjective thus particularly enhances the anachronism of the pre-war haircut.

form of obliteration or censorship. The narrator's capacity to name the ellipses is indeed precious, because to narrate trauma also means to consider its omissions as telling historical data, not as a lack that needs to be sugar-coated. Besides, as I have already anticipated in the first paragraph, the valorization of traumatic omissions should also be connected with the same oral storytelling, which is *per se* exposed to forms of «misremembering» (PORTELLI: 1991, 2), and the latter should be valued from an epistemological perspective.

Alexievich constantly records a hiatus between the great and intense moments lived by these women, and the past experiences that they have managed to preserve and defend after the war, in terms of individual awareness and collective memory. Within this hiatus, the physiological repression of the trauma interconnects with and is enhanced by a process of collective repression, which according to Alexander is crucial for denying the very existence of trauma (2012: 6, 31). The relationship between the narrator/reporter and her interlocutors thus goes towards a «retelling» (CALABRESE: 2020, 1-7): together, they try «to see and understand what they hadn't seen and understood then» (131). The practice of retelling namely mends this double laceration, because it recomposes what that has been broken for forty years, together with traumatic oblivion and social stigma, into as holistic and narratively consequential a dimension as possible. Furthermore, the retelling also affects the reception of the text, by reviving and retrieving for the reader the lost traumatic memory of this collective event. Not by chance, at the time of its release in the Soviet Union, Alexievich's book enjoyed a significant success with the audience, with two million copies sold; its publication in 1985 – after a two-year printing ban imposed by the Party's censorship – inaugurates a widespread reconsideration of the «archives of evil», in synchrony with the incipient perestroika. In her preface and in the different prologues to the chapter, the author at various times declares that she has selected those testimonies that had «astonished and impressed» her the most (ufw 88); the reporter's voice is intentionally anti-omniscient, i.e. able to use its emotional bias as a sharpened fact-finding weapon. As a writer, Alexievich has always expressed her deep gratitude both towards the strong Russian tradition of reportage, and towards Adamovich, one of the most prominent representatives of this literary genre (BRINTLINGER: 2017, 3). In this way, Alexievich has been able to elaborate a method that was anything but spontaneous,

but designed to recover the spontaneity of the true «texts»: «I keep regretting that I cannot “record” eyes, hands. Their life during the conversation, their own life. Separate. Their “texts”» (ufw 94). This is the methodology of a «historian of the soul», for whom «feelings are also documents» (ALEXIEVICH: 2018, 6). In the context of this authorial approach, the filial role that the narrator takes on with her interlocutors and that they explicitly attribute to her, becomes a decisive element (ufw XVII, 4, 112, 323). Thanks to this generational distance and the simultaneously maternal and intimate tone of their relationship with the narrator, the female veterans manage to free themselves from the «strong inner defences», the intense «self-control», the «constant correction» of official memory (88). This public and vertical truth is embodied in a concrete and horizontal form by the interference of husbands during the interviews, particularly if they are themselves veterans. The recurring narrative pattern is that of a woman who either speaks only when her husband (or any other man participating in the conversation) walks away, or she does so while evoking the shadow of that male presence who dissents from the content of her discourse (ufw XXIV, 88, 142). At the time of the publication of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Soviet male memory, whether public or private, is still a monumental one, its primary goal being to tune into the approved canon (XV) of a past jam-packed with heroic actions, winning military strategies, grandiloquent slogans. On the contrary, precisely due to the violent bio-social contradiction to which these women veterans were exposed, and because of the uncanny they evoked and introjected during and after the war, they indeed are the bearers of an intensely deconstructive traumatic memory, they are «the specks of gold», that the narrating voice reveals as she digs up and removes «the empty rock, rummaging together in the alluvial trifles» (77). As the narrator-speleologist dives into the truths of traumatic memory, she is like a daughter listening to her historic mothers; at the same time, these mothers manage to connect with this removed, subterranean space thanks to their mother/daughter plot. The boundless mosaic of these micronarratives is necessarily built upon fragments, therefore it relies upon the iconic force of traumatic images (see *Introduction*, II.2.3.), through which the reportage already acquires significant transmedial passages (MARCUCCI: 2023). This myriad of memorial fragments coagulates particularly around the mother figure, i.e. the founding feature attached to most of these testimonies. Hence, the text

reels around filial micronarratives that are often built upon maternal objects, consisting of endless trivial repertoires, which are nevertheless endowed with archetypal intensity. Among them, as a conclusion to this analysis I'd like to mention the «piece of rope» that a mother used in order to tie her daughter to a cart during an evacuation, under the bombings. The purpose was to prevent the daughter to escape and join the army. In fact, the daughter succeeds to run away, and joins the military forces as a medical assistant, while always carrying that piece of rope, now turned into a kind of talisman-bracelet. Forty years later, the fragile chain has survived together with the daughter – and it is still there, between the reporter and the veteran, Olga Jakovlevna Omelcenko: «But I quietly untied myself and left with a piece of that rope still on my arm» (ufw 132). As if in the labyrinth of the Great History, the rope managed to magically unravel to reconnect the daughters and the mothers, the Persephones and the Demeters.

Conclusions

History and *The Unwomanly Face of War* inhabit the same space of scandal, duplicity and contradiction Morante had in mind. In a sense, on the screaming headline featured on the cover of *History's* 1974 edition, the scandal was the most evident data of a striking injustice («a scandal that has lasted for ten thousand years»). However – as we have seen in the second paragraph – the scandal also coincides with a taboo: an intergenerational stigma imprinted on the victims whom, in addition, society blames for the evil they suffer.

Therefore, along with the scandal interpreted as an ethical issue there is the scandal as social question, as anachronism. Not only does great History advance while producing traumas, but it also causes feelings of guilt and shame in traumatized subjects (Root: 1992, 243). These two texts remind all of us of the scandal of human violence in its most extreme forms: racial hatred, genocide and war. At the same time, from the perspective of textual reception, both narratives have provoked and still provoke a scandal.¹³ The narratives also carry the same social stigma experienced by their protagonists: they are

¹³ On the scandal of *History*, see BORGHESI: 2019. Further on the scandal provoked by *The Unwomanly Face of War* see the comments expressed by the Party's censors, and included in the introduction to Alexievich's reportage (ufw XXVI, XXXI, XXXIII, XXXV, XXXVII).

uncanny because they insert the pathos of an entire, choral universe within the monumentalized spaces of great History, as well as in the great formal patterns of modern literature, while also challenging the rigidity of many modern and contemporary aesthetic rules devoted to antipathetic and antirealist postures.

History and *The Unwomanly Face of War* keep the deconstructive instance of «patriarchive» together with a deeply reconstructive one. They deconstruct microhistories and oral history by maintaining a strongly prospective vision on events, which is balanced thanks to a solid entrenchment within the trauma of historical contexts. As they choose to embed their plots inside traumatic occurrences, each one of these writers are able to forge a compact, hence memorable storytelling, one that can generate forms of identification that are no less influential than those of the «patriarchive». On a diachronic level, *History* and *The Unwomanly Face of War* describe traumatic memory from the point of view of female and maternal intergenerational relations. In *History*, the mother/daughter plot emerges as the nucleus of historical and biological evils that are passed on in a pre-verbal manner from mother to daughter (from Nora to Ida, first co-protagonist of the novel), and later from mother to son (from Ida to Ueseppe, second co-protagonist). In *The Unwomanly Face of War* the same mother/daughter plot keeps coming back as a metaphorical thread that can mend traumatic memory, which is often reconstructed and, above all, re-signified by the association between the grief of war and the pain of mother-child separation. By inhabiting, at once, the space of immediate as well as retroactive experienced past, mothers become the real protagonists of the Russian trenches, while turning into symbolic counterparts of death – whether this is suffered on the battlefield, or inflicted by their daughters.

The heterodiegetic account of *History* is managed by the shamanic voice of a female narrator who is capable of stratifications and variations in terms of register, style and authorial posture itself. It is the voice of a sibyl-like and ventriloquist storyteller who facilitates and conveys an archaic and contemporary discourse epitomizing the cyclical, yet historicized recurrence of pain and suffering. Her discourse addresses a community, which the narrator installs – along with herself – both inside and outside the rules of literary genres, written tradition, and canons.

The narrating voice of *The Unwomanly Face of War* modulates itself as a counter-voice vis-à-vis male/monumental discourses, as it constantly questions its own posture within the discourse. Throughout

the reportage, the ventriloquist dynamic of this voice indeed concerns the concrete pragmatism of a text spoken by countless women's voices, till then silenced: «Voices...Dozens of voices... They descended upon me» (ufw 19).

The text comparison has shown that female specificity in the face of war is a bio-cultural one and consists in the ability to inhabit the space of war and trauma through complementary, inclusive, multi-perspective and reversible approaches. In spite of the heterogeneous, sometimes even antithetical nature of their female characters, the «retelling» (CALABRESE: 2020, 1-7) of trauma conveys, in both texts, a liminal force and a deep connection with the authenticity of tragedy and the experience of pain shared by these women. By being, at once, heterogeneous and specular, real and fictional, these female bodies and minds – in their roles of soldier, nurse, or raped mother – all bear the traumatic traces of a radical, unconditional inquiry into evil and suffering. Due to reasons that combine and mutually shape bios and gender, generative power and socio-historical constructions, their existential and narrative parables teach them to what extent female exposure to trauma constitutes, in itself, a liminal experience. An impure Jew disguised as a «common Aryan» such as Ida, the bearer of a sacred, racial, and biological disease, blurs the boundaries between familiarity and extraneousness as much as, or perhaps more than Alexievich's Soviet veterans and former partisans. What they indeed share is a process of abjection that – by means of heterogeneous forms – makes them uncanny. They have in common the depth of a feminine pathos, which consists in embedding oneself inside and outside history, inside and outside life and death.

Across the ambiguous borderline of trauma.

[Translation by Serena Todesco]

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3. Narrating Trauma in Poetry: Elsa Morante and *The World Saved by Kids*

Antonella Rubinacci

Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to provide a new reading of *The World Saved by Kids* by Elsa Morante through the lens of Trauma Studies. It is through this book that the writer attempts to exorcize instances of individual and historical trauma by putting them into words. Originating from an initial state of Freudian *melancholia* which stems from personal loss, Morante then fuses the latter with an evocation of the tragic events of the twentieth century. Ultimately, she identifies in the utopia of children the only possible response to these personal and collective tragedies. Taking into account the author's own readings in those years, the intent of this chapter is to reflect specifically on the methods used to narrate trauma adopted in this book: the choice of verses, the experimentation with the genre of magical realism; the preference for a complex and stratified temporality; the use of stylistic and expressive strategies for the purpose of communicating, and thereby overcoming, the traumatic experience.

Obiettivo di questo contributo è rileggere *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* di Elsa Morante con la lente dei Trauma Studies. In questo libro la scrittrice tenta di verbalizzare ed esorcizzare traumi individuali e storici. Da un'iniziale condizione di freudiana *melancholia* – originata da una perdita individuale – intrecciata poi con l'evocazione degli eventi tragici del Novecento, Morante arriva a individuare nell'utopia dei ragazzini, cui sceglie di dare voce, l'unica risposta possibile a drammi personali e collettivi. Tenendo in considerazione anche le letture fatte dall'autrice in quegli anni, si intende riflettere soprattutto sulle modalità di narrazione del trauma adottate in questo libro: la scelta dei versi; l'avvicinamento al genere del realismo magico; la preferenza per una complessa e stratificata temporalità; l'uso di strategie stilistiche ed espressive per la rappresentazione e il superamento dell'esperienza traumatica.

Introduction

The widely shared understanding of trauma as «responsive to and constitutive of modernity» (MICALE AND LERNER: 2001, 10) invites further analysis of the works of Elsa Morante from the perspective of Trauma Studies, an interpretive key first introduced by Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi in relation to *History: A Novel* (DE ROGATIS AND WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021). This chapter aims to specifically reflect on the narrative strategies and stylistic choices which Morante puts in practice to verbalize individual and collective traumas in *The World Saved by Kids* (*Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini*),¹ which among her works is perhaps the most complex, problematic, and difficult to classify. Published in 1968 by Einaudi, the work is divided into three sections entitled *Farewell* (*Addio*), *The Chemical Comedy* (*La Commedia Chimica*) and *Folk Songs* (*Canzoni popolari*). Each section is in turn divided into subsections; the latter are extremely complex above all due to the many literary genres explored by the author (from prose to verse, from playwriting to visual poetry). In the *Introductory Notes* to the Einaudi edition of 1971 Morante defines *The World Saved by Kids* as follows:

In una serie di poesie, poemi e canzoni, una coscienza di poeta, partendo da un'esperienza individuale (*Addio* nella Prima Parte), attraverso una esperienza totale che si riconosce anche nel passato millenario e nel futuro confuso (poesie della Seconda Parte, e in particolare il poema in forma di dramma, *La serata a Colono*) tenta la sua proposta di realtà comune e unica (*Canzoni* della Terza Parte). Si capisce allora perché Elsa Morante definisca, fra l'altro, il suo libro romanzo e autobiografia: non intendendo questi come un seguito di fatti particolari o personali; ma come l'avventura disperata di una coscienza che tende, nel suo processo, a identificarsi con tutti gli altri viventi della terra (MORANTE: 1971, VI).²

¹ The book was translated into English by Cristina Viti in 2016 (MORANTE: 2016); all the translations from this text come from that edition.

² «In a series of poems and songs, a poetic conscience, starting from the experience of an individual (*Farewell* in the First Part) and encompassing a total experience that can be recognized both in the past of a thousand years ago and in the uncertain future (The poems in the Second Part, and in particular the poem in dramatic form *The Evening at Colonus*) attempts to suggest a common and unique reality (*Folk Songs* in the Third Part). It is thus possible to see why Elsa Morante defines her book as both a novel and an autobiography among other things, not meaning a series of specific or personal facts, but rather the desperate adventures of a conscience that tends, as it processes events, to identify itself with all the other living beings on the Earth» Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by P. H. Robison, the translator of this essay.

Reminiscent of a Dantesque comedy for the modern age in its journey from an existential hell towards salvation, this book thus retraces the steps of a poetic itinerary that digs deep into the recesses of the traumas of an epoch and a generation; «La tragedia della coscienza e il mondo attuale» («The tragedy of the conscience and the world of today») is in fact the emblematic subtitle of the 1971 edition. It is significant that, faced with the calling to give a literary form to experiences replete with anguish and loss but also closely related to the immediate contemporary, Morante, who is principally a novelist,³ chos es to write in verse. In this work, verse writing becomes a privileged medium tasked with narrating the indescribable. Whilst acknowledging and separately analyzing the marked heterogeneity of the three sections of her work, the present contribution will examine the forms of this writing in verse adopted by the author to give voice to what was left unexpressed.

The interplay of individual and collective trauma

In the first section of the book, *Farewell*, a two-part composition dedicated to the painter Bill Morrow (Morante's lover who committed suicide in April 1962), trauma is a personal wound. Here, however, mourning becomes the «metastasis of an ancient trauma» (NAVA: 1994, 53): the breaking, that is, of the primal, amniotic bond with her mother, a theme which, as clearly noted by Wehling-Giorgi (2015), informs all the author's early works up through her last great novel *Aracoeli*. The «mythologem» at the heart of *Farewell* is «a Mother figure, a figure of a great Goddess, whose son-lover has been wrenched away from her» (LEONELLI: 1993, 167). And indeed, Morante turns to Morrow, who appears in the form of a ghost according to a topical figuration of the return of the lost, as if he were a child, the Jungian *puer aeternus* «who only lives when rooted in the maternal body» (JUNG: 1967, 448):

³ The first poetic production of Morante is the collection entitled *Alibi*, published by Longanesi in 1958. Her choice to turn to verse, however, here is explained by the writer as the need to create a «coro dei suoi romanzi; e, in parte, nient'altro che un divertimento» (MORANTE: 1988, 1373) («chorus of her novels; and, in part, nothing more than entertainment»). Although the diminishing attitude to her poetry is here a rhetorical practice, it is clear that for Morante verses have at this level almost the value of commentary on the prose, an accompaniment of the text of the novel, as is well illustrated in the appearance of many of the components already present in *Lies and Sorcery* (*Menzogna e sortilegio*) and *Arturo's Island* (*L'isola di Arturo*) within the collection.

E adesso io qua sola in questa veglia di secoli
 seduta nell'angolo della stanza presso all'uscio
 dietro la finestra illuminata nella notte
 aspetto l'ora del tuo ritorno a casa.

Non posso lasciarmi al sonno, finché tu tardi.
 Voglio riaverti qua vicino, sentire il tuo fiato
 e medicarti della lebbra impossibile
 che ha sfigurato l'allegria dei tuoi occhi.

[...]

E così non ho udito il tuo passo, né il tintinnio
 del mazzetto delle chiavi, né l'aprirsi dell'uscio
 mentre tu rincasi. Due mani fanciullesche
 mi solleticano la nuca.

Riconosco, vicino alla mia faccia, il sapore di nido
 delle tue ciocche. Intravedo, con le mie pupille confuse,
 le ombre luminose dei tuoi occhi, del colore di un mare stellato.

«Ah, teppista! Ci sei, finalmente! A quest'ora, si torna?
 Potevi almeno dirmelo, ieri sera, che facevi nottata!
 Che hai fatto? Forse è successo qualcosa? una lite? chi t'ha offeso?
 Oppure un malore... t'hanno fatto bere, di nuovo! sei caduto?...
 ti sei ferito? dove hai male?»... (MORANTE: 2012, 17-18).⁴

What we are dealing with here is a form of Morante's writing that, moving in a dreamlike and hallucinatory dimension, brings back the dead: Nava terms the latter «medium-like-writing, in which the writer acts as mediator for a story, which existed prior to

⁴ «And now here alone in this wake of ages / sitting in a corner of the room by the door / behind the window lit up in the night / I wait for the time of your return home. / I cannot give myself up to sleep, while you delay. / I want to have you back next to me, feel your breath / and cleanse you from the impossible leprosy / that has disfigured the laughter in your eyes. // [...] / And so I didn't hear your step, not the clinking / of the little bunch of keys, nor the door opening / as you come home. / Two childish hands / are tickling my nape. // I recognize, near my face, the nest-like flavour / of your hair. With my uncertain gaze I can make out / the luminous shadows of your eyes, the colour of a starlit sea. / "You hoodlum-is this the time? Here you are at last! // You might have told me, last night, you'd be out for the night! / What've you been up to? Something happen to you? some fight? who crossed you? / Or some sickness... they got you drinking-again! did you fall over?.../ did you get hurt? where does it hurt?" ...» (MORANTE: 2016, 18).

the writer's conscious intentions and comes from deep within, from that place where next to the erotic impulses dwell the impulses of death» (NAVA: 1994, 71). Returning to an observation made by Elisa Gambaro regarding Morante's transcription of dreams in *Diario 1938*, it is however also interesting to note that just as in *Farewell* «the dreamlike syntax represents instincts and impulses [...] which call to mind the anthropological constellation of the mother, the body, and the home» (GAMBARO: 2018, 78). Following on from this representation of an «eroticized maternity» (DE ROGATIS: 2019, 97), the verses which follow in fact posit a dysphoric depiction of the aging body and of physical decline. These are central motifs in the writing of Morante,⁵ who always places figures of young women with regenerative powers such as «La Carlottina» («Charlottine»), who is found at the end of the book,⁶ alongside female figures who are degraded, barren, torn, and scarred by trauma. As in the pages of her *Diario*, here too it is «a room which contains images of the humiliated body and of carnal decay» (GAMBARO: 2018, 79) and which will become the setting for a mute, impossible dialogue with her beloved:

«Non sono ferito. Non ho nessun male.
Guardami, sono sano. Guarda, il mio corpo è intatto.
Ma tu, quanto vecchia ti sei fatta! sei perfino rimpicciolita!
Hai tutti i capelli bianchi! Pure le ciglia bianche!

Nel sorridere, la tua faccia si fa ancora più rugosa!
Povera buffa vecchiarella carina.
Sono venuto a darti la buona notte.
Questa è l'ora della guarigione (MORANTE: 2012, 19).⁷

⁵ Already back on 17 February 1938, the very young Morante, describing a dream in her *Diario* had voiced her terror at the physical decline connected to aging: «La mia bellezza che ancora sembra adolescente come afferrare tutto in tempo? Mi fa paura la vecchiaia la morte» (MORANTE: 1989, 35; «My beauty that still seems adolescent how can everything be grasped in time? I fear old age, death»).

⁶ *The Final Song of The Yellow Star Also Called the Charlottine (La Canzone finale della stella gialla detta pure la Carlottina)* is the final section of the Poem, *The World Saved by Kids*, which concludes the volume.

⁷ «I am not hurt. I'm not in any pain. / Look at me, I'm well. Look, my body is intact. / But you – how old you've grown! you've gone and shrunk on me! / Your hair's all white! your *lashes* are white! // When you smile, your face puckers up even more! / Poor cute funny little old lady. / I've come to say goodnight. / This is the hour of healing» (MORANTE: 2016, 19).

The verses of *Farewell* depict the idea of the absence and loss of a day-to-day life, now devoid of meaning, through a series of repetitions (*Over here* is the recurring formula in the incipit of each stanza)⁸ which, conferring an almost litany-like iterative rhythm on the text, suggest «an obsessive fixation on the object in melancholy» (FOSTER H.: 1996, 132). What Maria Pia De Paulis observes concerning the writings of Malaparte on trauma may also be applied to Morante: the enumerations, the percussive rhythm, «the stress on details 'made present', the numeration and the obsessive variation» (DE PAULIS: 2019, 47) become a tangible sign of the inability of language to put shock into words.⁹

Not far removed from this melancholy state is surely the influence that Freudian readings exerted on Morante during the years in which she was writing *The World Saved by Kids*. Among the numerous Freudian volumes owned by the writer were the 1926 *Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety*, a text that she read in the Italian translation of Emilio Servadio,¹⁰ and which she fills with copious notes and underlinings, highlighting specifically the following passage (here in its English translation):

When the ego is involved in a particularly difficult psychical task, as occurs in mourning, or when there is some tremendous suppression of affect, [...] it loses so much of the energy as its disposal that it has to cut down the expenditure of it at many points at once. [...] I came across an instructive example of this kind of intense, though short-lived, general inhibition. The patient, an obsessional neurotic, used to be overcome by a paralyzing fatigue which lasted for one or more days whenever something occurred: which should obviously have thrown into a rage. We have here a point from which it should be inhibition which characterizes states of depression, including the gravest form of them, melancholia (FREUD: 1981, 90).

⁸ For an analysis of the metrical structure and rhythm of *Farewell*, see CARMELLO: 2018, 57-59.

⁹ Anne Whitehead has shown how the repetitions symbolize a psychological condition suspended between «trauma and catharsis», thus, between the duress of repetition of the loss experienced and the attempt to reformulate the past in order to work through it (WHITEHEAD: 2004, 86).

¹⁰ All of the volumes of the writer's personal library to which reference is made in this chapter were donated by her heirs, Carlo Cecchi and Daniele Morante, to the National Central Library of Rome in 2013 and 2015, and are today part of the Elsa Morante Archives (F. MOR.).

The dissociative and alienating experience of trauma during her period of mourning is in part fueled, however, by substance abuse including narcotics, considered a way to forget that sense of «helplessness and terror» (HERMAN: 2001, 45) which annihilates the traumatized individual. Morante therefore recreates the steps of hallucinatory delirium which follows drug-taking in the verses of *Late Sunday Dusk* (*La sera domenicale*), the second composition of the central section of the work:

E ricomincia la piccola strage.
 Il sudore la nausea il freddo dei polpastrelli l'agonia delle ossa
 e la ridda delle astrazioni meravigliose
 nell'orrore della scarnificazione (MORANTE: 2012, 31).¹¹

The traumatic memory, up to this point only relative to the suicide of the son-lover, now touches in this text upon another dramatic loss experienced by Morante during those years, the death of her mother, which occurred in November 1963:

Memoria memoria, casa di pena
 dove per cameroni e ballatoi deserti
 Un fragore di altoparlanti non cessa di ripetere
 (il meccanismo s'è incantato) sempre il punto amaro
 degli Elì, Elì senza risposta... L'urlo del ragazzo
 che precipita accecato dal male sacro.
 [...]
 La mozza litania cristiana nel deposito dell'ospedale, intorno alla
 vecchia ebrea morta
 che scostò la croce con le sue manine deliranti.
 SENZA I CONFORTI DELLA RELIGIONE. Questa casa è piena di sangue
 ma il sangue stesso, tutti i sangui, non sono che vapori larvali
 conformi alla mente che li testimonia (MORANTE: 2012, 33).¹²

¹¹ «And the little slaughter starts anew. / The sweat the nausea the cold fingertips the agony of the bones / and the sabbath of wondrous abstractions / in the horror of scarification» (MORANTE: 2016, 32).

¹² «Memory memory, you house of punishment / where ugly big rooms & deserted landings echo / with the blare of loudspeakers whose stuck mechanism / won't stop replaying the bitter point /of unanswered Eli Elis. The howl of the boy / who crashes down blinded by the sacred sickness. / [...] / The Christian litany cut short in the hospital store room, around the dead old Jewess / who'd waved the cross away with her delirious little hands. / WITHOUT THE COMFORTS OF RELIGION. This house is full of blood / but blood itself, all bloods, are nothing but larval vapours / conforming to the mind that bears witness to them» (MORANTE: 2016, 34).

The ritual gesturing of her Jewish mother reflects Morante's experience of the sacred, marked by the resurfacing of a painful memory that recoils from the *Comforts of religion*:¹³ larval, ghostly, horrific images are expression of the traumatic grief and in these verses seems to be no chance of recovery.

But *Late Sunday Dusk* is a fundamental text within the overall architecture of the book, not least because it marks the passage from the private pain caused by the double loss to the collective pain caused by the tragic historical events of the twentieth century: war, the Holocaust, totalitarianism, and conflict, including the sense of disorientation among mass society which arises in modern life, produced by the economic boom.¹⁴ Morante herself, attempting to define the genre of this book which eludes traditional classifications, underlines its connection to tragic modern conflicts. Inside the dust-jacket flap of the 1968 edition, in fact, she writes:

È un sistema filosofico-sociale (naturalmente coinvolto nelle Attualità contemporanee, dominate dagli idoli atomici e dai conflitti umani tra il primo, il secondo e il terzo mondo; a cui si aggiunge il ricordo dell'altro mondo: un ricordo che dai filosofi contemporanei viene abitualmente rimosso). [...] Insomma è un libro: se per *libro* si intende un'esperienza comune e unica, attraverso un ciclo totale (dalla nascita alla morte e il contrario). Ma se per libro s'intende un prodotto d'altra specie, allora questo non è un libro (MORANTE: 1968).¹⁵

Returning to *Late Sunday Dusk*, right from the opening lines one can see how the individual trauma blends into and mirrors the collective tragedies of the century:

¹³ *Without the Comforts of Religion* (*Senza i comforti della religione*) is the title of an unfinished novel by Elsa Morante, upon which the writer worked from 1958 to 1964, when she began work on *The World Saved by Kids*. For a broader overview on the genesis of the work, the meaning of the novel and its relationship to later works, see CIVES: 2006 and CAZALÈ- BERARD: 2014.

¹⁴ On the need to interpret conflict and the economic boom of 1968 as traumatic experiences, see among others DONNARUMMA: 2014, 30.

¹⁵ «It's a philosophical-social system (naturally involved with contemporary current affairs dominated by atomic idols and by the human conflicts between the first, second and third worlds; to these is added the memory of another world – a memory that contemporary philosophers routinely banish from consciousness). [...] In short, it is a book, if by book we mean a common and unique experience fulfilling a cycle (from birth to death and vice versa). But if by book we mean a product of different sort, then this is not a book».

Per il dolore delle corsie malate
 e di tutte le mura carcerarie
 e dei campi spinati, dei forzati e dei loro guardiani,
 e dei forni e delle Siberie e dei mattatoi
 e delle marce e delle solitudini e delle intossicazioni e dei suicidi
 e i sussulti della concezione
 e il sapore dolciastro del seme e delle morti,
 per il corpo innumerevole del dolore
 loro e mio,
 oggi io ributto la ragione, maestà
 che nega l'ultima grazia,
 e passo la mia domenica con la demenza.
 O preghiera trafitta dell'elevazione,
 io rivendico per me la colpa dell'offesa
nel corpo vile (MORANTE: 2012, 31).¹⁶

Morante experiences firsthand, *in corpore vili*, the suffering of society, «the ulcers of existence» (LA MONACA: 2018, 125) of humanity in its state of torment, a suffering that exacerbates and serves as an echo chamber for the wounds that have torn her apart. The idea of the poet determined to give voice to collective trauma and the unconscious fears of humanity can already be found in Jung. In that respect one passage from *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* is particularly interesting; Morante has highlighted it with horizontal marks in her own edition. The closeness of the passage to the writer's Jungian vision is clear:

As a human being he may have moods and a will and personal aims, but as an artist he is 'man' in a higher sense – he is 'collective man' – one who carries and shapes the unconscious, psychic life of mankind (JUNG: 1961, 195).

For Morante, as for Jung, the artist is therefore the «'centro sensibile del dramma', naturale e storico, degli altri viventi», («'the emotional center' of the natural and historical tragedy of other living beings»); the one who must feel their suffering herself, «partecipare alla loro

¹⁶ «For the suffering of sick wards / and of all jailhouse walls/ and of barbed-wire camps, hard-labour convicts & their guards, / and of ovens & Siberias & abattoirs / and of marches & solitudes & poisonings & suicides / and the shudders of conception / and the sugary taste of seed & of deaths, / the numberless body of suffering / theirs and mine, / today I reject reason, majesty / denying the ultimate grace, /and choose to spend my Sunday with derangement. / O pierced prayer of elevation, / I claim for myself the guilt of the injury / *in the base body*» (MORANTE: 2016, 31).

esperienza, attraversare la loro stessa angoscia» (MORANTE: 1971, V) («participate in their experience, through their own anguish»), in order to find the type of narrative that can render it understandable and communicable in a literary form.

«It's me, that point of guilt»: a reading of *The Evening at Colonus* through the lens of trauma

At this point, it appears necessary to focus on the theatrical *pièce* at the heart of Morante's work, *The Evening at Colonus* (*La serata a Colono*). The latter text I believe offers, in an innovative form for the writer, an effective model of that «connection between words and wounds» (KURTZ: 2018, 8), or rather of the correspondence between her expressive choices and traumatic processes. A rewriting of the classical myth of Oedipus, decontextualized and placed in the 1960s in the corridors of a psychiatric hospital, the drama becomes a synthesis of all the traumatic experiences on which the writer bases her work. Morante indeed projects her bitter personal experiences on the tragedy of *The Evening at Colonus*. Even though there is a clear echoing of the verses of *Farewell* in the monologue of Oedipus, her words are charged with a greater drama, sanctioning the impossibility of reunification with those «youths and mothers and rooms» that had been her ghostly consolation in the opening pages of the book.

Addio ADDIO
 è la sola scritta leggibile su questo muro sgorbiato
 che è l'ultima mia casa, – eternità carceraria
 dove non si dà più fuoco domestico, né stanza d'incontri o di ritorni.
 [...]
 Ma essere il nervo della lacerazione
 la fronte accecata che piange il lutto di fanciulli e madri e stanze
 il maledetto Edipo... (MORANTE: 2012, 70).¹⁷

Oedipus, who surely serves as the incarnation of the figure of the poet¹⁸ in general, at the same time embodies the figure of Morante in

¹⁷ «Farewell FAREWELL / is the only legible word on this defaced wall / that's my last home – a jailhouse eternity / with no more home fires nor any rooms for meetings or returns. / [...] / But oh to be the nerve of laceration / the blinded forehead keening for youths and mothers and rooms / Oedipus the cursed...» (MORANTE: 2016, 82-83).

¹⁸ On this theme, see the wonderful reading of *The Evening at Colonus* done by Concetta

the Auerbachian sense of the word, a fictional character who completes the real person. Moving through a debris-filled landscape of death¹⁹ in a vain search for a divine response to the pain of humanity, Oedipus finds himself face to face with the horrors of the past and the «mostri irreali» (MORANTE: 1987a, 39) («unreal monsters»)²⁰ of the present. *The Evening at Colonus* is, in the words of its own author, «una Parodia» (MORANTE: 2012, 35) («A Parody»; MORANTE: 2016, 37). What is meant, however, is a «serious parody» (D'ANGELI: 2003, 123) which, as Agamben has deftly noted, allows her to «represent the indescribable» (AGAMBEN: 2012, 121) precisely thanks to its presentation as a deviation from the norm. Being a poet, Oedipus is «quel punto della colpa» (MORANTE: 2012, 69) («that point of guilt»;²¹ MORANTE: 2016, 114), his body is contaminated by the misdeeds of all men who are blinded by evil and by a false conscience: «Forse, io sono il corpo d'ogni antenato e d'ogni progenitura/ il luogo cieco e fisso di tutte le rotazioni temporali/ e lo sciame infesto di tutte le contaminazioni» (MORANTE: 2012, 67) («Perhaps, I am the body of each ancestor and each progeny/ the blind and fixed abode of all the rotations of time/ and the festering swarm of all contaminations»; MORANTE: 2016, 78).

The temporality in which the story of Oedipus is set seems to suggest the idea of traumatic fixation:²² it is, in fact, a mythical-ritual temporality, fragmented and devoid of consequentiality, in which the past, present and future are layered in a cycle of birth and death that is reminiscent of reflections on the eternal return of the Polish philosopher Mircea Eliade, whose works Morante reads during these years:²³

D'Angeli (2003).

¹⁹ The reference to concentration camps is explicit: «lager» (MORANTE: 2012, 93) («death camps»; MORANTE: 2016, 113).

²⁰ The expression comes from the essay *Il poeta di tutta la vita* which Morante dedicates to Umberto Saba, in which she reflects on the ethical duty of the poet, who must know how to «attraversare la prova della realtà e dell'angoscia, fino alla limpidezza della parola che [...] libera il mostro dai suoi mostri irreali» (MORANTE: 1987a, 38-39) («pass through the trial of reality and anguish, arriving at the clarity of the word which [...] frees the monster from his unreal monsters»).

²¹ For a deeper analysis of the question of guilt regarding the character of Oedipus in Morante and Pasolini, see BAZZOCCHI: 2014.

²² On the characteristics of temporality in the narration of trauma, see CARUTH: 1995, WHITEHEAD: 2004 and LUCKHURST: 2008.

²³ Among the texts of Eliade present in Morante's library, it is important to point to *Le mythe de l'éternel retour: archetypes et répétition*. For a deeper reflection on the relationship between Morante and Eliade, see BARDINI: 1999, 647.

... OGGI DOMANI e IERI sono tre cavalli che si rincorrono
intorno alla pista d'un circo.

La vicenda intera è sempre in atto nell'alone vertiginoso
ordine fisso e mutante sempre in una fuga all'inverso.

[...]

E MORTE E NASCITA E MORTE E NASCITA E MORTE E NASCITA
questo motto così ripetuto a caratteri uguali senza virgole né punti
è stampato lungo il cerchio d'una ruota.

Ma la mente, stretta nella sua frammentaria misura lineare,
si fabbrica le sue geografie e le sue storie
come un folle coatto che nel percorrere avanti e indietro la sua corsia,
crede di viaggiare alla scoperta di regioni inesplorate (MORANTE: 2012,
64-65).²⁴

History and myth both display the signs of trauma. They are layered in a single tale that has a tragic substratum in which the linear temporality unravels, giving way to repetitions, to overlapping and to the unspoken. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have written in this regard that traumatic events

[...] although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after (FELMAN AND LAUB: 1992, 69).

In our attempt to read *The Evening at Colonus* from the viewpoint of the link between traumatic events and forms of narration, it is now appropriate to stop and consider the interventions of the Chorus. By inserting an anonymous voice that interacts with Oedipus, Morante constructs dialogues through a strategy of combination and syncretism of different models, all of which bear witness to the trauma. One of the interventions made by the Chorus proves to be an emblematic example of cross-contamination of heterogenous references; blended by the

²⁴ «...TODAY TOMORROW and YESTERDAY are three horses chasing one another / round a circus track. / The entire story is constantly enacted in the vertiginous halo / fixed and ever-changing order always fleeing backwards. / [...] / AND DEATH AND BIRTH AND DEATH AND BIRTH AND DEATH AND BIRTH / this motto ever repeated in the same characters with no commas or full stops / is printed round the circumference of a wheel. / But the mind, gripped in the vice of its fragmentary linear measure, / fabricates its own geographies and histories / like a locked-up madman who pacing the length and breadth of his ward / thinks he is journeying to discover unexplored regions» (MORANTE: 2016, 74-75).

author in an almost paradoxical way, they produce a disorienting effect upon the reader:

– A Tlatelolco a Tla te lol co... – C'è odore di gas asfissiante – Mostri la tèssera – Fuoco!!! – Bisogna trasformarsi tutti in macchine per uccidere – per uccidere – Qui siamo nel paese dei campanelli – Un momento un momento –
 posso respirare per favore? Posso
 Fare un gran respiro per favore? Grazie – (MORANTE: 2012, 51).²⁵

Only by consulting the manuscripts of *The world saved by kids*²⁶ is it possible to understand the complex mechanisms of the reuse of sources which the author puts into practice at this point of the text. Indeed, on a page contained in one of the files, there are crucial notes penned by the author: «Questo ha fatto a Tlatelolco / Colui per cui tutti viviamo (antico canto azteco)»; «Voi dovete trasformarvi in macchine per uccidere (Che Guevara)»; «No, per favore. Ne taglio un pezzo? Posso respirare? Ora va meglio. Posso fare un gran respiro? Ok grazie [Parole di una cavia umana durante esperimento di decompressione a Dachau]» (*Vittorio Emanuele 1622*, Cart. III, c. 9r).²⁷ The concealment of the sources and their amalgamation in an alienating *pastiche* hides traces of trauma, as is evident above all in the case of the fragments of dialogue from the experimental subject at Dachau (words that are repeated obsessively also in other interventions of the Chorus). As Whitehead has underlined, in fact, intertextuality is one of the main stylistic constants of trauma narrative: it takes the form of a learned, combinatory quoting of sources, which undermines conventional expressive norms, suggesting the idea that «traumatic knowledge cannot be fully communicated or retrieved without distortion» (WHITEHEAD: 2004, 84).

²⁵ «– In Tlatelolco in Tlat-el-ol-co ... – I can smell poison gas – Show your card – / – Fire!!! – We must all turn into killing machines – / killing machines – [...] One moment one moment – / May I breathe please? May I / take a deep breath please? Thank you – » (MORANTE: 2016, 56).

²⁶ The personal papers of Elsa Morante were donated by her heirs in 1989 and 2007 to the National Central Library of Rome. The manuscripts, typescripts, and proofs of *The world saved by kids*, contained in five notebooks and six files, are today conserved in the *Vittorio Emanuele 1622* Archive of the Library.

²⁷ «You must transform yourselves into killing machines (Che Guevara)»; «No, please. Shall I cut a piece? May I breathe? That's better. May I take a deep breath? OK thank you [The words of a human victim during Nazi medical experiments in decompression at Dachau]».

The Happy Few

In the third section of the book, *Folk Songs*, this formal subversion reaches its apex: the overthrowing of traditional aesthetic canons, the entropy of languages, the presence of calligrams and drawings become predominant aspects of the work and display a powerful desecrating force. The adoption of innovative tools for representation, and the exasperation with formality lead to paroxysmal effects.²⁸ One that comes to mind is the extraordinary experiment of visual poetry, a hybridization of expressive codes and the dismantling of the norms for layout, that is *The Clandestine Song of the Great Masterwork* (*La canzone clandestina della Grande Opera*), a text included within the composition *The Song of Judas and the Wedding* (*La canzone di Giuda e dello spozalizio*), according to an interlocking technique that accentuates its eccentricity. The linguistic kaleidoscope and the undermining of the traditional poetic forms here become the instrument for expressing a reality which is so violent and painful that no adequate expression is possible through conventional means.²⁹ All «obsessions of the modern world», to use the words of Pasolini in his review of the book, converge in fact in these final songs and are inserted «into a linguistic system so communicative that it is scandalous» (PASOLINI: 1968). A polyphony cuts through this last part of the book: from Pazzariello to «la Mutria» («Longface») to Carlottina. They are all *figurae Christi*, those who Morante refers to as «I felici pochi» («Happy Few»), her *ragazzini*, the uncorrupted; faced with the atrocities of History, they represent the last hope for survival. The *Happy Few* are those who have been touched by both the horrors of the past and of modernity; they are the survivors of the «fabbrica della morte» (MORANTE: 1971, VII) («factory of death») built by the systems of power:

Un tale
 (F. P. anonimo)
 che fu dato in pasto alle belve sotto i Cesari perché schiavo
 ridato in pasto alle belve sotto i Flavii perché cristiano

²⁸ The extreme experimentation that characterizes *The World Saved by Kids* is also influenced by the closeness of Morante in those years to the poets of the Beat Generation, especially Allen Ginsberg, who proceeds to dismantle forms and refutes traditional expressive codes as inauthentic and limiting.

²⁹ On the aspects of a narration which must be daring to the extreme in order to overcome the inexpressible nature of trauma, see also ROTHBERG: 2000.

sgozzato a Tenochtitlan perché femmina vergine
 bruciato vivo dai Papi perché empio maledetto
 ribruciato vivo dai Vescovi delle Fiandre perché strega ossessa
 fucilato dagli Zar perché rivoluzionario
 impiccato da Stalin perché anarchico
 rastrellato dai fascisti perché maschio di leva
 gassato a Buchenwald perché ebreo
 linciato a Dallas perché negro [...] (MORANTE: 2012, 154).³⁰

Hence, all of the evils of society throughout the epochs are concentrated in the parable of the *Happy Few*. To the links of causality and progressive succession of events, Morante opposes, in these verses, a synchronic and alogical temporality. The reconfiguration of temporal experience should be referred to a tradition of simultaneity of temporalities inaugurated by T. S. Eliot with *The Waste Land*. At the heart of the quoted verses, in fact, temporal condensation is the form of an apocalyptic representation of the crisis of linear time, ascribable to the area of modernism.

The subversion of chronological temporality reaches its climax in *The Clandestine Song of the Great Masterwork*, discussed above. Here a highly dystopian scenario, evoking the drama of Fascist purges, is the backdrop for the story of the Pazzariello, an archetypal figure of outsider, marginalized by society, who comes from a mythical and ahistorical dimension:

Ma insomma, chi era?! Come nasceva?! Boh!
 qualcuno dichiarava d'averlo udito dichiarare in tutta serietà
 che lui era nato dallo sposalizio d'una asina
 con un chicco di grandine
 sotto il Diluvio Universale. Secondo altre informazioni più autorevoli
 pare che l'avessero ritrovato ignudo [...]
 in mezzo alle macerie e al polverone dei bombardamenti della Ottava
 Guerra Mondiale
 circa diciotto anni fa (MORANTE: 2012, 186-187).³¹

³⁰ «There's this guy / (anonymous H. F.) who / was thrown to the lions under the Caesars as a slave / thrown to the lions again under the Flavii as a Christian / throat-slit in Technotitlan as a female virgin / burnt alive by the Popes as an unholy heretic / burnt alive again by the Bishops of Flanders as an obsessed sorceress / executed by the Tsars as a revolutionary / hanged by Stalin as an anarchist / raided by fascists as a male of military service age / gassed in Buchenwald as a Jew / lynched in Dallas as a nigger [...]» (MORANTE: 2016, 184-185).

³¹ «But who was he anyway?! how was he born?! Bah! / Some said they'd heard him

In his naiveté as «idiota giocondo e inoffensivo» (MORANTE: 2012: 191) («a funny, harmless little idiot»; MORANTE: 2016, 233), upon the arrival of the Great Work, the monstrous machine of autocratic power, he remains indifferent and continues to play *Cielito lindo* on his ocarina. This arouses the outrage of the population and authorities, who consider him «un escremento della Nazione» (MORANTE: 2012, 192) («an excrement of the Nation»; MORANTE: 2016, 236) and decide to eliminate him in the gas chambers:

Finalmente
 di recente
 a séguito della Nuova Riforma Sociale
 s'è trovata una soluzione
 moderna e razionale
 in merito all'individuo in questione
 eliminandolo scientificamente
 nella camera a pressione.
 [...]
 Ivi, lungo un soggiorno di durata variabile
 a seconda delle opportune disposizioni superiori,
 l'individuo deteriore
 viene – profondamente o progressivamente –
 eliminato.
 E così
 l'affare «Pazzariello»
 è stato, infine, liquidato (MORANTE: 2012, 200-201).³²

In the story of Pazzariello, an innocent victim of racial persecution, the catastrophe of the Holocaust unfolds. It is possible to note in these verses Morante's approach to a peculiar literary genre, magical realism: the expressionistic twisting of language here translates a continuous oscillation between the real and the unreal. However, the

declare in dead earnest / that he'd been born in the Great Flood / from the wedding of a she-ass / with a hailstone. / According to more reliable sources / it seems they'd found him naked [...] / in the rubble & dust of the bombings of the Eighth World War / some eighteen years ago» (MORANTE: 2016, 226).

³² «Finally / recently / following the New Social Reform / a modern rational / solution / as regards the individual in question / was found at long last by scientific / elimination via the pressure chamber. / [...] / Here, after a sojourn of variable duration / as per the authorities' specification, / the deviant individual / is – promptly or gradually – / eliminated. / And so / the 'Pazzariello' affair / has finally been liquidated» (MORANTE: 2016, 241-242).

use of narrative devices peculiar to magical realism should not be understood as an escape into the fantastic to erase traumatic memory. Magical realist storytelling must, on the contrary, be seen as a tool for rewriting a horrific and violent reality, reworked in new forms that make it comprehensible. Indeed, as Eugene Arva points out, magical realism is a method of textual representation that

[...] gives traumatic events an expression that traditional realism could not, seemingly because magical realist images and traumatized subjects share the same ontological ground, being part of a reality that is constantly escaping witnessing through telling (ARVA: 2011, 6).³³

The mixing of diverse ontological codes, and the distortion of a reality which cannot be traced back to rationally understood parameters, magical realism acts as a privileged vehicle for the expression of trauma.³⁴ Clearly the story of Oedipus already dwelled at the intersection between the real and the supernatural; so, too, did the narcotic trip of the poet described at the end of *The Chemical Comedy* in the verses of *The Yearning for Scandal* (*La smania dello scandalo*), placed in a magical dreamlike dimension. Nonetheless, in this final section of the book, the stylistic features of magical realism seem to multiply; and *The Final Song of The Yellow Star Also Called the Charlottine* referenced above, is another significant example. These verses narrate the story of Carlotta, the last of Morante's *ragazzini*, a German child who, after the Jews were forced to wear a yellow star by the government of the Reich, decides «di trasformare quell'ordinaria ubbidienza in una / disubbidienza / straordinaria» (MORANTE: 2012, 239) («to transform that ordinary obedience into an extraordinary disobedience»; MORANTE: 2016, 306). Therefore she, too, wears that distinctive badge, thus inspiring her classmates at school, and one by one, everyone else, until it becomes impossible in Berlin to distinguish between Aryans and Jews. And as the whole population happily displays the yellow star, suddenly the miracle appears:

³³ For an overview of the characteristics of magic realism as a literary genre and its various declinations in different countries and cultures, see for instance BOWERS: 2004; ZAMORA AND FARIS: 2005; WARNERS AND SASSER 2020.

³⁴ Already in *House of Liars*, Morante proposes an early form of contamination between realistic and magical codes without, however, ever arriving at a normalization of the supernatural. Tiziana de Rogatis (2019) significantly called this form of realism «bewitching realism».

Infine, il miracolo inevitabilmente esplode!
 Una mattina, nel tempo d'un attimo
 quelle miriadi di stelle gialle tutte insieme
 si son viste diventare d'oro zecchino!
 [...]
 E dal fondo pulviscolo del cielo s'avanza
 un volo d'uccelli – almeno così pareva da lontano –... Storni? rondini?
 Cicogne?... Ma... no... NOO!
 Sono le squadre Angeliche! al completo!
 Angeli, Arcangeli e Principati,
 Potestà, Virtù e Dominazioni,
 Troni, Cherubini e Serafini.
 [...]
 Sempre librati nell'aria
 assieme in cerchio circondano il Reichstag;
 e la Dominazione negra
 soffia per prima nel suo strumento
 le note della levata
 (*Sveglia, Sveglia, Cappellon!*)
 subito seguita dall'intera orchestra che si scatena all'unisono.
 All'immenso effetto musicale
 l'edificio governativo sobbalza come al passaggio
 di venticinque reattori supersonici
 e da tre finestre dei piani superiori quasi contemporaneamente
 s'affacciano
 Hitler Adolfo, inteso fra i ragazzini col nomignolo di Monobaffo o
 anche di Vaffàn,
 Goering Herman, detto il Ciccione o il Panzone,
 E Goebbels Paul Joseph, soprannominato Itterizia.
 Le loro tre facce maniache
 guardano in su, stravolte da un orrore così nudo
 da parere un'indecenza (MORANTE: 2012, 241-242).³⁵

³⁵ «And finally the inevitable miracle explodes! / One morning, in the space of an instant / those myriads of yellow stars all together / are seen to turn into authentic solid gold! / [...] / a flight of birds – or that's what it looked like from afar – / is it starlings? swallows? / storks?... Well ... no ... NOOO! / It's the angelic hosts! in full order! / Angels, Archangels and Principalities, / Powers, Virtues and Dominions, / Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim. / [...] / Gliding through the air / together in a circle they surround the Reichstag; / and the Black Dominion / blows first into his instrument / sounding the notes of a reveille / (*Wake up, wake up, Awkward Squad!*) / immediately followed by the entire orchestra unleashed in unison. / The government building shudders / under the immense musical effect as at the passage / of twenty-five supersonic reactors / and almost simultaneously three windows on the upper floors / open to show / Hitler Adolf, known among kids by the nickname / of Monotache or also Goffukk, / Goering Hermann, aka Fatso or Tripes, / and Goebbels Paul Joseph,

Here, magical realism allows Morante to verbalize the trauma of discrimination and the deportation of the Jews. In an interview with Elsa Morante in 1961, Francine Virduzzo comments as follows on the presence of magical realism in Morante's works: «it has none of that magical realism, however, as it was understood before the war; [...] the art of Elsa Morante puts all its magic at the service of a cruel analysis of reality» (MORANTE: 1988, LXXIII)³⁶. Magical realism, therefore, is not an escape from the cruelty of reality for Morante; on the contrary, the fantastical elements placed side by side with real historical characters (Hitler, Hermann, Goebbels) serve to demystify an extreme reality with their exceptional nature. The latter form of reality lies at the confines of the unspeakable, offering a possible response to the weight of History «by developing a compensatory vision» (FOSTER J. B.: 1995, 271).

Beyond Trauma: Some Conclusions

In *Song of the H. F. and U. M. in Three Parts* (*La Canzone degli F. P. e degli I. M. in Tre parti*), the philosopher Simone Weil appears among the names of the *Happy Few*. Her work (above all the *Cahiers*) is one of the most important sources for *The World Saved by Kids*³⁷. In Weil, «sorelluccia inviolata» (MORANTE: 2012, 138; «immaculate little sister», MORANTE: 2016, 135), relives the tragedy of the victims of the *Shoah* once more, narrated here through the return of many of the motifs which in the first part of the book were tied to the experience of trauma (the Cross, guilt, the hospital bed where a Jewish woman is left to die, suicide):

Lo so
 che per una ragazza partita all'ordalia della Croce
 e approdata sola alla colpa delirante dell'esilio
 è un orrido labirinto spinato il lettuccio straniero d'ospedale
 dove il suo piccolo corpo ebreo si lascia
 alla febbre suicida
 per consumare in se stesso l'intera strage dei lager (MORANTE: 2012, 139).³⁸

nicknamed Jaundice. / Their three maniacal faces / are looking up, distorted by a horror so naked / as to look indecent» (MORANTE: 2016, 308-310).

³⁶ On the characteristics of Morante's magical realism, see CALITTI: 2016.

³⁷ To further explore Weil's influence on Morante's works, see GARBOLI: 1987; D'ANGELI: 2003, 81-103; CAZALÈ-BERARD: 2009.

³⁸ «I know / that for a girl starting out on the ordeal of the Cross / and arriving alone at the delirious guilt of exile / the foreign hospital bed is a harrowing maze of

Nonetheless it is precisely in the words of Weil that Morante finds the path to exorcize the trauma, redefining the role of the poet as a part of society. Her assiduous poring over the writings of Weil nurtures her idea that the poet must be one of the *Happy Few*: as the only ones freed from the numbing of conscience that threatens modern society, they accept the resulting suffering as inseparable from the collective experience of reality and are thus able to recapture the sense of a renewed human community. All the volumes by Weil, conserved by the Morante archives, are filled with numerous annotations and traces of reading which allow the observer to confirm the constant consultation of these philosophical texts by the writer during the years of writing *The World Saved by Kids*. In this context, it is interesting to see noted «62-63-64 (Via del Babuino)», scribbled by the author in her volume of *La pesanteur et la grâce*, flanking this emblematic passage of the text: «When pain and exhaustion reach the point of instilling in the soul the feeling of perpetuity, contemplating this perpetuity with acceptance and love, one is snatched up to eternity» (WEIL: 1948, 24). Morante, who personally experienced that *pain and exhaustion*, thus chooses to give voice to this collective anguish. Her words become a revolutionary act, an instrument with which it is possible to oppose the gravity of trauma, and, when it comes to the prison of corpses, the lightness of grace which can set them free.

Ma per voi
 adesso queste mie voci di pietà sono tutt'uno
 col vostro antico pianto: uno stesso oggetto risibile
 di compassione.
 La vostra sostanza è conoscere
 che questa macchina lacerante da noi chiamata il corpo
 non era se non un rifugio sepolcrale
 della paura e del desiderio (MORANTE: 2012, 240).³⁹

A note from 1964 (two years after the death of Morrow), which can now be read in the *Chronology* of the Mondadori edition of her *Works*,

barbed wire / where her Jewish little body yields itself up / to suicidal fever / so as to consume inside itself the slaughter of all death camps» (MORANTE: 2016, 167-168).

³⁹ «Yet for you / my voicing pity is now one / with your ancient weeping: one same risible object / of compassion. / Your substance is in knowing / that this lacerating machine we call *the body* / was but a sepulchral refuge / of fear and of desire» (MORANTE: 2016, 168).

confirms how the identification with the other has become for Morante the only possible response to a personal pain which is also the pain of humanity itself.

Due anni da quel trenta aprile. E io continuo a vivere come se fossi viva. In certi momenti io stessa dimentico l'orrore. Una consolazione arriva, come se io ti ritrovassi in altre cose. Ma l'urto s'avverte d'improvviso. Anche le altre morti adesso sono la *morte*. Prima di te non era così. [...] L'ultimo rimedio per arrivare alla morte umanamente è non essere io, ma tutti gli altri tutto il resto. Non separare. Essere tutti gli altri passati presenti futuri vivi e morti. Così posso essere anche te (MORANTE: 1988, LXXVII-LXXVIII).⁴⁰

The link between the experience of personal loss and the destiny of society, renders «the wound perceivable» (HARTMAN: 2003, 259), and makes healing possible. Indeed, the choral storytelling sublimates the individual experience and dissolves the condition of subjective alienation found at the opening of the book. In giving voice to the utopia of the kids, «sola, reale giustificazione della Storia» (MORANTE: 1971, IX) («the only, real justification of History»), the poet is able to work through her traumatic past concretely, by transforming it through narration. Thus, *The World Saved by Kids*, a book that «opens looking out upon the end» (LEONELLI: 1993, 170), on to the image of the bare, shriveled belly of a mother, closes instead with a message of rebirth. In this upturned collection of poems (see FIORILLA: 2009, 268), where following verses about death we find others in celebration of life, poetry is in fact the only salvation, the truly subversive act, the last bulwark between humans and the brutality of History. In the essay *Pro o contro la bomba atomica*, Morante defends the testimonial value of an art form that knows how to «narrate the unnarratable» (WHITEHEAD: 2004, 4). She underlines the ethical task of a poet who, descending into the hell of human pain, sinking deeply into the abyss of trauma, can emerge thanks to the revolutionary power of the word: the final optimistic act when faced with the tragedies of the modern world.

⁴⁰ «Two years have passed since that April 30th. And I continue to live as if I were actually alive. At certain moments I myself forget the horror. A consolation arrives, as if I had found you again in other things. But the blow returns when I least expect it. Now other deaths are “that death”. Before you, it was not this way. [...] The last remedy to arrive at death in a humane way is not to be me, but to be everyone and everything. Not to separate. To be all of the others past present and future alive and dead. In this way I can also be you».

La qualità dell'arte è liberatoria, e quindi, nei suoi effetti, sempre rivoluzionaria. [...] Per quanto, lungo il corso della sua esistenza, possa accadere al poeta, come a ogni uomo, di essere ridotto dalla sventura alla nuda misura dell'orrore, fino alla certezza che questo orrore resterà ormai la legge della sua mente, non è detto che questa sarà l'ultima risposta del suo destino. Se la sua coscienza non sarà discesa nell'irrealtà, ma anzi l'orrore stesso gli diventerà una risposta reale (poesia), nel punto in cui segnerà le sue parole sulla carta, lui compierà un atto di ottimismo (MORANTE: 1987b, 108).⁴¹

[Translation by Patricia Helen Robison]

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⁴¹ «The nature of art is liberatory, and therefore, in its consequences, always revolutionary. [...] Although over the course of his life, a poet may find himself, as could any man, reduced by misfortune to the naked embodiment of horror, and to arrive at the certainty that this horror will remain the law of his mind, this is not necessarily the last response to which he is destined. If his conscience does not descend into unreality, but instead that horror itself becomes a real response for him (poetry), at the moment in which he puts his words to paper, he commits an act of optimism».

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Biography

ANTONELLA RUBINACCI holds an MA in Modern Philology and now is a PhD student in Filologia e critica at the University of Siena, in co-supervision with Université Paris Nanterre. She is teaching fellow in Comparative Literature at the University for Foreigners of Siena. Her research project is dedicated to Elsa Morante's work *The world saved by kids*. The aim of this research is to retrace the writing process of this text, through the study of the autograph manuscripts and of volumes stored in the writer's library, in order to better situate the work in the contemporary literary landscape and in the socio-political scenario of the 1960s. Antonella Rubinacci has participated in various seminars and conferences with papers on Morante's poetic and narrative production, twentieth century Italian literature and post-colonial literature. She has published a contribution on the influence of Rimbaud in the works of Morante and is the editor of the journal "Narrativa" about Italian Women Writers of the 2000s (forthcoming 44/2022).

ANTONELLA RUBINACCI ha conseguito la laurea magistrale in Filologia moderna ed è ora dottoranda in Filologia e critica presso l'Università di Siena, in co-tutela con l'Université Paris Nanterre. È cultrice della materia per l'insegnamento di Letterature Comparete presso l'Università per Stranieri di Siena. Il suo progetto di ricerca è dedicato al *Mondo salvato dai ragazzini* di Elsa Morante. L'obiettivo di questa ricerca è ricostruire il processo di scrittura del testo, attraverso lo studio delle carte autografe e dei volumi conservati nella biblioteca della scrittrice, per meglio collocare l'opera nel panorama letterario contemporaneo e nello scenario socio-politico degli anni Sessanta. Antonella Rubinacci ha partecipato a diversi seminari e convegni con interventi sulla produzione poetica e narrativa di Morante, sulla letteratura italiana del Novecento e sulla letteratura postcoloniale. Ha scritto un contributo sulle suggestioni rimbaudiane nell'opera di Morante e ha curato un volume della rivista "Narrativa" (44/2022) sulle scrittrici italiane degli anni Duemila.

PART 2

TRAUMA, (POST)MEMORY AND TRANSLINGUAL SPACES

4. Raccontare il trauma della *Shoah*: tra memoria e postmemoria

Barbara D'Alessandro

Abstract

After a short introduction to the concept of postmemory, the paper explores the problems connected to the intergenerational transfer of memory trying to show how we can talk also in Italy of a «literature of postmemory» for what concerns the trauma of the *Shoah*, starting from the emblematic case of the Italian-Hungarian translingual author of first generation Edith Bruck, moving to the second generation of Jews and analyzing the case of another translingual author, Helena Janeczek, up to the most recent examples of adoptive or affiliating postmemory.

Dopo una breve introduzione al concetto di postmemoria, l'articolo esplora le problematiche connesse alla trasmissione intergenerazionale della memoria, cercando di mostrare come si possa parlare anche per l'Italia di una «letteratura della postmemoria» per quanto concerne il trauma della *Shoah*. Il saggio partirà dal caso emblematico di Edith Bruck, autrice translingue di prima generazione, per poi passare alla seconda generazione, attraverso il caso di un'altra autrice translingue, Helena Janeczek. L'analisi si soffermerà infine su alcuni recenti esempi di postmemoria adottiva o affiliativa.

Introduzione

Già a partire dagli anni Settanta i figli di sopravvissuti all'Olocausto iniziano a riflettere su cosa significhi crescere con la memoria di un evento doloroso non sperimentato in prima persona, ma di fatto sentito come proprio. Fondamentale, in tal senso, la pubblicazione nel 1979 del libro *Children of the Holocaust* di Helen Epstein, che raccoglie, oltre alla storia personale dell'autrice nata a Praga da genitori sopravvissuti e cresciuta a New York, una serie di profonde interviste con altri figli di sopravvissuti. Si tratta di un testo che ha svolto una funzione decisiva nel campo degli studi sul trauma e delle sue trasmissioni intergenerazionali, la cui pubblicazione in America ha dato avvio al dibattito pubblico sulla memoria della *Shoah* e sulla seconda generazione.

La relazione tra i discendenti dei sopravvissuti e il passato traumatico di cui non hanno avuto esperienza diretta è stata poi analizzata e descritta abbondantemente negli anni successivi e nei campi di studio più disparati, usando terminologie differenti. Si è parlato, solo per citare alcuni studi significativi, di *mémoire trouée* (RACZYMOW: 1994), di *absent memory* (FINE: 1988), di *vicarious witnessing* (ZEITLIN: 1998) e di *prosthetic memory* (LANDSBERG: 2004). Quella che ha avuto più successo e che è considerata oggi più influente è tuttavia la terminologia *postmemory*, coniata dalla critica letteraria Marianne Hirsch in un articolo del 1992 che commentava il ruolo delle fotografie di famiglia nella graphic novel *Maus*, di Art Spiegelman, che racconta l'esperienza del padre durante l'Olocausto (HIRSCH: 1992). Il termine si riferiva alla relazione esistente tra i figli dei sopravvissuti e l'esperienza traumatica raccontata (o non raccontata) loro dai genitori durante l'infanzia attraverso storie, immagini e gesti in un modo talmente potente da andare a creare dei veri e propri ricordi. Questo concetto è stato poi ampiamente esplorato dalla studiosa nel lavoro del 1997 intitolato *Family Frames*, in cui viene definitivamente proposto il termine *postmemory*. La postmemoria, scrive Hirsch, si distingue dalla memoria in primo luogo per la distanza generazionale dall'evento traumatico, e in secondo luogo anche per la forte connessione personale ed emotiva con lo stesso, che aggiunge potenza alla ricostruzione, creando quasi una nuova memoria nelle generazioni che non hanno fatto esperienza diretta dell'evento, attraverso il ricorso all'immaginario personale e collettivo.

La studiosa si spinge inoltre a pensare che non solo il trauma dell'Olocausto, ma anche altri eventi significativi per la collettività,

possano dare vita a queste forme di postmemoria (HIRSCH: 1997, 22-24). Il luogo deputato all'elaborazione di tale fenomeno è sicuramente l'arte, in particolare quelle opere prodotte da autori della seconda generazione, per cui il racconto dei genitori è stato fondamentale nella spinta verso la rappresentazione.

Hirsch sottolinea inoltre come la *postmemory* non sia «a movement, a method, or idea» (HIRSCH: 1997, 6) ma di fatto una *struttura* in cui inquadrare il fenomeno di un ritorno inter- e transgenerazionale di un passato traumatico. Proprio nell'aggettivo transgenerazionale scorgiamo l'ulteriore apertura del concetto di postmemoria, che non si limita più ad essere applicato alla memoria trasmessa nell'intimo spazio del contesto familiare, ma arriva ad estendersi «to more distant adoptive witnesses or affiliative contemporaries» (HIRSCH: 1997, 6). Qualsiasi collettività può diventare oggetto di questa *affiliative postmemory*, tanto più oggi che i nuovi media con la loro immediatezza nella comunicazione svolgono un ruolo sempre più importante nel processo di trasmissione e costruzione di memoria culturale.

Il movimento della memoria non è così più solo verticale, attraverso le generazioni, ma diventa orizzontale, andando a toccare e coinvolgere comunità apparentemente lontane. In tal modo qualsiasi autore o artista, anche non della «literal second generation» (HIRSCH: 2008), può arrivare a produrre *postmemory*.

Alla luce di quanto detto supponiamo quindi, inquadrandola nella struttura della *postmemory* di Marianne Hirsch, che esista oggi una letteratura italiana della postmemoria, una letteratura cioè che è frutto dello sforzo immaginativo di coloro che hanno tentato di elaborare le narrazioni e i silenzi di quanto avvenuto in famiglia prima della loro nascita (le seconde e terze generazioni), a cui è possibile aggiungere anche opere di postmemoria affiliativa, prodotte cioè da coloro che assumono il trauma come il proprio e lo rielaborano, nonostante non abbiano alcun legame, se non quello culturalmente mediato, con esso. Tale letteratura sembra privilegiare la narrazione in prosa, alternando il romanzo di autofiction e non fiction, oltre a quello di pura finzione letteraria, alla narrazione breve, presentandosi talvolta come operazione quasi psicologica di scavo interiore o come riflessione attiva sul presente. Le differenze tra i testi possono tuttavia essere molte e sostanziali, e agire come forze centrifughe che ostacolano qualsiasi assimilazione o raggruppamento. A impedire che ciò accada è la possibilità di rintracciare in ognuno di questi scritti dei nodi concettuali fondamentali.

Per nodo concettuale intendo, qui, la definizione proposta dalla semiotica e in particolare da Patrizia Violi, che lo definisce come

punto di interconnessione in un più ampio e complesso network concettuale che tiene insieme e collega una serie svariata ed eterogenea di differenti prospettive, ibridando campi concettuali e forme di esperienza soggettive anche distanti tra loro e permettendo di muoversi fra piani discorsivi e teorici diversi (VIOLI: 2014, 31-32).

In questo senso tali nodi possono toccare elementi testuali ed extratestuali, spaziando dall'analisi tematica a quella sociologica, passando per il discorso sui generi letterari, sul personaggio e sulla voce autoriale, con riferimenti anche alla transmedialità.

Un nodo concettuale fondamentale è il rapporto tra storia e memoria e tra verità e finzione, che interessa anche il rapporto tra vita e letteratura ma anche cinema e televisione.

Tra storia e memoria: il caso di Edith Bruck

Una data fondamentale per la nascita della letteratura italiana della postmemoria è, a mio avviso, il 1978, anno di pubblicazione del testo di Edith Bruck intitolato *Transit*.

In realtà, come è ovvio, Edith Bruck è una rappresentante della prima generazione, quella che ha vissuto in prima persona le persecuzioni: nata in Ungheria da una famiglia ebraica di umili origini, deportata ad Auschwitz a soli dodici anni nel 1944 e miracolosamente sopravvissuta dopo essere rimasta orfana, l'autrice è a tutti gli effetti una testimone dell'evento. In Italia dal 1954, fin dalla prima autobiografica opera del 1959, *Chi ti ama così*, Bruck ha infatti speso le sue energie non solo nella scrittura, definita spesso dall'autrice più che una scelta una vera e propria necessità (che è riuscita a esprimersi solo attraverso l'uso di una lingua non materna, l'italiano appunto), ma anche nella testimonianza in prima persona, attraverso la presenza a incontri e dibattiti, soprattutto nelle scuole. Nonostante nel caso di Bruck si possa quindi parlare a tutti gli effetti di memoria, ritengo tuttavia che la mole e la grande varietà di opere di finzione letteraria prodotte dall'autrice proprio a partire dal 1978 possano situarla in una posizione particolare: quella cioè di essere punto di partenza e riferimento imprescindibile per tutta la successiva letteratura della postmemoria italiana. L'opera narra le vicende di una donna di nome Linda Weinberg che si trova a fare da consulente per

un film su Auschwitz, girato in una imprecisata città della Jugoslavia, probabilmente Belgrado (dove si erano tenute davvero le riprese di *Kapò* di Gillo Pontecorvo, per cui Bruck era stata chiamata come consulente). Il fulcro della narrazione è però situato proprio nella scena iniziale, quando alla protagonista accade un fatto terribile. Come accaduto veramente a Edith a Belgrado, nel 1965, la donna viene aggredita all'interno di un negozio di vestiti per via della sua origine ungherese. Se il tentativo di riabilitare la sua figura e soprattutto la verità, che la terrà occupata per tutto il resto della narrazione attraverso la ricerca di una rettifica, finirà con un misero fallimento, tra una polizia invadente e finti avvocati che promettono risarcimenti, il rapporto con la stampa jugoslava non è però l'unico del libro a turbare la donna. Anche il cinema, nella sua veste più cruda, quella di riproduzione della realtà in stile Jacobowska, instilla nella donna un senso di ribrezzo e sofferenza per il modo con cui affronta la tragedia del lager. Anni dopo Edith Bruck, parlando della sua esperienza come consulente di *Kapò*, dichiarerà:

Io sono stata molto attenta, cercando in qualche maniera di avvicinarmi il più possibile alla realtà, anche se è impossibile rappresentare la realtà. È impossibile fare un film 'vero' sui campi di concentramento, sia chiaro questo. Non si può raccontare né descrivere. Ci si può avvicinare in qualche maniera alla realtà, e io ho cercato di farlo avvicinare il più possibile (BALMA: 2007, 77).

Le descrizioni della protagonista, che narra in prima persona, ci riportano infatti a un mondo, quello cinematografico, fatto solo di apparenza che, nonostante la ricerca di una consulente che avesse davvero vissuto l'esperienza del lager, la tratta in realtà senza alcun rispetto per il suo passato. Tutti, a partire dal regista senza nome forse alter-ego di Pontecorvo, sono indifferenti all'effetto che deve fare alla donna vedere la scritta ARBEIT MACHT FREI (a cui tra l'altro manca una i, come a segnalare la falsità di qualsiasi possibile riproduzione di quell'atroce scritta) (BRUCK: 1978, 44) le prigioniere emaciate e con i capelli tagliati, le baracche ricostruite tali e quali, e soprattutto il mucchio di cadaveri riprodotti artificialmente, che viene presentato addirittura come «una sorpresa».

«C'è una sorpresa», e con il guanto di cachemire il regista indicava la baracca. [...] Stavo per saltare dentro anch'io quando, alla vista di centinaia di occhi vuoti e di braccia scheletriche ammicchiate, rimasi impietrita, di traverso sul davanzale.

«Be'? Che ne dici, non sembrano veri? [...]»
 [...] Io che all'infuori dei pidocchi non ho mai ucciso sentivo un desiderio profondo di distruggerlo all'istante (BRUCK: 1978, 45).

Altrettanto priva di sensibilità si rivela l'attrice americana protagonista, anche lei ebrea, che dichiara continuamente di soffrire – una sofferenza gratuita per la protagonista (BRUCK: 1978, 51) – e chiede addirittura a Linda di essere consolata. Durante un attacco di pianto, chiamato dal regista «attacco d'isterismo ebraico» (BRUCK: 1978, 75), si pone addirittura sullo stesso piano della sopravvissuta, chiedendole come avesse fatto a superare gli incubi, se avesse preso o fatto qualcosa per «guarire questo trauma». «No. Non è una malattia, era una realtà, la vita» (BRUCK: 1978, 77), è la laconica risposta di Linda. L'altra attrice francese, all'opposto, la evita il più possibile, perché convinta di non avere bisogno di assistenza e di sapere perfettamente quello che fa, dato che «prima di interpretare il suo ruolo aveva studiato e visto dei documentari sull'argomento» (BRUCK: 1978, 60), sostituendo quindi alla verità della testimonianza diretta, quella della testimonianza mediata, che a sua volta si trova a interpretare.

Da una così breve presentazione del testo emergono tuttavia chiaramente le problematiche e i nodi essenziali di quest'opera e i motivi che mi hanno spinto a sceglierla, insieme alla sua autrice, come capostipite della letteratura postmemoriale italiana: il rapporto tra la memoria e la sua rappresentazione, e di conseguenza quello tra l'io autobiografico e l'io narrante; il profondo legame esistente tra esperienza vissuta, esigenza di trasmissione e forme artistiche diverse (il cinema e la letteratura in questo caso); lo scontro tra lo statuto di testimone, e quindi la verità storica, e la sua messa in scena, necessariamente imperfetta e parziale; la vulnerabilità e l'intensità specificamente femminile di questo statuto testimoniale; l'esigenza di rielaborare esperienze traumatiche anche ricorrendo a personaggi ed eventi immaginari.

La seconda generazione: Helena Janeczek

Le dinamiche realtà/finzione sono spesso al centro della letteratura della postmemoria, insieme alla ricerca delle proprie origini, al tentativo di elaborazione e superamento del trauma per le seconde e terze generazioni. Emblematico in questo senso l'incipit di *Lezioni di tenebra* di Helena Janeczek:

L'altra sera in televisione una tizia sosteneva di essere la reincarnazione di una ragazza ebrea uccisa in un campo di sterminio. Me l'ha detto il mio amico Olek, al telefono da Roma, e parlando con me continuava a seguire le tappe ricostruite non si sa come di quella vita precedente, il racconto preciso dei ricordi prenatali, e ripeteva «è allucinante» (JANECZEK: 2011, 11).

Il punto di partenza è quello di un non sapere, di un non conoscere («ma in fondo che ne sai tu...»), dice tra sé la narratrice in conclusione dell'episodio della tv, al termine del quale aveva preso la parola anche un'anziana deportata che aveva definito il lager un'«esperienza altissima»; JANECZEK: 2011, 12) che sfocerà poi nel percorso di scoperta e ritorno in Polonia per la narratrice e la madre sopravvissuta. La prima parte del testo, infatti, costituisce per lo più un'analisi del complesso rapporto madre-figlia e delle dinamiche familiari dell'autrice. Il tema del viaggio, comunque, pervade come una trama sotterranea l'intero testo, anche se occupa nello specifico solo la parte conclusiva. Esso viene infatti introdotto in modo drammatico già nelle prime pagine, quando la voce narrante, dopo aver descritto la madre Nina come precisa e curata fin da bambina, definendola addirittura «un'esteta» (JANECZEK: 2011, 15), sovrappone questa immagine edulcorata a quella più drammatica della sopravvissuta al campo, che cinquant'anni dopo, visitando Auschwitz, urla disperata ricordando la propria madre uccisa (JANECZEK: 2011, 16). Oltre ai rapporti familiari, sono il recupero del passato rimosso e di un non detto che ha permeato la vita dell'autrice/narratrice fin da bambina a costituire l'elemento fondamentale del testo. Helena sostiene infatti che, della *Shoah*, «a casa mia non se n'è quasi mai parlato» (JANECZEK: 2011, 98) affermando di essere tutto sommato contenta di questo silenzio, anche perché lei stessa non ha mai avuto la voglia o il coraggio di fare domande:

Sono grata ai miei di avermi risparmiato le loro reminiscenze, penso che abbiano fatto bene a tacere. Credo che abbiano taciuto per dimenticare o almeno per non risvegliare ricordi e anche per non assillare me, per farmi crescere come una ragazzina normale. Penso che mi basti sapere quanto so. In queste pagine l'ho raccontato né più né meno. Dal canto mio non ho mai chiesto niente (JANECZEK: 2011, 98).

Tuttavia, lei stessa ammette che questo imponente non detto le ha impedito di conoscere davvero i suoi genitori, e il padre in particolare, che ormai non c'è più e con il quale non può più recuperare il dialogo

mancato. Si tratta di un silenzio, quello da parte dei genitori, che impedisce anche l'immaginazione, per la potenza stessa dell'evento subito, avvertito come insormontabile nella sua essenza traumatica. Segno di tale impossibilità di recupero, nota Quercioli (QUERCIOLO MINCER: 2010, 209), è anche la mancanza di una lingua comune, il fatto, afferma la narratrice, «che non possiedo nemmeno la lingua che lei parlava allora» (JANECZEK: 2011, 128). È un «azzerramento» (JANECZEK: 2011, 128) totale che non potrà essere mai ricostruito, nemmeno a partire da libri e racconti altrui e forse nemmeno attraverso il viaggio di ritorno in Polonia, veramente comprensibile solo alla madre.

Il silenzio iniziale dei genitori dà quindi luogo a un viaggio a ritroso. Si tratta di una ricerca di luce, per quanto possibile, all'interno delle tenebre del proprio passato.

Il cuore di tenebra da esplorare è quindi quello relativo al rapporto madre-figlia, ma anche quello di un passato tenuto nascosto e alle cui origini si cerca di fare ritorno attraverso questo viaggio a ritroso. Il titolo rimanda certamente anche a *Heart of Darkness* di Conrad e al suo viaggio nel centro della giungla africana, assumendo una serie di molteplici valenze, dato che, come ha notato Cristina Mauceri (MAUCERI: 2004, 140-151), le tenebre in cui ci si inoltra andando avanti con la lettura del testo sono contemporaneamente quelle in cui ha vissuto la madre dell'autrice nel periodo del lager e quelle che hanno oscurato la vita della figlia per anni, proprio per via di un passato così ingombrante.

Il viaggio di Helena Janeczek non è però solo un viaggio interiore, ma un itinerario realmente percorso da madre e figlia nel 1995. Le descrizioni dell'autrice di questi luoghi riflettono contemporaneamente la sua voglia di comprendere e l'incapacità di entrare veramente nel passato, incomprensibile per lei a partire da queste costruzioni o ricostruzioni e forse intuibile solo da piccoli particolari come «il poco colore e il molto grigio» del centro storico di Varsavia ricostruito, che «mi hanno fatto vedere Varsavia rasa al suolo dalle bombe» (JANECZEK: 2011, 132) e lo spiazzo lasciato appositamente vuoto intorno alla stazione dei treni «di cui ricordo vagamente solo il marmo bianco e nient'altro» (JANECZEK: 2011, 135). Varsavia si configura a tutti gli effetti, per Helena, come un sito del trauma, ritrovando l'autenticità della traccia anche nei palazzi ricostruiti, «case quasi uguali» (JANECZEK: 2011, 135) che colmano il vuoto lasciato un tempo dalle bombe, grigie ma allo stesso tempo non brutte e desolate, e che le danno la dimensione di un monumento perenne eretto alle atrocità

della guerra, dato che, a confronto con Monaco, la sua città natale ugualmente distrutta dalla guerra e ricostruita (seppure città tedesca e quindi identificata con i carnefici) lì a Varsavia «si vedeva che il comunismo era finito mentre la guerra no, la guerra resta pietrificata nei condomini» (JANECZEK: 2011, 135). Il peso della memoria o meglio la sua ombra (SERKOWSKA: 2017, 145-159), l'ombra di Auschwitz – che copre anche metà della figura presente sulla copertina del libro – non sarà superato se non, parzialmente, attraverso la scrittura dello stesso romanzo, che proprio per questo si presenta come un'opera tanto complessa, «polifonica», ma anche «contrappuntistica (parlano diverse persone, io, lei, tu), rispecchiando l'identità (per)turbata in fuga da un'identità fissa, con un "noi" inteso come famiglia, città di origine, lingua, nome» (SERKOWSKA: 2017, 156). La costruzione di postmemoria può quindi avvenire solo attraverso un movimento a ritroso ma allo stesso tempo in avanti, attuato in ambito familiare e collettivo, tanto della madre quanto della figlia, che in conclusione dell'opera arriva anche a recuperare dalle tenebre la figura della balia tedesca Cilly, rimossa dal suo passato proprio in quanto tedesca, in un modo che sembra essere «quasi speculare a quello dei tedeschi nei confronti delle vittime ebre» (JANECZEK: 2011, 196), e contro la cui vergogna Helena prova finalmente a lottare per andare avanti. Per il resto, almeno per quanto riguarda il rapporto madre e figlia, e quindi anche la possibilità di superare il cuore di tenebra del loro rapporto, «non è cambiato niente, o poco» (JANECZEK: 2011, 185), e la *Shoah* continuerà ad essere elemento centrale nella vita e nella produzione artistica di Janeczek, come mostreranno anche le sue opere successive.

La postmemoria affiliativa in Italia

Come abbiamo detto, Marianne Hirsch apre alla possibilità che la postmemoria possa estendersi anche in orizzontale, a coloro che non hanno vissuto personalmente o nella propria famiglia il trauma, in questo caso della *Shoah*, ma che possono adottarlo e farlo proprio rielaborandolo artisticamente. Quando iniziano a venire meno i testimoni diretti dell'evento, la trasmissione del passato diventa sostanzialmente un fatto culturale e afferente all'ambito della sfera pubblica, che si basa sulla mediazione di opere artistiche e in particolar modo testi narrativi. La costruzione della memoria passa dal terreno in cui la storia narrata coincide con l'esperienza diretta, dove chi racconta

è anche chi ha vissuto l'evento, al terreno in cui chi racconta non ha vissuto i fatti ma si fa carico di trasmetterli in qualità di autore e lettore di un testo. Attore della memoria diventa chi sceglie di raccontare una storia che ha riguardato altri uomini come se fosse la propria (AFFUSO: 2017, 51). Abbiamo quindi il passaggio da testimone primario a testimoni secondari o adottivi. Spesso i meccanismi di empatia portano naturalmente all'identificazione con le vittime, a riprodurre le loro voci e a creare dei racconti di fiction dedicati alle loro vite, per quanto sia in realtà impossibile conoscere davvero e ricostruire che cosa hanno provato coloro che sono morti, gli unici che potrebbero veramente raccontare l'orrore dell'accaduto, ma che non possono farlo perché sono i sommersi, i musulmani. La scelta di assumere il punto di vista dei carnefici è stata tuttavia operata solo da pochissimi autori: in ambito internazionale ricordiamo nel 2007 il caso editoriale *Le Benevole* di Jonathan Littel, mentre in campo italiano sono certamente da nominare, per quanto riguarda il romanzo¹, Lorenzo Pavolini con *Accanto alla tigre*, pubblicato da Fandango nel 2010, e Demetrio Paolin con *Conforme alla gloria*, edito dalla casa editrice Voland nel 2016.

Il discorso del punto di vista da adottare è estremamente importante soprattutto nelle opere scritte da autori non appartenenti al mondo ebraico o non discendenti di deportati nei campi, che pure scelgono di farsi testimoni di vicende che apparentemente non li riguardano. È un discorso che si presta ad essere affrontato ed esemplificato soprattutto nelle raccolte di racconti dove si possono vedere in sequenza le diverse soluzioni adottate dai diversi autori e le motivazioni che li hanno spinti a sceglierle, motivazioni tanto personali quanto strettamente narratologiche. Una raccolta fondamentale in questo senso, per le riflessioni anche metaletterarie alla base della sua genesi, per l'intreccio inscindibile di storia e letteratura e per la volontà di porsi consapevolmente come opera della postmemoria italiana, è *1938. Storia, racconto, memoria*, curata da Simon Levis Sullam e ideata dallo stesso e Shulim Vogelmann, pubblicata nel 2018 da Giuntina in occasione degli ottant'anni dalla promulgazione delle leggi razziali. I tredici autori di questa antologia sono sia scrittori di professione sia storici,² ai quali

¹ Da citare anche SULLAM: 2015, che però si situa nel genere saggistico.

² In ordine alfabetico: Eraldo Affinati, Giulia Albanese, Enrica Asquer, Viola Di Grado, Carlo Greppi, Helena Janeczek, Bruno Maida, Federica Manzon, Andrea Molesini, Vanessa Roghi, Igiaba Scego, Chiara Valerio, Alessandro Zaccuri.

è stato chiesto dal curatore «di servirsi di documenti e di trasmettere il senso dell'esperienza delle persecuzioni antiebraiche in Italia tra il 1938 e il 1943-1945, attraverso una narrazione di fiction» (SULLAM: 2018, 7) proprio per sviluppare il discorso, sostiene Levis Sullam, sui limiti della rappresentazione della *Shoah* avviato da Saul Friedlander. La vera sfida della silloge è stata, prosegue il curatore, non tanto chiedere agli scrittori di partire da documenti e fatti storici (pratica ormai consueta a partire dagli anni Duemila in diversi ambiti letterari), ma chiedere anche agli storici di creare opere di finzione, «invitandoli per certi versi a riconoscere e svelare la dimensione narrativa e persino poetica – nel senso etimologico greco del *poiein*, creare – della loro attività: il ruolo quindi della narrazione, del racconto, nel fare storia» (SULLAM: 2018, 8). Molti degli studiosi interpellati hanno declinato l'invito, mentre altri l'hanno raccolto, riconoscendo probabilmente, come acutamente fa notare Levis Sullam nella sua *Introduzione*, che «la trasmissione della storia e memoria delle persecuzioni avverrà crescentemente in forme narrative» (SULLAM: 2018, 9), narrazioni certamente da affiancare al lavoro degli storici, ma che sono di fatto la forma prediletta del testimone secondario, di cui lo studioso dà un'efficace definizione:

Il testimone secondario è un testimone indiretto della Shoah: innanzitutto perché l'esperienza diretta dello sterminio per definizione non può essere testimoniata direttamente dalle vittime (poiché esse sono state 'sommese' e non 'salvate'); inoltre perché il racconto dell'esperienza diretta è affidato ai sopravvissuti (alle persecuzioni, ai campi: che si sono avvicinati a, ma non hanno subito direttamente lo sterminio). Ma la sua narrazione e memoria è affidata a delle figure ulteriori, scampate alle persecuzioni dirette e sempre più distanti da essere, man mano che trascorre il tempo; che tuttavia si sono fatti narratori: narratori altrettanto efficaci, attendibili e preziosi che i testimoni (SULLAM: 2018, 9).

Lo storico prosegue nella sua argomentazione sostenendo che già i primissimi testimoni secondari hanno spesso adottato la forma del racconto breve: Giacomo Debenedetti con *16 Ottobre 1943* (1945), Umberto Saba con *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (1948), Giorgio Bassani con le sue *Storie ferraresi* (1956) e Primo Levi con i suoi racconti de *Il sistema periodico* (1975). Gli autori della raccolta del 2018 seguono perciò la via già tracciata da questi importanti predecessori, con i quali si confrontano in maniera più o meno esplicita, diventando a loro volta testimoni secondari (o meglio, testimoni terzi, essendo tutti

nati dopo la guerra). Gli scrittori e gli storici autori dei testi contenuti in 1938 provengono tutti da ambiti ed esperienze differenti, ma due sono definiti da Sullam i «capostipiti» (SULLAM: 2018, 10), per il fatto di essersi già confrontati con «la letteratura delle persecuzioni tra storia, memoria, narrazione»: si tratta di Eraldo Affinati, già autore di *Campo del sangue* (1997) e Helena Janeczek, di cui viene citato proprio *Lezioni di Tenebra*. Tuttavia, la peculiarità di questa antologia è quella di contenere in maggioranza voci non ebraiche e di riuscire, pur avendo come punto di partenza le leggi razziali, ad aprire il discorso delle persecuzioni «ben oltre l'ottantesimo delle leggi antiebraiche» (SULLAM: 2018, 11) fino a includere tematiche nuove e attuali come quella delle migrazioni e del razzismo nei confronti degli immigrati, oppure introducendo il discorso sulla rielaborazione e trasmissione della memoria. Secondo Levis Sullam, il ragionamento sulla commistione di storia memoria e narrazione è di fondamentale importanza per la nostra società e non solo in relazione al ricordo della *Shoah*. «Tale questione riguarda in realtà tutte le esperienze storiche, personali e collettive» (SULLAM: 2018, 13-14) dell'essere umano, sebbene risulti innegabile che nel caso della *Shoah* «le strutture del pensiero e quindi anche quelle della narrazione siano messe a dura prova», collocandosi decisamente «ai limiti della rappresentazione» (SULLAM: 2018, 14). Tutta l'antologia è quindi attraversata da quello che Martina Mengoni nella sua *Postfazione* chiama un «interrogativo manzoniano» (MENGONI: 2018, 137): i vari autori si chiedono, con esiti narrativi molto diversi, se esista la possibilità di testimoniare «per interposta persona» e di creare opere di finzione con punti di vista altrettanto finzionali su eventi e personaggi reali e storici.

Se alcuni racconti rivelano all'interno del testo, prima o dopo, il nome delle persone alle cui vite gli autori si sono liberamente ispirati, sono presenti all'interno della silloge anche testi di fiction che, seppur ispirati a vicende reali, non svelano mai nel corso della narrazione l'identità di queste persone. Si tratta di racconti che spesso hanno a che fare con eventi in cui il lettore è in grado di riconoscersi (il più delle volte il passaggio dall'infanzia all'età adulta) e che ancora una volta, oltre a tramandare la memoria delle conseguenze delle leggi razziali, cercano di attivare una riflessione sull'Italia e sulle sue responsabilità, anche attuali. Tre testi hanno in comune, in particolare, la dimensione scolastica: si tratta di *Il cortile* di Bruno Maida, *L'esame* di Giulia Albanese e *La chat* di Igiaba Scego. La speranza, il muoversi in difesa di

qualcuno, sono in particolare i temi al centro del racconto intitolato *La chat* di Igiaba Scego. Con questo testo l'ambientazione non è più quella dell'Italia del 1938, ma quella molto distante nel tempo dei giorni nostri. Il racconto è narrato dal punto di vista di una madre, che scopriremo chiamarsi Yvonne ed avere due figli, uno dei quali, Ivan, di tredici anni, ha appena avuto dalla professoressa l'incarico di scrivere un'intervista immaginaria a qualcuno che ha vissuto la Seconda guerra mondiale. È proprio per via di questo compito che Yvonne trova il figlio intento a contemplare l'album delle foto di famiglia, e in particolare quelle della bisnonna, di cui lei non ha quasi mai parlato. «Era un passato che nessuno tirava fuori in famiglia. Mia madre, ancora adesso, di sua madre non ama parlare» (SCEGO: 2018, 102), commenta la narratrice, resta a dare al figlio le informazioni che chiede. La narrazione di Igiaba Scego si configura quindi subito come appartenente al genere della postmemoria: il racconto delle vicende di famiglia parte, come spesso accade, da un album di fotografie, e i ricordi traumatici sono in generale protetti dal silenzio su di un passato che non si vuole ricordare. Forse per evitare il discorso, forse per l'eccessiva concentrazione su sé stessa, la madre del ragazzo viene quindi distratta dalla chat di gruppo con le altre mamme di scuola, e solo dopo cena si appresta ad iniziare la conversazione sul passato della famiglia, mentre Ivan, figlio di madre ebrea e padre cinese, è intento a leggere un libro. Curiosamente, con una sorta di omaggio che è allo stesso tempo un modo per proseguire il filone della postmemoria e un espediente narrativo, tra le mani del ragazzo si trova il libro di Helena Janeczek *La ragazza con la Leica*. Scopriamo così che Yvonne è una fotografa, come Gerda Taro, e che il legame tra lei e la nonna era stato suggellato proprio da una macchina fotografica, una Semflex regalata alla nipote «impacchettata nella carta in cui si avvolgeva in drogheria il parmigiano» (SCEGO: 2018, 106), rimasta negli anni molto cara a Yvonne e ancora oggi conservata come un cimelio di famiglia. La storia della bisnonna è simile a quella di tanti ebrei che riuscirono a salvarsi grazie alla compassione e al coraggio di altri: «La nonna era stata liberata letteralmente. Era nascosta sotto l'asse del pavimento del soggiorno. C'era una botola ed è lì che la famiglia Strozzi nascondeva la piccola ebrea, mia nonna bambina, quando veniva qualche fascista» (SCEGO: 2018, 106). La storia della sua salvezza era stata raccontata dalla nonna alla nipote quando era solo una bambina, cercando di metterne in luce gli aspetti positivi e il fatto di aver trovato solidarietà nelle persone, più che la crudeltà delle deportazioni:

«E li hai rivisti gli Strozzi?» Chiedevo alla nonna con un'ansia che mi opprimeva il cuore. Ero una bimba e il mio cuore palpitava per un nonnulla.

«Non mi hanno voluto vedere loro.»

«E perché?»

«Non lo so. Mi hanno detto che la guerra era finita, "pensa al futuro, Emanuela, non ti far fermare dalla cattiveria del mondo" sono state le ultime parole che ci siamo detti.»

«E se torna? La cattiveria, dico» chiesi spaventata alla nonna.

«Se torna ci sarà sempre qualcuno che nasconderà chi è perseguitato sotto l'asse del soggiorno, c'è sempre una botola e sempre persone di buona volontà» (SCEGO: 2018, 106).

Proprio quest'ultima affermazione (insieme alla visione del film *Casablanca*, altro elemento tipico della postmemoria che può attivarsi anche attraverso la visione di film o televisione) si rivela infine essere il collegamento tra la memoria della *Shoah* e il presente, in particolare il tema dell'immigrazione. Nel suo giorno libero dal lavoro, mentre gira per la città con in mano la sua vecchia Semflex, Yvonne incontra infatti un palazzo da poco sgomberato, prima occupato da eritrei. Guardando i volti della povera gente cacciata dai propri giacigli, la donna rivede la nonna e di conseguenza tutti gli ebrei perseguitati:

Guardo quei volti e vedo mia nonna sotto l'asse di legno. Mia nonna nella botola sotto il soggiorno di casa Strozzi. Vedo mia nonna che vive accanto al pericolo di essere internata in un campo di concentramento. Mia nonna aveva avuto gli Strozzi. Quella povera gente chi aveva per proteggerli? (SCEGO: 2018, 109)

Ma ecco che la storia fornisce alla donna un modo per provare a proteggere, seppure in piccolo, qualcuno di loro. Tornato da una cena di classe, Ivan racconta infatti alla madre che due nuovi compagni di origine eritrea, Bisrat e Tedros, da poco arrivati in Italia, non sono stati invitati. Yvonne si rivolge quindi alla chat delle mamme di scuola, chiedendo per quale motivo le madri dei nuovi compagni non siano tra i partecipanti. Le risposte che riceve («Sono negre, non ci conoscono, non sanno la lingua. [...] Attenta che ti ruba il marito [...] Dovrebbero fare una scuola a parte [...] Chissà in che condizioni vivono [...]»;
SCEGO: 2018, 111) la riempiono di rabbia e sembrano far tornare indietro il tempo al periodo in cui la nonna le raccontava degli stereotipi sugli ebrei: l'avidità, il naso a uncino, la sporcizia, menzogne che avevano

condotto alla promulgazione delle leggi razziali. «Per poterci annientare meglio ad Auschwitz» (SCEGO: 2018, 111), diceva la nonna. Yvonne, nel suo piccolo della chat, si appresta così a difendere queste due donne che non posso farlo da sole, sentendo su di sé tutto il peso della sua storia familiare e caricando la sua memoria di una responsabilità ulteriore: quella di farsi modo di agire nel presente, dato che, come afferma Simon Levis Sullam parafrasando Franco Fortini, storia e memoria «riguardano non tanto il nostro passato, quanto “quello che abbiamo davanti”, cioè il nostro futuro» (SULLAM: 2018, 15).

Mia nonna non ci era finita ad Auschwitz. Qualcuno l'aveva nascosta sotto l'asse del soggiorno, in una botola creata apposta per lei. Lei si era fatta piccola piccola, e qualcuno per lei si era fatto grande grande per proteggerla. Gli Strozzi, marito e moglie, coppia senza figli, genitori dell'umanità. Piango di rabbia. Riprendo lo smartphone e comincio a rispondere. Anch'io voglio farmi grande grande per quei due bimbettini eritrei che nemmeno conosco.

Nonna, vedrai, sarai orgogliosa di me (SCEGO: 2018, 111).

Un'altra raccolta di racconti che possiamo considerare postmemoria affiliativa si intitola *Ultimo domicilio conosciuto*: è stata pubblicata nel 2018 e prende ispirazione diretta dal fenomeno delle pietre d'inciampo.

Le pietre d'inciampo sono uno degli oggetti che simboleggiano meglio, a livello pubblico, il dovere di memoria e che non a caso sono spesso utilizzate come punto di partenza per la creazione di opere postmemoriali che cercano di dare voce e sostanza alle parole impresse nella pietra. Gli *Stolpersteine*, iniziativa ideata dall'artista tedesco Gunter Demning nel 1993 e poi installata per la prima volta a Colonia due anni dopo, sono delle pietre interrato di fronte alla casa delle vittime della deportazione, delle dimensioni di un sampietrino (10x10cm), che recano incise sulla superficie superiore di ottone nome e cognome, data di nascita, data e luogo di deportazione e data di morte, quando nota (ZEVI: 2014). Le pietre sono interrato personalmente dall'artista e sono collocate sul marciapiede adiacente all'abitazione. Si tratta di monumenti in continua crescita nel tempo, senza una data di scadenza predefinita, che nella loro creazione mettono in campo processi in cui si intersecano sfera privata (sono le famiglie delle vittime a richiederli e a fornire i dati) e pubblica, dato che sarà la città a occuparsi della loro installazione e manutenzione, diventando a tutti gli effetti una memoria municipale, che sarà protetta non più solo dai familiari, ma

da tutti i cittadini, i quali ragionando e collegando le pietre alla mappa della città possono farsi un'idea di quanto davvero avvenuto.

Non è un caso che questi monumenti così atipici, opere d'arte apparentemente semplici, ma in realtà complesse dal punto di vista concettuale, vengano spesso utilizzate come punto di partenza per progetti da attuarsi nelle scuole e non solo, che prevedono di affiancare ai pochi dati biografici forniti dalle pietre immagini fotografiche o disegni, oppure opere di narrativa.

Uno degli ultimi progetti da ricordare è proprio quello collegato a Bottega Finzioni, la scuola di scrittura fondata a Bologna da Carlo Lucarelli. Si tratta di una raccolta di racconti, pubblicata poi nel 2018 dall'editore Morellini, intitolata *Ultimo domicilio conosciuto*, che prende ispirazione diretta proprio dalle pietre d'inciampo. Nell'introduzione Andrea Tarabbia racconta il suo primo incontro con gli *Stolpersteine* e riflette sul significato di queste opere, mettendone in luce il legame con la letteratura:

Ci ho messo del tempo a capirlo, ma il progetto degli *Stolpersteine*, benché non abbia nulla di scritto né di dichiaratamente letterario, è qualcosa che ha a che fare con la letteratura. Credo che Demnig faccia, con le sue pietre, ciò che da più di mezzo secolo (ma mi verrebbe da dire da sempre) fanno gli scrittori più grandi: egli usa cioè una forma d'arte per testimoniare l'esistenza di qualcuno e di qualcosa: questo qualcuno è la vittima, ma è anche il carnefice; questo qualcosa è il dolore, la guerra, la paura, l'orrore, l'omertà (TARABIA: 2018, 10).

Così, prosegue Tarabbia, gli autori dei racconti raccolti «fanno con la parola ciò che Demnig fa con l'ottone e gli scalpelli» (TARABIA: 2018, 11) perché cercano di riportare alla luce le vite delle persone descritte da pochi dati biografici. Ad ogni allievo del corso di letteratura della scuola è stata affidata una pietra, «vale a dire una persona» (TARABIA: 2018, 107) per cercare di trovare il modo di raccontare la sua storia. Tutti gli autori sono partiti in prima battuta, proprio come fa Demnig, dalle carte contenute nell'archivio dell'Istoreco, Istituto per la Storia della Resistenza e della Società Contemporanea di Reggio Emilia. Per diverso tempo, prima di scrivere, hanno svolto ricerche per tentare di ricostruire al meglio la vita delle vittime della deportazione. La meticolosa ricerca dei documenti e dei dati storici, desumibili da carteggi, libri, incontri diretti con discendenti, è estremamente importante per la stesura dei brevi racconti dal momento che, come afferma lo stesso curatore,

all'interno del libro si trovano «storie di pura finzione e storie, invece, di non-fiction, dove l'autore è sulla scena e racconta il suo percorso di avvicinamento al personaggio» (TARABBIA: 2018, 12), quasi esibendo il lavoro di scavo storico e la riflessione metaletteraria.

I testi contenuti nella raccolta sono preceduti dai nomi e cognomi dei deportati e assumono di volta in volta il punto di vista dei protagonisti in prima persona, di amici delle vittime, oppure un punto di vista esterno. In alcuni casi più di un testo è dedicato agli stessi nomi, declinando la stessa (possibile) storia in modi differenti. La raccolta contiene narrazioni di stampo molto diverso, che qui non possono essere analizzate integralmente per motivi di spazio.

Vorrei tuttavia soffermarmi sulla modalità con cui Antonella Gullotta racconta la storia di Giorgio Melli, definito dall'autrice «vittima collaterale dell'Olocausto» (GULLOTTA: 2018, 175), per via della morte avvenuta sì, trentatré anni dopo, ma a causa di una malattia mentale che lo aveva costretto al ricovero in una struttura psichiatrica per via di «traumi dalle radici profonde che lo trascinarono in un mondo da cui non fece più ritorno» (GULLOTTA: 2018, 176). Non una morte direttamente dovuta al nazi-fascismo, ma una morte strettamente collegata alle persecuzioni, e non secondaria per via del dolore prolungatosi nel corso degli anni. «Cosa aveva fatto prima di impazzire? E chi era diventato, dopo, Giorgio Melli?» (GULLOTTA: 2018, 176) sono le domande da cui parte Gullotta per ricostruire la storia di Giorgio e dei suoi genitori, con le loro morti «collegate da una linea immaginaria, come a formare una minuscola costellazione» (GULLOTTA: 2018, 176). Tra le riflessioni personali dell'autrice (che in questo testo, in una sorta di autofiction, parla in prima persona) sul suo viaggio nei luoghi in cui aveva vissuto la famiglia Melli, già visitati molti anni prima, quando tuttavia la scrittrice riconosce di essere stata «indifferente a quel pezzo di storia» (GULLOTTA: 2018, 178), si situano frammenti delle storie di Benedetto e Lina, le loro paure ma allo stesso tempo la fiducia nella propria comunità, la certezza di Benedetto che il fatto di essere stato un eroe decorato di guerra, e di aver mantenuto per tanti anni l'iscrizione al partito fascista, potessero proteggerli, la premura e lungimiranza nel mandare il figlio lontano. Gli *Stolpersteine* a loro dedicati vengono visti come «un atto di penitenza estorto ai passanti con l'inganno del luccichio di ottone» (GULLOTTA: 2018, 179), come la possibilità di aprire finalmente uno «squarcio nel presente» sulla storia di una famiglia spezzata, attraverso ricerche, racconti nelle scuole, ritrovamenti di

foto. Il testo si incentra quindi sul lavoro di scavo nella memoria, tra i documenti d'archivio, testimonianze fotografiche, ricerche su altri rami della famiglia e continue ipotesi e tentativi di ricostruire la vita di Giorgio, smarrita nei meandri della storia. L'unica testimonianza scritta dell'esistenza di questo ragazzo geniale è contenuta in un fascicolo che viene recapitato all'autrice dall'Archivio federale svizzero di Berna, intitolato proprio *Melli, Georges, 1919 (1948-1951)*, con la versione francese del nome, contenente un carteggio tra la Polizia federale degli stranieri e il Dipartimento federale di informazione stampa svizzeri, con le richieste di rinnovo di soggiorno di Giorgio, che intanto aveva intrapreso il mestiere di giornalista accreditato all'Onu, laureandosi in Scienze politiche, sebbene fosse già laureato in ingegneria chimica. Il ritrovamento di successive lettere personali di Giorgio testimonia, afferma la scrittrice commentando il suo studio dei documenti, «un progressivo peggioramento del tratto» (GULLOTTA: 2018, 189), da cui sembrano trasparire stati d'animo contrastanti, ansiosi per l'imminente ritorno in Italia avvenuto dopo il 1951. Da quel momento, di Giorgio Melli non si sa più nulla fino al ricovero in casa di cura a Verona del 1962, che testimonia il crollo nervoso dell'uomo. Il racconto intreccia la vicenda di Giorgio con quella personale dell'autrice, con le sue ricerche affannose e il tarlo continuo di questa storia: «Doveva essere solo un esercizio di scrittura, invece mi ero messa a inseguirlo e quanto più mi sfuggiva, tanto più diventava il mio chiodo fisso» (GULLOTTA: 192, 2053). Si tratta a tutti gli effetti di una lunga riflessione sull'eccesso di empatia, su quanto si corra il rischio di identificarsi ed essere coinvolti psicologicamente nella ricostruzione di vicende tragiche come quella di Giorgio Melli, anche nel tentativo di farsi testimoni secondi, di riscrivere una storia familiare che riporti alla luce vicende dimenticate. L'episodio dell'autrice che viene travolta da una forte reazione emotiva mentre visita la casa di cura in cui è stato rinchiuso Giorgio Melli per tanti anni sembra evocare il controverso concetto di memoria protesica coniato da Alison Landsberg: è come se Gullotta vivesse in prima persona la memoria di un evento che non è stato direttamente vissuto dalla voce narrante, ma esperito piuttosto attraverso altri mezzi di mediazione, in questo caso specifico le carte ritrovate e le testimonianze acquisite (e non un mezzo di comunicazione di massa come invece teorizza Landsberg). Il momento della ricerca e il tentativo di scrivere una nuova forma di testimonianza è un'esperienza totalizzante in cui empatia e identificazione con la vittima rischiano di confondersi, tanto

che la prima reazione dell'autrice è quella di «mollare tutto e prendere una ventata di aria fresca» (GULLOTTA: 2018, 193) finché non si rende conto dell'importanza del proprio compito, della dimensione etica della scrittura e della possibilità di far riflettere sui traumi del passato, con il rischio di restare in bilico tra «l'empatia e l'impassibilità», ma allo stesso tempo il dovere di trasmettere anche il proprio coinvolgimento.

Una staffetta della memoria: ricordare, tramandare alle nuove generazioni, evitare la reiterazione di quell'orrore. [...] Giorgio Melli era veramente esistito. E a me sembrò che con la sua presenza evanescente e al tempo stesso ingombrante, si fosse voltato a guardarmi per domandarmi: «Perché mi hai seguito?» [...] E allora capii. Dare significato alle cose che si scrivono è un'illusione, soprattutto se si racconta il dolore. Non esiste una risposta definitiva sul perché una storia debba essere raccontata. Si guarda a un nord immaginario, si cerca di non perderlo, mentre si procede in bilico tra l'empatia e l'impassibilità (GULLOTTA: 2018, 193-195).

Un coinvolgimento che colpisce anche Antonio Bria, autore di un altro racconto dedicato alla famiglia Melli, dal titolo *Il doganiere*, il cui punto di partenza è proprio il viaggio della memoria ad Auschwitz compiuto dallo scrittore prima di intraprendere la stesura del testo.

Sto veramente male, mi gira la testa. Lo so che non è possibile che io senta questa devastazione dell'anima, non posso neanche immaginarla... eppure la sento. Non sono ebreo, non ho parenti che sono morti qui, non conosco nessun superstito. Sono troppo sensibile e facile alla commozione? E che significa? (BRIA: 2018, 131)

Come ha scritto Patrizia Violi, il problema relativo ai siti del trauma, tra cui il campo di Auschwitz divenuto un museo a cielo aperto, è la tendenza ad essere luoghi «di esperienza», più che di conoscenza, aspetto che lascia spesso il visitatore, dopo che ha vissuto momenti molto intensi a livello emotivo per via delle forme di empatia suscitate, con una «fame di storia», il desiderio di comprendere i motivi, le cause e gli eventi che hanno portato alle vicende dolorose rappresentate attraverso il sito (VIOLI: 2014, 156). Quasi come rispondesse a questo bisogno, l'autore del racconto inserisce a questo punto un incontro inaspettato con un anziano personaggio in sedia a rotelle, che inizia a parlare in italiano all'autore, prima facendo domande e poi raccontando la propria storia. Pensando possa trattarsi di un sopravvissuto, l'io

narrante di questa autofinzione letteraria si pone in ascolto, per poi rimanere sorpreso nella scoperta dell'identità dell'uomo, che racconta invece di essere stato un doganiere, in servizio al confine con la Svizzera, a Porto Ceresio. Tra fraintendimenti e piccole schermaglie (l'uomo si dichiara un patriota e ancora fedele agli ideali fascisti provocando la reazione inorridita dell'io narrante) il racconto prosegue fino all'episodio dei due coniugi Melli, giunti alla frontiera italo-svizzera nel dicembre del 1943, con documenti falsi. Il doganiere rivela allora di riconoscerli immediatamente, provenendo anche lui da Reggio Emilia, e di volerli condurre subito in caserma per farli arrestare, nonostante le preghiere, i pianti, le offerte di denaro e gioielli, il tentativo di appellarsi al nome dei genitori e alla comune provenienza. Gli ordini sono stati eseguiti, la coscienza del funzionario di polizia di frontiera è a posto, eppure qualche anno dopo qualcosa comincia a turbarlo. La notizia della fine dei Melli, la loro immediata morte ad Auschwitz, si diffonde in città (insieme alle voci che si sia trattato di «un infame» a tradirli) e giunge anche alle orecchie del doganiere, che forse fino a quel momento non aveva voluto sapere o sentire e che ora non può più ignorare quanto accaduto. Tuttavia, l'uomo non si dimostra del tutto pentito, continua a ripetere che ha solo fatto il suo dovere, quello di poliziotto e quello di patriota, perché quelle persone erano a tutti gli effetti «da considerare nemici» (BRIA: 2018, 237) e perché, a suo avviso, non c'era altro da fare. Allo stesso tempo, però, si trova ad Auschwitz, per cercare di trovare un senso alle conseguenze delle proprie azioni, o forse per cercare di capire come abbia potuto, per tutti quegli anni, ripetersi che lui non poteva sapere, che Fossoli era solo un campo di lavoro e che non c'erano altre destinazioni per i nemici della patria. Il giudizio dell'io narrante è perentorio e non c'è perdono né redenzione per l'anziano ex doganiere:

Guardi che non è questione di «sapere», ma di ragione; se lei avesse ragionato avrebbe trovato ingiusto denunciare e far arrestare delle persone inermi, le avrebbe salvate, e avrebbe fatto il suo dovere di uomo, forse non quello di poliziotto, forse non quello di convinto fascista, ma quello di umano tra gli umani... Non so cosa si aspettava da me, raccontarmi la sua storia, ma io non posso aiutarla... (BRIA: 2018, 241).

Ecco quindi che la fame di storia del narratore è in parte saziata, anche se non nel modo che si aspettava. La risposta alla domanda «Come è stato possibile?» non è probabilmente esaustiva né soddisfacente,

tuttavia l'uomo che ha contribuito a mandare a morte Benedetto e Lina Melli è sicuramente «parte della risposta a quel come» (BRIA: 2018, 243), una risposta che deve accettare il fatto, per quanto doloroso, che tante, troppe persone «hanno obbedito a ordini e indicazioni, ma questo non li salva» e che, purtroppo, «non esistono tutte le risposte. Qualcuno ha costruito cassette per le domande e cassette per le risposte, ma il numero delle prime sopravanza quello delle seconde» (BRIA: 2018, 243).

In conclusione, la scelta di rendersi eredi della memoria di coloro che non possono più parlare in prima persona delle persecuzioni è oggi sempre più diffusa e consapevole, affiancando al lavoro artistico e di creazione letteraria anche quello intellettuale di studio e rielaborazione di testimonianze. Quando iniziano a venire meno, come sta accadendo oggi, i testimoni diretti di un evento traumatico, la trasmissione del passato diventa un fatto culturale, afferente cioè all'ambito della sfera pubblica e basato essenzialmente sulle mediazioni e sui racconti. Proprio da questi prenderanno sempre più le mosse la conoscenza storica e le opere del futuro. È pertanto fondamentale che i nuovi attori della postmemoria, soprattutto gli scrittori che si fanno testimoni adottivi, agiscano in modo eticamente consapevole e storicamente responsabile, senza limitarsi nell'atto creativo e nello sforzo immaginativo, ma documentandosi il più possibile e cercando di recuperare vicende traumatiche potenzialmente destinate all'oblio.

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Biography

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5. Lutto della (lingua) madre: le lingue del trauma in *The Other Language* di Francesca Marciano

Veronica Frigeni

Abstract

In *The Other Language* (2014), translingual writer Francesca Marciano addresses the relationship between mother, trauma, identity and language(s). The choice of the protagonist Emma to learn English detaches her from her mother tongue, in which the mother's suicide cannot be symbolised and mourned. The short story articulates trauma at a threefold level: (1) as unsayable in Italian, a language which negates and represses the mother's death; (2) as metamorphosis in English, through which trauma becomes socially sayable and sharable; (3) as the trace of a more primary and transgenerational wound, established upon the exclusion of women's and mothers' voices from the symbolic order.

In *The Other Language* (2014), la scrittrice translingue Francesca Marciano interroga il rapporto che esiste tra figura materna, trauma, identità e linguaggio. La scelta della protagonista Emma di imparare l'inglese costituisce una forma di distacco dalla lingua italiana, legata a un'impossibile elaborazione del suicidio della madre nell'idioma materno. Nel testo il trauma si articola a un triplice livello: (1) come indicibile aporia del linguaggio in italiano, in cui la morte della madre è negata e rimossa; (2) come metamorfosi identitaria che conduce a un'elaborazione del lutto e a una narrazione condivisibile in inglese; (3) come traccia di un trauma più originario e transgenerazionale, fondato sull'esclusione della voce femminile e materna dall'ordine del simbolico.

Introduzione

Francesca Marciano rappresenta uno dei più interessanti casi di translinguismo letterario per vocazione. Per scrittore translingue si intende anzitutto «chiunque scriva in una lingua diversa da quella materna» (KELLMAN: 2007, 9), nonché, ad un livello più profondo, chi si esprime in una dimensione interstiziale, tra diverse lingue. Italiana, Marciano ha composto tutte le proprie opere di narrativa in inglese, lingua appresa durante l'adolescenza. La sua produzione narrativa riflette, quindi, una vita transculturale (WELSCH: 1999), che si immerge fisicamente in geografie e culture multiple, aprendosi all'alterità e ad una visione fluida, ibrida e composita dell'identità. Studentessa di cinema a New York dove vive per sette anni, la biografia di Marciano è segnata da lunghi soggiorni in India e in Kenya, prima del rientro attuale a Roma, sua città natia. Per sua stessa ammissione, la scrittrice opera una sorta di scissione tra scrittura filmica e narrativa: se le oltre venti sceneggiature prodotte per il cinema e la televisione sono redatte interamente in italiano, i testi narrativi, come detto, nascono invece in inglese. Una predilezione, almeno inizialmente, dettata da motivi di autenticità, giacché il tentativo di scrittura in italiano del primo romanzo *Rules of the Wild* (1998), ambientato a Nairobi, suona eccessivamente alieno, non autentico, straniato (WILSON: 2020, 217). Tale scelta estetica rispecchia e risponde, più in generale, al contesto storico in cui l'autrice vive e scrive, caratterizzato da un continuo spaesamento che favorisce l'affermarsi di letteratura post-monolingue (YILDIZ: 2013) e translingue. Questo perché una scrittura che superi il cosiddetto paradigma monolingue, fondato sulla corrispondenza tra confini nazionali e linguistici, offre l'opportunità di esprimere identità complesse e ibride, che interrogano e sfidano le tradizionali aspettative rispetto ai processi di costituzione identitaria. Inscrivendosi entro il nucleo transculturale della letteratura italiana contemporanea, Marciano occupa una posizione linguisticamente eccentrica, che sfida e problematizza la nozione medesima di letteratura e canone nazionale (WILSON: 2020, 221).

The Other Language, racconto eponimo della raccolta pubblicata nel 2014, tematizza il rapporto che esiste tra figura materna, trauma, identità e linguaggio. Esso narra, in terza persona, la vicenda di Emma, ragazzina dodicenne che, insieme al fratello Luca di un anno più grande e alla sorellina Monica, viene portata in vacanza dal padre in Grecia, nel tentativo di distrarli ed allontanarli dal trauma della

recente scomparsa della madre, suicidatasi lanciandosi da un ponte con l'automobile. In Grecia Emma entra per la prima volta in contatto con la lingua inglese, parlata da due fratelli poco più grandi di lei, Jack e David. Proprio l'attrazione adolescenziale per Jack la spinge ad imparare la lingua inglese, così da esser pronta, l'estate successiva, ad interagire con il ragazzo. Tuttavia è con David che Emma scopre, allo stesso tempo, la verità sulla propria madre – ovvero che non di incidente ma di suicidio si era trattato – e si scopre per la prima volta donna. Il ritorno improvviso in Italia sancisce la fine dei contatti con i due fratelli, ma non con l'inglese, che Emma elegge a propria lingua e ideale di vita. Trasferitasi negli Stati Uniti, ottiene un ottimo lavoro come architetto, si sposa e soprattutto realizza il proprio desiderio di diventare qualcuno che pensa, sogna e ama in una lingua differente. L'incontro fortuito con Jack, avvenuto a Roma decenni dopo le vacanze greche, che le rivela la morte per overdose di David e la scelta di Jack di guadagnarsi da vivere come artista di strada, è solo l'ultimo episodio che – come il lettore scopre solo sul finire del racconto – Emma sta raccontando nostalgicamente al marito americano durante un viaggio nel deserto dell'Arizona.

Che la correlazione tra lingua e identità costituisca il motivo dominante di tutti i racconti nella raccolta *The Other Language* è suggerito sin dalla citazione posta in epigrafe: «To change your language / you must change your life» (MARCIANO: 2014, 1). Tale elemento paratestuale introduce alla lettura del translinguismo di Emma come di ciò che contribuisce a organizzare un'identità nuova, differente, capace di intraprendere la costruzione di significati molteplici ed alternativi rispetto agli eventi che si trova a fronteggiare. Nel racconto la (tras) formazione identitaria è l'unico modo per far fronte alla perdita della madre, lutto inesprimibile nella lingua materna. Si tratta, però, di un motivo ricorrente e trasversale alla narrativa di Marciano poiché, anche nei precedenti romanzi *Rules of the Wild* (1998) e *The End of Manners* (2008), la perdita o l'assenza materna conduce le figlie protagoniste alla ricerca di una nuova identità e di una nuova appartenenza, anche linguistica.

Eppure *The Other Language* si distingue proprio nel portare in primo piano l'indagine del legame tra identità trans-lingue e trauma: la scelta della protagonista Emma di imparare l'inglese costituisce una forma di distacco dalla lingua italiana, legata ad un'impossibile elaborazione della perdita della madre nell'idioma materno. Nel racconto, la lingua

non materna offre l'unica possibilità di esprimere l'inesprimibile, di elaborare il lutto per la traumatica morte del genitore: «l'esperienza di un'altra lingua offre la possibilità di dire qualcosa altrimenti rimasto legato a un vissuto, ma non detto» nella lingua madre «da cui risultava impossibile comunicare» (THÜNE: 1998a, 65-69).

Inoltre *The Other Language* articola una posizione sfumata e molteplice dinnanzi al trauma, sia rappresentandolo come un vuoto che rende impossibile la significazione, sia leggendo questa indicibilità come una tra le possibili reazioni, culturalmente situate e influenzate. Se l'italiano è lingua del trauma come indicibile, solo in inglese, lingua in cui il trauma è dicibile, condivisibile e significabile, Emma può costruirsi una soggettività nuova, arricchita, non segnata dalla mancanza. Lungi però dal creare una dicotomia o una frattura insanabile tra le due lingue, il racconto ne sottolinea, invece, la comune natura perturbante (FREUD: 1977 [1919]). O meglio suggerisce come a partire dall'inglese Emma sia in grado di ritornare alla madrelingua come già originariamente straniata invece che come familiare. L'inglese recupera ciò che in italiano era un familiare rimosso e perciò inquietante, così aprendo il personaggio ad una alterità in cui è possibile ri-conoscersi e appartenere.

Nel testo il trauma si articola ad un triplice livello: (1) anzitutto la perdita della figura materna lascia Emma orfana anche linguisticamente, allorché la lingua materna è segnata da una serie di reticenze e rimozioni che culminano nell'impossibilità di affrontare e simbolizzare tale trauma, almeno inizialmente, in italiano. Non è casuale che la verità sul suicidio materno avvenga per Emma in inglese, lingua altra e neutra, che di fatto annulla tale catena di rimozioni e reticenze. In secondo luogo, (2) il distacco dalla lingua madre si configura come «possibilità di riformulazione e trasformazione di esperienze tramite un'altra lingua che tocca il rapporto tra rimozione e memoria» (THÜNE: 1998b, 162). Se quella del trauma è una risposta condizionata dalla cultura e dal linguaggio che lo simbolizza, Emma scopre come la morte della madre sia dicibile e condivisibile in inglese: David, che ha sofferto il medesimo lutto, ne parla con lei, così come i genitori inglesi, Penny e Peter, ne discutono apertamente con i figli. Infine, (3) nel ritorno all'italiano e nella sua composizione con l'inglese, viene portato a galla un rimosso, un trauma più originario nella lingua madre. Non si può infatti trascurare il fatto che le voci del racconto, l'una taciuta, l'altra rappresentata nel suo articolarsi, siano femminili,

e specificamente quelle di una madre e di una figlia. Leggere il trauma del suicidio materno adottando la prospettiva della trama madre-figlia (HIRSCH: 1989) consente di rinvenire una frattura più originaria dell'/nell'indicibile lingua materna, e di illuminare una possibile catena di ripetizioni trans-generazionali.

L'italiano: il trauma come indicibile

Secondo il modello interpretativo classico, che trova una delle sue formulazioni più significative nelle riflessioni di Caruth, il trauma costituisce uno shock, un'aporia dell'esperienza a cui non è stato attribuito un significato psichico e che comporta un vuoto, una lacerazione del discorso (CARUTH: 1996, 59). Nel racconto di Marciano, l'italiano è la lingua di tale rappresentazione interdotta del trauma. In essa, l'assenza della madre diviene però una presenza ingombrante, proprio perché il suo suicidio è alluso e taciuto. A tal fine, sono attivi nella lingua italiana sia un meccanismo individuale di negazione e rimozione che uno collettivo di censura.

Il rifiuto di Emma di parlare italiano, legato alla volontà di sottrarsi a domande rispetto alla morte materna, si configura inizialmente come negazione del trauma: del resto la madre non è semplicemente morta, ma si è suicidata. Adottando tale meccanismo di difesa «il soggetto prende coscienza di qualcosa, ma può accettarla solo col sigillo della negazione» (BENVENUTO: 2015, 2): quest'ultima è pertanto un parziale ritorno del rimosso, o meglio della sua rappresentazione intellettuale ma non dell'aspetto emotivo legato ad essa. In *The Other Language* ad essere rimosso è sia un dato di realtà esterno al soggetto – il suicidio della madre – sia una componente affettiva interna ad Emma – il dolore, il senso di colpa, la nostalgia e il senso di abbandono per la morte della madre. Del resto, «Emma didn't want to make friends with anybody new. She didn't want to answer when they'd ask, "Where is your mother?"» (MARCIANO: 2014, 7). La perdita della madre è infatti vissuta da Emma con vergogna, «as if the loss of the mother had made her a lesser person in the eyes of the world» (MARCIANO: 2014, 12). La negazione culmina nel rigetto della madre stessa, scandito dall'anafora della negazione: «Emma wanted to get away as far as possible from what had happened so she could pretend it never had. No accident, no funeral, and no mother» (MARCIANO: 2014, 4). Tuttavia, attraverso la negazione, Emma respinge ciò che nondimeno sa e conosce. Ciò è

evidente nella risposta che la ragazza fornisce a David rispetto alla morte della madre:

«How did your mother die?»

Emma froze. She decided she had misunderstood the question.

«What? »

«Your mother». David spelled out. «She died last year, right?»

Emma nodded.

«How?»

«It was an accident.» [...]

«Is it true she killed herself?» [...]

«No», she said. «She was in a car. It was an accident in a car.»

«Penny said she drove off a bridge,» he insisted.

«No, no», Emma said in one breath.

«She said it was a suicide», David pressed. [...]

«It was an accident», she repeated forcefully.

«What happened? »

«I don't know –»

She searched for the word *exactly* but she couldn't find it anywhere. She knew this sounded dumb and unbelievable, despite its being the truth.

So she added:

«I don't remember» (MARCIANO: 2014, 33).

Dall'altro lato, l'inglese è una forma di reazione alla mancata elaborazione del lutto, poiché Emma ed i fratelli sono costretti dai parenti, dal mondo adulto, a misconoscere, dimenticare, non affrontare l'evento della morte della madre. Il suicidio della madre è oggetto di censura da parte del padre e di tutte le figure adulte che circondano Emma e i fratelli; tale censura alimenta un meccanismo di rimozione che sottrae il trauma alla dimensione del simbolico, della rappresentazione, del discorso. Diffusamente Marciano ricorre alle diverse sfumature e gradazioni emotive e linguistiche della strategia retorica della lacuna e della reticenza, che riproducono a livello formale la rimozione attivata dai personaggi. L'incipit scandisce un movimento di avvicinamento al trauma, dapprima un generico e impersonale «what had just happened», successivamente definito quale «their greatest loss», ovvero perdita di cui l'oggetto è precisato in un terzo momento – «by losing their mother» –, sino alla finale esplicitazione del modo in cui tale perdita è accaduta – «the accident» (MARCIANO: 2014, 3). Tuttavia, tali passaggi non sono altro che velature progressive di reticenza rispetto al suicidio materno. A livello retorico, la lacuna

fattuale della morte trova la sua espressione migliore nella preterizione che consiste nell'affermare di non voler parlare di un qualcosa quando di fatto lo si enuncia, e che rappresenta la censura simbolica messa in atto dagli adulti. Il silenzio sul suicidio materno è assordante, giacché la censura alimenta, in Emma e nei suoi fratelli, un fraintendimento, e quindi una esclusione della morte dal linguaggio:

The children had been spared the details of the accident: where it had happened, how badly crushed the car was, how long before she died, whether on spot or at the hospital. The adults had decided they were too small to be told such dreadful particulars [...]. But Emma, Luca and Monica misunderstood. They assumed death must be an impolite subject to bring up in conversation, a disgrace to be hidden, to be put behind (MARCIANO: 2014, 7).

Si noti il ritmo triadico della rimozione, laddove la morte è pensata come argomento scomodo – il trauma eccede, è estraneo alla verbalizzazione del simbolico –, disgrazia da nascondere, da lasciare indietro – immagini che rimandano a come il trauma sia registrato esclusivamente come contenuto rimosso, a livello inconscio e non di coscienza.

Lo scambio verbale tra David ed Emma, precedentemente citato, costituisce l'episodio centrale e di svolta nella trama del racconto e include tre elementi fondamentali: anzitutto, mediante la presenza del medesimo verbo, «misunderstood», esso crea un rimando testuale a quella condizione di fraintendimento rispetto allo status verbale della morte, che distingue i tre fratelli a partire dalla reticenza paterna. In secondo luogo, l'avverbio «exactly» riappropria uno degli attributi con cui Emma aveva inizialmente definito la lingua inglese – «exact» – di fatto ammettendo, pur implicitamente, come l'idioma straniero la costringa alla precisione, alla verità, come essa sia in grado di squarciare l'ordito delle censure italiane. Infine, appunto, il brano accumula negazioni e silenzi, e la risposta di Emma appare non solo difficile da credere ma, alludendo alla duplice valenza dell'aggettivo inglese *dumb*, tanto 'infantile' quanto 'muta, vuota', estranea al significato ed al processo comunicativo medesimo.

In seguito, le parole di David riecheggiano come uno spettro nei pensieri di Emma che, a partire da un confronto con il fratello maggiore Luca, troverà conferma della loro veridicità. Il successivo dialogo con Luca, una sorta di scatola cinese delle verità taciute – «Everyone knew,

they must. [...] She knew Luca knew, just like she did» – sancisce la fine del disconoscimento della realtà da parte di Emma; lo sforzo psichico richiesto, il ritorno di contenuti intellettivi e affettivi sino ad allora rimossi e negati, richiede «air, space, [...] darkness, to be talking about what they'd been avoiding for so long» (MARCIANO: 2014, 40-41). Benché il padre, che non ha avuto tempo e modo di affrontare il lutto, non avrà mai il coraggio di rivelare loro la verità, saranno i figli, una volta adulti, con una sorta di scambio di ruoli, a proteggere il genitore dal ricordo del suicidio della moglie.

Lingua del lutto e lutto della lingua. L'inglese, ovvero il trauma come metamorfosi identitaria

Il più recente approccio pluralistico alla letteratura del trauma si allontana dalla teoria dell'inesprimibile di Caruth, criticandone la presupposizione di un nesso di causalità tra esperienza traumatica, dissociazione patologica della coscienza e impossibilità di significazione (BALAEV: 2012, 10-11) e suggerendo, di contro, come l'evento traumatico, pur alterandone percezione e identità, contribuisca a creare, per il soggetto, una nuova conoscenza di sé e del proprio essere nel mondo (BALAEV: 2014, 360-368). Anzitutto ciò è reso possibile dal fatto che, secondo la prospettiva pluralistica, la memoria costituisce un processo attivo e continuo di ri-significazione e non un archivio di ricordi statici e, nel caso del trauma, inaccessibili. In secondo luogo, la stessa definizione e la narrazione di eventi traumatici sono riconosciute quali pratiche influenzate da fattori individuali, dinamiche collettive e modelli culturali, per cui l'indicibilità non è più intesa come una qualità intrinseca al trauma, al suo essere prima e oltre ogni tentativo di rappresentazione. L'inesprimibilità del trauma da assunto epistemologico diviene il risultato di un sistema di valori: ciò di cui è possibile parlare e ciò che è invece inesprimibile è, infatti, condizionato dal contesto socio-culturale e l'indicibilità è solo una delle possibili reazioni al trauma. (BALAEV: 2014, 368). Adottando tale modello teorico è possibile leggere, in *The Other Language*, il trauma come esperienza che conduce Emma a una nuova esplorazione e conoscenza di sé, a un'identità arricchita, poiché cambiare lingua significa depotenziare la censura specifica dell'italiano, lingua propria di un ordine simbolico che condanna il suicidio materno all'indicibile. Attraverso la prospettiva pluralistica, diviene pienamente intelligibile

perché l'inglese sia, per Emma adolescente, la lingua di scoperta e definizione del trauma e, per Emma adulta, la lingua attraverso cui elaborare un personale processo di ricordo e rappresentazione del trauma. La lingua inglese è precisa, esatta: uno squarcio nel tessuto di omissioni e reticenze. I suoi suoni veloci, troncati e ovattati anticipano la dinamica della traversata di Emma verso l'isolotto, dove non a caso si confronterà con David sul suicidio materno, poiché anche questa richiederà un ritmo essenziale, pausato, con bracciate esatte, e il controllo assoluto di ogni muscolo del proprio corpo.

Il primo a parlare in inglese a Emma, durante la prima estate, è Jack: pur non comprendendo il significato delle sue parole, Emma assapora «an unfamiliar sensation: the first perception, of something as yet unknown to her and still unnamed» (MARCIANO: 2014, 13). L'incontro con la lingua è interamente sotto il segno dell'alterità e dello straniamento, e subito legato a una sensazione inquietante di intimità non familiare. Esso contiene quella promessa di felicità e metamorfosi che di fatto si sovrappongono nella cotta adolescenziale per Jack e nell'innamoramento per la lingua straniera:

Everything she had experienced during that short holiday had been a discovery: from the sound of his language, to the endless possibilities of her hopes and aspirations. That was the summer when Emma understood that one of the many ways to survive the pain buried inside her was to become an entirely different person (MARCIANO: 2014, 14).

L'alterità della lingua apre alla possibilità di un'identità altra, e la possibilità di un'altra identità rappresenta l'unico modo per dare senso al dolore della perdita della madre. Per questo motivo, Emma non si accontenta dell'apprendimento scolastico: al contrario «she needed to pry open the secret of the language» (MARCIANO: 2014, 18). Il medesimo verbo ritorna una sola volta nel racconto, per descrivere il tentativo di David di baciarla, prima del loro rapporto sessuale: «His tongue was trying to pry open her lips» (MARCIANO: 2014, 35). Tale spia linguistica non solo avalla la sovrapposizione tra cotta adolescenziale e innamoramento per l'inglese che Emma, da adulta, racconta ai suoi amici; ma essa allude anche a un parallelismo tra il nucleo più recondito della lingua inglese e l'identità più intima del personaggio.

L'acquisizione della lingua straniera trova un canale privilegiato nell'ascolto della musica inglese. Marciano inserisce nel racconto una strofa della canzone *Carey* di Joni Mitchell, nei cui versi Emma identifica

se stessa: «There was something so seductive in the image of a free-spirited young woman on a Greek island [...] soon, might that person be her?» (MARCIANO: 2014, 18). Indubbiamente agisce, nell'acquisizione dell'inglese, un reiterato meccanismo d'identificazione con una serie di modelli esterni: Carey, ma anche i fratelli inglesi David e Jack. La ragazza non desidera propriamente stare con loro, bensì vuole essere come loro, vuole essere persino figlia dei loro stessi genitori. I fratelli inglesi sono, come riconosce alla fine, le sue ispirazioni. Per questo Emma arriva a desiderare che la loro madre sposi suo padre in un precario equilibrio, in una volontà di sintesi dei due mondi. Al pari della negazione, anche l'identificazione è del resto un meccanismo di difesa, attraverso il quale il soggetto attribuisce a sé stesso le caratteristiche desiderate dell'altro: «io non sono altro che una molteplicità di identificazioni. La mia cosiddetta interiorità è l'insieme stratificato delle mie identificazioni con l'altro [...] dunque un'esteriorità che ho interiorizzato» (RECALCATI: 2007, 14). Emma non abdica interamente alla sua identità italiana, ma l'apprendimento dell'inglese, una costante negoziazione tra familiare ed estraneo «pasting an unknown word to one she new» (MARCIANO: 2014, 32), le appare come una magia: in un gioco di corrispondenze tra autore e personaggio, il translinguismo si radica nell'autenticità della vita vissuta:

Emma doesn't remember now how the magic happened [...]. All she knows is that the memories of that summer turned into English because that's what she found herself speaking. It was like an infant going from blabber to complete sentences in just a few weeks [...]. It came like a flow, an instantaneous metamorphosis she was completely unaware of [...]. That summer forever marked the moment when she swam all the way to the island and landed in a place where she could be different from whom she assumed she was. There were so many possibilities. She didn't know what she was getting away from, but the other language was the boat she fled on (MARCIANO: 2014, 21-22).

In questa lunga citazione, il narratore dà voce, attraverso l'uso del discorso indiretto libero, ai pensieri non di Emma adolescenziale, ma della donna che ripercorre la propria vita a ritroso nel racconto finale al marito: significativo è, infatti, l'uso del tempo presente per situare l'azione espressa dai verbi principali. Si apprende quindi come per la protagonista l'acquisizione della lingua straniera sia legata a due ordini principali di metafora: anzitutto quello dell'infante, giacché

l'inglese costringe almeno inizialmente ad una sorta di regressione e conduce Emma alla soglia del linguaggio medesimo. L'inglese le consente di creare una famiglia 'alternatale' (HAI: 2012, 181), nella quale occupa sia il ruolo di figlia (come un infante si affaccia balbettante alla nuova lingua) che quello di amante: per la protagonista l'inglese rappresenta, infatti, un ideale compagno di vita. Secondo ordine di metafore è quello riguardante la metamorfosi, il cambiamento, che insiste proprio sul legame tra lingua e identità: non a caso Emma capisce di dover perdere «any trace of accent for her transformation to be complete» (MARCIANO: 2014, 24). L'inglese acquisisce per Emma un valore terapeutico non solo rispetto all'elaborazione del lutto materno, ma anche rispetto alla ricomposizione della propria identità composita e translingue. Certo, l'accento italiano con cui Emma inizialmente parla inglese, la sua difficoltà nel pronunciare talune parole, la sua meticolosità nell'imparare modi di dire per raffinare la propria purezza linguistica, rivelano come anche la nuova lingua non sia immune da una condizione di difficoltà. Nondimeno, per Emma l'inglese rappresenta fin da subito l'occasione di diventare un'altra persona; divenuta cittadina statunitense, festeggia esaltando il proprio radicamento nell'alterità: «It was my destiny. I always knew I belonged somewhere else» (MARCIANO: 2014, 45).

Tuttavia per il personaggio ciò non conduce a una lacerazione o scissione tra le diverse identità. La cronaca finale del proprio apprendimento linguistico al marito sancisce anche una successiva presa di consapevolezza, ovvero che l'unico ritorno a casa sia possibile, paradossalmente, solo nelle parole di una lingua altra, nelle quali Emma può finalmente ricomporre dialogicamente la propria identità italiana e inglese: «She didn't know how to explain why the story had stayed with her all those years and why it still pained her» (MARCIANO: 2014, 51).

Narrando la propria esistenza in inglese, Emma si scopre soggetto «polilogico», ovvero soggetto agito da «un'intricata rete di percorsi linguistici alternativi, nei quali ci si può smarrire o ritrovare» e che è «pilastro della propria identità» (MEHLER ET AL: 1990, 388). Nel caso di Emma, lungi dal condurre a una scissione insanabile tra persona italiana e inglese, il translinguismo arricchisce l'identità della protagonista: grazie alla sua condizione translingue la protagonista capisce di essere a casa non tanto in questa o quella lingua specifica, bensì, ad un livello più profondo, nel linguaggio. Emma comprende di essere sé stessa, di avere una propria identità, solo nel momento in cui questa dà luogo a

un'esperienza di significazione condivisibile, a prescindere dalla lingua effettivamente utilizzata: così facendo, è infatti in grado di chiudere il cerchio rispetto all'originaria estromissione dal simbolico del lutto materno.

Rispetto a tale presa di consapevolezza, l'incontro a Roma con la performance mimica e muta di Jack si conferma decisivo, poiché nel provare a radicare la propria identità nel linguaggio, Emma si confronta con il grado zero della comunicazione: Jack lavora come mimo, ovvero come figura che si muove ad un livello neutro rispetto alle lingue, che agisce attraverso il linguaggio in quanto tale, in quanto pura significazione, al di là di ogni lingua particolare. Nella sua performance di strada egli solleva a fatica una valigia, leggerissima invece per Emma. Per Jack il viaggio, l'attraversamento di nuovi territori e lingue, è stato faticoso, e lo ha condotto all'emarginazione sociale, o almeno ad un'identità fragile, anche sottilmente avida, e legata inutilmente al passato. Per Emma invece il percorso è stato molto più agevole e ha condotto, almeno apparentemente, al successo.

L'inglese è tuttavia, doppiamente, lingua del lutto: l'uno cercato, l'altro subito. Da un lato, come detto, Emma abbraccia l'inglese come schermo, elaborazione e superamento della perdita della madre e come trasformazione identitaria. D'altra parte, però, anche l'inglese si rivela ben presto linguaggio in sé luttuoso. Prima di avere il loro primo e unico rapporto sessuale, David rivela a Emma di aver perso da bambino entrambi i genitori. Una perdita che, nel suo caso, non condurrà al liberatorio apprendimento di una nuova lingua, bensì ad un rapporto non ordinario, improprio, distorto con la propria (è dislessico) e con il mondo. Malato di depressione e tossicodipendente, incapace di elaborare il proprio lutto materno, abbandonato due volte da Emma, che non gli scrive pur avendo il suo indirizzo e che lo rimpiazza con Jack nei suoi racconti sulle proprie estati greche, David muore in giovane età. Per David, la lingua inglese reitera pertanto il ruolo di una madre destinata ad abbandonarlo. La narrazione fittizia e costruita a posteriori da Emma – «this tale [...] the fiction» (MARCIANO: 2014, 45), nella quale l'iniziazione alla lingua e al sesso sono associate alla figura sostitutiva del fratello Jack, opera un'evidente negazione di fronte ad un dato di realtà per lei inaccettabile: David, con le sue parole, con la sua stessa vicenda di orfano abbandonato e adottato, finisce per costituire la minaccia di un eccessivo avvicinamento ad un trauma troppo simile a quello del lutto materno. Per questo, nel

ricordo artificioso di Emma, «David has been conveniently omitted» (MARCIANO: 2014, 45). Eppure, nel racconto finale al marito, Emma ammette tale sostituzione e scioglie le proprie resistenze affettive: solo in questo modo il passaggio all'alterità linguistica può farsi autenticamente occasione di una nuova soggettività non più mutilata affettivamente, ma arricchita.

E la madre? Trauma, perturbante e ritorno del rimosso

Il racconto tematizza un movimento che dal trauma come indicibile arriva al trauma come elaborazione e cambiamento, per poi approdare nuovamente all'italiano. Questo non è però un ritorno lineare, poiché mutata è Emma e a cambiare sarà pertanto la sua relazione con la lingua e la dimensione materna. Questo movimento circolare e decentrato trova una propria rappresentazione nella Grecia descritta dal testo, luogo investito della funzione di elaborazione e superamento del lutto – «they marked that beach as the place where pain had ended and a new life could begin» (MARCIANO: 2014, 5) –, e che è presentata con la sua particolare connotazione di doppia isola. Proprio nella traversata verso l'isolotto roccioso, che per la ragazza incarna un immaginario anglofono, e nel ritorno all'isola principale (metafora dell'italiano) si trova l'immagine più limpida non solo del *coming-of-age* di Emma, ma della sua natura translingue, vale a dire del suo essere in mezzo a due lingue, soggetto in transito, e della sua identità come di un arcipelago di appartenenze plurime. Quello che lei compie, nuotando verso l'isola grande, e più in generale, dopo la scoperta di un sé in inglese, non è un ritorno a ciò da cui è partita. Ma è un ritorno come un nuovo approdo all'italiano. Quando, da adulta, torna brevemente a Roma, Emma è ormai estranea alla città di origine, a ciò che le dovrebbe essere familiare, al punto da sentirsene una semplice turista, di passaggio. Il racconto non assume perciò i connotati di un *nostos*, perché lo si conosce già impossibile e destinato al fallimento – come dicono il fratello e il padre ad Emma, «always a disappointment» (MARCIANO: 2014, 43). Nel breve soggiorno nella capitale Emma, ormai adulta, accetta tutto ciò che prima di Roma le dava fastidio, poiché la sua identità arricchita le consente di accogliere pienamente la dimensione italiana e quella inglese.

Ciò è possibile solo perché tornare all'italiano dall'inglese significa per Emma scoprire e finalmente portare a galla una familiarità

inquietante. Di fatto la lingua madre è perturbante poiché rivela al centro un'intima estraneità: come suggerisce Waldenfels, si impara «a conoscere l'estraneità della lingua innanzitutto nella lingua madre e non nella lingua straniera» (WALDENFELS: 2011, 74). La stessa espressione 'lingua madre' si basa su un presunto assunto di familiarità stabile associata alla figura materna, come se essa non avesse alcun lato di penombra. Tale presupposto è radicalmente messo in questione nel racconto, laddove lo sradicamento di Emma nasce proprio dall'inquietante estraneità della madre, persona che credeva di conoscere, e che invece celava un abisso oscuro, di depressione.

Nell'omonimo saggio del 1919 Freud riconosce per primo come il perturbante (*Unheimliche*) «non è in realtà niente di nuovo o di estraneo, ma è invece un che di familiare (*Heimlich*) alla vita psichica fin dai tempi antichissimi e a essa estraniatosi soltanto a causa del processo di rimozione» (FREUD: 1977 [1919], 102). Con l'*Unheimliche* il non familiare inquieta non perché assolutamente nuovo, o sconosciuto, ma poiché tale estraneità partecipa di una precedente familiarità. L'italiano per Emma è, inizialmente, freudianamente, *Heimlich*: è la familiarità, la consuetudine, il materno. Esso si rovescia però rapidamente nel proprio opposto, giacché reca in sé, intollerabile, l'eco, la traccia della perdita materna. L'intimità straniante dell'italiano si rivela a Emma chiaramente nel movimento verso una lingua altra, straniera. L'inglese si iscrive subito in una costellazione semantica relativa a tutto ciò che è estraneo, nuovo, non familiare. Paradossalmente però, solo in tale lingua Emma può provare a ritrovare la familiarità di sé stessa, attribuendo un senso al dramma della madre e mettendo in atto una metamorfosi della propria identità. Infatti, è in questa lingua che Emma conosce per la prima volta una verità solo intuita, ovvero che la madre si sia suicidata. Ma è sempre in tale lingua che Emma trova una nuova madre, benché solo auspicata (Penny, ma anche la lingua inglese medesima), e una nuova identità.

L'inglese, infatti, è perturbante non tanto perché coincide con l'estraneità o la novità; bensì perché identifica qualcosa di estraneo che diventa familiare, o meglio, che recupera un familiare nascosto. Non è fortuito che il racconto dispieghi un'ampia fenomenologia del perturbante: l'incipit, per esempio, articola una variegata costellazione semantica del non familiare, laddove la Grecia viene descritta come esperienza «first time abroad», come «a real adventure» da compiere a bordo di una nuova auto che suona come la promessa «of a richer

and more exciting life» (MARCIANO: 2014, 3). La Grecia è lo straniero ospitale, «a foreign land [that] seemed a liberation» (MARCIANO: 2014, 4). La vacanza si configura come un vero e proprio tentativo di rimozione e di negazione del familiare: «to drive them so soon this far away from the familiar» è esplicitamente l'intento del padre (MARCIANO: 2014, 4). La Grecia diventa, per Emma, Luca e Monica, una fantasia, quasi uno spettro il cui ricordo li insegue per tutto l'inverno seguente. *Unheimlich* è infine, nel testo, il desiderio momentaneo di Emma e dei fratelli di avere entrambi i genitori morti: desiderio inquietante, dettato dall'euforia della giornata trascorsa senza il padre e che gli fa assaporare una libertà nuova. Desiderio che, come il precedente di realizzare un matrimonio tra il padre e Penny, potrebbe anche alludere a un ulteriore meccanismo di difesa, quello del romanzo familiare teorizzato da Freud, al cui nucleo si trova la fantasia di eliminazione e sostituzione dei genitori reali. Il romanzo familiare costituisce, infatti, una risposta alle frustrazioni affettive del soggetto preadolescenziale che, nel crearsi una personale genealogia, afferma la propria emancipazione dai genitori biologici (FREUD: 1972 [1908]).

L'esoticità positiva della vacanza differisce dal non familiare che si è invece insinuato nella vita di Emma e dei suoi fratelli nei mesi successivi alla perdita della madre, durante i quali «an unusual attention» da parte di tutti gli adulti, anche estranei, che li circondano determina una sensazione di disagio e spaesamento, «[an] uncomfortable feeling» (MARCIANO: 2014, 4). Per questo motivo l'arrivo di turisti italiani viene avvertito dai figli come un'intrusione, un disturbo e quasi una rottura del loro «sense of foreignness and adventure» (MARCIANO: 2014, 12). Roma identifica invece la madre, apparentemente familiare ma in realtà essa stessa già estranea (e non è un caso che il testo racconti di una Roma straniata, innervata). Il primo ritorno a casa dalle vacanze è segnato dallo spaesamento: «The children went back to [...] what they assumed was home only to realize how unfamiliar it had become. Everything was the same but nothing was the same anymore» (MARCIANO: 2014, 14). Gli oggetti appartenuti alla madre «innocuous, ordinary, had acquired an ominous nature» (MARCIANO: 2014, 16): nonostante una zia li avesse portati via tutti in loro assenza – gesto che Marciano paragona a un poliziotto che rimuove una prova, dunque iscrivendolo all'interno della costellazione semantica della censura e della rimozione – la spazzola, l'accappatoio, la tazza della madre assumono una valenza spaventosa. Essi sono indizi di

un'assenza ingombrante, di un silenzio assordante. Non solo, il gesto di eliminare i capelli della madre, elemento interstiziale, vivo e morto, dalla connotazione in sé macabra, indica anche una forma di ostilità alla figura materna: Emma dolorosamente la rifiuta, prima di riuscire a elaborare il lutto, come la madre aveva rifiutato i figli uccidendosi. Ciò mostra come, forse, i bambini avessero consapevolezza del suicidio ben prima di venirne a conoscenza e di poterne effettivamente parlare. Proprio durante l'inverno seguente i sentimenti sino a quel momento rimossi trovano libera espressione in Emma:

For the first time [...] she felt a burst of longing [...]. Shouldn't her mother be in the photograph with them [...]? Where else could she belong? The injustice of loss manifested itself in all its cruelty. Emma burst out crying, as if a hidden button had been pushed, and the tears she had withheld for almost a year found their way out at last [...] she somehow knew she shouldn't be afraid of them (MARCIANO: 2014, 15).

Per la prima volta, al cuore di un familiare sorretto artificialmente dalla reticenza degli adulti, si rivela l'alterità, il non familiare, lo sradicamento legato alla perdita della figura materna. Il pianto di Emma rappresenta, inoltre, il momento in cui il contenuto affettivo legato alla perdita della madre, che era stato rimosso, ritorna a livello di coscienza, destabilizzante eppure liberante.

La dimensione testuale del perturbante, sinora tratteggiata, serve ad alimentare un terzo livello traumatico, dove a essere indicibile non è più la morte della madre bensì la sua stessa voce. Da un lato ciò può essere letto, in termini più astratti e universalistici, come metafora dell'esclusione della dimensione femminile, e segnatamente materna, dall'ordine del simbolico. Se il soggetto si struttura accedendo all'ordine simbolico paterno, alla lingua socialmente codificata, ciò è possibile solo a partire da una perdita originaria, quella della relazione e del linguaggio più propriamente materno, affettivo, che caratterizza i primi anni del bambino: si pensi, a tal proposito, alla distinzione operata da Kristeva tra semiotico, o ordine materno preverbale, e simbolico, o ordine paterno verbale (KRISTEVA: 1979). In tale prospettiva,

[l]a lingua straniera getta infatti una luce su ciò che in fondo è già presente nella lingua materna. Il fatto cioè, che già nella lingua materna coabitiamo, sempre, più lingue e che dobbiamo sottoporci continuamente ad un'omologazione linguistica tramite cui rischia di venire meno proprio la parte viva della nostra esperienza (THÜNE: 2006, 92).

Dall'altro lato, interrogando più da vicino il periodo in cui è ambientato l'inizio del racconto, ovvero gli anni settanta, il silenzio materno potrebbe essere riletto alla luce delle istanze femministe che a partire da quel decennio avrebbero rivendicato in Italia un nuovo ordine simbolico femminile e materno. E allora a essere veramente traumatica non sarebbe la perdita della madre ma la sua esclusione originaria. L'indicibile andrebbe dunque riletto come afasia, ovvero non solo come ciò che non si riesce a rappresentare ma anche come ciò di cui è proibito parlare, come chi non può parlare. La società italiana patriarcale, caratterizzata da strutture di potere discriminatorie, si regge tradizionalmente (anche) sulla produzione di un discorso egemonico maschilista e fallocentrico, su un sistema di subordinazione ed esclusione culturale e cioè sull'interdizione per le donne alla parola, contro cui il pensiero femminista italiano della differenza, sin dagli anni settanta, si è mobilitato per promuovere la creazione di un ordine simbolico materno (MURARO: 1991). Significativo, quindi, che la riscoperta dell'identità materna in *The Other Language* si affidi a racconti femminili, la zia più giovane, le amiche, alcune lettere della madre stessa: per la prima volta ne conosciamo il nome (Eleonora), mentre il padre resterà sempre anonimo, totalmente coincidente con la sua funzione simbolica.

Agisce, a questo livello del trauma, un preciso intertesto mitologico, quello di Clitemnestra ed Ifigenia, che rappresenta infatti un possibile archetipo della narrazione madre-figlia. E che definisce la madre come colei che per eccellenza non ha voce (HIRSCH: 1989, 30). Nella prima estate, durante la visita alle rovine del palazzo di Agamennone, luogo «dark and sinister» e che suscita «a strange effect on all of them» (MARCIANO: 2014, 8-9), la sensazione di spaesamento raggiunge il proprio climax con il racconto, da parte del padre, del mito di Ifigenia, giacché rivela l'inquietante intimità del luogo e della vicenda con quella di Emma e della sua famiglia. Proprio Emma, angosciata dal mito del sacrificio di Ifigenia e non paga della salvifica metamorfosi della figlia di Agamennone in cerva, ritrova anche nella leggenda la stessa omissione, la stessa assenza ingombrante, la stessa lacuna che lacera la sua esistenza, rendendo l'episodio una ripetizione, una prefigurazione del suo trauma: «And what about the Queen? Why didn't she do anything to stop him? [...] what about the mother?» (MARCIANO: 2014, 9).

Se la metamorfosi salvifica di Ifigenia allude positivamente al cambiamento e all'identità arricchita di Emma medesima, tale archetipo forse consentirebbe di interrogarsi ulteriormente anche in

merito all'assenza della madre e quindi al suo suicidio. Esso stesso, forse, a parti inverse, un sacrificio? Non un semplice sacrificio, ma quello primigenio e matricida, per cui è solo l'uccisione simbolica della madre a consentire l'accesso dell'individuo all'ordine del simbolico e del linguaggio, esattamente come nel mito il sacrificio di Ifigenia è necessario e deciso dal padre, in quanto re e condottiero, dunque in quanto esponente di un ordine sociale e simbolico maschile e patriarcale? Inoltre, entro e oltre tale valenza metaforica, ancora una volta storicizzando il mito nel periodo in cui il racconto è ambientato, forse ne ricaveremmo l'immagine di una madre soffocata, nella sua depressione, dalla mentalità patriarcale dell'Italia degli anni settanta, da quei rigidi protocolli di indicibilità a cui i figli obbediscono ligi, e per i quali anche i sentimenti devono conformarsi alle aspettative? Significativamente, nell'ordito di censure che alimenta il primo livello del trauma, «the adults had decided they were too small to be told such dreadful particulars, as if their mother's death was just another protocol they had to observe» (MARCIANO: 2014, 7). E proprio in quella sovrapposizione tra ciò di cui non si riesce e ciò di cui non si deve parlare, forse la madre incarnerebbe una voce già indicibile nell'ordine simbolico paterno, proprio perché altra, femminile, materna?

L'atteggiamento interrogatorio di Emma dinnanzi al mito, che pur indirettamente dà voce a quelle stesse domande cui dichiara più volte di volersi sottrarre, di non saper rispondere, non solo anticipa il successivo confronto con David ma, di fatto, mette a nudo la fragilità della censura paterna rispetto al suicidio della madre e il sentimento di abbandono e di rabbia che ciò ha alimentato nella figlia. Oltre a «mamma» e «papà», compare qui, infatti, l'unica parola italiana di tutto il racconto, il «basta» pronunciato da Luca alla sorella, e che nell'uso della madrelingua di fatto segna il punto di massima prossimità al trauma e l'inizio di un luttuoso allontanamento dallo stesso. Quel «basta» è, in un certo senso, intraducibile poiché ultimo legame con le pulsioni e gli affetti precedenti l'elaborazione del lutto: nell'imporre verbalmente un limite, una frontiera oltre cui non è possibile andare, esso rivela l'impossibilità del lutto della madre nella lingua madre.

In conclusione, come detto, questa ipotesi di una trama madrefiglia consente di attivare un terzo livello traumatico, che oltre a risignificare il suicidio materno problematizza anche l'identità inglese di Emma. In tale ottica, anzitutto, si possono rileggere le reazioni di Emma dinnanzi alle diverse potenziali figure materne del racconto.

Impossibile per lei accettare Mirella, la donna milanese che corteggia il padre in vacanza, «the woman's presence had made their mother rise from the dead and they felt frightened» (MARCIANO: 2014, 20), ma che ancora soccombe all'ordine patriarcale: di fronte al gesto di stizza del padre verso Mirella, «it pained her [Emma] to see how desperate a woman could become» (MARCIANO: 2014, 39). Ciò spiega il desiderio, di contro, di avere Penny come madre, una donna la cui caratteristica distintiva è quella di essere «at ease», a proprio agio persino nel disordine domestico e a seno nudo, di fronte ai figli e a Emma stessa.

In secondo luogo, però, la trama madre-figlia pare alludere a un doppio, a una ripetizione della madre nella figlia. Come la madre anche Emma ha abbandonato, prima in Grecia e poi a Roma, i due fratelli inglesi. Come la madre ha un marito pragmatico, che «didn't understand what she was trying to convey [...] he was a person with a strong practical sense who found Emma's penchant for introspection both charming and alien» (MARCIANO: 2014, 51). Il racconto non prosegue oltre: sta al lettore immaginare se nel suo peregrinare in un arcipelago identitario, rivendicare l'appartenenza e l'accesso al linguaggio, prima e più che a una specifica lingua, impedisca ad Emma di ripetere la vicenda materna. Se il deserto finale è luogo di smarrimento, la richiesta del marito di passargli la mappa, poiché con Emma come navigatore si sono persi, potrebbe forse alludere a un ritrovarsi che è però ancora una volta di imposizione maschile. Allora, si potrebbe comprendere la finale incomprensione fra il marito, concreto e indifferente, ed Emma, che ha finalmente capito qual è stata la molla del suo agire. Un finale perturbante, perché basato su un continuo iterarsi della stessa situazione: nell'impaziente richiesta del marito a Emma si allude simbolicamente al fatto che il percorso translingue della protagonista non ha condotto a risultati effettivi, o che comunque tali esiti non siano ancora una volta condivisibili, per la donna, tramite il linguaggio, in nessuna lingua.

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PART 3

TRAUMA AND TEMPORALITY

6. From a Double Trauma to a Double Destiny: New Traumatic Perspectives in Anna Banti's *Artemisia*

Edoardo Bassetti

Abstract

Even though Anna Banti's novel *Artemisia* is widely related to gender and trauma, a systematic study that considers these two aspects simultaneously has yet to be conducted. Focusing on the «multidirectional memory» underlying the open-structure of the work, the chapter explores the dialogical approach adopted by the author to represent her personal trauma and that of her protagonist. Contrary to the rape suffered by Artemisia Gentileschi, however, Banti's wartime experience has perhaps not yet been sufficiently investigated, underestimating the fact that she experienced the bombings of Florence firsthand. Through the lens of trauma and a close reading of Banti's correspondence, the essay thus suggests how WWII may have played an even more important role than previously thought in the elaboration of *Artemisia's* «polytemporal» montage.

Sebbene *Artemisia* di Anna Banti affronti questioni relative al genere e al trauma, non vi è ancora uno studio programmatico che consideri questi due aspetti simultaneamente. Focalizzandosi sulla «memoria multidirezionale» alla base della struttura aperta del romanzo, il saggio indaga l'approccio dialogico adottato dall'autrice nel rappresentare il proprio trauma e quello della sua protagonista. Contrariamente allo stupro subito da Gentileschi, però, l'esperienza bellica di Banti non è stata forse ancora approfondita a sufficienza, nonostante la scrittrice abbia vissuto in prima persona i bombardamenti su Firenze. Attraverso la lente del trauma e l'analisi della corrispondenza bantiana, il saggio suggerisce dunque come la guerra possa aver svolto un ruolo ancora più importante di quanto pensato fin qui nell'elaborazione del montaggio «politemporale» di *Artemisia*.

Introduction

In her seminal essay *A Double Destiny*, Susan Sontag (2003) states that Anna Banti's *Artemisia* is «a tragic reflection on the condition of being a woman, and of defying the norms of one's sex [...]. As an account of exemplary tribulations that follow from being independent, an artist and a woman, Banti's novel is also exemplary in its despair and its defiance». Nevertheless, even though Banti's best-known work is widely related to issues involving gender and trauma, a programmatic study that considers these two aspects simultaneously has yet to be conducted, especially within the context of Italian academia.

Focusing on the «multidirectional memory» (ROTHBERG: 2009) underlying the open-structure of the novel, this chapter aims to explore the *dialogical approach* adopted by Banti to represent her personal trauma and that of her protagonist. If, on the one hand, the rape suffered by the Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 – c. 1656) has been a privileged object of study in recent decades, on the other Banti's wartime experience has perhaps not been sufficiently investigated yet. Indeed, the bombings of Florence are usually mentioned only in respect to the loss of the first manuscript or the setting of *Artemisia's* incipit, underestimating the fact that the author experienced the atrocities of war first-hand. Thus, through the lens of trauma and a close reading of Banti's correspondence (not yet translated into English), I will examine how WWII may have played an even more important role than previously thought in the elaboration of such a «polytemporal» montage (LUCKHURST: 2014).

Along this critical journey, Derrida's hauntology and the subsequent spectral theory will be indispensable points of reference. In particular, the analysis will refer to three seminal notions introduced by the French philosopher in his *Spectres of Marx* (1994): first of all the *visor effect*, that is «to feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross» and that «we cannot identify in all certainty, we must fall back on its voice» (7) – exactly as happens between Artemisia's ghost and Banti's character; the *mourning*, which according to Derrida «consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead» (9) – an operation that, in the case of the body-manuscript lost under the rubble, can only be performed by the writer in a literary dimension; and, finally, Derrida's concept of *inheritance*,

which fits well with the way Banti seeks to create a continuum from *Artemisia* to the generation of 20th century women, because, as stated by the French thinker, «one never inherits without coming to terms with some specter» (24).

Furthermore, as we will discuss in more detail in the last part of the article, in a period in which war has once again reached the heart of Europe, *Artemisia* might also help us to question how Banti's traumatic realism (ROTHBERG: 2000) can provide an alternative representation of the human conflicts, a narrative device that could be used to demystify any propaganda regarding warfare.

Banti's traumatic experience of WWII

Until the summer of 1943, Banti's attitude towards the ongoing conflict appears surprisingly detached, like that of a woman who «non riusciva di avere paura perché non ci credeva» (BANTI: 1945, 35; «couldn't be afraid because she didn't believe it»)¹ According to Enza Biagini (2004, 280), not only in her private correspondence but also in texts intended for publication, it is possible to detect a feeling of discrepancy from the historical moment, a disorientation that generates an alienating effect.

However, the bombing of Florence on September 25, 1943, shatters this process of unconscious removal: the approach of war plunges Banti into a state of profound anxiety, as can be seen from a letter to the Italian writer Maria Bellonci on October 11: «Ora non so che dire. [...] Vederti sarebbe, senza esagerazione, l'unica cosa che mi sia permesso, ormai, di desiderare: e piangere con te» («I don't know what to say. [...] Seeing you would be, without exaggeration, the only thing that I am allowed, by now, to desire: and crying with you»)² – as I will further emphasize below, tears take on a seminal role in *Artemisia's* incipit. In Banti's war experience, the escalation of the attacks also coincides with the impossibility of writing and the painful questioning of her literary vocation.

Io? No, non lavoro più. Credo [...] di aver esaurito quel che potevo dire e che del resto così pochi hanno ascoltato. [...] Ora bisognerebbe guardare le cose in un'altra maniera, con altre giustificazioni. Aver 'capito' insomma certe ragioni umane che ci sfuggono. Dico 'ci' perché non vedo nessuno degno di capirle né sulla strada di esserlo. E allora,

¹ All translations from Italian into English are mine unless otherwise stated.

² All the letters sent by Banti are quoted from GARAVINI: 2013a.

ecco che passo il mio tempo leggicchiando, senza rimorsi. Te lo ricordi come ero attiva e regolare nel mio lavoro? Non ha servito a nulla, non ne valeva la pena. Leggo gli *Sposi promessi*, Montaigne, e tanti altri vecchiumi. Di rado, m'illudo di esser nata qualche secolo fa (a Maria Bellonci, 27 dicembre 1943).³

Banti's lack of confidence in her talent is related to the need to discern new paradigms for interpreting a world that, after the personal and collective trauma of WWII, will never be the same – the last part of the essay will try to show what Banti's «other justifications» consist of. As stated by Cathy Caruth (1995, 153), the unexpected nature of trauma «cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge», and in fact the author does not seem to be looking for epistemological models in the near past, but rather in another temporal dimension (see BASSETTI: 2021).

Forced to stop because of the war, Banti reflects on the identity value of her creative writing (several times considered by the author herself as inferior to her previous activity as art critic), realizing that it was not just a mere literary exercise, but also (and above all) a profession. It is no coincidence, therefore, that «the right to do congenial work» will be the recurring theme in the following months, as one of the «human reasons» through which to start looking at things «in another way», achieving the «equality of spirit between the sexes» (BANTI: 2004, 2). The theme of female independence had already been addressed by the author,⁴ but only after WWII – thanks also to Virginia Woolf, as we will see below – it will assume a leading and theoretical role in Banti's production.

A few months later, however, the war situation becomes even more critical for the author, since Florence is now on the battlefield and her husband, Roberto Longhi, courageously refuses to join the Nazi-Fascist Social Republic. The couple, in danger, is therefore obliged to take refuge in Palazzo Pitti together with thousands of other refugees.

³ «Me? No, I don't work anymore. I think [...] I have exhausted what I could say and that so few have listened. [...] Now one should look at things in another way, with other justifications. Having 'understood', in short, certain human reasons that escape us. I say 'us' because I see no one worthy to understand nor on the road to be. So, here I spend my time just reading a couple of pages, without remorse. Do you remember how active and regular I was in my work? It was useless, it wasn't worth it. I'm reading *I promessi sposi*, Montaigne, and lots of other old stuff. I seldom delude myself that I was born a few centuries ago» (to Maria Bellonci, 12/27/1943).

⁴ See for instance the previous short stories *Sofia o la donna indipendente*, *Vocazioni indistinte*, and *Felicina*.

Cara Mariolina,

ti scrive una mezza insensata, senza casa, rifugiata a Palazzo Pitti, fra una turba di disperati. Siamo al fronte, a pochi metri dall'Arno, fra cannonate mitragliere, franchi tiratori partigiani e alleati. [...] Maria, Maria! Le mine sono state inaudite! Abbiamo passata una notte di terrore [...]. Un incubo, Maria [...]. Sono dunque senza rifugio, senza biancherie né abiti, con poco cibo, assediata in questo inferno, colla visione di una città distrutta e le voci degli orrori che di là d'Arno si commettono da quattro giorni. Se i tedeschi ritornassero indietro non credo che nessuno di noi si salverebbe. O Mariolino, e allora ti sia raccomandata *la mia memoria e quella della povera Banti* che sotto le macerie ha perduto i suoi due ultimi libri, *Artemisia*, e *Storia di famiglia* (a Maria Bellonci, 8 agosto 1944, emphasis mine).⁵

In addition to the trauma of war, the author also experiences the loss of her manuscripts. Focusing on the final request that the writer addresses to Bellonci («e allora ti sia raccomandata...»), I wish to dwell on what could be described as a sort of traumatic dissociation between the person Lucia Lopresti⁶ («la mia memoria») and the author⁷ («quella della povera Banti»). It is as if the trauma of WWII abruptly laid bare a previous trauma that had never really been processed, namely Banti's problematic choice to move away from art criticism to pursue a career as writer around the early 1930s – a choice closely linked to the hierarchical relationship between the author and her husband, the celebrated art critic Roberto Longhi.⁸ The issue is certainly not new to

⁵ «Dear Mariolina, I'm writing to you as a half-senseless, homeless woman, refugee in Palazzo Pitti among a crowd of desperate people. We are on the battlefield, a few meters from the Arno, among machine-gun fire, shooters, partisans, and Allies. Maria! Maria! Mines were unheard-of! We spent a night of terror [...]. A nightmare, Maria [...]. I am therefore with no safehouse, linen, and clothes, with little food, besieged in this hell, with the vision of a destroyed city and the voices of the horrors that have been taking place on the other side of the Arno for four days. If the Germans came back, I don't think any of us would be saved. Oh Mariolino, *so please remember me and poor Banti* who lost under the rubble her last two books, *Artemisia* and *Storia di famiglia*» (to Maria Bellonci, 08/08/1944, emphasis mine).

⁶ Lucia Lopresti is the real name of the author.

⁷ Anna Banti is the *nom de plume* adopted by the writer in her narratives since the 1930s.

⁸ Banti married Longhi in 1924, after having had him as a high school teacher in the years 1913-1914, even though the two were only 5 years apart. Regarding the problematic nature of their relationship, the words of the author herself, interviewed by Enzo Siciliano in 1981 (more than ten years after Longhi's death), are very significant: «Non è stato facile, mi creda, vivere con un uomo come lui» («It was not easy, believe me, to live with a man like him»).

critics (see PETRIGNANI: 1984), but the interpretative insights that can be gained by an in-depth analysis through the lens of trauma remain largely unexplored, as this unnoticed textual evidence shows.

Several years later, shortly after Longhi's death, Banti declared to Grazia Livi: «Ero la moglie di Roberto Longhi e non volevo espormi né esporlo con quel nome. Né volevo usare il mio nome di ragazza, Lucia Lopresti, col quale avevo già firmato degli articoli d'arte. Così scelsi Anna Banti, il mio vero nome, quello che non mi è stato dato dalla famiglia, né dal marito» (LIVI: 1971, 12).⁹ But one only needs to read Banti's last autobiographical novel *Un grido lacerante* of 1981 (translated into English with the title *A Piercing Cry* in 1997), to realize how this formalization was certainly not taken for granted at the time, and it is rather a subsequent reinterpretation.

The American Psychiatric Association defines dissociation as «a disruption and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behaviour» (2013, 291). Such a definition could be very useful to outline the underlying reasons that led the author to transform the canonical structure of the first version of the novel,¹⁰ lost under the rubble of the bombings. Indeed, the trauma of war seems to have somehow triggered the manifestation of another trauma that had been dormant for many years. Hence, the unexpected choice of establishing a maieutic dialogue with «a character of whom [she] was perhaps too fond» (BANTI: 2004, 2): another woman artist who has suffered profound traumas, and with whom Banti can now empathize in an unprecedented way compared to the pre-war period.

No, Mariolino, non ho recuperato i miei manoscritti, non li riavrò mai più. Non solo "Artemisia" e l'altro romanzo, ma tutto, tutto quello che avevo scritto, da tanti anni, abbozzi, racconti finiti e non finiti, tutto, tutto. Stavano in una cassetta da imballaggio insieme ai libri più cari,

⁹ «I was the wife of Roberto Longhi and I didn't want to expose myself or him with that name. I didn't even want to use my own name, Lucia Lopresti, which I had already used to sign art essays. So, I chose Anna Banti: my real name, the one that was not given to me by the family, nor by the husband».

¹⁰ See *Quaderni di Leonetta Cecchi Pieraccini*, Fondo Cecchi, Gabinetto G. P. Vieusseux, Firenze: «[Banti] ha terminato la nuova stesura dell'"Artemisia": ma ha fatto una cosa più breve e non biografica come aveva stabilito nel manoscritto perduto nel bombardamento di via S. Jacopo» («[Banti] has finished the new draft of "Artemisia": but she has made it shorter and not biographical as she had stated in the manuscript lost in the bombing of via S. Jacopo»).

quelli che mi servivano per Artemisia, insieme ai quaderni del processo Gentileschi e a lettere preziose, ricevute etc. [...] Tu mi chiedi se 'lavoro' Mariolino, e mi vien da ridere. Chi sono, infine? Son una che ha scritto qualche cosa? Nulla me lo prova. *Le mie povere tele son disperse*, non hai idea di cosa voglia dire ritrovarsi senza un pezzo di carta scritta, non ci si riconosce più (a Maria Bellonci, 6 ottobre 1944, emphasis mine).¹¹

I would want to emphasize the expression «*le mie povere tele son disperse*» («my poor canvases are scattered») because it appears to me as a sort of conscious re-enactment of a previous lapsus: instead of “my poor *manuscripts*”, Banti writes “my poor *canvases*”, as if it was Artemisia speaking and not herself – it is precisely through this symbolic inversion that the ongoing process of symmetrization between the author and her protagonist, triggered by the trauma of war, begins to take shape. Such a statement, however, cannot be attributed to the prosopopoeia of the historical Gentileschi (whose canvases were never scattered), but rather to the protagonist of the lost manuscript, whose ghost (as we shall explore in the second paragraph) seems to cry out from an otherworldly dimension. Besides WWII, Banti’s painful choice (art criticism/literature) and Artemisia’s rape, this slip reveals a further trauma of loss, which concerns at the same time the lost manuscript for the author and the missed opportunity to be rediscovered after centuries of obscurity for the painter: exactly from this common terrain of absence stems *Artemisia’s* polysemic nature as an untold tale of a doubly silenced destiny.

It is therefore not surprising that a work inspired by a seventeenth-century artist appeared to one of its first readers, the critic Emilio Cecchi (2000, 81), as «un’autobiografia appena mascherata» («a barely disguised autobiography»).¹² This impression seems to be confirmed not only by the presence of Banti’s character in the novel, but also by

¹¹ «No, Mariolino, I have not recovered my manuscripts, I will never get them back. Not only “Artemisia” and the other novel, but everything, everything I had written, for many years, drafts, finished and unfinished short stories, everything, everything. They were in a packing box together with the dearest books, the ones I needed for Artemisia, together with the notebooks of the Gentileschi trial and precious letters, receipts, etc. [...] You ask me if I ‘work’, Mariolino, and this makes me laugh. In the end, who am I? Am I someone who has written something? Nothing proves it to me. *My poor canvases are scattered*, you have no idea what it means to find oneself without a piece of written paper, one no longer recognizes oneself» (to Maria Bellonci, 10/06/1944, emphasis mine).

¹² The expression is taken from a letter that Cecchi sent to Gianfranco Contini on 12/24/1947. It should be noted that both interlocutors were close friends of the Banti-Longhi couple.

the manner in which the writer reinterprets the biography of a painter about whom very little was known at the time. Indeed, as Pasolini (1973, 75) symptomatically notes about Banti's *La camicia bruciata* (1973), it can be stated that the author represents «una dissociazione di una sola persona reale in due, altrettanto reali» («a dissociation of one real person into two equally real ones») also in *Artemisia*.

Nevertheless, the double *topos* on one side, and the mere autobiographical analysis on the other, are not enough to explain literary aspects such as Banti's significant insistence on presenting two opposite and complementary female characters in most of her narratives.¹³ In this regard, I believe that trauma theory can suggest new research perspectives, particularly in shedding light on the narrative devices adopted by the author to unconsciously and consciously formalize painful aspects of her life.

As I will further point out below, during the war period Banti manages for the first time to somehow overcome her usual reticence, giving voice to her own traumatic experiences through *Artemisia's* life and painting, because «one war time will always be seen through the lens of another» (LUCKHURST: 2014, 60).

Never has the passion of novelist for protagonist been so intently formulated. Like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, *Artemisia* is a kind of dance with its protagonist: through it course all the relations that the author can devise with the fascinating woman whose biographer she has decided to be. The lost novel has been recast as a novel about a haunting. Nothing so crude as an identification: Anna Banti does not find herself in *Artemisia Gentileschi* – any more, or less, than Woolf thinks that she is *Orlando*. On the contrary, *Artemisia* is forever and supremely someone else (SONTAG: 2003).

Akin to a dance movement, the relationship between Banti and *Artemisia* is characterized by paroxysms and extended periods, abandonments and recoveries, synchronies and sudden shifts. The dialogic dimension and the emotional tension that nurture their reciprocal haunting in fact allows one of them to express what the other is reluctant to expose, drawing on alterity as a two-way, and unexpected, source of the formalization of trauma.

¹³ See for example Ofelia and Giulia in *Vocazioni indistinte* (1940), Maria and Fernanda in *Sette lune* (1941), Arabella and Claudia in *Arabella e affini* (1955), Angelica and Agnese in *La monaca di Sciangai* (1957), Marguerite Louise and Violante in *La camicia bruciata* (1973).

Dialogical re-enactment of trauma in *Artemisia*

Once every hope of finding the lost manuscript had been abandoned,¹⁴ Banti decides to rewrite *Artemisia* immediately, leaving out *Una storia di famiglia*, which she had previously described as «a succession of emotions», a novel that «perhaps was not bad».¹⁵ As pointed out by Fausta Garavini (2013b, XXIII), this choice reveals how the rewriting of *Storia di famiglia* is not characterized by the same urgency of *Artemisia*: the novel, published only in 1953 with the title *Il bastardo*, will in fact present a canonical structure, probably similar to the previous version. Such a consideration is suggested by the author herself, who at the end of the book indicates the date «June 1943» (before the bombings), differently from *Artemisia*, where she writes «Summer 1944-summer 1947»: that is to say not the moment when she finished the book, but the entire time frame of its rewriting process.

As noted by Pasolini (1957, 3), although also *Il bastardo* is «technically» a novel «to be made» insofar as it was already written and then lost during the war, it appears in the new version as a «reconstructed» work: a book still belonging to a bygone era, unlike *Artemisia*, which is instead a reconstruction in progress, and therefore projected forward into the future.¹⁶

At first glance, the new version of *Artemisia* presents two main innovations: on one side, the author becomes a character within her own novel, on the other the figure of Artemisia is articulated in (at least) two Artemisias, namely the historical painter and the ghostly protagonist of the lost manuscript. As stressed by Sontag (2003), «Banti's presence in the narrative is at the heart – is the heart – of the novel»; nevertheless, here I would also emphasize the equally significant choice of *re-enacting* Artemisia in a phantasmatic form, which may be linked precisely with the dimension of trauma.

¹⁴ «Sai quante pagine ho ritrovato, nel mucchio portato dalle macerie, dei miei due libri? Venti, dico venti: e solo di "Storia di famiglia". Di Artemisia solo il frontespizio, coll'indice dei capitoli» (a Maria Bellonci, 27 maggio 1945; «Do you know how many pages of my two books I found in the rubble heap? Twenty, I repeat, twenty: and only of "Storia di Famiglia". Regarding Artemisia only the frontispiece, with the index of chapters»). It should be noted that the new version of *Artemisia* does not present any chapter.

¹⁵ See Banti's letter to Bellonci of 10/06/1944 (GARAVINI: 2013a, LXXXVII-LXXXIX).

¹⁶ Regarding the projection towards the future of Banti's works (represented for example by the open endings of *Artemisia* or the short story *Lavinia fuggita*) and its possible relationship with Woolf's «poetics of the lighthouse», see BASSETTI: 2022.

The irruption of one time (Artemisia's life experience in the 17th century, the terrible months of the WWII escalation) into another (the immediate post-war reconstruction) is figured by Caruth (1995, 4) as a form of possession or haunting: the figure of the ghost represents a possible embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the ongoing survival of the past into the present.¹⁷ In that sense, Artemisia's phantom personifies unresolved traumas related to the other two characters of the novel: the rape suffered by the painter, her problematic relationship with the male sex, her difficulties in establishing herself as a professional artist in a patriarchal context; but at the same time also the anguish suffered by Banti under the bombs, the loss of «two sons nagging at her»,¹⁸ and the gender conventions that a woman still has to face in the 20th century.

As already seen, the author does not simply identify with Artemisia, but carries out a much more complex operation: she creates, that is, something similar to what Homi Bhabha (2004) would define as a «third space» (Artemisia's ghost), making room for the traumatic experiences shared by the other two interlocutors of the novel/dialogue – a space that the bombings had taken away from the author, denying her a place in which she could process the trauma of losing her *body*-manuscript and locating its *mourning*. Hence the exceptional empathy that binds the two women artists, whose voices often end up interweaving through Banti's polysemic writing.

A new space also implies a new time, and it is no coincidence that Artemisia's ghost wanders through the centuries of history as Woolf's Orlando does:¹⁹ the plot thus takes on a dimension that is both polyspatial and polytemporal at the same time, arising precisely from the feeling of absence caused by the loss of the manuscript. To realize this palimpsestic layering of spectral features such as materiality and immateriality, visibility and invisibility, proximity and remoteness,

¹⁷ From the perspective of visual studies, it is compelling to note that "sopravvivenza" was a pivotal notion within the artistic-literary environment of "Paragone", the journal founded by Longhi and Banti in 1950. See BAZZOCCHI: 2016.

¹⁸ «Lavoro soltanto "su commissione", sai, e quando ho un po' di vena artistica *quei due "figli perduti" mi assillano*, non so far altro che rimasticar cenere» (a Maria Bellonci, 27 maggio 1945, emphasis mine).

¹⁹ As we will explore in the third section, Banti read *Orlando* right in 1945 along with *A Room of One's Own*, and she translated *Jacob's Room*. On the relationship between Banti and Woolf, and in particular a comparative analysis between *Artemisia* and *The Lighthouse*, see BASSETTI: 2020.

present and past, life and death, it would be enough to analyze just the first lines of the novel.

«*Non piangere*». Nel silenzio che divide l'uno dall'altro i miei singhiozzi, questa voce figura una ragazzetta che abbia corso in salita e voglia scaricarsi subito di un'imbasciata pressante. *Non alzo la testa*. «*Non piangere*»: [...] *Non alzo la testa*, nessuno mi è vicino.

Poche cose esistono per me in quest'alba faticosa e bianca di un giorno d'agosto in cui siedo in terra, sulla ghiaia di un vialetto di Boboli, come nei sogni, in camicia da notte. Dallo stomaco alla testa mi strizzo in lacrime, non posso farne a meno, in coscienza, e ho il capo sulle ginocchia. [...] Gente che alle quattro del mattino si spinge come gregge spaurito a mirare lo sfacelo della patria, a confrontare colla vista i terrore di una nottata che le mine tedesche impiegarono, una dopo l'altra, a sconvolgere la crosta della terra. [...] E di nuovo, mentre mi fermo un istante e raccapuzzo, nel mio vuoto, che dovrò pure alzarmi, quel suono «*non piangere*» mi tocca in fretta come un'onda che s'allontana. *Alzo finalmente la testa che è già una memoria*, e in questa forma gli presto orecchio. Taccio, attonita, nella scoperta della perdita più dolorosa (BANTI: 2013, 247, emphasis mine)²⁰.

Anaphoric repetition is the main element of the incipit. The ghost of Artemisia, still presented in an anonymous and universalizing way here, seems to come to life in the interstice between the author's sobs («*Non piangere... Non piangere*»), taking the form of a third space that bursts onto the scene by surprise, as «a young girl who has been running uphill and who wishes to deliver an urgent message as quickly as possible». Just as in the *visor effect* theorized by Derrida,

²⁰ «*Don't cry*». In the silence that separates each of my sobs this voice conjures up the image of a young girl who has been running uphill and who wishes to deliver an urgent message as quickly as possible. *I do not raise my head*. «*Don't cry*». [...] *I do not raise my head*; there is no one beside me.

Few things exist for me in the white, troubled dawn of this August day as I sit on the gravel of a path in the Boboli Gardens, wearing, as in a dream, only a nightdress. From the waist up I am racked with sobs; I cannot help it, in all honesty, and my head is bent on my knees. [...] People who at four o'clock in the morning are pushing forwards like frightened sheep to have a look at their city in ruins, to see for themselves the reality of the terrors of this night during which the German mines one after the other shook the Earth's crust. [...] And once more, as I stop for an instant and in my disarray take stock of the fact that I shall nonetheless have to stand up, I am touched briefly by the sound of that «*Don't cry*», as by a receding wave. *I finally raise my head, but already it is only a memory and as such I pay it heed*. I stop crying, stunned at the realization of my most grievous loss» (BANTI: 2004, 3-4, emphasis mine).

however, Artemisia's ghost can see without being seen: hence its position of strength, because Banti's character «must fall back on its voice» (DERRIDA: 1994, 7).

At the very beginning, it is not yet clear to whom the voice-over whispering «don't cry» belongs, whereas the first person makes explicit who continues to repeat «I do not raise my head». As argued by Anne Whitehead (2004, 86), «one of the key literary strategies in trauma fiction is the device of repetition, which can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot. Repetition mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression». Punctually, in fact, after this *double* series of repetitions, the author raises her head and realizes her «most grievous loss» through Artemisia's voice. This initial sense of absence foreshadows Banti's programmatic sabotage of the linear temporality and emplotment of the entire narration, between a tragic present and an unresolved past, but also (according to Derrida) toward a future yet to come: in this sense, Artemisia's ghost takes on a spectral aura because it «is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future» (COLIN: 2005, 378-379).

Similarly to what Marianne Hirsch (1997, 20) asserts about photography, the visual dimension evoked by the author aims at bringing «the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability»: Banti's encounter with Artemisia as *the lens of another* (in a similar way to how the painter reinterpreted the biblical figures of Susanna²¹ and Judith²²) is therefore «the encounter between two presents, one of which, already past, can be reanimated in the act of looking» (HIRSCH: 2012, 134). Thus, the semantic field of gaze and memory («Non alzo la testa. [...] Alzo finalmente la testa che è già una memoria») is there to highlight that the time has come for Banti to process and represent traumatic experiences that (before the war) she had been unwilling or unable to face.

²¹ See Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, Schloss Weißenstein, Pommersfelden.

²² See Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1612-1613, Museo Capodimonte, Napoli; Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, c. 1620, Uffizi, Firenze.

Sotto le macerie di casa mia ho perduto Artemisia, la mia compagna di tre secoli fa, che respirava adagio, coricata da me su cento pagine di scritto. Ho riconosciuto la sua voce mentre da arcane ferite del mio spirito escono a fiotti immagini turbinose: che sono, a un tempo, Artemisia scottata, disperata, convulsa, prima di morire, come un cane schiacciato. Tutte immagini pulite, nitidissime, rilucenti sotto un sole di maggio. Artemisia bambina, che saltella tra i carciofi dei frati, sul monte Pincio, a due passi da casa; Artemisia giovinetta, chiusa in camera, col fazzoletto sulla bocca perché non la sentano piangere: e irosa, con la mano alzata, a imprecare, i sopraccigli contratti: e giovane bellezza, chino il viso appena sorridente, in veste di gala un po' severa, *per questi viali, proprio per questi viali*: la Granduchessa passerà a momenti. [...] Con una agilità meccanica, ironica, le immagini continuano a fluire, il mondo sconquassato le secerne come un formicaio, non posso fermarle né riconoscere quelle che più mi premono (BANTI: 2013, 248, emphasis mine)²³.

The realization of her «most grievous loss» takes on the rhetorical features of true and proper synesthesia, where, as Derrida (1994, 7) would say, «anachrony makes the law». The auditory recognition of Artemisia's voice as «the lens of another» involves the release of «swirling images», synchronic frames that alter any space-time coordinate and represent simultaneously, in order: the protagonist of the manuscript lost in the summer of 1944 («Artemisia scottata, disperata, convulsa, prima di morire, come un cane schiacciato»); Artemisia's carefree childhood spent in Rome at the beginning of the 17th century: that is, a pre-rape Artemisia who still represents a vitality unaffected by the brunt of the sexualized femininity as bearer of physical and symbolic violence; the immediate moment after the rape she suffered in 1611 («Artemisia giovinetta, chiusa in camera,

²³ «Under the rubble of my house I have lost Artemisia, my companion from three centuries ago who lay breathing gently on the hundred pages I had written. At the same time as I recognize her voice, hordes of swirling images pour out from hidden wounds in my mind; images, at first, of a disillusioned and despairing Artemisia before she died, in spasms, like a dog that has been run over. Images, all of them crystal clear and sharp, sparkling under a May sun. Artemisia as a child, skipping among the artichokes in the monks' garden on Pincio hill, a stone's throw from her house; Artemisia as a young girl, shut in her room, holding her handkerchief over her mouth to stifle her sobs; and hot-tempered, her hand raised in anger, calling down curses with knitted brow; and a young beauty, with bent head and a faint smile on her lips, all dressed up in a slightly severe gown, *on these paths, on these very paths*; the Grand Duchess will be passing any moment. [...] The images continue to flow with a mechanical, ironical ease, secreted by this shattered world like ants from an anthill. I cannot stop them nor recognize those which oppress me most» (BANTI: 2004, 4-5, emphasis mine).

col fazzoletto sulla bocca perché non la sentano piangere»), when, as the painter related during the trial,²⁴ Agostino Tassi had locked her in her room and then put a handkerchief in her mouth to keep her from screaming;²⁵ and finally, Artemisia as an established painter at the Medici court in Florence, between 1612 and 1620.

But, at this point, the author creates a sort of interstice, a moment of breakage within the projection of those swirling images: through a further repetition («per questi viali, proprio per questi viali»), Banti succeeds in creating an a-temporal connection between her destiny as a war refugee in Palazzo Pitti and that of the painter, who had walked along those same Boboli paths about three centuries earlier. After this brief pause, the images immediately resume their uncontrolled flow, in an aberrant manner vaguely reminiscent of Goya's imagery («con una agilità meccanica, ironica, [...] come un formicaio»). The onset of war shatters any of the author's defense mechanism («le immagini continuano a fluire, il mondo sconquassato le secerne [...], non posso fermarle né riconoscere quelle che più mi premono»), bringing to the surface «hidden wounds» from her past («da arcane ferite del mio spirito escono a fiotti immagini turbinose»).

Significantly, the writer's path does not cross that of Artemisia at the exact moment of the rape (which is actually never explicitly addressed in the novel),²⁶ but afterward, when she is a successful painter searching for adequate forms to represent it to herself, just as Banti is now in search of the right formalization of her past choices as a woman and as an author. In both cases, the expression of the trauma will take place through a creative act (painting for Gentileschi,

²⁴ «After we had walked around two or three times, each time going by the bedroom door, when we were in front of the bedroom door, he pushed me in and locked the door. He then threw me onto the edge of the bed, pushing me with a hand on my breast, and he put a knee between my thighs to prevent me from closing them. Lifting my clothes, which he had a great deal of trouble doing, he placed a hand with a handkerchief at my throat and on my mouth to keep me from screaming» (GARRARD: 1989, 416).

²⁵ The handkerchief represents the symbolic trait d'union between pre-rape Artemisia and post-rape Artemisia, both victims of violence and silencing: in fact, in the former case it is used so that she does not scream (to call for help), and in the latter so that she does not cry (so as not to cause scandal).

²⁶ The shadow of this (other) specter is omnipresent throughout the narrative, but at the same time never really faced. In this regard, it is no coincidence that in 1960 Banti felt the need to stage this omitted part in the play *Corte Savella* (the name of the court in which the rape trial was held).

writing for Banti) as a form of agency; because, as stated by Penelope Fitzgerald (2002, 109),²⁷ «if a story begins with finding [the ghost of the lost character], it must end with searching [the experimental open-structure of the new novel]».

Banti and Woolf: a female counter-representation of trauma, history, and war

Banti was one of the first Italian critics who recognized the theoretical (and not just literary) value of Woolf's production. At the invitation of Gianna Manzini, director of the review *Prosa* at the time, Banti wrote an essay on *Orlando* in the first months of 1945 – thus right in the middle of the rewriting process of *Artemisia*.

Cara Gianna, ecco il mio piccolo saggio sull'Orlando [...]. Vedrai che il mio punto di vista non è strettamente letterario. Infatti il mio esame dei lavori della Woolf mi ha portato alla conoscenza di un suo saggio, che certo tu avrai letto, "A room of one's own", su cui m'è parso improntata tutta la morale di Orlando. Allora, tu capisci: ho parlato più di questo saggio che dell'Orlando stesso (a Gianna Manzini, 16 marzo 1945).²⁸

Banti had probably already read the essay in the 1930s,²⁹ and therefore this 'sudden discovery' can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize her «not strictly literary» approach – while instead only a fictional reading allowed *Orlando* not to be initially censored under Fascism (see BOLCHI: 2010). Symptomatically, the text was never published,³⁰ and Manzini's

²⁷ The sentence is quoted from the novel *The Blue Flower*, which Sontag (2003) relates to *Artemisia*.

²⁸ «Dear Gianna, here is my little essay on Orlando [...]. You will see that my point of view is not strictly literary. Indeed, my examination of Woolf's works led me to discover an essay of hers, which certainly you have read, "A room of one's own". It seems to me that the whole moral of Orlando is based on it. So, you will understand: I have spoken more about this essay than about Orlando itself» (to Gianna Manzini, 03/16/1945).

²⁹ Regarding possible Woolfian influences on Banti's narratives of the 1930s, see BIAGINI: 2004, 278, and BANTI: 1934, 84: «È con questi mezzi lungamente studiati che la Gigetta, povera figliola, è riuscita quest'anno ad ottenere una cameruccia tutta per sé» («It is by these long planned means that Gigetta, poor child, has managed this year to obtain her own small room», emphasis mine).

³⁰ «Ho mandato a Gianna un soggetto sull'Orlando che le deve aver dato un fastidio notevole: sai, una cosa tutta antiletteraria» (a Maria Bellonci, 19 aprile 1945) («I sent Gianna a paper on *Orlando* that must have annoyed her considerably: I mean, it was

refusal irreparably damaged the relationship between the two writers.³¹ Banti wrote again about her «not strictly literary» reading of Woolf's work around ten years later, emphasizing how such an interpretation was not well received by most critics.

Queste riserve dei lettori specializzati erano ancora sensibili anni fa, quando, invitata a commemorare la Woolf, m'indugiai a porre l'accento sulla qualità dei suoi interessi sociali: ricavandone l'impressione di avere, per i suoi affezionati, mancato di tatto e quasi di rispetto per la memoria della gran donna. Indicavo, infatti, come una delle chiavi del suo carattere il suo estroso intervento a favore dei diritti intellettuali della donna inglese; un excursus in terreno minato che contraddiceva vistosamente la leggenda della prima signora delle lettere, così cara ai woolfiani di qua e di là della Manica (BANTI: 1963, 101).³²

The very effective expression «terreno minato» («minefield») represents all those political and social issues on which a woman could not yet have her say, even less in the guise of a writer.³³ In this regard, the spectral charge of Banti's *Artemisia* as a figure of unprocessed and therefore returning trauma concerns not only her personal biography, but also the silencing of all women in history. Since the writer wants to

an anti-literary text»). The text was later published in 1952 with the title *Umanità della Woolf* in the review *Paragone*.

³¹ See for example Banti's indignant letter to Bellonci on 10/30/1946: «Gianna mi mandò uno scocciantissimo e insignificante racconto di autrice americana da giudicare e tradurre. Ma mi sai dire se quella donna legge o non legge l'inglese? Se vorrà tradotta da me questa melensaggine se ne accorgerà nel conto» («Gianna sent me a very annoying and insignificant story by an American author to judge and translate. But can you tell me if that woman is able to read English or not? If she wants me to translate this sappy thing, she'll figure it out from the expensive bill»).

³² «These objections raised by specialized readers were still evident years ago, when I was invited to commemorate Woolf and I lingered to stress the quality of her social interests, gaining the impression of being, for her devotees, tactless and disrespectful for the memory of the great woman. Indeed, I pointed out that one of the keys to her character was her creative intervention in favor of the intellectual rights of English women; an excursus into a minefield that blatantly contradicted the legend of the first lady of letters, so dear to Woolfians on both sides of the Channel».

³³ Many critical responses to female literary works that address political and social issues such as Elsa Morante's *La Storia* or Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale* «are, at their root, reactions against the way the novel trespasses beyond the confines traditionally staked out for women writers, against the way it challenges literary hierarchies (in particular, the double standards for men and women writers), and against the point of view from which the stories are told – reactions that are purely reflexive, muddled when not downright hysterical, and at times embarrassingly poorly argued» (DE ROGATIS: 2019, 15).

collect – and at the same time give voice to – the *inheritance* left to her by a woman artist of the past such as Artemisia, she cannot avoid facing the specter (see DERRIDA: 1994, 24) of entire generations of women who have been excluded from the public arena.

«Autoritratto di Artemisia Gentileschi» dichiarò il solito discendente di lady Arabella, appassionato di archivi. [...] «Fu violata da Agostino Tassi e amata da molti»: così è ripetuto a stampa, anche in inglese. Ma la mano di Artemisia è forte [...]. Ritratto o no, una donna che dipinge nel milleseicentoquaranta è un atto di coraggio, vale [...] per altre cento almeno, fino ad oggi. «Vale anche per te» conclude, al lume di candela, nella stanza che la guerra ha reso fosca, un suono brusco e secco. Un libro si è chiuso, di scatto (BANTI: 2013, 245).³⁴

As suggested by Mieke Bal (2010, 10), conceptual metaphor differs from an ordinary one in evoking not just another thing, but a discourse, a comparative system of producing knowledge. Besides fulfilling a narrative function, then, in this sense it can be stated that Artemisia's ghost also *performs* theoretical thinking: through a pioneering approach of international scope,³⁵ indeed, Banti (like Woolf) conceives of her *Artemisia* as a «creative intervention in favor of women's rights» to start looking at things «in another way» – that is to say what a post-war writer should have tried to do, as she wrote to Bellonci in December 1943.

To carry out this purpose, however, the author realizes that it is not enough to rediscover a female artist who had been forgotten by history (written for centuries only by men), but that it is necessary to revise

³⁴ «"Self-portrait by Artemisia Gentileschi", declared the inevitable descendant of Lady Arabella, a keen archivist. [...] "She was raped by Agostino Tassi and loved by many": thus was it repeatedly written, even in English. But Artemisia's hand is strong [...]. Whether it is a self-portrait or not, a woman who paints in sixteen hundred and forty is very courageous, and this counts for [...] at least a hundred others, right up to the present. "It counts for you too", she concludes, by the light of a candle, in this room rendered gloomy by war, a short, sharp sound. A book has been closed, suddenly» (BANTI: 2004, 199).

³⁵ Interviewed about de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Banti replied to Grazia Livi (1991, 139): «Però queste cose le ho dette anch'io e ben prima di lei. Pensa solo ad Artemisia o a Lavinia: sono donne che vengono fuori da una storia che per loro non c'è, non è mai stata scritta, anzi le cancella. Tant'è vero che quasi ne muoiono, sì, ne muoiono di disperazione» («But I have also said these things and well before her. Just think of Artemisia or Lavinia: they are women who come out of a history that does not exist for them, that was never written, that actually erases them. So much so that they almost die, yes, they die of despair»).

from the ground up the very criteria through which history is written. As well as for Woolf (2015, 103) the historical moment when «middle-class women began to write» represents «a change [...] which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses», in the same way also for Banti (2013, 268) «Artemisia ridotta da una effimera scandalosa celebrità a una solitudine riottosa e insidiata: ecco fatti che mi valgono – e non so se arrossirne – come una seconda guerra punica» («Artemisia condemned by her short-lived, scandalous fame to an unruly, besieged solitude: all facts of which I avail myself – and I am unsure if I ought to be ashamed or not – as a sort of second Punic war»; BANTI: 2004, 26).

As pointed out by Joann Cannon (1994, 333), *Artemisia* challenges the conventional *Künstlerroman* (artist's novel) based on (male) Renaissance individualism: «Banti's own intuition about the difficulty of being both woman and artist leads the writer to choose a mode of emplotment which necessarily differs significantly from the traditional portrait of the male artist. In Banti's *Artemisia* accomplishment is always coupled with failure, self-fulfillment with self-doubt».

What allows Banti to avoid any idealization of the artistic vocation is the traumatic realism underlying the representation of both her personal condition and the biography of another woman who, through art, was able to reframe traumatic experiences of her life. There is no closed ending in *Artemisia*, no rhetorical triumphalism regarding Gentileschi's success as a painter (and consequently Banti's accomplishment as a writer), because «when the hope for closure is abandoned, when there is an end to fantasy, adventure for women will begin» (HEILBRUN: 1988, 130).

Thanks to her magnificent novel, Banti thus shows how to escape the dangerous tendency to represent complex and contradictory realities under teleological forms: a possible solution, indeed, could be exactly focusing on the female authorship, and in particular on the feminine narration of traumatic experiences, including war, which has been described instead for centuries by men in glorious and chauvinistic terms – as Woolf points out in *Three Guineas* or *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid*, spotlighting the relationship between patriarchy and militarism.

The English playwright Howard Barker, for example, seems to have acknowledged this pivotal teaching, staging in his play *Scenes from an Execution* (1990) the character of the female painter Galactia (inspired by Artemisia Gentileschi), accused of having depicted the

battle of Lepanto (commissioned by the Doge of Venice) in a too realistic, bloody, and non-epic way: a representation of war that, symptomatically, could never have emerged from the brush of a male painter, as repeated several times in the play.

The cultural legacy left by Banti is yet to be properly investigated, since the complexity of her work has often been mistaken for haughty detachment; nevertheless, as this chapter attempts to illustrate, one of the best critical approaches to make its polysemic richness emerge – all the more so in the tragic context of these early 2020s – might be focusing precisely on the poetics of trauma.

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Biography

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7. The Interrupted Temporality of Trauma in Elena Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment* and Goliarda Sapienza's *Compulsory Destiny*

Alberica Bazzoni

Abstract

In this chapter, I discuss two literary texts that represent the altered temporality of trauma: *The Days of Abandonment* by Elena Ferrante (*I giorni dell'abbandono*, 2002) and the collection of short stories *Destino coatto* [*Compulsory Destiny*] by Goliarda Sapienza (2002, posthumous). These works resort to a similar imagery in conveying a traumatic state, including liminality, entrapment, doubles, mirrors, fragmentation and somatization, but also present diverging structures: while *The Days of Abandonment* is a retrospective and linear narrative that recomposes time, *Destino coatto* performs the interrupted time of trauma by means of scattered fragments that do not achieve any temporal order nor comprehension. However, I also argue that *The Days of Abandonment* retains a performative element in the use of obscene language, which defies diegetic distance and re-enacts the trauma of bodily abjection.

Il capitolo analizza la rappresentazione della temporalità alterata del trauma nei *Giorni dell'abbandono* di Elena Ferrante (2002) e nella raccolta di racconti brevi *Destino coatto* di Goliarda Sapienza (2002, postumo). Nella raffigurazione di uno stato traumatico i due testi fanno ricorso a un immaginario simile, fatto di liminalità, spazi chiusi, specchi, doppi, frammentazioni e reazioni somatiche, ma presentano anche differenze strutturali: mentre *I giorni dell'abbandono* ricomponne retrospettivamente una temporalità lineare, *Destino coatto* mette in scena l'interruzione del tempo del trauma attraverso frammenti che non approdano ad alcun ordine temporale né ad alcuna comprensione. Il capitolo mostra però come anche nei *Giorni dell'abbandono* permanga un elemento performativo nell'uso del linguaggio osceno, che annulla la distanza diegetica e ripete il trauma dell'abiezione corporale.

Introduction

Temporality lies at the core of the constitution of human experience. As cognitive, phenomenological and psychoanalytical studies show, trauma impacts deeply on the sense of time, affecting the cognitive level, interrupting the plot of personal narrative, and repeating itself on a collective and intergenerational level.¹ Literature offers a powerful means to articulate the disruption of temporality that occurs in trauma, thanks to the non-linear and semantically open potential of metaphors, performativity, poetic iterations, fragmentation and displacement of meaning. In this chapter, I look at two original examples of how literary texts can voice the altered temporality of trauma: *The Days of Abandonment* (*I giorni dell'abbandono*, 2002) by Elena Ferrante and *Destino coatto* [*Compulsory Destiny*] by Goliarda Sapienza (2002).²

Ferrante and Sapienza are two major voices in contemporary Italian literature. Although Sapienza was writing from the '50s to the '80s, the majority of her works have been published posthumously in the 2000s, becoming available almost at the same time as Ferrante's works (*I giorni dell'abbandono* and *Destino coatto* in fact came out exactly the same year, 2002), with which they share significant thematic areas of interest. I am not the first to draw a parallel between these writers. Katrin Wehling-Giorgi in particular has highlighted the centrality of the relationship to the maternal body and maternal neglect as key channels through which patriarchal violence operates in both authors. She highlights that «[i]n reflecting on the various forms of violence that inhabit both authors' works – be it in its linguistic, social or conceptual manifestations – the maternal figure emerges as playing an essential role in the discontinuous construction of the subject» (2017a, 73).³

In this chapter, I am focusing specifically on the narrative and linguistic affordances of these texts in expressing traumatized temporality. Narrated in the first person, *The Days of Abandonment* tells the story of Olga, a Neapolitan woman in her late thirties who lives in Turin, a housewife and mother of two, who undergoes a dramatic

¹ See for example FREUD: 2015; ROOT: 1992; CARUTH: 1996; O'BRIAN: 2007.

² From now on cited respectively as GA and DC. Some pieces from *Destino coatto* were first published in *Nuovi Argomenti* in 1970. Translations of *I giorni dell'abbandono* are from FERRANTE: 2005, from now on cited as DA. *Destino coatto* has not yet been translated into English, therefore translations from this book, including its title, are mine.

³ See also WEHLING-GIORGI: 2016; CRISPINO AND VITALE: 2016; MORELLI: 2021a.

crisis when she is unexpectedly abandoned by her husband. *Destino coatto* is a collection of ninety-six short pieces in prose, which represent a multiplicity of characters who are trapped in compulsory repetitions, obsessions, hallucinations, and a melancholic death drive – an unconscious refusal to detach from a lost object of love with whom the subject identifies, which gives rise to «ambivalence, and regression of the libido into the ego» (FREUD: 2001, 258).⁴ I will show how both works center on traumatic interruptions and display intensive and highly original manipulations of temporal structures to represent them.

The Days of Abandonment: precarious boundaries

The Days of Abandonment is a short novel that focuses specifically on the destructive effects of an experience of sudden abandonment which shatters the plot of the protagonist's life.⁵ The novel illustrates how the impact of trauma on the continuity of the protagonist's existence creates a breach into her very cognitive faculties, as Olga loses her grasp on reality and the ability to differentiate between distinct times and spaces. In the representation of such a crisis, the collapse of temporality plays a crucial role.

The novel is divided into three parts: in the first one, Olga receives the news that her husband, Mario, is leaving her. She progressively loses control, obsesses over Mario's sex life, gives in to violent reactions and obscene language, tries compulsively to understand what went wrong, and becomes less and less present to herself. The central part takes place over one nightmarish day in which Olga wakes up in confusion and finds her son Gianni ill, her dog Otto agonizing, her phone disconnected, and the door to her apartment inexplicably locked. The escalation of temporal and spatial disaggregation, hallucinations, and sadomasochistic infliction of pain to regain contact with her body, finds resolution with the death of the dog Otto, after which Olga regains her grasp on reality and manages to open the

⁴ In the «crushed state of melancholia», Freud writes, «a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment, and – what is psychologically very remarkable – by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life» (FREUD: 2001, 246), all elements that are conspicuously present in *Destino coatto*. See also KRISTEVA: 1989.

⁵ Zarour Zarzar analyzes the loss of «grammar», that is, the loss of order and meaning, in *The Days of Abandonment*, with reference in particular to the «plot» of Olga's life (ZAROURE ZARZAR: 2020).

door. In the third and final part of the novel, Olga slowly recovers and adjusts to that new phase of her life without her husband, she finds a job and begins a new relationship with her neighbor.

The precise tripartite structure of the narrative is punctuated with temporal indications that orient the reader in the sequence of events. Everything begins «un pomeriggio d'aprile, subito dopo pranzo» (GA, 7) («One April afternoon, right after lunch»; DA, 5) when Olga's husband announces that he is leaving her. The beginning of the central part is marked in similarly precise temporal terms, and most importantly with the narrator anticipating to the reader what is going to happen, thus creating a clear demarcation between Olga as a narrator and Olga as a protagonist: «Quando aprii gli occhi, cinque ore dopo, alle sette di sabato 4 agosto, feci fatica a ritrovarmi. Stava per cominciare la giornata più dura di quella mia vicenda di abbandono, ma ancora non lo sapevo» (GA, 97) («When I opened my eyes again, five hours later, at seven o'clock on Saturday August 4th, I had trouble getting my bearings. The hardest day of the ordeal of my abandonment was about to begin, but I didn't know it yet»; DA, 85). The reader is invited to look back at this tragic day of Olga's, but also knows already that she has survived it and has regained her ability to narrate and construct meaning.

In her cogent interpretation of Ferrante's first three works, Tiziana de Rogatis points out how the tripartite structure of *The Days of Abandonment* corresponds to a ritual structure (which this novel also shares with *L'amore molesto* and *La figlia oscura*): «The ritual structure at the same time contains and unleashes the fragmentation of the self, giving rise to a creative elaboration of lack» (DE ROGATIS: 2019b, 101).⁶ Thanks to the sacrifice of the dog Otto, the novel performs a ritual of «purification» that enables Olga to overcome her crisis and «reintroduce order in her life» (105). The ritual structure allows Olga to survive, channeling a shapeless experience of suffering into a recognizable «narrative frame» (107).⁷ In my reading of this novel, I also wish to draw attention to what remains unprocessed in Olga's experience, as the incandescent wound of her trauma is dealt with more through disciplining control than by

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, translations are mine.

⁷ The view of an effective elaboration of the trauma of abandonment on the part of Olga and her acquisition of a more fluid and creative subjectivity is shared also by ALSOP: 2014; FERRARA: 2016; and MORELLI: 2021b, as well as being suggested by FERRANTE herself (2016). For a very interesting reflection on the relationship between trauma, narrative and rituals, see TULLY: 2017.

progressively reintegrating her body into a sense of self as a desiring subject. The underlying trauma of bodily abjection connected to the maternal and inflected by gender, I argue, is not fully articulated and processed – as it most likely *cannot* be fully articulated and processed – but is rather exorcised through the ritual displacement of death on a sacrificial scapegoat and the related discharge of energy that such a process enables. This gives rise to an ambivalent, haunted narrative, whereby the reconquered grammar of life is nonetheless still threatened by the insurgence of uncontrolled, non-integrated forces.

Although the novel portrays a radical crisis that impacts Olga's very cognitive faculties, as well as her emotional and ethical spheres, her experience is recounted retrospectively from a safe place after the crisis has passed. The narrating voice, which speaks in the first person, tells her story in the past, recomposing the exploded fragments of her traumatic experience into a linear narrative. The perspective of the narrating voice, which looks at the events from a safe distance, does not coincide with that of the protagonist caught in the middle of a collapsed temporality. The positioning of the narrator *after* the events offers her a vantage point from which to look down at those dramatic moments. Such a relationship between a safe point of observation and the depth of traumatic experiences corresponds to what Olga declares in the novel about the kind of storytelling she likes:

Non mi piaceva la pagina troppo chiusa, come una persiana tutta abbassata. Mi piaceva la luce, l'aria tra le stecche. Volevo scrivere storie piene di spifferi, di raggi filtrati dove balla il pulviscolo. E poi amavo la scrittura di chi ti fa affacciare da ogni rigo per guardare di sotto e sentire la vertigine della profondità, la nerezza dell'inferno (GA, 21).⁸

This passage is in fact a declaration of poetics that describes fittingly Ferrante's own literary construction in *The Days of Abandonment*. The writer peeps through the slots in the shutters, she gazes down into the vertiginous abyss of trauma, but she does so from a shielded, safe position. Writing takes place on a threshold, which is also a protective boundary – and language is what guarantees that boundary.⁹ In all of

⁸ «I didn't like the impenetrable page, like a lowered blind. I liked light, air between the slats. I wanted to write stories full of breezes, of filtered rays where dust motes danced. And then I loved the writers who made you look through every line, to gaze downward and feel the vertigo of the depths, the blackness of inferno» (DA, 16).

⁹ As Wehling-Giorgi remarks, «[l]anguage [...] in Ferrante's works assumes a near-

Ferrante's works, characters struggle to preserve boundaries that can contain the liquefaction of reality into an indistinct, unintelligible mass of debris, what the writer has cogently described as «frantumaglia» – «il deposito del tempo senza l'ordine di una storia, di un racconto. [...] è l'effetto del senso di perdita, [...] paesaggio di detriti» («the storehouse of time without the orderliness of a history, a story. [...] an effect of the sense of loss, [...] landscape of debris»)¹⁰ In her effort to stay present, Olga strenuously relies on linguistic injunctions as protective and structuring frames against the invasion of other temporal dimensions, against the ants, against thieves, against death, and against the dispersion of her own body: «tener ferma la realtà dei fatti arginando il flusso delle immagini mentali e dei pensieri» (GA, 62) («I had to keep hold of the reality of the facts while sidelining the flow of mental images and thoughts»); DA, 55).

Numerous images of thresholds recur in the novel, conveying Olga's liminal position – which is also a defining feature of Sapienza's *Destino coatto*.¹¹ When Mario had his first doubts in the early stages of their relationship, Olga remembers, she was standing next to a stony banister, feeling cold and looking down on the faded city and the sea: «Avevo avuto freddo, lui se n'era andato, ero rimasta al parapetto di pietra sotto Sant'Elmo a guardare la città scolorita, il mare» (GA, 8) («I was cold, he was gone, I stood at the stone parapet below Sant'Elmo looking at the faded city, the sea»); DA, 5). After this flashback, Olga comes back to her present situation of abandoned wife, similarly characterized by the cold and by a liminal position: «Restai in piedi a lungo, davanti alla finestra che dava sul parco buio, cercando di attenuare il mal di testa col freddo del vetro contro la fronte» (GA, 12) («I stood for a long time at the window that looked onto the dark park, trying to soothe my aching head against the cold of the glass»); DA, 8). As her psychological state rapidly deteriorates, she is increasingly exposed to the precipice: «Il balcone si protendeva sul vuoto come un trampolino su una piscina» (GA, 53) («The balcony extended over the void like a diving board over a pool»); DA, 46).

ontological dimension of its own» (2017a, 70). On the fundamental role of language in providing a re-structuring of the self against the death drive in GA, see ALSOP: 2014.

¹⁰ FERRANTE: 2016a, 95; trad. 2016b, 87. From now on cited respectively as FR and FRt.

¹¹ On the structuring function of liminality in the context of the rite, see DE ROGATIS: 2019b, 108-110.

While the narrator positions herself firmly after the events narrated, Olga goes through a severe crisis that, beginning with a rupture in her life plot and the eruption of devastating pain, reaches all the way into her cognitive faculties. *The Days of Abandonment* offers an insightful representation of a traumatic interruption of temporality leading to a loss of cognition. A core element in this figuration of a traumatic crisis is the character's sense of entrapment: the interruption in the flow of time reverberates spatially, turning the city of Turin into a cold fortress: «Torino mi sembrava una grande fortezza dalle mura ferrigne, pareti di un grigio gelato che il sole primaverile non riusciva a riscaldare» (GA 34) («Turin seemed to me a great fortress with iron walls, walls of a frozen gray that the spring sun could not warm»; DA, 29). The stuck temporality of trauma is most powerfully represented through the image of the locked door of Olga's apartment, which effectively interrupts the course of her life, secluding her from the outside world and trapping her in the depth of her hellish state.

The significance of the entrapped space in relation to trauma is highlighted by Ferrante in *La Frantumaglia*, where she discusses how, as a child, she used to hide in a small storeroom when her mother went out to run some errands and she felt an acute sense of abandonment. The storeroom is a space where causal relationships between guilt and expiation, sin and punishment, derail, arresting time:

Sicuramente i miei due libri muovono da lì. La porta chiusa, l'immaginazione del male, la paura. [...] Stare al buio, nel luogo più temuto della casa, forse era una forma di espiazione e insieme un richiamo disperato d'amore. [...] Abolivo il mio corpo, lo davo alle forze del buio. [...] Mi immolavo, mi consegnavo al terrore per ottenere in cambio la salvezza. Ero allora l'innocente che si sacrifica per redimere la colpevole? O ero la colpevole che si punisce per restituire innocenza alla vittima? Non lo so (FR, 114-115).¹²

As a space of guilt and abandonment, the storeroom becomes for Ferrante the ultimate image of the stuck temporality of trauma,

¹² «Yet surely my two books start from there. The closed door, the imagining of evil, the fear. [...] Being in the dark, in the most feared place in the house, was perhaps a form of expiation and at the same time a desperate cry of love. [...] I abolished my body, I gave it to the forces of darkness. [...] I immolated myself, I delivered myself to terror to gain her salvation in exchange. Was I then the innocent who sacrifices herself to redeem the guilty? Or was I the guilty one who punishes herself to restore innocence to the victim? I don't know» (FRT, 103).

«una sorta di luogo della ripetizione come in certi sogni, sempre la stessa azione, lo stesso bisogno» (FR, 111) («the sort of place where, as in certain dreams, always the same action, always the same need is repeated»; FRt, 101). Mario's abandonment in the novel triggers a previous sense of affective abandonment, which Olga felt primarily in relation to her mother. Trauma haunts because it repeats itself: «Mario fin dall'inizio è diventato per lei inavvertitamente il bozzolo di fantasie legate alla madre, e sarà soprattutto questo a rendere l'abbandono così devastante» (FR, 132) («Mario from the beginning inadvertently became for her the cocoon of fantasies tied to the mother, and it is this above all that makes the abandonment so devastating»; FRt, 119). A further subtle but significant detail connects Ferrante's storeroom as the space of abandonment to Olga's apartment: it is the smell of DDT, which Ferrante remembers vividly from her childhood, and which Olga sprays in her apartment trying to kill the ants that are invading it, inadvertently killing her dog (and her sacrificial double) Otto instead.

The Days of Abandonment describes in detail the effects of traumatic abandonment on the protagonist's psyche. As Olga's ability to discern the sequence of before and after weakens, she cannot retain a sense of self as an embodied and emplaced living subject who orders her perceptions into a readable experience.

Non volevo correre, se correvo mi rompevo, già ogni gradino lasciato alle spalle si disfaceva subito dopo persino nella memoria, e la ringhiera, la parete giallina mi correvano di lato fluida, a cascata. Vedevo solo le rampe coi loro segmenti netti, alle spalle mi sentivo una scia gassosa, ero una cometa. [...] Forse ero troppo stanca per trattenere il mondo dentro l'ordine consueto (GA, 105-106).¹³

This passage exemplifies Olga's compromised ability to retain and organize experience, which constitutes the foundation of a temporal sense of self and reality. Olga cannot create duration, spatial distinctions melt, and vital movement is impeded. The very unity of an emplaced body is lost and space becomes itself discontinuous:

¹³ «I didn't want to run, if I ran I would break, every step left behind disintegrated immediately afterward, even in memory, and the banister, the yellow wall rushed by me fluidly, cascading. I saw only the flights of stairs, with their clear segments, behind me was a gassy wake, I was a comet. [...] Maybe I was too tired to maintain the usual order of the world» (DA, 118).

Mi mossi, mi pareva di essere puro fiato compresso tra le metà mal connesse di una stessa figura. Com'era inconcludente percorrere quella casa nota. Tutti i suoi spazi si erano mutati in piattaforme distanti, separate tra loro. [...] Adesso non sapevo quanto fosse distante il bagno dal soggiorno, il soggiorno dal ripostiglio, il ripostiglio dall'ingresso (GA, 139).¹⁴

When trauma impacts on temporality, the present is overcrowded with other dimensions, in which the subject loses orientation and risks disintegration. In *La Frantumaglia*, Ferrante reflects on the impact of trauma on time and self: «L'insorgere della sofferenza annulla il tempo lineare. [...] simultaneamente, in una sorta di acronia, si affolla il passato delle loro antenate e il futuro di ciò che cercano di essere» (FR, 102-103) («The eruption of suffering cancels out linear time. [...] simultaneously, in a sort of achrony, is the past of their ancestors and the future of what they seek to be, the shades, the ghosts»; FRt, 107-108). This is what happens to Olga, within the entrapped space of her apartment, as the overlapping of temporal layers brings out one of her deepest fears, that of becoming like «la poverella» – the woman from her childhood's neighborhood who was abandoned by her husband and killed herself, whose figure keeps haunting Olga:

se mi fossi abbandonata, sentivo che quel giorno e lo spazio stesso dell'appartamento si sarebbero aperti a tanti tempi diversi, a una folla di ambienti e persone e cose e me stesse che avrebbero esibito tutte, simultaneamente presenti, eventi reali, sogni, incubi, fino a creare un labirinto così fitto da cui non sarei più uscita (GA, 126).¹⁵

As we have seen, while Olga undergoes such a dramatic crisis, exposed to the «confusione dei tempi» (FR, 101) («confusion of time»; FRt, 93), the narrator is able to relate those events from a safe position,

¹⁴ «I moved, I seemed to myself to be pure air compressed between the poorly connected halves of a single figure. How inconclusive it was to traverse that known house. All its spaces had been transformed into separate platforms, far away from one another. [...] Now I didn't know how far the bathroom was from the living room, the living room from the storage closet, the storage closet from the front hall» (DA, 124).

¹⁵ «If I were to abandon myself, I felt, then, that day and the very space of the apartment would be open to many different times, to a crowd of environments and persons and things and selves who, simultaneously present, would offer real events, dreams, nightmares, to the point of creating a labyrinth so dense that I would never get out of it» (DA, 110).

exerting her linguistic control over the narrative. However, some elements pierce through the narrator's diegetic frame, opening up to metaphorical, mimetic and performative dimensions of narrative. The metaphors of entrapment and the apparition of the ghost of «la poverella» are among these elements, to which we can add the expansion of the central part of the novel, entirely dedicated to one single day. But it is the use of obscene language which most prominently destabilizes the narrator's control of narration, for it irrupts on the page annulling the distance between diegesis and mimesis.

If language is Olga's disciplining tool to keep her grasp on reality, sex is the *Other* of language, a destructive force that emanates from an unruly, disavowed body.¹⁶ As Olga's crisis begins to unfold, sexual fantasies creep into her thoughts despite her will, posing a threat to the grammar of her sense of self:

No, mi dissi, erano affermazioni di deragliamento. Mettere sempre le virgole, tanto per cominciare, dovevo ricordarmene. Chi pronuncia parole così, ha già varcato la linea, sente la necessità dell'autoesaltazione e perciò si approssima allo smarrimento. Poi anche: le femmine sono tutte bagnate le fa sentire chissà cosa che lui abbia la mazza dritta. Da ragazzina mi era piaciuto il linguaggio osceno, mi dava un senso di libertà maschile. Ora sapevo che l'oscenità poteva levare faville di follia, se nasceva da una bocca controllata come la mia (GA, 22).¹⁷

Linguistic expression of sexual fantasies is deemed «obscene» because it crosses a threshold, a line beyond which lies a «masculine freedom». Sexuality, in other words, is presented as belonging to a male sphere that is interdicted to women, for whom it does not represent freedom but madness. In line with the bodily abjection that characterizes Olga's self-repression, and which is a defining feature of Ferrante's narrative universe, female sexuality does not exist in its expressive,

¹⁶ A vast body of work has analyzed Ferrante's representation of female troubled relationship with the female body and the traumatic effects of patriarchal physical and symbolic violence. See SAMBUCCO: 2012; HAALAND: 2018; WEHLING-GIORGI: 2017b; 2021; DE ROGATIS: 2019a.

¹⁷ «No, I said to myself, those were affirmations of derailment. To begin with, I had better remember, always put in the commas. A person who utters such words has already crossed the line, feels the need for self-exaltation and therefore approaches confusion. And also: the women are all wet he with his stiff prick makes them feel who knows what. As a girl I had liked obscene language, it gave me a sense of masculine freedom. Now I knew that obscenity could raise sparks of madness if it came from a mouth as controlled as mine» (DA, 17).

creative, desiring dimension, but only as a violent and magmatic force to be disciplined.¹⁸ Tearing apart the linguistic boundaries that Olga constructs to protect herself, sexuality invades her mind – and the page. Obscene language is in fact what brings back the narrator close to the protagonist’s experience, threatening the temporal distance between the two, for the narrating voice does not limit herself to relate diegetically that she had sexual obsessions and that she was uttering obscenities, she actually brings those images and words to the fabric of narration (and of course, it is Ferrante herself using those images and words).

Crossing the line of linguistic continence, the narrator recounts her obsessive fantasies about Mario’s sexual life with Carla. In one the most violent scenes in the novel, when Olga meets the couple in the street, she gives vent to her fury:

Ce l’avevo solo con Mario che le aveva dato quegli orecchini [...]. Volevo strapparglieli dai lobi, lacerarle la carne, negarle la funzione di erede delle antenate di mio marito. Cosa c’entrava lei brutta puttana, cosa c’entrava con quella linea di discendenza. Si atteggiava a bella fica con le cose mie, [...]. Apriva le cosce, gli bagnava un po’ il cazzo e si immaginava che così l’avesse battezzato, io ti battezzo con l’acqua santa della fica, mi immergo il tuo cazzo nella carne madida e lo rinomino, lo dico mio e nato a nuova vita. La stronza. [...] puttana di merda. Dammi quegli orecchini, dammi quegli orecchini (GA, 78).¹⁹

This passage continues with an escalation of ferocious fantasies of disfigurement that Olga wants to inflict to Carla, ripping off her skin to uncover her bare skeleton. What is most striking, here the narrating voice loses her detached position and is fully immersed in the present of the scene. Narration becomes theatrical, as insults and degrading fantasies accumulate on the page. Diegesis gives in to mimesis, the past is replaced by the present: «puttana di merda. Dammi quegli orecchini» («the fucking whore. Give me those earrings»). Far from

¹⁸ See MILKOVA: 2013; BAZZONI: 2022a.

¹⁹ «I was angry only at Mario, who had given her those earrings [...]. I wanted to rip them from her lobes, tear the flesh, deny her the role of heir of my husband’s forebears. What did she have to do with it, the dirty whore, what did she have to do with that line of descent. She was flaunting herself like an impudent whore with my things [...]. She opened her thighs, she bathed his prick, and imagined that thus she had baptized him, I baptize you with the holy water of the cunt, I immerse your cock in the moist flesh and I rename it, I call it mine and born to a new life. The bitch. [...] the fucking whore. Give me those earrings, give me those earrings» (DA, 69).

being a protective boundary, obscene language is here performative of the violent sexual force of the protagonist, as its only outlet.²⁰

It is no coincidence that Olga's recovery manifests also in her ability to resume a standard, polite Italian, which expels the unruliness of the body from it: «Il linguaggio osceno di colpo sparì [...]. Arretrai verso una lingua libresca, studiata, un po' farraginoso, che però mi dava sicurezza e distacco. Tornai a controllare il tono della voce, le rabbie si posarono sul fondo» (GA, 173) («The obscene language suddenly disappeared [...]. I retreated to a bookish, studied language, somewhat convoluted, which, however, gave me a sense of security and detachment. I controlled the tone of my voice, anger stayed in the background»; DA, 156). Yet, the explosion of obscene language in the narrative betrays the self-repressive rather than healing process underwent by Olga and the perdurance of her traumatic bodily abjection.

Destino coatto: performing disgregation

In Goliarda Sapienza's *Destino coatto*, there is no protective distance between a traumatic state and its telling. The flow of temporality is shattered into fragments, as we are thrown into the minds of a myriad characters who are stuck in obsessions, hallucinations, dreams and compulsions. In reflecting on the limits of language to tell an experience that in itself defies temporal organization, Wendy O'Brian asks: «How can trauma be written? In giving words to trauma and its after effects, aren't all those aspects of such overwhelming encounters with unmediated life lost?» (2007, 211). A collection of short prose pieces, ranging from a few lines to a few pages each, *Destino coatto* does not recompose a story of a crisis into a meaningful and intelligible narrative, but rather *performs* the interrupted temporality of trauma through a de-structured mosaic of voices and images.

The metaphorical imaginary mobilized by Sapienza to convey a traumatic state bears striking similarities to the depiction of Olga's crisis in *The Days of Abandonment* and to Ferrante's concept of «frantumaglia» more broadly. If in *The Days of Abandonment* it is abandonment that triggers the protagonist's previous wounds, the collection of *Destino*

²⁰ Linked to the use of obscene language in Ferrante's work is the function of dialect. Wehling-Giorgi points out in particular the connection between dialect and the abject maternal, which she foregrounds to draw a parallel between Ferrante and Sapienza (WEHLING-GIORGI: 2016).

coatto is haunted by loss, and specifically by the death of Sapienza's mother Maria Giudice, and by the author's melancholic state and loss of memory after two suicide attempts and an electroshock therapy.²¹ The stuck condition of a traumatic state is expressed through recurring images and patterns, such as the derailment of a life trajectory, stagnation into unfulfilled hopes, the breaking of identity and the body, images of doubles, mirrors, repetitions of numbers, inexplicable and uncontrollable somatic reactions, and confusion of singulative and iterative tenses. The state of paralysis is also conveyed spatially, with an opposition between internal and external spaces, and existentially, with a regressive drive that identifies moving with dying and aspires instead to a protective uterine immobility.

A prominent way in which stories in *Destino coatto* perform a traumatic crisis is by breaking down identity. Not only Sapienza disseminates autobiographical details from her own life into many characters' vicissitudes; she also portrays the fracturing of self through stories centered on doubles, identifications and mirror images. One piece, for example, tells the story of a girl who wants to identify with her boyfriend and become him, but as she succeeds in perfecting her mimetic endeavor, her boyfriend loses any sexual attraction towards her and starts relating to her as if she were himself (DC, 15). In another short piece, a woman finds herself in the act of combing her sister's hair, but it is in fact her own hair, which she decides to cut: «Questa mattina mi sono trovata che mi pettinavo i capelli di Licia» (DC, 34) («This morning I found myself combing Licia's hair»). In the following story, a reenactment of Narcissus' myth, a woman called Maria is hit by the reflection of the sun in the mirror and falls in love with her own image, becoming oblivious to her surrounding:

Tutto è avvenuto perché Maria, ieri, al tramonto, non ha coperto lo specchio con lo scialle di seta nera. E così il sole si è specchiato e lei si è innamorata della sua immagine. Adesso è lì chiusa nella sua stanza, seduta davanti allo specchio e si pettina e parla sottovoce. Io la chiamo. Ma non mi sente (DC, 37).²²

²¹ Pellegrino notes: «These pieces already reveal her wounded soul since her difficult childhood [...]. Some of these short stories seem to be part of the writer's own life, as at the time she was engaged in a cruel and dramatic existential search through psychoanalytic treatment» (2002, 6). On the autobiographical backdrop of *Destino coatto*, see TREVISAN: 2016 and BAZZONI: 2022b.

²² «It all happened because yesterday at sunset Maria didn't cover the mirror with the

Identity also splits into doubles, as in the following piece – which can be read in parallel with the scene of Olga seeing herself as «la poverella» in the mirror:²³

Ieri l'altro ho incontrato a Piazza Fiume davanti alla Rinascente Marisa. Io mi chiamo Marisa. Certo, molte volte, fra amici, a scuola, mi è stato detto: «Lei mi ricorda qualcuno». Ma vederla lì, quest'altra Marisa che guarda le vetrine esattamente così come faccio io... che potevo fare, ditemi, che potevo fare se non tirarle una rivolverata? (DC, 71)²⁴

In this story, a homicidal and suicidal act come to coincide, as the identity of the subject splits and doubles. Significantly, the name of Marisa, which is at the center of the subject's split, is a variation of the name of the mother Maria, creating a link between the two deaths – that of Maria, and that of the speaking subject.

The breaking down of the subject's identity is portrayed through widespread instances of somatization, some literal (such as vomiting, cutting hair, not digesting, not being able to eat, being injured, unrestrained crying, insomnia, intense feelings of hot and cold), others metaphorical (such as sweating blood or surviving on water and salt). Stories in the collection place the body at the center of a dense series of images, obsessions and oneiric transfigurations that convey a state of profound and inexplicable suffering.²⁵ The body's elementary functions and sensations become the territory of analogical links between the present and the past and between dreams and reality, blocking and reversing the flow of temporality:

Mi sembra che stavo vomitando. Qualcuno mi teneva la testa e la tazza era grigia, sbeccata. Qualcuno mi teneva la fronte e mi frugava nella gola, in fondo. Mi faceva il solletico. Volevo ridere ma avevo freddo.

black silken shawl, so the sun hit the mirror and she fell in love with her reflection. Now she's there, closed in her room, sitting in front of the mirror combing her hair and whispering. I call her. But she doesn't hear me».

²³ See REYES FERRER: 2016.

²⁴ «The other day I met Marisa in Piazza Fiume in front of Rinascente. My name is Marisa. Of course, many times, with friends, at school, they told me: "You remind me of someone". But to see her there, this other Marisa who looks at the shop windows exactly like I do... what could I do, please tell me, what could I do, other than shoot her?».

²⁵ *Destino coatto* represents a sort of laboratory of Sapienza's imagery related to space, time, the maternal body and somatization, which recurs in all her other works and with particular intensity in *Lettera aperta* (1967) and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969).

Sempre ho sofferto il freddo ed il solletico. Carlo lo sapeva e sempre mi afferrava alla vita e mi faceva il solletico ma non vomitavo. Ridevo. Mentre adesso non posso ridere e vomito. Vomito delle palline bianche nel cesso dove ieri ho cercato di fare *la pupù, come dicevamo a Catania, ti ricordi, Carlo?* E non ci sono riuscita (DC, 95, emphasis mine).²⁶

The passage above is framed as an oneiric scene, characterized by the dubitative «mi sembra» («I think») and the use of the imperfect. However, the oneiric scene of vomiting in a toilet is soon followed by a recollection. The link between dream and memory is constructed via contrasting sensations: tickling and vomiting, feeling cold, laughing. The speaking voice then suddenly switches to the present tense, «adesso non posso» («now I can't»), which places the scene of vomiting no longer in a dream nor in memory, but in the subject's present reality. That reality consists of vomiting pills – «palline bianche» («white pills») (which evokes Sapienza's own suicide attempt by ingesting sleeping pills). What in the first part is presented as a shift from a dream to an actual memory, in the second part is framed as a passage from the present reality, «vomito» («I'm vomiting»), to a reenactment of a childhood scene, which becomes the subject's «ieri» («yesterday»). The last sentence, «e non ci sono riuscita» («and I couldn't»), with yet another temporal shift to the past participle, merges the two subjects – the adult speaking voice and the infant, brought together by the combined actions of vomiting and not being able to defecate. The body stops functioning like a cognitive and emplaced unit and gets lost into analogical connections as memory and imagination become one, indistinguishable knot. As a substantial body of research shows, trauma can manifest in extremely intense somatic reactions. Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk in particular have stressed how overwhelming experiences of trauma disrupt the ability to make sense of spatial and temporal coordinates, resulting in a form of embodied dissonance (VAN DER KOLK: 2012; HERMAN: 2015). Herman identifies three main somatic manifestations of a traumatic state: «hyperarousal»,

²⁶ «I think I was vomiting. Somebody was holding my head and the toilet was grey and chipped. Somebody was holding my forehead and rummaging deep in my throat. It tickled me. I wanted to laugh but I was cold. I've always suffered from cold and tickle. Carlo knew it and he grabbed my waist all the time and tickled me but I didn't vomit. I laughed. But now I can't laugh and I vomit. I vomit white little balls in the toilet where yesterday I tried to *poo, like we used to say back then in Catania, do you remember, Carlo?* And I couldn't» (emphasis mine).

a heightened alertness to expected harm; «intrusion» of traumatic memories into the present; and «constriction» or «dissociation» – an altered state of consciousness which «reflects the numbing response of surrender» (HERMAN: 2015, 35) in front of complete helplessness, and which can lead to a proper split of the self as a form of self-defense:

Perceptions may be numbed or distorted, with partial anesthesia or the loss of particular sensations. Time sense may be altered, often with a sense of slow motion, and the experience may lose its quality of ordinary reality. The person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body, or as though the whole experience is a bad dream from which she will shortly awaken (HERMAN: 2015, 43).

In *Destino coatto*, the body is a site where trauma manifests as an obscure and transcending force, as characters are confronted with unexpected somatic reactions (real or metaphorical) and do not have access to an understanding of their own condition:

Quel giorno c'era molto caldo anche se era gennaio. Così caldo che cominciò a sudare. Portandosi le mani alla fronte, si accorse che quel sudore era sangue. Si fermò e si asciugò col fazzoletto. Era sangue, anche le mani sudavano sangue, rosso come corallo. Si appoggiò all'albero e chiuse gli occhi. Non poteva proseguire. Doveva aspettare che quel sangue finisse. Avrebbe aspettato un'ora, due, fino a sera? (DC, 107).²⁷

Such a manifestation of uncontrolled and unfathomable physical reactions creates, and reenacts, a traumatic break in the flow of time and in the subjects' perception of themselves, leading to a suspended and confused wait without any sense of future.

In the following passage, the dimension of an interrupted temporality is staged precisely as the breaking of time itself, represented through a watch that suddenly tells the wrong time:

Da dieci anni porto questo orologio che è andato a me insieme al pianoforte quando aprimmo il testamento. Io sono molto puntuale. Del

²⁷ «That day it was very cold although it was January. So hot that she started sweating. Touching her forehead with her hands, she realized that her sweat was blood. She stopped and cleaned herself with a handkerchief. It was blood, her hands too were sweating blood, red like coral. She leaned against the tree and closed her eyes. She couldn't continue. She must wait for that blood to end. Would she wait one hour, two, until night?».

resto faccio un lavoro nel quale la puntualità è indispensabile. Oggi, appunto, sono arrivata con venti minuti di ritardo. Non è successo niente perché in venti anni è la prima volta. Ma io ho cominciato a tremare e tremo ancora adesso. Questo orologio ritarda di venti minuti, ma perché da ieri a oggi è successo questo? Ieri andava bene e oggi erano tutti lì, già col camice, i guanti intorno al lettino. E io in tailleur, la borsa in mano. E poi tutto il giorno mi hanno tremato le mani. E ancora adesso tremano, non riesco a fermarle (DC, 100).²⁸

The character's hands start shaking, she looks for an explanation that is not available to her in any form and this interruption continues in an indefinite present. The sense of a blocked and iterated temporality of trauma is reinforced through the repetition of the number twenty – the clock is twenty minutes late, she was never late in twenty years, and through the connection to death – she inherited the watch from someone who died, as expressed through the reference to the will.

Numbers are often repeated in the collection, as in the following piece, suspended between an oneiric and magical scene, where numbers evoke a repetition in time, again in connection to a loss that is figured as a physical injury:

Qualcuno mi spingeva giù verso le scale buie. In fondo c'era una notte. Tre volte ho visto il mio corpo rigirare su sé stesso, poi ho battuto la testa una volta, due volte, tre volte. Mi sono seduta e ho frugato con le dita fra il sangue del palato appena in tempo per raccogliere nel palmo della mano tre denti bianchi lisci come pietre (DC, 77).²⁹

Loss is a disruptive force that splits identity, breaks temporality, and can ultimately be experienced as the dismembering of the body itself, a dramatic figuration of what Herman describes as «dissociation».

²⁸ «Ten years I've been wearing this wristwatch, which I inherited together with the piano when we opened the will. I'm very punctual. After all, in my job being punctual is essential. Today as I was saying I arrived twenty minutes late. Nothing happened, because it was the first time in twenty years. But I started shaking, and I'm still shaking now. This watch is now twenty minutes behind, but why did this happen from yesterday to today? Yesterday it was working fine and today they were all there, already in their white coats, the gloves next to the hospital bed. And I, there, holding my bags. And then my hands kept shaking the whole day. And they're still shaking now, I can't stop them».

²⁹ «Somebody was pushing me down towards the dark stairs. At the bottom was a night. Three times I saw my body turning on itself, then I hit my head one, twice, thrice. I sat and rummaged with my fingers in the blood in my mouth, just in time to grab three teeth white like stones in my palm».

While Ferrante stages a narrative that looks down into the abyss from a safe position, Sapienza's characters precipitate into it and «cry out» their stories from within their crisis (CARUTH: 1996, 4). Texts in *Destino coatto*, in other words, do not achieve any temporalization nor reconstruction of meaning, but they get close to performing what remains unspeakable in the experience of disaggregation taking place in trauma. As Caruth remarks, trauma «is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available» (4).

In another instance of repetition and the falling apart of the self, a woman who broke her nose twice feels that she needs to reiterate that injury and break her body into pieces, in the hope that someone would collect her parts and repair her (one of the very few references to a possibility of receiving help from others):

Se sei caduta una volta devi cadere la seconda per riparare. E la terza volta? [...] O poteva fare l'equilibrista sulla tastiera del letto, se l'avesse fatto ogni giorno una volta o l'altra sarebbe caduta. E non solo il naso, si sarebbe rotta tutta. In tre pezzi. Qualcuno li avrebbe raccattati e rimessi insieme. O li avrebbero almeno raccattati e tenuti fra le braccia (DC, 38).³⁰

Against the breaking down of the self, many characters in the collection seek a protective immobility, a holding boundary that may shield them from the excruciating demands and pain of life. Similarly to Ferrante's poetics of disgust,³¹ here too we encounter the need to contain the liquefaction of experience: «Non posso soffrire i liquidi. Tutti i liquidi. Mi fa schifo quel movimento continuo» (DC, 104) («I can't stand liquids. All liquids. That continuous movement disgusts me»). The character who pronounces this sentence is so terrified of movement, which she associates to death, that she stops drinking water – a form of rejection of life in order to protect life, realizing a semantic subversion of movement and stasis which characterizes the collection as a whole.

³⁰ «If you fell once you have to fall a second time to fix it. And the third time? [...] Or perhaps she could walk on the bedpost like on a tightrope, and if she kept doing it every day perhaps one time or another she would fall down. And she wouldn't break only her nose, all of her would break, into three pieces. Somebody would collect them and piece them together. Or at least collect them and hold them».

³¹ See Milkova's fundamental articulation of Ferrante's poetics of disgust, MILKOVA: 2014.

The choice to reject movement and inhabit the stuck temporality of trauma is also represented figuratively in spatial terms, through oppositions between indoor and outdoor spaces and through numerous liminal images such as windows and doors, «objects in which the twofold semantic possibility of movement and stasis is implied» (CARTA: 2012, 263). While in *The Days of Abandonment* Olga is locked in her apartment, several characters in *Destino coatto* seek enclosed spaces as a protection from the flow of life itself:

Se credete che una persona, maschio o femmina che sia, possa continuare ad alzarsi da una sedia per sedersi su una poltrona, uscire da una porta per entrare in un'altra, vi sbagliate! Si deve pur sdraiarsi qualche volta o restare in piedi, che so, davanti ad una finestra, uno specchio, senza uscire ed entrare da tutte le porte e portoni che tanta gente, chissà perché, si ostina a schiudere invitante (DC, 115).³²

In response to the threat of disintegration that comes with being alive, and therefore re-living the same traumatic experience of loss, characters regress towards protective immobility:

Avete mai avuto l'impressione che la vostra carne si sciolga nell'aria? [...] Ebbene appena esco dalle lenzuola alla luce vedo che la mia carne si sfalda nell'aria e va vagando in brandelli. [...] ho trovato un rimedio: mettetevi nell'acqua calda. Così la luce non vi tocca e le vostre carni restano ferme. È così che vi scrivo, immersa nell'acqua calda (DC, 70).³³

Movement threatens the very integrity of the subject, who responds by pursuing a condition of stasis that is self-annihilation and self-preservation at the same time. Carta rightly points out how «the condition sought for by Sapienza in these short stories resembles and recalls a pre-natal amniotic state» (CARTA: 2012, 265), a state preceding language and differentiation that can be productively linked to Julia

³² «If you think that a person, male or female it doesn't matter, can constantly stand up from a chair to go sit on an armchair, pass through a door to cross another one, you're wrong! [...] One must be able to lie down sometimes or just stand, I don't know, in front of a window, a mirror, without going out and in through all the doors that so many people, who knows why, insist on leaving open, inviting».

³³ «Have you ever had the impression that your flesh dissolves into the air? [...] Well, as soon as I get out of the bedsheet into the light, I see my flesh flaking off in the air and floating in shreds. [...] I found a remedy: immerse yourselves in hot water. In this way the light doesn't touch you and your flesh stays still. That's how I'm writing to you, immersed in hot water».

Kristeva's notion of the chora, the pre-symbolic site of «semiotic functions, energy discharges that bind and orient the body in relation to the mother» (KRISTEVA: 1985, 26). Such regressive condition is also intrinsically a destruction of the subject, who is no longer able to distinguish between different states, spaces, times and identities, blurring life and death: «Per anni ho sperato di poter dormire. Ora dormo da anni e spero di svegliarmi, almeno un po', almeno per qualche secondo» (DC, 127) («For many years I wished I could sleep. Now I've been sleeping for years and hope I can wake up, at least a little bit, at least for a few seconds»).

Through the breaking down of identity, somatization, the semantic subversion of movement and stasis, openness and enclosure, the collection conveys the stuck temporality of trauma. Recursive temporality haunts the subject, bringing the past into collision with the present, exhausting the possibility of a future.

Vorrei tanto scordarmi di ieri ma non posso. Lavoro per casa, cucino, tengo in braccio Carluccio, ma non posso scordarmi di ieri. È lì, davanti a me. Ieri con quel sole che spaccava le pietre lì davanti dietro i vetri sporchi di pioggia. Domani li debbo lavare un'altra volta (DC, 110).³⁴

In *Destino coatto*, characters are fixed in forces that remain obscure to them and at the same time determine them. The structuring force behind these fragments is not that of temporal reconstitution, but rather that of a compulsion that condenses into a «destino coatto», undoing temporal distinctions.

Conclusion: narratives of trauma and traumatized narratives

In their works, Ferrante and Sapienza offer insightful explorations of the disrupted temporality of trauma, its iterative mechanisms, its cognitive disconnections, and its fundamental opacity, as trauma defies meaning and comprehension. By unsettling the basic structures of temporalization and related coordinates of space, identity and

³⁴ «I would really want to forget about yesterday but I can't. I work at home, I cook, I hold little Carluccio, but I can't forget about yesterday. It's there, in front of me. Yesterday, with that crushing sun right there behind the windowpanes, dirty with rain. Tomorrow, I shall clean them again».

referentiality, these texts provide an original answer to O'Brien's question about the possibilities of narrative, which is understood as intrinsically temporal, to tell trauma. On the one hand, *The Days of Abandonment* and *Destino coatto* resort to a similar imagery in conveying the breaking down of the subject's reality, including thresholds, liminality, entrapment, doubles, mirrors, fragmentation and somatization. On the other hand, Ferrante and Sapienza employ very different textual constructions: while *The Days of Abandonment* is a linear narrative told in the past from a stable position after the events, *Destino coatto* juxtaposes scattered and enigmatic fragments which resist any temporalization. We can say that while in *The Days of Abandonment* Ferrante constructs a narrative of trauma, in the case of *Destino coatto* we are in the presence of a traumatized narrative, that is, a text that *performs* the very temporality of trauma in its form.

The differences in structure between the two works are the manifestation of diverging approaches to the relationship between language, body, and trauma. In the case of Ferrante, the rigorous structure of the book is exemplary of Ferrante's ethics of surveillance and the tremendous power she accords to language. Olga's retrospective narration serves to recompose the chaotic fragments of her experience into a meaningful and linear discourse, exerting control on an otherwise unruly body. The trauma of female bodily abjection, linked to maternal neglect and patriarchal violence, is traversed ritually by Olga through the encounter with a destructuring experience and the sacrificial displacement of death on the dog, but in her crisis and recovery it is also further repressed through linguistic disciplining. In this way, trauma can only insurg in powerfully disruptive manifestations, such as in Olga's (and Ferrante's) use of obscene language, sexual fantasies and sadomasochistic drives, which pierce through the barrier of diegetic distance and overflow on the page, effectively *performing* trauma. As diegesis gives way to mimesis, in the use of obscene language we have a glimpse of «the manifestation of the power of the repressed» (FREUD: 2015, 16), whereby the subject «is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of [...] *remembering* it as something belonging to the past» (25).

The mimetic element is precisely what characterizes the prosés of *Destino coatto*. Sapienza looks at trauma and its disruptive manifestations in the subject's psychic life without pursuing comprehension, control and closure. As in all her writings, Sapienza

uses language performatively to work through a question, a feeling, a condition, without knowing in advance where such an open exploration will take her. In this sense, Sapienza's literary work does not tend to exert control, retrospectively organizing the chaos of experience, but rather to stay as close as possible to the unfolding of experience itself.³⁵ *Destino coatto* stages a paralyzed time before meaning is restored, through a prismatic representation of the breaking down of the subject, a fractured mosaic of unfathomable compulsory destinies. In both authors, ultimately the temporality of diegesis contends with the unresolved pressure of traumatic iterations, giving rise to haunted and haunting narratives: «Because trauma repeats and returns even when it is supposedly over, aftermath writing as a hauntedness that haunts, has a double character of untimeliness» (CHAMBERS: 2004, 191).

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³⁵ See BAZZONI: 2017.

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PART 4

TRAUMA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SOUTH

8. Trauma and Literary Experience in Anna Maria Ortese's *The Gold of Forcella*

Achille Castaldo

Abstract

This essay investigates the traumatic origin of Anna Maria Ortese's short story *The Gold of Forcella* (*Oro a Forcella*). My point of departure is the idea that classical definitions of trauma as a singular, extreme event cannot be used to describe Ortese's experience. A more apt conception is Greg Forter's notion of «systemic traumatization», a low intensity exercise of violence through which sections of the population are kept in subjugation. Given these premises, I overturn Raffaele La Capria's analysis of *Neapolitan Chronicles* (*Il mare non bagna Napoli*) as revolving around what he calls «the fear of the plebs»: this might be central for the bourgeois intellectual facing the crowd of the poor in the streets of a metropolis, but, for Ortese, the encounter with that same crowd gets translated into a literary experience that communicates the traumatic existence of the underclass she had known from the inside.

Il saggio indaga l'origine traumatica del racconto *Oro a Forcella* di Anna Maria Ortese. Punto di partenza è l'idea che le definizioni classiche del trauma come singolo evento estremo non possano descrivere l'esperienza di Ortese. Più utile risulta essere la nozione, coniata da Greg Forter, di «traumatismo sistemico», che fa riferimento a un esercizio della violenza a bassa intensità, attraverso cui parti della popolazione vengono mantenute in soggezione. Date queste premesse, il saggio ribalta l'analisi de *Il mare non bagna Napoli* fatta a suo tempo da Raffaele La Capria, che vi leggeva la centralità della «paura della plebe»: per Ortese l'incontro con tale folla si traduce piuttosto in un'esperienza letteraria che comunica l'esistenza traumatica del sottoproletariato (da lei conosciuta in modo diretto, attraverso la condivisione di una comune condizione di miseria).

Terror everywhere

Experience, war, terror, limit, disorientation. These are some of the key terms in the short preface to *Neapolitan Chronicles (Il mare non bagna Napoli*, first published in 1953), that Ortese added to the book for its re-edition in 1994, titled *Il Mare come spaesamento [The Sea as Estrangement]*. These words serve as the starting point of my reading of the central story of the book, *The Gold of Forcella¹ (Oro a Forcella)*, which has an important function in the economy of the collection, as it stands as a *limen* between the first part, made of two fictional stories, and the second, consisting of «three 'racconti-inchiesta' (a hybrid of the genres of the short story, the autobiographical essay, and the reportage)»,² as aptly synthesized by Lucia Re (2015, 35). All five words point toward a traumatic source inscribed in Ortese's writing; therefore, investigating the nature of this traumatic origin will be essential for understanding the nature of the literary experience of her work. More precisely, the aforementioned terms are included in the following passage:

Aggiungo che *l'esperienza* personale della guerra (*terrore* dovunque e fuga per quattro anni) aveva portato *al colmo* la mia irritazione contro il reale; e lo *spaesamento* di cui soffrivo era ormai così vero, e anche poco dicibile – perché senza riscontro nella esperienza comune – da aver bisogno di una straordinaria occasione per manifestarsi (ORTESE: 1994, 10, emphasis mine).³

The author speaks here of an experience that brings her «al colmo» («to the limit») of an emotional turmoil («la mia irritazione») provoked by the horror of war: the limit, that is, of what is sayable, of what

¹ First published as *La plebe regina* in "Il mondo", 6 October 1951.

² «A far da cerniera tra le due tipologie è il breve racconto *Oro a Forcella*, che mescola aspetti di entrambe e anticipa l'io narrante della second serie» («To act as a hinge between the two topologies is the short story *The Gold of Forcella*, which mixes aspects of both and anticipates the narrator of the second series») (BALDI: 2000, 95). For a discussion of the relation between *Il mare* and the category of Neorealism, see RE: 2003, 112, and DE GASPERIN: 2014, 108-114. From now on, unless otherwise specified, translations of primary and secondary texts are mine.

³ «I would add that my personal *experience* of the *war* (*terror* everywhere and four years of flight) had brought my irritation with the real to the *limit*. And the *disorientation* I suffered from was by now so acute—and was also nearly unmentionable, since it had no validation in the common experience—that it required an extraordinary occasion in order to reveal itself» (ORTESE: 2018, 10). From now on, the English translation of *Il mare non bagna Napoli* is cited as NC, standing for *Neapolitan Chronicles*.

requires a split temporality to manifest itself, one of silence and one of discourse, none of which properly possesses the core of the experience itself. The horror of the years of war belongs to silence; only a second, deferred, «extraordinary occasion» was able to trigger discursivity, to re-inscribe the event of the war («terror everywhere and four years of flight») within verbal discourse.

The readers of *Neapolitan Chronicles* will not fail to notice, however, that the disorientation expressed in the book is never directly linked to a specific experience, but rather works as a background radiation, as if it were made of the same substance as her gaze, and as the translation of that gaze into writing. Experience properly said remains unsaid («unmentionable»). One could attempt to interpret this book's relation to the traumatic experience from which it seems to originate through the classical framework of Cathy Caruth's understanding of the relation between trauma, narrative, and history. Indeed, her definition of trauma as a shock that works as «a break in the mind's experience of time» (CARUTH: 1996, 11) seems to perfectly describe the split temporality, the double occasion to which Ortese refers when describing the composition of this book. Yet a closer look at the lines already quoted, a further consideration of the whole preface and, finally, a wider examination of the author's *œuvre* in its biographical context, force us to question the applicability of the paradigm that understands trauma in terms of a punctual event (although a complex one, existing on two different levels of temporality), to use the definition of «punctual trauma» coined by Greg Forster, to which I will return. As we will see, the traumatic nature of Ortese's experience could rather be defined as insidious, to use a concept elaborated by Maria Root, who has described a kind of experience «associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power, for example, gender, color, sexual orientation, physical ability. As a result, it is often present throughout a lifetime and may start at birth» (ROOT: 1992, 240). As I will argue, it is indeed Ortese's social status and her life experience of poverty and deprivation that produces her «irritation with the real».

When she writes that her experience of war «had brought [her] irritation with the real to the *limit*», rather than saying it had *created* that irritation, she is inviting us to consider more carefully her previous affirmation (from the same introduction) that the origin of the excessive and hallucinatory tone of the book's writing was in her neurosis: «sono

palesi [nella scrittura] tutti i segni di una autentica neurosi» (ORTESE: 1994, 10) («Evident in [the writing] are all the signs of an authentic neurosis»; NC, 10). She admits to not being able to trace the origin of this neurosis. It seems to go back to an unfathomable personal past: «e da dove avesse origine sarebbe troppo lungo ed impossibile dire» (ORTESE: 1994, 10) («It would take too long and would be impossible to say where its origin is»; NC, 10). Yet she does find a name for that origin, that is, «metafisica» («metaphysics»):

Da molto, moltissimo tempo, io detestavo con tutte le mie forze, senza quasi saperlo, la cosiddetta *realtà*: il meccanismo delle cose che sorgono nel tempo, e dal tempo sono poi distrutte. Questa realtà era per me incomprendibile e allucinante (ORTESE: 1994, 10).⁴

Can metaphysics be the origin for a neurosis? The ambiguous and unclear way she uses this word, almost as a two-faced term indicating both a classic materialist vision of things⁵ and the incapacity to accept it, suggests the possibility that it rather works here as a place-holder, an empty signifier standing for a reality she is not able to clearly define. In other words, if the origin of her neurosis (later «irritation») is metaphysics, and this, in turn, refers to both physical reality and a refusal of it, she is not really offering a solution, but rather creating an enigma that needs to be interpreted. Therefore, we need first and foremost to look at the form that unbearable material reality took *for her*, and how it trespasses in her writing.

My hypothesis is that the origin of what she calls neurosis, the encounter with the «mechanism of things» that appears «incomprehensible and ghastly», must be situated in the material context of her reflections, that is, in her difficult social position, placed at the precarious border between a petit bourgeois condition from which her family originated and the abyss of absolute poverty, toward which financial hardships were constantly pushing her. It is worth

⁴ «For a very long time, I hated with all my might, almost without knowing it, so-called *reality*: that mechanism of things that arise in time and are destroyed by time. This reality for me was incomprehensible and ghastly» (NC, 10).

⁵ Here she was probably echoing Leopardi's materialist conception of Nature: «L'ordine naturale ... è un cerchio di distruzione, e riproduzione, e di cambiamenti regolari e costanti quanto al tutto» (LEOPARDI: 1983, 541) («The natural order [...] is a circle of destruction, and reproduction, and of regular and constant changes as regards the whole»).

emphasizing that this painful condition put her in direct contact with the historical process traversing Neapolitan society in those years (when poverty and exploitation were becoming progressively exacerbated by the war and the subsequent military occupation), so much so that she would be in a better position, compared to her intellectual peers, to understand and analyze the material features of that period.

The post-war years in Naples were the hardest for her, when she experienced homelessness and hunger, and started to work as a journalist to try to make a living:

C'è stato un tempo, quello compreso tra la fine della guerra e gli ultimi anni Cinquanta, in cui non ho fatto che viaggiare. Il mio problema di fondo era sempre il problema 'economico': un eufemismo per non dichiarare troppo apertamente la questione della sopravvivenza fisica (CLERICI: 2002, 146).⁶

She wrote this in 1990, and in 1996 she invoked the feeling of «terrore economico» («economic terror») (ORTESE: 1997, 50) to retrospectively describe the conditions of her life as a writer. Yet this condition was the culmination of a social fall that had begun much earlier, that is, when she had moved to Naples with her family in 1928 at age 14:

La mia famiglia veniva dalla Libia;⁷ anche se poveri, eravamo stati molto sereni. Trovarmi a Napoli in mezzo a crudeltà che non si possono neppure immaginare fu per me una grande sorpresa, un dolore [...] a Napoli ho vissuto quel mondo lacero, spaventoso. Un trauma orribile. Ho vissuto la vita di Napoli come l'inferno (CLERICI: 2002, 52).⁸

⁶ «There was a time, the one between the end of the war and the late fifties, in which I did nothing but travel. My basic problem was always the 'economic' problem: a euphemism for not declaring too openly the question of physical survival». On this period of her life, see the chapters *Da Napoli a Napoli* and *In treno* in Clerici's biography (CLERICI: 2002, 130-221), and De Gasperin's biographical introduction to her monograph devoted to the author (DE GASPERIN: 2014, 13-18). A reading of Ortese's letters to Pasquale Prunas from the post war years is also illuminating to understand the degree of misery and physical exhaustion of her condition (ORTESE: 2006).

⁷ They had lived there for the previous 4 years, as her father, a low rank state employee, had demanded to be transferred there to attempt a commercial enterprise. Complete failure had compromised the family's economic stability. See CLERICI: 2002, 44-51.

⁸ «My family came from Libya; although poor, we had been very serene. To find myself in Naples amid cruelty that cannot even be imagined was a great surprise for me, a pain [...] In Naples I lived in that ragged, scary world. A horrible trauma. I lived the life of Naples like hell».

It is necessary to understand why she uses expressions like «unimaginable cruelties», «a ragged, fearful world», «a horrible trauma», and «hell», to define a period of her life that in her short stories and poetry of the time never appeared to be permeated with such a sensation of horror. What has happened (the two quotes are from the nineties and the eighties respectively), after so many years, to sharpen her awareness of her own experience?

Her arrival in Naples coincided with both a steep decline in her family's social position and with the awakening of her conscience to the simple consideration that as a woman without an education (she had failed almost every school until that moment, and her parents simply gave up on her and allowed her to stay at home without any occupation or plan for the future), growing up in a large family with a precarious social position, with parents who seemed not to care about debts, practical problems, and for the future of their offspring, her expectations for the years to come were depressing and a constant source of anxiety.⁹ Moreover, this first awareness about her situation hit her in conjunction with her encounter with Naples, and specifically with one of its poorest neighborhoods, populated by a large crowd of what was still called (and continues to be called) *plebs*: an underclass (a *Lumpenproletariat*) largely surviving, over the centuries, in the informal economy of the city. This meant that for her, in the passage to adulthood, the physical proximity of the Neapolitan crowd of the poor was not only a menacing shadow, but the embodiment of a concrete possibility, a material reality into which she and her family could fall at any moment, and from which it was for her, especially after the war, increasingly difficult to distinguish herself when, despite being a published author, she was effectively part of it.

When trying to identify the traumatic sources of her writing and to grasp the void left by the empty concept that she names «metaphysics», we therefore need to look at the pervasive and enduring violence through which the lower strata of society are kept in subjugation in daily life. As this subjugation produces an erasure of subjectivity through pure exhaustion (hunger, fatigue, anxiety, etc.), a key task of this analysis will be to understand how this loss of subjectivity is translated in Ortese's literary experience. Thus, to understand this phenomenon historically, it is helpful to reference the concept of

⁹ See her autobiographical article *I Gomez* from 1947, quoted in CLERICI: 2002, 12.

«routine violence» as defined by Gyanendra Pandey, the «unceasing, if partly unconscious and often disguised» (PANDEY: 2006, 14) ordinary violence used to exercise oppression in day to day existence, and to forge and naturalize the social formation of oppressed groups, «the routine violence involved in the construction of naturalized nations, of natural communities and histories, majorities and minorities» (PANDEY: 2006, 8). Also, it is important to specify that the pervasiveness of such a routine oppression must be understood as something able to act beyond its physical manifestations, thus permeating every aspect of social discursivity, in both the public and the private sphere, as a symbolic form of violence. Pierre Bourdieu has described it as able to disappear and be 'naturalized' in social relations, where it functions

dans l'obscurité des dispositions de l'habitus, où sont inscrits les schèmes de perception, d'appréciation et d'action qui fondent, en deçà des décisions de la conscience et des contrôles de la volonté, une relation de connaissance et de reconnaissance pratiques profondément obscure à elle-même (BOURDIEU: 1997, 204).¹⁰

As we will see more in detail in the next section, Ortese's hallucinatory attitude in narrating Naples and its crowd of the poor, which constitutes the main object of her book, has been interpreted by Raffaele La Capria as originating in a widespread Neapolitan phenomenon, that is, the fear of the plebs that permeates the unconscious of the city's bourgeoisie. My hypothesis is that the origin of her disorientation in describing the plebs is not rooted in the fear of it, but rather in the sharing of (or identification with) its original, permanent, routine traumatization, up to the interiorization of the symbolic violence that defines this form of domination. Based on this hypothesis, I will describe the functioning of her prose as communicating this kind of traumatic condition not at the level of the content, as objective narrative, but through pathetic intensity, forcing on the reader an emotional experience of suspension of the point of view that reproduces the erasure of subjectivity that is at the core of the plebs' form of life. In sum, to draw on Michelle Balaev's language, my approach to the analysis of the traumatic origin

¹⁰ «In the obscurity of the dispositions of habitus, in which are embedded the schemes of perception and appreciation which, below the level of the decisions of the conscious mind and the controls of the will, are the basis of a relationship of practical knowledge and recognition that is profoundly obscure to itself» (BOURDIEU: 2000, 170-171).

of Ortese's writing will be «pluralistic» and focused on «the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience» (BALAEV: 2014, 3).

To conclude these introductory considerations, it is important to take a moment to situate *The Gold of Forcella* and the whole collection *Neapolitan Chronicles* in Ortese's literary production, which spans many decades. It would be reasonable to infer that the traumatic source at the center of this investigation had a similar influence on the rest of the writer's creative work, even if some of her *oeuvre* differs greatly from the text analysed on this occasion. If we were to look for a common denominator that traverses her prose throughout the decades, we could resort to the concept of «traumatic realism» that Tiziana de Rogatis and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi have recently explored as a tool to analyze the narratives of Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante in a global context.¹¹ Indeed, from her early short stories of the thirties, close to the peculiar form of the Italian Magical Realism practiced and theorized in those years by Massimo Bontempelli,¹² to her novels written up to six decades later, where reality is rarefied and dissolved in theriomorphic apparitions, her writing could be described, in terms de Rogatis used for Morante, as driven by «a continuous swerve between a chronicle-like narrative plane to an underground horror» (DE ROGATIS AND WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021, 176). This horror will manifest, as we will see, as an outbreak of inarticulate affect that interrupts the ordered temporal progression of the narrative function to deliver the reader to the contemplation of a scene where such temporality is effaced: as Fredric Jameson has shown, it is exactly the antinomic subsistence of these two poles, never to be recomposed or even balanced, that constitutes the structure of what we call realism (JAMESON: 2013, 1-44). It is, in sum, the traumatic core of modernity itself that breaches the surface (see de Rogatis' definition of «underground realism», a term she coined for Ferrante's novels; DE ROGATIS: 2019, 276-291), where it inevitably recedes from full visibility (*inevitably* because it is the very ideology of the modern that produces such obfuscation) to side with the unreal, through which, not by chance, a «literary genealogy» has been built, «that resists master narratives to bear witness to a subaltern, silenced voice» (WEHLING-GIORGI: 2021, 120).

¹¹ The expression first appeared in FOSTER: 1996 and ROTHBERG: 2000.

¹² For a discussion of this topic see GHEZZO: 2015, 8-10.

The Fear of the Plebs and the plebs' experience

The contemporary reception of *Neapolitan Chronicles* is complex (CLERICI: 2002, 240-245). Besides some success and appreciation at the national level (the book won the Premio Viareggio), it was met with strong disappointment by the Neapolitan bourgeoisie, which saw in it a frontal attack on its responsibilities for the disastrous life conditions of the lower social strata at the center of the book. Particularly virulent were the reactions of Ortese's former colleagues (and friends) from the radical leftist journal *Sud* (published from '45 to '47), whom she mentions with their real names in the story *The Silence of Reason* (*Il silenzio della ragione*), the longest of the book. One of them was the writer Raffaele La Capria, who continued to be obsessed with Ortese's book, and three decades later wrote two (rather self-absolutory) essays to reflect on her attitude toward Naples in *Neapolitan Chronicles*. The two essays are included in his collection devoted to Neapolitan ideology, *L'armonia perduta* [*The Lost Harmony*] (1986). In the first one, titled *Il mare non bagna Napoli?* [*Does Not the Sea Bathe Naples?*], while mainly focusing on apologetic arguments, he attempts to locate the core object of *Neapolitan Chronicles*:

Stiamo invece attenti a cogliere la Cosa Nascosta che si agita perennemente nel fondo di questo libro, con un sordo continuo rumore «pari al fruscio della risacca sulla rena, dopo l'uragano». Questa cosa è ancora e sempre la paura della plebe che si riproduce, e qui riappare, come «condizione di insicurezza ontologica», cioè come rischio di perdere il proprio io... La paura ereditaria della piccola borghesia napoletana di essere coinvolta, stravolta, sommersa dalla marea plebea (LA CAPRIA: 2014, 398-399).¹³

The hidden thing La Capria mentions is not simply a generic petty bourgeois fear of the possibility of being declassed and absorbed into the proletariat or even the «plebs», nor is it the vague psychoanalytical anxiety at which he hints – «to lose one's own ego». Rather, it is a

¹³ «Let us be careful to seize the Hidden Thing ceaselessly squirming at the bottom of this book, with a deaf noise "similar to the rustle of the backwash on the shore, after the hurricane". This thing is again and always the fear of the plebs that is once more generated, and here resurfaces, as a "condition of ontological insecurity", that is, as the risk of losing one's own ego [...] the hereditary fear felt by the Neapolitan petty bourgeoisie for the eventuality of being involved, perverted, submerged by the tide of the plebs».

more concrete and historically determined situation, one that he went on to explore in the essay, *La paura della plebe* [*The Fear of the Plebs*]. Here he largely follows and quotes a book by the historian Atanasio Mozzillo, titled *La sirena inquietante* [*The Disquieting Siren*] (1983), in order to analyze the unique nature of the Neapolitan underclass. I will follow his argument here, in order to clarify the historical features of the social class at the center of this essay and in Ortese's book. He traces its historical origins to the policies implemented by the Spanish administration during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which created a *monstrum* that was unparalleled in Europe at the time and that proved to be an unsolvable problem throughout the following centuries and changes in political sovereignty. The explosion of demographic pressure in Naples has been summarized as follows by Mozzillo, in particular with reference to the years 1663 and 1665 (a period of famine and plague, respectively):

Carestia e contagio non furono certo accidenti imprevedibili e improvvisi, bensì sbocchi inevitabili di un processo che già da qualche tempo andava minando le strutture economiche del Reame. Sono ormai decenni che la spinta demografica caratterizza negativamente lo sviluppo di una capitale che si avvia a diventare la testa mostruosa di un organismo gracile e malato. [...] il processo di inurbamento [...] si sviluppa a ritmi sempre più serrati; e se nei primi anni del Settecento il fenomeno è legato alla incipiente disgregazione del sistema feudale [...] Nei mesi precedenti «l'anno della fame», il terribile '64, l'esodo diviene ancora più massiccio, incontrollato e incontrollabile. [...] Entrano nella città orde di contadini famelici [...] Una turba di straccioni che viene via via ingrossandosi sino a raggiungere in pochi mesi i quarantamila individui, i quali vengono peraltro come dimenticati, confusi nella già immensa folla di mendicanti (MOZZILLO: 1983, 18-20).¹⁴

¹⁴ «Famine and contagion surely were not unforeseeable and unforeseen accidents, but unavoidable outcomes of a process that for some time had been undermining the economic structures of the Kingdom. It now has been decades since the demographic pressure has negatively characterized the development of a capital that is about to become the monstrous head of a gracile and sick body. [...] The process of urbanization [...] develops at ever tighter rates; and if in the early eighteenth century the phenomenon is linked to the incipient disintegration of the feudal system [...] In the months preceding 'the year of hunger,' the terrible '64, the exodus becomes even more massive, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. [...] hordes of famished peasants enter the city [...] A mob of derelicts that gradually grows bigger until they are forty thousand in a few months, and who are, moreover, as forgotten, confused in the already immense crowd of the beggars».

Mozzillo quotes accounts and letters by travelers from northern Europe who visited Naples in the eighteenth century, thus providing an idea of what must have been the disconcerting impression made by the Neapolitan reality on foreigners. What emerges is the picture of

una entità urbanistica abnorme e persino mostruosa, un unicum nell'Europa di allora, terra di conquista o colonia, in cui neanche ci si preoccupa di catechizzare o vestire gli indigeni più miserabili, preferendo servirsene come massa di manovra contro le pretese dei ceti più ritrosi all'obbedienza (MOZZILLO: 1983, 10).¹⁵

Mozzillo further indulges in an expressionistic description of the inhuman condition of the Neapolitan underclass (which is not surprising, since the focus of his essay is an examination of first-hand testimonies from foreign travelers), yet the soundness of his argument is backed by the historians' consensus on the causes and outcomes of the disastrous economic and social conditions of the kingdom of Naples dating back to the Spanish domination, when, as summarized by Gaetano Sabatini, «the entire kingdom was, in a sense, the capital's economic hinterland, though one marked by strong territorial discontinuities» (SABATINI: 2013, 93): a situation that ended up producing the inhuman situation described by Mozzillo.¹⁶

The contact with the aggressive mass of the urban poor represented a higher threat and a source of anxiety especially for the lower strata of the bourgeoisie, who were weaker and deprived of the protections enjoyed by the upper classes. Indeed, this particular class had been the first victim of the popular fury that erupted in specific moments of crisis: the so-called revolt of Masaniello in 1647 and the bloody suppression of the Neapolitan republic in 1799, when the underclass had turned against the revolutionary bourgeoisie and committed massacres and looting of unprecedented proportions. According to La Capria, the memory of such traumatic events, together with the unsettling presence of the crowd of the poor, which suddenly becomes more visible in the most difficult moments, produced, as a

¹⁵ «[A]n abnormal and even monstrous urban entity, a *unicum* in Europe at the time, a land of conquest and colony, where one does not even bother to dress or catechize the most miserable natives, preferring, rather, to utilize them as a mass tool to maneuver against the claims of social classes recalcitrant to obedience».

¹⁶ See the bibliography in Sabatini's essay for further literature on the topic of early modern Naples's financial and social situation.

compensatory reaction, a specific ideology, which, over the centuries, became the peculiar *Neapolitan ideology*: the *napoletanità*. While he is not the first intellectual to analyze this ideology, his specific idea is that it was produced, in particular, as a compensation for an open wound that has never healed, as a result of the events of 1799:

Nel 1799 accade qualcosa di irreparabile: la Guerra Civile – atroce – e quell'immagine è attraversata da una lacerazione che la sfigura. La 'napoletanità' nasce per ricomporla. Nasce dopo il genocidio della borghesia illuminista che lascia la piccola borghesia sola di fronte alla plebe sterminata, ancora ribollente di furore e *desiderio di rapina*. Nasce come reazione della piccola borghesia alla paura della plebe (LA CAPRIA: 2014, 436, emphasis mine).¹⁷

According to La Capria, this ideology was not only a device used to domesticate an intimate fear, but also a tool to domesticate the plebs, providing them with a self-image in which their most unsettling features were blurred by the well-known positive side of the antinomy governing the traditional orientalist perception of the southern populations – vitality, passion, sensuality, and so on. He defines the effects of the *napoletanità* as a work of seduction:

quell'opera di seduzione, per così dire, della borghesia napoletana tendente a trasformare la *barbarie istintiva* di questa parte della popolazione in qualcosa di più sottile e meno pericoloso, che s'identifica con quel fondo di sentimenti comune ad ogni napoletano, e perciò stesso abolisce ogni temibile diversità (LA CAPRIA: 2014, 411, emphasis mine).¹⁸

Yet what he calls a seduction can clearly be interpreted as a form of epistemic violence, as defined by Gayatri Spivak (SPIVAK: 1988, 280-291), since this rhetorical self-understanding of the Neapolitan bourgeoisie is imposed on the whole society, and the subaltern,

¹⁷ «In 1799 something irreparable happens: the Civil War – atrocious – and that image is traversed by a laceration that disfigures it. The 'napoletanità' was born to repair it. It was born after the genocide of the enlightened bourgeoisie who left the petty bourgeoisie alone in front of the exterminated mob, still seething with fury and *desire for robbery*. It was born as a reaction of the petty bourgeoisie to the fear of the plebs» (emphasis mine).

¹⁸ «[T]hat work of seduction, so to speak, of the Neapolitan bourgeoisie tending to transform the *instinctive barbarity* of this part of the population into something subtler and less dangerous, which is identified with that depth of sentiments common to every Neapolitan, and therefore abolishes all fearful diversity» (emphasis mine).

marginalized underclass is forced to fit into the framework. Moreover, the ideological operation to which La Capria is referring to can be seen as the reinforcing of a «cultural trauma» elaborated by the Neapolitan bourgeoisie over the previous two centuries. In the essays collected in the volume *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, Jeffrey Alexander and his co-authors have interpreted this kind of trauma as being the product of a collective awareness that needs to be built over the years by an elite of cultural agents belonging to the social group that understands itself as the victim of a historical event able to mark its history:

A memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions (SMELSER: 2004, 44).

Yet, it is important to stress, again, that this trauma has solely a class dimension, as the Neapolitan plebs have no active part in its elaboration. La Capria is not interested in exploring the other side of the story, where the traumatic experience of the underclass has no rhetorical force to become a cultural trauma in its own right, since, as stressed by Alexander, «for traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, representations of these events quite another» (ALEXANDER: 2004, 10).

Indeed, if we pay attention to La Capria's word choice – the «instinctive barbarism» in the last passage, or the «desire for robbery» in the previous one – it is clear that his historical analysis, although plausible, is in turn a sort of self-absolutory, ideological fable aimed at concealing the responsibilities of the Neapolitan bourgeoisie for the permanence of the abject condition of the lower strata.¹⁹ Indeed, if it is true that the *napoletanità* functions as a psychological defense, a consolatory myth, it is also an alibi, the acceptance of a precise situation (one of privilege for the upper classes) as natural and therefore immutable.

¹⁹ For this argument in the context of post-war years, see ALLUM: 1973. For a more narrative oriented, less technical overview on the responsibilities of the Neapolitan ruling class for the enduring underdevelopment of the city, see Antonio Ghirelli's chapter *Il massacro urbano*, in his *Storia di Napoli* (GHIRELLI: 1992). Ghirelli was himself a Neapolitan intellectual of the same generation of La Capria and a close friend of his: he is the dedicatee of *L'armonia perduta*.

It is helpful here to recall Pandey's definition of «routine violence» as being present «in the construction and naturalization of particular categories of thought, in history and in politics» (PANDEY: 2006, 15). This is exactly the ideology denounced by Ortese in her book, implicitly in stories like *The Gold of Forcella* and *The Involuntary City (La città involontaria)*, and more explicitly in *The Silence of Reason*, where the central function of that ideology is revealed in its power to blind, to produce a narcotic indifference to the suffering of the surrounding underclass. Not by chance, La Capria notes that it is exactly this refusal of the *napoletanità* that leaves Ortese defenseless in the face of the fear of the plebs. La Capria's intuition about Ortese is indeed profound (although imprecise, as we will see); namely, that her confrontation with the disquieting presence of the Neapolitan plebs allowed her to perform a sort of excavation of that fear and to recreate the conditions of the originary experience that produced it in the first place, when the first contact happened between the middle class and the new entity created by the historical conditions we have seen, when the violence broke free in the inflection points of 1647 and 1799:

La Ortese comunque ha rifiutato quel tipo di pietas [...] e si ritrova, con tutta la sua sensibilità scoperta, esattamente nello stato della borghesia anteriore alla 'napoletanità', rivive la vicenda non conclusa di quella borghesia di fronte alla plebe, *risale al momento fatale in cui fu bloccata la storia di una città*. La rivive poeticamente e dolorosamente, ma non può riuscire a superarla (LA CAPRIA: 2014, 400, emphasis mine).²⁰

It is certainly true that Ortese refused the reassuring protection of the Neapolitan ideology, but this happened because her capacity of vision was not obfuscated by class privilege and by the necessity to preserve it (as was the case with La Capria and other intellectuals). As we have seen, she shared with the underclass feared by the bourgeois a common relegation to the depths of society, and, for long periods, experiences like homelessness, hunger, and physical exhaustion. Therefore, the core of her literary experience is not to be found, as La Capria argues, in the experience of the encounter of the bourgeois person with the

²⁰ «Ortese, however, has refused that kind of *pietas* [...] and finds herself, with all her sensibility uncovered, exactly in the state of the bourgeoisie prior to the 'napoletanità,' relives the unfinished story of that bourgeoisie in the face of the plebs, *goes back to the fatal moment in which the history of a city was blocked*. She relives it poetically and painfully, but cannot manage to overcome it».

crowd of the poor, but rather in a communal experience, a condition of misery the author had shared for years in her proximity with the underclass, and which she would continue to share, although in other forms, through the poverty and marginalization of the subsequent decades. We will see shortly how this translates in her writing. Yet what kind of traumatic experience is this? As already mentioned, illuminating in this case is the definition developed by Greg Forter in his study *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism*, where he works out a concept of trauma embedded in «the very mechanisms by which our societies reproduce themselves» (FORTER: 2011, 100). Forter echoes the aforementioned definition of insidious trauma elaborated by Root, whose effects she sees as being «cumulative and directed toward a community of people. In effect, it encompasses some very normative, yet nevertheless traumatic, experiences of groups of people» (ROOT: 1992, 241). In other words, we are not talking here of a punctual, overwhelming experience, able to pierce the conscious defenses of the person suspending the experience of time, planting a seed of void, a gap in the flow of the inner stream of consciousness. We have to think, rather, of a different paradigm, something of the order of the already mentioned «systemic traumatizations», which are employed by the ruling classes to implement both «processes of patriarchal gender formation» and «the processes governing the production of class and racial identities» (FORTER: 2011, 100). «Insidious trauma incurred by minority groups usually starts early in life before one grasps the full psychological meaning of the maliciousness of the wounds» (ROOT: 1992, 241-242). This is not the overwhelming event that explodes consciousness: this is instead the everyday instrument used to reproduce multiple dynamics of social oppression.

Thus, if we accept the hypothesis that Ortese's traumatic experience is the systemic traumatization she shared with the underclass,²¹ and not the fear of it, as might happen to the bourgeois in the unsettling

²¹ Discussing Root's concept of «insidious trauma», Laura Brown has emphasized its utility in the analysis of the psychological conditions of social groups: «it can be spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group as well, when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma» (BROWN: 1995, 108). In more recent years, discussing Brown's essay – which has become influential for this sector of trauma studies – Laurie Vickroy has again stressed the importance of the class perspective for the analysis of traumatic experiences in connection with literary analysis, speaking of «the constant stress and humiliation associated with being a person of low socioeconomic status» (VICKROY: 2015, 7).

moments of an unexpected and dangerous encounter, the task of our analysis is now to define how this traumatic experience is communicated in the literary text.

At the formal level, the central feature of her prose will be the communication of the loss of subjectivity that I have proposed as the core of this experience, and which gets translated into a disconnection of the point of view, happening when the pathetic intensity peaks and the reader loses her mimetic connection with the story. We could see this process as retracing the dissociative response elicited by a traumatic experience – a topic discussed by Balaev in connection with literary expression (BALAEV: 2012, xvi) – but in the present context, such dissociation is not represented and thematized, but rather incorporated in the textual structure. At this point the text channels emotional energy toward a form of contemplation of plebeian existence, to which the reader is exposed in a moment of maximum weakness, when the defenses of her own subjective discursivity have been shattered together with the point of view of initial identification. What I call here pathetic intensity is exactly the free-floating anxiety retrospectively produced by traumatic experiences. To reframe this in phenomenological terms, we could define this experience as a non-intentional one, as the mere communication of affects unbound to referential objects. Indeed, as we will see, Ortese never thematizes the affect, the pathetic intensity, in the intentional correlates signified by the text, but rather communicates it via an insistence on the materiality of the text itself, through the rhetorical intensification of writing.

In an essay focused on affect and on the relationship between articulated and non-articulated communication, titled *Discours d'enfance* (included in *Lectures d'enfance*, 1991), Jean-François Lyotard makes reference to Aristotle's distinction between *phonè* and *lexis* in human language. *Lexis* is the articulated side of language through which reality is coded, which only belongs to human expression. On the other hand, *phonè* is the pathetic intensity expressed by the voice, a channel of communication of *pathemata* that adult humans share with infants and non-human animals. In articulated language, *phonè* and *lexis* are not separable, and through the first, affects are attached to the referential meanings of the second:

De fait, la *phônè* ne s'entend guère hors de la *lexis*, chez celui qui parle en articulant. Elle s'entend, même comme silence, dans la *lexis*. La voix

inarticulée timbre la voix articulée. Les affects squattent en silence les significations référentielles et les destinations les plus explicites (LYOTARD: 1991, 139).²²

As we will see in the next section, it is precisely the abundant overflowing of emotional intensity through *phonè* (which can be understood as the emotional *tone* aroused by rhetorical devices, and not only as the tone of the voice itself) that *communicates* the traumatic experience at the heart of Ortese's writing. The literary experience created by her work cannot be reduced to the content of her description of the Neapolitan crowds, which scandalized the audience of the time; it is rather to be sought in the rhetorical intensification through which she is able to recreate that exhaustion of subjectivity from which her writing originates. Yet, paradoxically, as this exhaustion is produced through the intensification of the inarticulate affect, it points back toward the singularity and the relationality of the voice (not intended to be separated by its vocality and therefore its corporeality) according to Adriana Cavarero's «ontologia vocalica dell'unicità» («vocalic ontology of unicity») (CAVARERO: 2003, 189). Therefore, beyond recalling, in the literary experience, that same experience of exhaustion she shares with the crowd, her writing also inverts this process, thus hinting at the absolute singularity of the voice.

Emotional intensity and rhetorical construction in *The gold of Forcella*

The gold of Forcella begins with a self-diegetic voice describing an urban environment with significant use of *passato remoto*: for example, «mi fu impossibile [...] voltai le spalle e tornai indietro [...] pensai [...] mi fermai» (ORTESE: 1994, 63) («it was impossible for me [...] I turned and headed back [...] I thought [...] I stopped»; NC, 63). Ortese thus sets the conventional narrative framework. The narrator is directed to the public pawnshop in Piazza Nilo and must pass through one of

²² «In fact, the *phoné* is hardly heard outside the *lexis*, in someone who speaks while articulating. It is heard, even as silence, in the *lexis*. The inarticulate voice stamps the articulate voice. The affects silently squat the most explicit referential meanings and destinations». As synthesized by Claire Nouvet: «The *phone* is neither the absolute other nor the absolute outside of articulated language. It can inhabit articulated language, but as a squatter, a clandestine guest, an 'outside within', the presence of which articulated language does not even suspect or hear» (NOUVET: 2007, 114).

Naples's poorest neighborhoods in order to get there. Yet the central event of the story is soon overshadowed (and will regain attention only at the end, with the narration of an anecdote at the pawnshop) by long descriptions of the street called San Biagio dei Librai, which «come altre vecchie e poverissime vie di Napoli [...] era fitta di negozi d'oro» (ORTESE: 1994, 65) («like other ancient, impoverished streets in Naples [...] [it] was packed with shops selling gold»; NC, 65), that is, of those shops where people go to sell their own objects of value. The description of these shops and their owners is organized according to a metaphorical imagination that compares their activity to a predatory luring of victims inside an insect nest (later in the story, this metaphor will be clarified and fully deployed, as we will see). The verb tenses used in these descriptions are *imperfetto* and present, which tend to interrupt the flow of the story linked to the *passato remoto*:

una larva d'uomo con gli occhiali, che bilancia nella mano cauta e osserva silenziosamente un oggetto brillante, mentre una donnina o una vecchia, in piedi davanti al banco, lo spia con ansia. Spettacolo ancora più intenso: la trappola momentaneamente vuota, e la stessa larva, uscita sulla soglia come per riposarsi, guarda vagamente intorno, spiando a sua volta, nella folla, l'accostarsi di un viso scolorito dai digiuni, di due occhi vergognosi (ORTESE: 1994, 65).²³

After some lines, a condensed description of the street follows, preceded by a deictic clause, pointing to the immediate presence of something that will be developed subsequently, a structure that is frequent throughout the book: «rimaneva un fatto» («a fact remained»):

Rimaneva un fatto: come già a Forcella, non avevo visto ancora tante anime insieme,²⁴ camminare o stare ferme, scontrarsi e sfuggirsi, salutarsi dalle finestre e chiamarsi dalle botteghe, insinuare il prezzo di

²³ «[A] bespectacled shadow [but the original *larva* also means 'maggot', which is important for the figurative development of the story] of a man who cautiously balances a shiny object in his hand and silently observes it, while a woman, young or old, standing before him at the counter, eyes him anxiously. Another scene, even more intense: the trap now momentarily empty, the same maggot, coming out onto the shop's threshold as if taking a break, looks vaguely around him, spying, in turn, on the crowd, the approach of a pale, hungry face, the eyes full of shame» (NC, 65).

²⁴ Lucia Re notes here the reference to Dante and Eliot: «the spectacle is dreadful and heart-rending, comparable in fact to the vestibule of hell in Dante's *Inferno* (III, 55-57) and in *The Waste Land*, when in the *Unreal City* section the poet exclaims: "I had not thought death had undone so many"» (RE: 2015, 44).

una merce o gridare una preghiera, con la stessa voce dolce, spezzata, cantante, ma più sul filo del lamento che della decantata allegria napoletana. Veramente era cosa che meravigliava, e oscurava tutti i vostri pensieri (ORTESE: 1994, 65).²⁵

The passage is interweaved with patterns of parallelism, introduced by a kind of hyperbole typical in Ortese's descriptions: «non avevo visto ancora tante anime insieme» («I had never before seen so many beings together»). The clauses that follow are, in different ways, structured according to the rhetorical figure of the *isocolon*: «scontrarsi e sfuggirsi, salutarsi dalle finestre e chiamarsi dalle botteghe» («colliding and fleeing one another, greeting one another from their windows and calling out from the shops»). Moreover, they offer a progression from an accumulative series of scattered actions toward a single element that reduces them all back to unity – «con la stessa voce» («with the same voice») – which is in turn defined with a climax structure through the variation of adjective, past participle, and present participle: «dolce, spezzata, cantante» («sweet, aching singer»). The intensity fades in the lyrical distension produced by the alliteration of «l» and the assonance of «a» in the final sentence: «ma più sul filo del lamento che della decantata allegria napoletana» («more the tone of a lament than of the vaunted Neapolitan cheer»). The passage is closed by another noteworthy rhetorical element, the allocutory use of the second person plural with an impersonal function: «oscurava tutti i vostri pensieri» («It ... shocked and eclipsed all one's ['your' in the original] thoughts»). This calls the reader to play a role in the *anamorphosis* of such descriptions from fictional identification to critical (metaliterary) experience, which, in its evident artificiality, interrupts the narrator's point of view.

The description continues to focus on street children, insisting on the use of the impersonal second person plural: «vi spingevano a cercare [...] non vedevate nulla» (ORTESE: 1994, 66) («they forced you to search [...] you could not see anything»; NC, 66). When the mothers appear, that impersonal contact with the audience is brought to a

²⁵ «The fact remained that, as in Forcella, I had never before seen so many beings together, walking or hanging out, colliding and fleeing one another, greeting one another from their windows and calling out from the shops, bargaining over the price of goods, or yelling out a prayer, in the same sweet, aching singers' voices that had more the tone of a lament than of the vaunted Neapolitan cheer. It was truly something that both shocked and eclipsed all one's thoughts» (NC, 65-66).

further degree, as from the second person the speaking instance shifts to the infinitive:

Cercare le madri, appariva follia. Di tanto in tanto ne usciva qualcuna da dietro la ruota di un carro, gridando orribilmente afferrava per il polso il bambino, lo trascinava in una tana da cui poi fuggivano urli e pianti (ORTESE: 1994, 66).²⁶

Moreover, at the figurative level, that first image of the insect nest, or trap, from which larvae (maggots) prey on weaker creatures, arrives at a further degree of clarity as the mothers are here depicted as if assaulting their own children by surprise in order to drag them back into the lairs from which «shouts and cries» are heard. At the same time, the use of the iterative *imperfetto*, even if logically motivated by the temporal clause «every so often», collides with the singulative nature of an event that in this context – the narrator traversing a street – is expected to be punctual and not habitual («Every so often one would dash out from behind the wheel of a carriage»). Even if this is not an uncommon rhetorical procedure,²⁷ it nevertheless plays a role in shattering the fictional illusion – thus cooperating with the general increase in intensity produced by the rhetorical structure of the text to disconnect the reader's identification with the narrative point of view, at this point pushing her toward a lyrical meditation where the «inarticulate affect» (as defined by Lyotard) is free to float in pure contemplation:

Faceva contrasto a questa selvaggia durezza dei vicoli la soavità dei volti raffiguranti Madonne e Bambini, Vergini e Martiri, che apparivano in quasi tutti i negozi di San Biagio dei Librai [...] Non occorre molto per capire che qui gli affetti erano stati un culto, e proprio per questa ragione erano decaduti in vizio e follia; infine, una razza svuotata di ogni logica e raziocinio s'era aggrappata a questo tumulto informe di sentimenti, e l'uomo era adesso ombra, debolezza, nevrastenia,

²⁶ «To look for their mothers would be insanity. Every so often one would dash out from behind the wheel of a carriage and, screaming at the top of her lungs, grab a child by the wrist and drag him into a lair from which emanated shouts and cries» (NC, 67).

²⁷ As remarked by Gérard Genette, its function is often that of conferring a partial iterative value to the whole scene: «par une sorte de classement paradigmatique des événements qui la composent» («through a kind of paradigmatic classification of the events that compose it») (GENETTE: 1972, 204).

rassegnata paura e impudente allegrezza. Una miseria senza più forma, silenziosa come un ragno, disfaceva e rinnovava a modo suo quei miseri tessuti, invischiando sempre più gli strati minimi della plebe, che qui è regina. Straordinario era pensare come, in luogo di diminuire o arrestarsi, la popolazione cresceva, ed estendendosi, sempre più esangue, confondeva terribilmente le idee all'Amministrazione pubblica, mentre gonfiava di strano orgoglio e di più strane speranze il cuore degli ecclesiastici. Qui, il mare non bagnava Napoli. Ero sicura che nessuno lo avesse visto, e lo ricordava. In questa fossa oscurissima, non brillava che il fuoco del sesso, sotto il cielo nero del sovrannaturale (ORTESE: 1994, 67).²⁸

This passage, in turn, re-summarizes all the rhetorical means employed up to this point to enhance pathetic intensity, from the insistence on the formal complication of the signifiers, to the use of metamorphic personifications. It begins with a contrast, opposing the «savage cruelty of the alleys» to «the sweetness on the faces of the Madonnas», as if to stress the gulf separating an impersonal, faceless existence – that of the poor people of the alleys – from the imagined sweetness of a condition of ‘personality’ symbolized by the face, which is at the same time relegated to a dimension of falsity and even ridicule, as only the statues of the nativity scenes in the shop windows seem to be able to afford it. Moreover, the substantives used to express certain qualities («cruelty [...] sweetness») in lieu of adjectives immediately elevate the lyrical tone.

As the passage proceeds with a contemplation of the desperate conditions in which this underclass is forced to live, its lyrical quality is produced mainly by the insistence on the figure of personification,

²⁸ «In contrast to the savage cruelty of the alleys was the sweetness on the faces of the Madonnas with their infant Christs, of the Virgins and Martyrs, who appeared in almost every shop in San Biagio dei Librai [...] It didn't take much to understand that passions here were cultish in nature and precisely for this reason had deteriorated into vice and folly; in the end, a race devoid of all logic and reason had latched onto this shapeless tumult of feelings, and humankind was now a shadow of itself, weak, neurotic, resigned to fear and impudent joy. Amorphous poverty, silent as a spider, unraveling and then reweaving in its fashion those wretched fabrics, entangling the lowest levels of the populace, which here reigned supreme. It was extraordinary to think how, instead of declining or stagnating, the population grew and, increasing, became ever more lifeless, causing drastic confusion for the local government's convictions, while the hearts of the clergy were swollen with a strange pride and even stranger hope. Here Naples was not bathed by the sea. I was sure that no one had ever seen this place or remembered it. In this dark pit only the fire of sexuality burned bright under an eerie black sky» (NC, 67).

giving subjective consistence to concepts and abstract entities: «affects [...] a race [...] humankind [...] misery», while abstract personifications are also the qualities and the accidents through which such entities are characterized. For example, humankind has become «ombra, debolezza, nevrastenia, rassegnata paura e impudente allegrezza» («shadow of itself, weak, neurotic, resigned to fear and impudent joy»: in translation, rhetorical personification is mostly lost in favor of adjectives), where abstract substantives are used again to express qualities, also nurturing an inclination toward parallelisms: «rassegnata paura e impudente allegrezza» («resigned to fear and impudent joy»: same for the parallelism). The only plain simile – misery weaving like a spider the substances of this underworld to ensnare the plebs – helps clarify the original nature of the figurative representation of the streets, where first the shopkeepers as maggots, then the mothers as similarly ambiguous insects, appear to have been subsumed under the sign of the spider since the beginning. In the second half of the passage, the terminology shifts to bureaucratic jargon imbued with a hallucinatory tone, thus inaugurating a tendency that will be fully developed in *The Silence of Reason*, where the reactionary forces will be figured as a «secret ministry for the defense of nature from reason» (ORTESE: 1994, 122). We find here terms like «lowest levels of the populace», «the population grew», «local government», «clergy», all used in combination with poetic, imaginative language and violent metaphors, which are in turn introduced by clauses like «faceva contrasto» («in contrast with»), «it didn't take much to understand», «it was extraordinary to think how», characterized by an objective, impersonal tone. Thus, in the context of a long, lyrical meditation, such abrupt alternation among different registers inevitably disrupts the original fictional illusion the story had produced at the beginning.

To summarize the results of this analysis: if one of the main criticisms of Ortese's book is its unrealistic quality, how she packed her streets with horrors that, although surely plausible taken singularly, were unlikely to be in the same place at the same time all together (this was one of the ironic objections proposed by La Capria),²⁹ we can start to understand, noting the thick rhetorical fabric of her writing, that this

²⁹ «Ma sarà davvero *così alta* la percentuale di nani a Napoli? Se ne vedono davvero *tanti* passare da ogni parte nelle strade?» (LA CAPRIA: 2014, 398). «But will the percentage of dwarfs in Naples really be so high? Are you really seeing *so many* passing through every part of the streets?».

concentration of elements at the level of content, corresponding to an intensification of emotion through the rhetorical fabric of her writing, is precisely aimed at reproducing the traumatic experience at the source of her writing, which enters the text as anxiety and exhaustion, and which, once the narrative point of view has been disconnected in the lyrical meditation, finally confronts the reader, deprived of discursive defenses, in the pure contemplation of the object.

As though wishing to provide a justification to the colleagues and friends from *Sud* who had never forgiven her, in the aforementioned preface to *Neapolitan Chronicles* Ortese writes: «pochi riescono a comprendere come nella scrittura si trovi la sola chiave di lettura di un testo, e la traccia di una sua eventuale verità» (ORTESE: 1994, 9) («although many may find it difficult to understand how writing can be the unique key to the reading of a text, and provide hints about its possible truth»; NC, 9). This suggests that the truth of her work is not meant to reside in the reliability of what she represents, as if in a journalistic reportage, but in the intensity produced by her prose, whose rhetorical construction, as we have seen, aims at freezing the moment in which the empathic connection gets pulled away from the mimetic point of view and lingers in the impersonal zone of free pathos. At this point, the fictional identification with the narrator fades, and the emotional intensity is concentrated (and not dispersed or put to different use) in the speechless meditation on the thing: not the fearful appearance of the poor, as La Capria imagined, but their traumatic routine.

This routine, insidious presence (both material and symbolic) of violence in the life of the lower strata of the Neapolitan population, was the enigmatic experience Ortese needed to communicate in her book on Naples. She was evidently not able or willing to clearly frame it as such; as we have seen, she called it a neurosis originating in metaphysics. Even if not thematized, however, this violence comes to us having traversed the generations since its centuries-old inception. It is clearly not possible, for the reader, to vicariously experience it through the text: and yet, its inscription in the formal structure, through a process of depersonalization in the sudden erasure of the point of view, is able to abandon us, deprived of any discursive defenses, in front of the faceless presence of the crowd, which is both the object of the astonished observation of the narrator and her mirror image.

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Biography

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9. Walking Across Fears: Mapping the Topographies of Trauma in Nadia Terranova's Narratives

Serena Todesco and Stiliana Milkova Rousseva¹

Abstract

In this essay, we investigate what we define as a recurring *topography of trauma* in Nadia Terranova's poetics of space. We argue that in her novels traumatic events, personal or collective, are inscribed onto the cityscapes or seascapes her characters negotiate. Her characters' walking in the city or crossing the Strait of Messina is entwined with the recalling, narrating, and elaborating of the trauma. More specifically, we focus on the writer's representation of Messina's spaces and of human bodies as sites of trauma in two novels, *Farewell, Ghosts* (*Addio fantasmi*, 2018) and *Trembles the Night* (*Trema la notte*, 2022). We propose that the interplay of spatial and gendered dimensions enriches the representation of Terranova's Mediterranean South, for it suggests a dynamic interaction between female protagonists and their traumatized time and space, on the one hand, and between a traumatic past and a present informed by often painful and unacknowledged history, on the other.

Questo saggio esamina la *topografia del trauma* e la *poetica dello spazio* nei romanzi di Nadia Terranova in cui eventi traumatici, sia personali sia collettivi, vengono iscritti nel paesaggio urbano o marittimo attraverso i spostamenti dei personaggi. Proponiamo che il camminare per la città o l'attraversare lo Stretto di Messina diventano modi per recuperare, raccontare ed elaborare le memorie traumatiche. Ci soffermiamo sulla rappresentazione degli spazi messinesi e dei corpi umani quale luoghi di trauma in due romanzi, *Addio fantasmi* (2018) e *Trema la notte* (2022). Riteniamo che l'incrocio di dimensioni spaziali e di genere ulteriormente arricchisce la rappresentazione del Meridione nell'incontro dinamico sia tra le protagoniste e i loro spazi e tempi traumatici, sia tra il passato traumatico e il presente portatore di una storia dolorosa e mai riconosciuta.

¹ This article is the result of a long-term close collaboration and shared ideas. The Introduction and the section on *Trembles the Night* were written by Serena Todesco, while the section on *Farewell, Ghosts* was written by Stiliana Milkova Rousseva. The Conclusion was written by both authors.

Introduction: Messina and its Strait as spaces of trauma and rebirth

When three orca whales crossed the Strait of Messina (Sicily) on 27th December 2019, Nadia Terranova described her intense relationship with the sea that divides her native Sicily from the rest of the Italian peninsula:

Troppi simboli, troppi segnali e tutti insieme: per voi altri che le chiamate coincidenze niente più che un grandioso spettacolo marino, ma per noi altri che crediamo solo all'invisibile un trionfo di costellazioni significanti [...]. Il pomeriggio del 27 dicembre 1908, centoundici anni fa, fu l'ultimo dell'antica Messina, prima dell'alba sulle macerie causate da un sisma venuto dal mare. Qui il rilevatore di strettesità si ferma, terrorizzato: c'è intatta, dentro questo fatalismo nel quale noi strettesi viviamo, anche la paura con la quale conviviamo, da sempre, da prima di nascere, dai nostri nonni prima di noi, la paura di essere travolti e spazzati via ancora una volta, una volta per sempre (TERRANOVA: 2019, 10).²

Terranova evokes the tragic earthquake that in 1908 struck Messina and its neighboring sister city of Reggio Calabria. As she calls upon both an individual and collective experience of trauma in which geography, as well as history, has forged the identity of this city, Terranova also refers to the mythopoeia of the sea as a signifying space where rituals of loss, renegotiation, and rebirth can be performed. The excess of symbols embodied by this narrow stretch of waters thus legitimizes the Strait and its repository of stories primarily told and shared by those who participate in that particular *belief in the invisible*.

If it is indeed true, and almost trivial, to observe a tight connection between social history and geography, perhaps this is even more true

² «Too many symbols, too many signs, and all at once: you call them coincidences, no more than a grandiose sea spectacle, but for us who believe only in the invisible, it is a triumph of signifying constellations [...]. The afternoon of 27th December 1908, one-hundred-and-eleven years ago, was the end of the old Messina, before the sun rose on the ruins caused by the earthquake that came from the sea. Here the detector of *strettesità* stops, filled with terror: inside this fatalism where we as inhabitants of the Strait live is also the fear we have always had to live with, since the time before we were born, since the time of our grandparents, the fear of being crushed and wiped away once more, once and for all». Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian are ours. The novels *The Years in Reverse* (*Gli anni al contrario*, 2015), and *Trembles the Night* (*Trema la notte*, 2022) have not yet been translated into English.

when it comes to fictional representations of Sicilian landscapes and urbanscapes, also due to the island's multiple external conquerors and imposed civilizations throughout history. Particularly, Sicilian maritime and coastal spaces have frequently become literary protagonists thanks to their capacity to bear the traces of human ordeals and losses, founding traumas, divided cultural heritages and different forms of oppression and subalternity. Suffice to mention the Malavoglia family narrated by Giovanni Verga in *I Malavoglia* (1890), or evoke Sciascia's meditations in his *Rapporto sulle coste siciliane* (SCIASCIA: 1982, 204-213). In analyzing the interconnection between place and text in renowned Sicilian authors such as Gesualdo Bufalino and Vincenzo Consolo, Catherine O'Rawe has suggested the existence of a Sicilian «poetics of place». This poetics consist in different narrative strategies, such as the creation of specific literary cartographies and topographies, the description and retrieval of past landscapes through the citation of canonical Sicilian texts, as well as the use of figures and metaphors that combine the material and the symbolic, «with the effect of positioning their own texts as monuments to a disappearing place» (O'RAWE: 2007, 79). In her concern with the creation of a Messina-centered poetics of place, Terranova's connections between individual and collective histories framed by given spatial references indeed reflect some of O'Rawe's suggestions. However, Terranova's urban and natural landscapes of Messina become vehicles of significant transitions involving each character's coping with a given traumatic event. The role of spaces surrounding the individual experiences is thus crucial, as each single spatial reference is charged with a number of functions that accompany and acknowledge the character's difficult journey.

In this contribution, we investigate what we define as a recurring *topography of trauma* in Terranova's narratives in the context of our contemporary post-traumatic culture. Terranova writes a topography of trauma whereby traumatic events, personal or collective, are inscribed onto the streets and sights her characters negotiate so that their walking (or crossing the Strait) becomes tantamount to recalling, narrating, and elaborating the trauma. More specifically, we focus on the writer's representation of Messina's spaces (the city's urban landscape, the sea waters) and of human bodies as sites of trauma. We propose that the interplay of spatial and gendered dimensions enriches the representation of Terranova's Mediterranean South, as it suggests a dynamic interaction between female protagonists and

their traumatized time and spaces, as well as between past memories and present generations that live in the light of a painful and often unacknowledged history.

These interconnections have much to do with the experiences of each character as the space of the city and the Strait elicits psychic and physical memories. Spatial referents thus become the main triggering agents in the re-enactment of that experience (otherwise almost impossible to verbalize in a straightforward manner), and allow the double process of falling into the traumatic experience from a close or distant past, as well as finding a way to be reborn out of it. As Cathy Caruth observes, «the flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility [...]», and, at the same time, «the trauma requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure» (CARUTH: 1995, 153). In light of a re-reading of Freud's insights on trauma in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth also suggests that a given trauma-based pathology cannot be solely defined by the event itself, rather «the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it» (CARUTH: 1995, 4).

Caruth's observations find a powerful echo in Terranova's narratives, where the intradiegetic voice is often telling her own story in order to make sense of it and, at the same time, enters a form of creative journey since, as we shall see, her protagonists are often self-legitimized storytellers. As their voices forge the account of a disruptive experience, they also express a form of *Bildung* bridging together their past, present, and future existence, while seeking a way of coping with the traumatic event through a more intimate relationship with the space around them. Moreover, the postponed nature of the trauma implies an immensely rich potential in terms of literary storytelling, as it offers the possibility to play with different time frames that can turn the reader into a fully involved and, to some extent, actively participant witness.

Our analysis focuses on how, from the constant interplay of human and non-human spaces of trauma, the same events appear to find a form of appeasement once the spaces themselves have been directly negotiated. In other words, in Terranova's novels, walking across the topography of trauma and narrating the experience constitutes a form of elaborating and overcoming the trauma. While acknowledging that the very idea of space pervades both Terranova's fiction and her

essays, we analyze two of her best known and most successful novels, *Farewell, Ghosts* (*Addio fantasmi*, 2018; English translation 2020), and *Trembles the Night* (*Trema la notte*, 2022). We identify specific patterns of trauma epitomization that Terranova utilizes in order to construct a poetics that relates individual experience with a critical reading of collective history. These elements are further strategically reinvented from a gendered perspective since many of Terranova's protagonists are women who enact change by crossing traumatic experiences. This choice is both cultural and political, since by giving voice to Sicilian female stories of psychic and symbolic collapse, mourning, and rebirth, the author's original representations of Mediterranean and Italian Southern spaces confront a tradition famously marked by a canon of male writers. Terranova's works then may be associated with the wave of Italian women writers who, at least since the second half of the twentieth century, have often re-interpreted canonic tropes of Sicily and the Italian South. Authors such as Elsa Morante, Anna Maria Ortese, Fabrizia Ramondino, Maria Attanasio, Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante have often transfigured Southern spaces through marginal microhistories, female creative genealogies, and reframed conceptions of gendered bodies and spaces in opposition to different forms of patriarchal scrutiny and/or symbolic oppression.

As we illustrate in the next sections, Terranova's retrieval of a more porous Sicilian cultural heritage also involves women's bodily and symbolic memories. At the same time, her epitomization of the space around the Strait of Messina bears a tribute to male Sicilian writers from previous generations, such as Stefano D'Arrigo.³ As we argue in our conclusion, Terranova's topographies of trauma may effectively contribute to a more informed and nuanced investigation of the connections between Sicilian literature written by women and the rediscovered role of the island's anthropological and cultural memory from a gendered perspective.

Terranova's trilogy of novels, *The Years in Reverse* (*Gli anni al contrario*, 2015), *Farewell, Ghosts* (*Addio fantasmi*, 2018), and *Trembles the Night*

³ Born in Ali Terme, near Messina, in 1919, D'Arrigo authored one of the few 'opera mundi' of Italian literature, *Horcynus Orca* (1975). Filled with intertextual references to Homer's *Odyssey* and to Melville's *Moby Dick*, it is the story of a young Sicilian sailor and World War II survivor who has to cross the Strait of Messina in order to come home and, once arrived, finds a major threat embodied by a killer whale. Within the literary universe of D'Arrigo, the Strait of Messina represents a crucial space of revenants and myths that call to be unburied.

(*Trema la notte*, 2022), features plots that thematize different forms of personal and collective survival and convey an intense yearning for her native city and the Strait. These recurring elements can be attributed precisely to the participant distance with which the writer looks at these geographical areas. Terranova's fictional inventions are not motivated by a nostalgic drive for an idyllic childhood in Messina, and yet they express a quest for a literary dimension able to restore and creatively reinvent the fragments of the city's precarious identity. In the mind of many Messina residents indeed dwells the sentiment of living in a city that has been deprived of its identity and that, unlike the larger cities of Palermo and Catania, does not enjoy the same form of historical and cultural prestige. Unlike other major Sicilian cities, Messina is a place of transition and passage, a territory where no full identity seems to have lasted or enjoyed historical legitimacy. This sentiment frequently comes from the major trauma of the 1908 earthquake that involved Messina and Reggio Calabria, killing altogether between 80,000 and 100,000 people (DICKIE: 2008, 6). With the destruction of most of its urban space, the city entered a long period of difficult, hindered and interrupted reconstruction that has lasted for decades.

Nadia Terranova steers away from both interventionist (providentialist) and eschatological readings, two interpretations which have informed disaster discourses since the eighteenth century (WALTER: 2017, 164-167), and instead offers a new approach to narrating a collective catastrophe from the very space and time of the earthquake. One may therefore even state that the whole of Terranova's poetics is directly nourished by the consequences of her city's trauma, which still needs a comprehensive recognition, as well as a form of collective healing, due to different socio-political reasons. Terranova's scope is, however, wider and multilayered: the core of her narratives is often constituted by personal memories that, by being connected with spaces, also dynamically refer to the lacerated existence of a given collectivity.⁴ In *The Years in Reverse*, the narrativization of a personal or collective trauma remains implicit in the plot in which two young

⁴ The introspective dimension of Terranova's novels contains subjective experiences that can ultimately become exemplary narratives giving a voice to some of the marginal segments of Sicilian history that have never been fully elaborated on a collective level. This is an element that the author shares with the microhistories of other Sicilian women writers, such as Maria Attanasio and Maria Rosa Cutrufelli (TODESCO: 2017, 303-524).

lovers in 1970's Messina are affected by the troublesome experience of terrorism (TODESCO: 2009). In *Farewell, Ghosts* the atmosphere grows more intimate and the introspective view of trauma is further explored as the city becomes a mirror in which the protagonist's multiple losses are elaborated. Both in this novel as well as in *Trembles the Night* there are numerous references to the consequences of different kinds of traumas affecting individual lives. This is obtained by adopting a contemporary story of loss and mourning, and a historical fresco of a catastrophe, respectively. We analyze these two novels where major traumatic events restructure the relationship between the space of Messina and its waters on the one hand, and the novels' female protagonists, Ida Laquidara (*Farewell, Ghosts*) and Barbara Ruello (*Trembles the Night*).

To examine the ways in which trauma informs the dynamic relationship between bodies and spaces in Terranova's novels, or what we call the topography of trauma, we first turn to *Farewell, Ghosts*, then move on to *Trembles the Night*.

The topography of trauma in *Farewell, Ghosts*

Nadia Terranova's novel *Farewell, Ghosts* could be read as trauma fiction. Not only does it traffic in painful, unclaimed experiences that haunt its characters, it also uses the lexicon of trauma narratives – from multiple references to psychical «wounds» («trauma» means wound in Greek) to the rhetoric of survival and testimony to the realization of the cathartic, curative implications of transforming traumatic memory into narrative memory (CARUTH: 1995, 153). Ida Laquidara, the novel's protagonist and first-person narrator, returns to her hometown of Messina, summoned by her mother who wants to repair the crumbling roof and sell the house. Ida's task is to sort out her belongings accumulated over three decades and help her mother take care of the roof repairs. Returning to her childhood home, Ida is forced to face the ghosts of her past: her father's depression and his eventual disappearance twenty-three years earlier, when Ida was thirteen and his sole caregiver. This traumatic event haunts her and informs the novel's plot and structure.

Over the course of her stay in Messina, Ida gradually retrieves painful memories of the past and begins to tell herself the story of her father's disappearance and how his absence has scarred her and

damaged her relationships with others. The pain and the guilt, never acknowledged, articulated, or elaborated, have opened an abyss between Ida and her loved ones – her mother and her best friend Sara. Both her mother and Sara have stayed in Messina while Ida has moved to Rome and become a writer. In the novel, Ida completes the journey to recovery by exhuming the details of her father's abandonment and integrating them, retrospectively, into an uncomfortable but bearable narrative that frees her from the hold of the past. In other words, she takes possession of her traumatic memories by reliving them and transforming them into narrative. More importantly for our argument, however, trauma in *Farewell, Ghosts* acquires topographic structure as well, always in relation to specific urban sites and practices such as walking. Ida's negotiation of urban space is tied to her ability to imagine and narrate her father's absence, conferring to him a name, a body, and a voice which can be finally laid to rest.

Ida's plot is characterized by the double telling inherent in trauma, «the story of the unbearable nature of the event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival», as Cathy Caruth writes (CARUTH: 2018, 7-8). She traverses precisely this zone of unbearability, eventually accepting her survival and recognizing others in her life as survivors of their own personal battles. And since «trauma fiction mimics the structure of trauma» (NADAL AND CALVO: 2018, 8), Terranova's novel employs the symptoms and mechanisms of trauma to represent Ida's psychical and physical journey. These include a suspended, unfinished or belated temporality; recursive reenactments of the traumatic event; its manifestations in dreams, nightmares, and repetitive images; and the inability to verbalize or represent it (NADAL AND CALVO: 2008, 1-13).

Stuck within the suspended, frozen temporality of the traumatic event, Ida cannot move beyond the specific time, 6:16 am, when her father left the house never to return: «La mattina in cui mio padre era uscito da casa e non era più tornato non era ancora finita: dentro di me l'orologio non aveva mai segnato il pomeriggio» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 32).⁵ She is trapped between the traumatic reality and its continuous reenactments, wavering between the present and «a primary experience that can never be captured» (LUCKHURST: 2008, 5). Ida's narrative is

⁵ «The morning my father left the house and didn't return wasn't over yet: inside me the clock had never signaled afternoon» (TERRANOVA: 2020, 37). This frozen temporality recurs throughout the novel.

likewise characterized by compulsive repetitions and reenactments of the original scene of trauma (her father's leaving) and the sequence of events that led up to his disappearance. This sequence recurs regularly as Ida cannot move past the time and the traces left by her father and continuously replays the scene in her mind, confronting the primary shock over and over again: «[L]o stesso ricordo si ripete mille volte come un nuovo debutto a teatro, mio padre si sveglia alle sei e sedici, spegne la sveglia con un colpo secco e quella sveglia per magia non va più avanti» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 62).⁶

Structurally, *Farewell, Ghosts* is haunted by Ida's recursive nightmares and flashbacks that constitute eight distinct chapters titled *Nocturne* and that punctuate the narrative flow. These nocturnes bring to the surface more of her painful memories and revolve primarily around her father's missing body. Without a body, and without certainty about her father's fate, Ida can never have closure, can never acknowledge his loss, and can never bury and mourn him properly. Her father is at once dead and alive and she continues to conjure up visions of him, to invent stories about what happened to him, and to inhabit the time of his disappearance, as the chapter title *Six-Sixteen Forever* signals. The recursive replay of the past does not allow Ida to articulate and elaborate the trauma, she is stuck in its «double telling»: neither able to acknowledge the unbearable experience, nor to tell the story of her own survival. On the level of narrative structure, the text is likewise suspended within the frozen temporality of trauma: recurring images, phrases, and actions slow down or freeze narrative time while also capturing the peculiar temporal structure of trauma.

The recursive repetitions of the traumatic event reveal its unrepresentability. Ida is unable to communicate with her mother about her father's disappearance, she can never express her distress or give voice to her pain, she never seeks solace or allows herself to mourn. She remains closed off temporally and verbally, unsaid words and unacknowledged feelings weigh on her psyche and on her storytelling as well. The novel wavers between words and silence, the recurring formula «I didn't say» (TERRANOVA: 2020, 127) («Non dissi»; TERRANOVA: 2018, 114) pointing to the unclaimed, unspeakable

⁶ «[T]he same memory repeats countless times like a theatrical debut, my father wakes at six-sixteen, flicks off the alarm, and magically that clock doesn't go forward». (TERRANOVA: 2020, 71, 160, 196).

nature of Ida's memories. In a nightmare, she sees herself as a mute and mutilated kitten without a mouth and without genitals which «vorrebbe parlare, se solo potesse» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 129) («would like to speak, if only it could»; TERRANOVA: 2020, 143). This image evokes Ida's own silence, her figurative mutilation as a traumatized subject who has never grown past the age of thirteen. She is even unable to write her father's name until seventy pages into the text, when she begins the slow process of recovering and narrating her father's name, body, and voice, of confronting and working through the trauma.

Notably, this process begins as physical movement across space, a reappropriation of the city and the experiences it contains. Ida traverses the city of Messina, wearing the «sturdy shoes of memory» (TERRANOVA: 2020, 69) («la memoria ha scarpe buone»; TERRANOVA: 2018, 60) and revisits all the places she frequented with her father as a child, naming city streets and squares, mapping the topography of trauma in the very act of walking (TERRANOVA: 2020, 18, 53, 54, 65-71, 104, 136, 148, 169, 171, 213). Ida is trapped not only within the suspended temporality of trauma, but also within a suspended spatiality. The father's ghostly presence/absence is inscribed onto topographic reality, embedded in Messina's urban fabric. Messina itself becomes a site of trauma, a city riven, in the first place, by the memory (and postmemory) of the 1908 earthquake which razed to the ground most of its buildings and killed close to 100,000 people. Ida is aware of the collective urban trauma that plagues her home city:

«Dev'essere stato dopo il terremoto del 1908 che abbiamo smesso di buttare le cose, incapaci per memoria storica di eliminare il vecchio per fare posto al nuovo; dopo il trauma tutto doveva convivere, accatastarsi, non si poteva demolire niente, solo costruire a dismisura per lo spavento, baracche e palazzine, strade e lampioni: da un giorno all'altro la città c'era e poi non c'era più, e se il disastro era accaduto poteva accadere di nuovo, infinite volte» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 57-58).⁷

⁷ «It must have been after the earthquake of 1908 that we stopped throwing things out, historical memory making us incapable of eliminating the old to make room for the new; after the trauma everything had to live together, pile up, we could demolish nothing, only construct to excess out of fear, shacks and apartment buildings, streets and streetlights: overnight the city was there and then it wasn't, and if the disaster had happened it could happen again, infinite times» (TERRANOVA: 2020, 66).

Ida represents the city itself as traumatized, its topography suspended in an infinite repetition of the past, in excessive urban manifestations of fear and terror. Excess and accumulation characterize her childhood home as well – her mother has never thrown anything out, the past is preserved in its immobility, as if in a museum. Moreover, Ida maps her own memories onto Messina's traumatic history, conflating personal and collective trauma (TODESCO: 2022, 355): like the city, her father «was there and then [he] wasn't». And like the city, Ida is unable to eliminate «the old to make room for the new». This topographic equivalence between city and traumatized subject informs the novel and Ida's topographic path to recovery. Ida gradually succeeds in naming her father's name, recuperating and 'burying' his body, and mourning for him by walking in the city. Negotiating streets and squares that bear witness to her trauma, inscribing an urban text by revisiting sites of painful memories, she manages to give verbal form to her grief.

In *Farewell, Ghosts*, traumatic experiences are contained within the urban topography and then constitute triggers for painful memories and flashbacks. Thus, the city itself participates in the unfolding of both narrative and recovery. Ida's compulsive walks through the city partake in the logic of repetition and reenactment, in the suspended temporality of trauma. In the chapter *The Blue Hour*, Ida maps meticulously her itinerary through the city, describing and naming the steep streets or *torrenti*, the seaside promenade or *passeggiatammare*, squares and public fountains. In the square near the courthouse, by the *Fonte dell'Acquario*, she lies down on a bench and reads the messages written on its iron back. She takes out a green pen she has kept since childhood and writes on the bench: «"Qui giace Sebastiano Laquidara, lo piange la figlia Ida." Quando finii di scrivere il necrologio di mio padre, la furia del suo nome si placò» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 63).⁸ This first mention of the father's name is the first step towards Ida's verbalization of her own suffering, the transformation of traumatic memory into narrative. The father's name acquires textual and corporeal form – as graffiti on a city bench – and becomes part of the urban fabric. The deictic phrase «here lies» solidifies the association between city, father, and daughter. Ida is lying on the bench while writing «Here lies Sebastiano Laquidara». Messina becomes the locus of walking and writing, topographic memory and

⁸ «"Here lies Sebastiano Laquidara, his daughter Ida weeps for him." When I finished writing my father's obituary, the fury of his name subsided» (TERRANOVA: 2020, 71).

narrative coincide as Ida begins to elaborate the traumatic events of the past by way of inscribing her grief.

Ida's perambulations lead her to discover the city's curative potential. She climbs up the hills of Messina to visit her friend Sara and a panoramic view of the city reveals «un plastico alieno», a different perspective: «Io la città la sapevo a memoria, ma così non la guardavo mai; così dunque, dall'alto, la vedeva e la immaginava Sara?» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 155).⁹ The optical and physical distance allow Ida to consider another point of view and to accommodate the knowledge of other people's suffering. Sara tells Ida about her own trauma – abortion and cancer – as she is driving Ida back into Messina. Ida's friend tells her what Ida has not been able to tell herself: «Esiste anche il dolore degli altri, Ida» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 160) («Other people's suffering exists too, Ida»; TERRANOVA: 2020, 177). The cityscape unfolding «incauta e maestosa» outside the window (TERRANOVA: 2018, 163) («heedless and majestic»; TERRANOVA: 2022, 180) parallels the unfolding of Sara's story. But Sara, unlike Ida, has overcome her pain and moved on, while Ida, as Sara tells her, remains a slave to the past (TERRANOVA: 2020, 180). Sara's tale of trauma and recovery provokes in Ida a kind of «empathic unsettlement» that entails a recognition of the traumatic experience of others (LACAPRA: 2001, 41). Ida exits the topographic dead-end of her solipsistic suffering and describes in spatial terms not her own, but Sara's pain: «Il dolore di Sara aveva riempito l'abitacolo» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 164) («Sara's suffering had filled the car»; TERRANOVA: 2020, 181).

The cathartic effect of Messina's map is completed when Ida traverses the city to go to the funeral of Nikos, the young man who was helping repair the house roof and himself, as Ida finds out, a trauma survivor. Attending the funeral together, Ida and her mother can mourn and bury a body that, although not Sebastiano's, allows them to express their grief vicariously, in a kind of «transversal catharsis» (TODESCO: in press): «Io e mia madre possiamo ora dire addio a qualcuno, e per mezzo di un ragazzo salutiamo anche quell'altro che un tempo è stato ragazzo» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 189).¹⁰ Mother and daughter, finally united by their shared mourning, walk together

⁹ «an alien relief map» [...] «I knew the city by heart, but I never looked at it like that; was that how Sara saw and imagined it, from above?» (TERRANOVA: 2022, 171).

¹⁰ «My mother and I can now say farewell to someone, and by means of a boy we also say goodbye to that other who was once a boy» (TERRANOVA: 2020, 211).

through Messina's streets, mapping their itinerary through the city that contains the milestones and landmarks of their personal history (TERRANOVA: 2020, 213). This topographic and toponymic traversal allows the two women to talk about the present and to move away from the past. Now that they have symbolically buried Sebastiano Laquidara, the mother decides not to sell the house. Ida instructs her to throw out all of Ida's accumulated belongings. The literal and metaphorical debris of their now shared trauma can be cleared away to open space for change and growth.

This final ritual taking leave of the past remaps and re-semanticizes the space of house and city, gendering it female, as mother and daughter reclaim their present and future. Ida, freed of the topographic and temporal constraints of trauma, can move on and forward, but without the burden of her father's ghost. Crossing the Strait of Messina on her journey back to Rome, she literally buries her memories of her father – commemorative objects contained in a red metal box – by throwing the box in the sea. This farewell reactivates the passing of chronological time: «Rido e ancora rido, davanti a una tomba che so solo io; e il piccolo orologio al mio polso segna, finalmente, le sei e diciassette» (TERRANOVA: 2018, 196).¹¹ The crossing of the Strait is a figurative crossing as well: Ida accepts her thirty-six-year-old self.

The Strait is a key image in Terranova's spatial poetics. A liminal and intensely mythological space, it is also the novel's literal and metaphorical frame. Structurally, the narrative unfolds within the chronology of two crossings – Ida's arrival and her departure. And within these temporal and geographic (maritime) coordinates, she completes a personal journey through the *topoi* of trauma. We see in action Terranova's mythopoeia of Messina and the Strait as signifying spaces where rituals of loss, mourning, and acceptance can be performed. But Terranova makes a wider claim for women's command of urban topography and maritime geography, one that can be read in the context of a canon of male authors' writing about Sicily. In a recent interview about her latest novel *Trembles the Night*, she identifies the essential topographic nature of her novels in which women negotiate city streets and engage with the cityscape differently from men:

¹¹ «I laugh and laugh again, before a tomb that only I know; and at last the small watch on my wrist says six-seventeen» (TERRANOVA: 2020, 218).

Mi piace raccontare gli attraversamenti delle città. Credo che l'incedere femminile nel mondo sia diverso da quello maschile. Il modo in cui le donne tagliano le strade delle città, attraversano i quartieri, ha uno sguardo tendenzialmente diverso, più onnicomprensivo. Le mie protagoniste camminano sempre e dialogano con quello che vedono, ci entrano in relazione (QUARTI: 2022).¹²

It is Ida's woman's «all-encompassing gaze» that enters in conversation with the city's traumatic past and entwines it with her own traumatic memories, enabling an act of storytelling – she is a writer, after all – that connects individual experience with a critical reading of collective and urban history. And it is Nadia Terranova, a Sicilian woman writer, who trains her own «all-encompassing gaze» on women walking and writing in her native Messina, Sicily, and the Mediterranean.

Healing through unstable landscapes: *Trembles the Night*

The recurrence of the Strait in both *Farewell, Ghosts* and *Trembles the Night* establishes a dynamic dimension within a Sicilian landscape historically marked by the obsession with time and impermanence. The specificity of the Strait's position makes it a hybrid space in which the illusion of individual freedom and/or escapism is troubled by one's awareness of a border that may thwart that very freedom. However, such scenery can also signify the constant need for a border where to negotiate one's will for independence.

The multilayered nature of the Strait is exemplified by the incipit of *Trembles the Night*, a short chapter called *Preludio* in which Barbara Ruello clearly claims her role as the main narrator:

Ho trascorso su questa riva tutte le notti della mia vita, e del mio finto orizzonte conosco ogni inganno: gli occhi di chi nasce davanti al mare si perdono all'infinito, ma il mio mare è diverso, ti spinge indietro come uno specchio. Io sono nata con il muro di un'altra costa a bloccarmi lo sguardo: per questo, forse, non me ne sono mai andata, anche quando l'acqua mi ha offesa e ingannata, ha violato la mia giovinezza e distrutto

¹² «I like narrating the traversal of the city. I believe that women walk in the world differently from men. The way in which women cut through city streets and cross urban neighborhoods affords a different way of viewing the city, an all-encompassing gaze. My female protagonists always walk, converse and engage with what they see as they walk».

chi ero. Da ragazzina, fantasticavo che nella città di fronte vivesse un bambino affacciato a una finestra uguale alla mia, un bambino solitario e rinchiuso in gabbia come me. La sua storia, la mia e quella di questo posto si sono legate sott'acqua e sottoterra, carte di quel mazzo di tarocchi che il vento ci ha disordinato nel buio (TERRANOVA: 2022, 10).¹³

The very idea of a water-triggered movement that pushes back the internal narrator's body, as if she were inside a mirror, suggests the necessity to look back at one's past in order to make sense of it. If Barbara's past has itself become a physical horizon to be coped with, the whole plot of *Trembles the Night* features a series of intertwined situations in which all characters fatally, yet decisively, affect and cross one another's paths. Though the spatial borders of the cities demarcated by the Strait's waters coerce individual lives, people's reactions to dramatic events remain unpredictable, because things evolve according to one toss of cards, i.e., only one of the many possibilities of fate. Furthermore, on a metaphorical level, Barbara's storytelling means to go back (and forth) across the horizon and the waters of traumatic and fragmented memories; yet, this is a necessary step, because reminiscing the earthquake allows the young woman to self-legitimize her longtime desire to become a writer, as well as to visualize another presence – a boy – who is part of a shared experience. Charting one's past thus motivates the novel's double temporality in which intertwined stories give birth to a composite journey that eventually comes full circle as the plot comes to its conclusion, and the *Preludio* is once again evoked:

La sera dopo [...] nel silenzio ho cominciato a scrivere ciò che durante quell'anno era accaduto a me e ciò che era accaduto a Nicola. Non volevo andasse perduto niente né di me né di lui, dei fatti che ricordavo bene e di quelli che mi aveva raccontato nei nostri giorni assieme. [...] Nient'altro è, questo mio romanzo, che una lettura tra le ombre della

¹³ «On this shore I have spent all the nights of my life, and I know every deceit of my artificial horizon: the eyes of whoever is born in front of the sea lose themselves in infinity, yet my sea is different, it pushes you back like a mirror. I was born with the wall of another coast blocking my gaze: perhaps this is why I have never left, even when the water offended and deceived me, violating my youth and destroying who I used to be. As a little girl, I used to fantasize that in the city across from mine there lived a boy looking out of a window just like mine, a solitary boy locked in a cage just like me. His story, my story and the story of this place have tied each other underwater and underground, like the cards of that Tarot deck that the wind has scattered in the darkness». All translations of *Trema la notte* are by Serena Todesco.

storia, dove le luci restano sempre spente e le vite delle persone sono sopraffatte da narrazioni posticce (TERRANOVA: 2022, 140).¹⁴

The incipit and the final lines of the novel are thus two metaphoric horizons that enclose the narrative, just like the horizon of the Strait closes the space shared by Messina and Reggio Calabria and just like the Strait frames Ida's journey in *Farewell, Ghosts*. Barbara is the main narrator of a story she is writing in 1919, as she looks at her own past self in 1908, when she was a twenty-year old girl who experienced the earthquake. Her freedom in reconstructing the memories of her trauma situated in space is testified by an authentic writer's choice, i.e., the idea that her own experience can encompass the story of another person who used to live on the other side of the sea, a young eleven-year-old boy named Nicola. This strategy endows the novel with a dynamic rhythm, where the chapters narrated in a first-person diegesis are alternated by third-person accounts. Moreover, each one of the twenty-two chapters is titled after each of the twenty-two Major Trumps of the Tarot Cards, further suggesting the need to stress how stories, just like earthquakes, throw individual lives into a dimension of mysterious and unpredictable rituality.

Barbara and Nicola are at the center of the novel's attempt to problematize any linear account of the earthquake that struck Messina and Reggio Calabria on 28th December 1908. Rather than adopting a polarization where there are clear notions of «before» and «after» the seismic event, the main characters' lives are already troubled by metaphorical earthquakes that shake their existence, especially by stifling their freedom in their everyday, domestic spaces.

Native of a small town near Messina, twenty-year old Barbara has been deprived of any actual freedom by a cold and overbearing father, especially after her mother's death, and feels unease with her life, where «le porte dell'infanzia erano state tutte malferme» (TERRANOVA: 2022, 17) («All the doors of childhood had been unstable»). Her only comfort is her grandmother who has allowed her to have a cultural education. Barbara is, first of all, a fervent reader of women writers

¹⁴ «The following evening [...] in the silence I began writing what had happened to me and what had happened to Nicola during that year. I didn't want anything of his or mine to get lost, anything of the facts I remembered well and those he had recounted during our time together [...] My novel is nothing but a reading between the shadows of history, where the lights are always out and the lives of people are overwhelmed by false narratives».

such as Letteria Montoro, whose novel *Maria Landini* is frequently evoked in the text as a role-model of female emancipation and rebellion against patriarchal rule. Whereas her father would marry her to a man she despises, she describes herself as «una ragazza che aveva imparato il coraggio dai libri e [...] aveva scelto di somigliare a certe eroine ribelli che si sottraevano ai destini scritti per loro» (TERRANOVA: 2022, 19) («A girl who had learned courage from books [...] had chosen to emulate certain rebellious heroines who escaped from their prescribed destinies»). After a hostile exchange with her father, to whom she has shouted her desire to be *seen* the way she is, on the night of 27th December a raging Barbara takes a train to Messina, where she is accompanying her grandmother to see Verdi's *Aida*. That same night the earthquake strikes Messina, and she accidentally survives by falling on a window on which she was leaning, lost in her dreams of rebellion and independence. Throughout the text, Barbara's strife to survive coincides with a series of encounters that will mark her *Bildung*, such as a group of convent nuns who shelter her during the first few weeks after the event; her neighbor Elvira, who has lost her three little daughters in the earthquake; a Bavarian woman named Jutta, who protects and psychologically supports our heroine like a mother throughout the entire story.

On the other side of the Strait, in Reggio Calabria lives the young son of a rich perfume industrial producer, Nicola Fera, who grew up in an atmosphere of pain and horror (TERRANOVA: 2022, 10). Every night his deeply religious mother Maria forces him to sleep locked in a basement, on a catafalque, with his arms and legs tied by ropes, so that, as she states, the Devil will think that he is already dead and won't take him away from her. The boy has come to accept this constriction as the sole possible form of love, as he finds himself at ease «nell'oscurità, nella ripetitività, nella fantasia di dormire fra i topi, nella ritualità delle paure» (TERRANOVA: 2022, 13) («in the darkness, in the repetitiveness, in the fantasy of sleeping among the mice, in the ritual nature of fear»). Described as an eerie, monstrous, devil-like creature «dall'espressione assatanata» (TERRANOVA: 2022, 12) («with the expression of a possessed»), Maria has a name that clearly subverts the traditional image of the Virgin Mary as the emblem of all reassuring maternal figures. Terranova's vocabulary evokes the atmosphere of a Gothic fairy tale, but also draws from the myths of the sea that the cultural history of Messina shares with its major Greek sources:

La creatura metà medusa e metà ringhio arrivò sopra il catafalco e si fermò a pochi centimetri dal suo viso, per poi aprire una bocca gigante e piena di denti aguzzi. La voce di sua madre lo divorò (TERRANOVA: 2022, 28).¹⁵

Maria's psychological and physical control over her son's body is epitomized by the humid and gloomy space of the basement.

Nicola's going down the trapdoor that leads to the basement recalls a coerced return to a mournful, prison-like womb, a descent into a personal Hell where his will is destined to remain silenced. Whereas, at the beginning of the story, Barbara's domestic environment is fragmented and precarious, without any space for any physical or symbolic room of her own, Nicola lives a situation of suffocation that starts in his own house – a space suffocated and oppressed by a demon-mother who holds him captive. These contrasts are suggested by textual allusions to both open and closed spaces (e.g. the basement for Nicola, the doors of childhood for Barbara). One could say that, especially after the earthquake, Barbara's metaphoric door definitely opens for change, since she doesn't enjoy the safety and the privacy of a family nest. Barbara and Nicola share the fact that they are both deprived of personal freedom, whether in physical or psychological terms.

When the earthquake destroys most of the city of Reggio Calabria, Nicola survives his entire family and remains accidentally buried alive in his basement, which becomes his temporary shelter. He is eventually rescued by Madame, a French clairvoyant who, thanks to her powers, senses the presence of survivors under the rubble. After reaching the port, he manages to go on a torpedo boat that takes him across the Strait, into the destruction of Messina, after having lied to a sailor that his aunt is waiting for him in Messina. As a thirsty Barbara is walking through the ruins of the city in search of water, she ends up on the same docked torpedo boat, and for a brief, dramatic moment, they share the same precarious space, surrounded by the waters of the Strait:

Un'ombra fredda si posò sulle spalle del bambino. Eccoli, l'uomo cui aveva consegnato gli argenti in cambio dell'incolumità. [...] La ragazza si spaventò [...] captò un'intercapedine tra il corpo del marinaio e la porta, respirò per trattenere nei polmoni più aria possibile,

¹⁵ «The creature half-Medusa and half-growl pounced on the catafalque and stood a few centimeters from his face, then opened an enormous mouth filled with pointed teeth. The voice of his mother devoured him».

e prese la rincorsa; l'uomo però la immobilizzò piegandole le braccia dietro la schiena. [...]

– Grazie, – supplicò provando a divincolarsi, ma il soldato le spinse una mano sul seno e lo strizzò, poi infilò l'altra sotto la gonna. La larga schiena di lui coprì l'intero corpo di lei, dando inizio a qualcosa per cui non esiste una parola. [...]

Nicola rimase impietrito [...] La voce gli si era nascosta in fondo alla gola, sparita, dispersa (TERRANOVA: 2022, 67-68).¹⁶

Barbara's resilient and socially confident attitude prior to the rape – a resilience of which a feeble trace is visible in her attempt to thank her violator, hoping he will let her go – is definitely shattered by this brutal event. The transformation is exemplified by her sudden and complete inability to physically react to her aggressor; she has indeed become an inert, passive object, immobilized by terror. The scene described by Terranova effectively mirrors what Judith Herman observes when speaking of post-traumatic stress disorder caused by sexual violence, and its being an «experience of terror and disempowerment» (HERMAN: 1997: 61). The same disempowerment affects Nicola, who has to witness how the sailor brutally violates Barbara; he is terrified by the perpetrator's gaze, whose eyes are similar to his mother's (TERRANOVA: 2022, 68), and his voice is incapacitated, as there are no words that can verbalize the trauma of her violence. Not surprisingly, already the first chapter that describes Nicola's traumatic experience in his basement is entitled *The Hanged Man*, a Major Arcana symbolizing a person whose freedom is destined to be mutilated. At the same time, it is somebody who can look at the world from an upside-down perspective. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear how Nicola's disturbing beholding of the rape will bind him to Barbara forever. His previous ordeals had already characterized him as the story's dreamer who is tormented by a series of visions; after the earthquake and the rape, the most important vision of all connects

¹⁶ «A cold shadow landed on the boy's shoulder. There he was, the man to whom he had given his silverware in exchange for his safety. [...] The girl got frightened. The water she had gulped down had spilled over her cape and hair [...] The girl sensed a crawlspace between the sailor's body and the door, she breathed to hold as much air as possible in her lungs, and took a run-up; however, the man immobilized her by twisting her arms behind her back. [...] - Thank you, - implored she as she tried to wriggle away, but the soldier pushed his hand down her breast and squeezed it, then he stuck his other hand under her skirt. His large back entirely covered her body, starting a thing for which there exists no name. [...] Nicola remained stunned [...] His voice had remained hidden down his throat, disappeared, dissolved».

him with Barbara and her feeling «helplessly broken» (TERRANOVA: 2022, 69) («spaccata senza rimedio»). Nicola will be eventually rescued by a priest who helps orphaned children get adopted by generous families all over Italy, yet he won't be able to speak for months. The harrowing memory of Barbara's paralyzed and violated body constitutes the core of his silence, which will only be broken once his adoptive parents give him the love he has never received from his biological family. Indeed, Nicola's trauma gets elaborated through a series of spatial movements, which mark a brand-new form of freedom: for instance, when he is finally able to enter and exit his basement-shelter as he pleases, when he first crosses the sea from Reggio to Messina, and eventually when is able to leave for the Northern city of Biella, where Sabina and Giuseppe Crestani adopt him. The last, decisive movement in space breaks the spell of Nicola's trauma: during a family trip to a glacier, months after the earthquake, his voice finally returns, as he is able to confide in his new mother by telling her all about Barbara's rape. Ten years later, he will come back to Messina in order to find her. Conversely, ever since the earthquake and until their actual meeting in 1919, Barbara keeps visualizing in her mind a mysterious pair of child's eyes that insistently stare at her, with a calming effect (TERRANOVA: 2022, 77-78). The whole narrative thus creates a thread of shared traumatic experiences for the two co-protagonists: Nicola's upside-down perspective as the Hanged Man was once the result of a constrained condition, yet it eventually becomes decisive for the life of another person, whereas Barbara's inner vision of the boy's eyes accompanies her until, many years later, she meets an older Nicola who has come back to tell her his version of the same story.

From the moment of the earthquake onwards, both Barbara's and Nicola's journeys into trauma are marked not only by the spaces they are bound to cross, but also by the albeit problematic freedom provided by the very gesture of charting these wounded spaces. In fact, even before the earthquake, as Barbara walks towards her grandmother's house she is imagining a different life for herself, as she embraces with her gaze the spaces surrounding her as if they were a theater stage:

[A] ogni passo immaginavo la ragazza che volevo diventare, cercavo il coraggio di piantare i miei occhi negli occhi degli altri [...] Camminavo a testa alta nella sera di Messina, la voce dentro di me si faceva sempre

più forte, ferma, il petto più sporgente, mi trasformavo in roccia, in uno degli scogli della zona falcata della città, avrei arginato i venti e fermato le acque vincendo le correnti contrarie (TERRANOVA: 2022, 21).¹⁷

The desire to merge with the urban landscape is complete, with Barbara's body wishing to become one of the rocks of the city's port (commonly called *zona falcata* because of its shape, similar to a *falce*, a sickle). Eventually, the city's deformed physiology parallels Barbara's coping with her multiple traumatic experiences, as each place is identified with such precision that one has almost the feeling that the narrator's eye acts like a film camera capturing every smallest detail. Therefore, the readers themselves become spectators of the city's transformation into a place suspended between life and death, where bodies and things have lost their original shapes and margins: «Noi, sagome smarginate dentro nuvole di fumo incendiario e calcinacci [...] A poco a poco che continuavano a crollarne parti, la forma della palazzata non era più quella di una linea» (TERRANOVA: 2022, 48).¹⁸

As Barbara has finally been *seen* by Nicola – whose eyes seem to magically follow her everywhere – her own eyes become part of the visualizing strategy of the text, where the city's violated spaces echo her nightmarish suffering. We thus follow her to the remains of the Duomo, where she stops to pray the Virgin Mary, then through the streets scattered across the Palazzata (a long complex of buildings once symbolizing nineteenth-century Messina's flourishing trades), then to the *lungomare* and its waters, in front of the Church of Ringo, where she tries to wash away her shame and disgust after the rape, and for a moment wishes only to drown herself (TERRANOVA: 2022, 69-70).¹⁹

¹⁷ «At each step I would imagine the girl I wished to become, I'd search for the courage to fix my eyes in other people's eyes [...] I was walking with my head held high in the night of Messina, as the voice inside me was getting stronger, firm, my chest was sticking out, I was transforming in a rock, in one of the cliffs of the sickle-shaped area of the city, I would have contained the winds and stopped the waters by winning all opposite streams».

¹⁸ «We, silhouettes with unbound margins inside clouds of flammable smoke and plasters [...]. As its parts kept crumbling down, the shape of the *palazzata* was no more than a line».

¹⁹ Emptied by the violence, Barbara has now stopped associating seawater with bodily freedom, while right before going to the theater, she had wished she could swim away like the legendary man-fish Colapesce (whose original name, according to the legend, is Nicola). See TERRANOVA: 2022, 34.

The crossing of the city's traumatic spaces leads Barbara to a progressive itinerary of rebirth, which coincides with the experience of motherhood. Unlike *Farewell, Ghosts* (where Ida never wants to have children, due to her trauma of loss), Terranova's imagined Messina is here directly connected with a protagonist whose body is unexpectedly faced with a transformative maternity resulting from brutal male violence. Barbara's pregnancy is revealed by Madame who reads her Tarots, in a chapter significantly titled with the Major Arcana of Strength (or Fortitude). Barbara's card will be the Empress (TERRANOVA: 2022, 82), another figure of female force and courage: other than naturally entailing a transformation of her body, this moment also inaugurates a progressive metamorphosis in her identity, starting from the girl's new name. Thanks to a well-timed intervention of friendly and pragmatic Suor Rosalba, she can rename herself Barbara Cosentino and, together with her elective mother-figure Jutta, becomes a primary school teacher for a group of children living in the Villaggio Sant'Elena, a cluster of wooden houses where Messina refugees try to reconstruct their lives. Being a husband-less, single mother is now possible, since all the old social constraints and conventions have been annulled by the earthquake: «Finché non c'erano prove, mi ero illusa che nel futuro avrei potuto vivere come se non fosse mai accaduto: Messina sarebbe risorta, e con lei anch'io. Nelle ferite della città avrei nascosto le mie» (TERRANOVA: 2022, 91).²⁰

Together with Barbara's motherhood and personal transformation, the earthquake brings about many other forms of elective maternal bonds, which stress the idea of a connection between female trauma and reinvention of the self: Jutta, who has lost a child when she was younger, clearly takes Barbara under her protection, just like Suor Rosalba does, whereas Elvira adopts Mimma, the little daughter of her husband and his mistress, thus constructing a new form of relationship with her painful past. One peculiar form of elective motherhood is, finally, represented by Letteria Montoro, the writer whom Barbara admires to the point of rescuing, after the earthquake and her rape, a marble piece of her burial site as if it were an amulet. As Jutta sees the chipped photograph of Montoro in Barbara's hands, she mistakes her

²⁰ «As long as there were no proofs, I had had the illusion that in the future I would have lived as if nothing had ever happened: Messina would have risen again, and I with her. In the wounds of the city I could have hidden my own».

for the girl's real mother, and the latter lets her believe it is so. As it is clear from these narrative strategies, the text highlights the importance of storytelling in relation to the process of trauma and rebirth: the memory of another woman writer inspires and gives courage to Barbara and her newly found self, by also sealing her vocation as a writer of other female traumatic memories and bonds.

Conclusion

In describing the land and the maritime spaces of Messina, Terranova's novels interrogate and retrieve its traumatic memories. Both the city and the sea significantly concur in the forging of a poetics of trauma and rebirth in which the stories of the people and the places they inhabit are intertwined. In *Farewell, Ghosts* and *Trembles the Night* Terranova's female protagonists negotiate Messina's topography and cross the Strait creating their own narratives related to both cityscape and seascape. The Strait is also reinvented from a cultural perspective, its spaces experienced by two women whose existence has been silenced by traumatic events. The rediscovery of city and sea allows them to find a new subjectivity, as well as a new voice, which in the case of Barbara is also the voice of a writer.

Though present in different proportions, the 1908 Messina earthquake is featured in both texts, as it epitomizes other forms of collapsing and catastrophic transitions experienced by Terranova's characters inside the space of the city. Messina serves as a constant reference to their different evolutions and is what psychically circumscribes the shock of a given trauma and its subsequent reviviscence. The city plays a central role in the plot of *Farewell, Ghosts* where Ida returns to her past as she crosses the waters of the Strait and the streets of her city in order to cope with the traumatic and fragmented memory of her lost father. In *Trembles the Night* the main action takes place in Messina and Reggio Calabria: it is through these twin cities, separated by a short arm of water, that the seismic event and its consequences acquire a double, mirror-like dimension, reflected in the lives of the novel's two protagonists.

As both texts creatively utilize sea and urban spaces as tropes, they also show how these become sources of gendered self-determination for both Ida and Barbara, the latter also embodying a female subjectivity who is able to write her own story – both personal and collective –

where crossing the spaces of trauma leads to a rebirth. These novels thus reinvent the cultural memory of the Strait by highlighting its liminal dimension, where the act of crossing sea waters and streets is a ritual allowing forms of survival and regained subjectivity. In this sense, the Sicilian identity suggested by Ida and Barbara dwells in a flux where geographical and cultural realities become functional to women's individual journeys.

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PART 5

TRAUMA, BODIES, LANGUAGES

10. Narrations of Traumatic Childbirth in Contemporary Transnational Women's Writing

Laura Lazzari

Abstract

Nowadays one in three childbirths is experienced as traumatic, with negative outcomes on mothers' mental and physical health. In the last few years, several authors have addressed this topic with the aim of processing and overcoming traumatic childbirth experiences. In my essay, I analyze a transnational corpus of texts published between 2018 and 2019. By close reading, I shed new light on how the trope of trauma shapes contemporary mothers' writing. My chapter focuses on three main points: first, I investigate how childbirth trauma is represented and how it is closely linked to torture and rape; second, I show how the writers not only aim at processing and overcoming a traumatic experience, but also at preventing it from happening again; and, finally, I stress how they engage with a hybrid narrative form to better convey their message.

Oggi un parto su tre è vissuto in modo traumatico, con importanti ripercussioni sulla salute fisica e mentale delle madri. Negli ultimi anni alcune autrici hanno affrontato il tema con l'obiettivo di elaborare le proprie esperienze di parto. Nel presente contributo analizzo un corpus transnazionale di testi pubblicati tra il 2018 e il 2019 e, attraverso l'analisi testuale, dimostro come il tema del trauma da parto modelli la scrittura contemporanea delle madri. Il capitolo indaga tre aspetti principali: la rappresentazione del trauma da parto e le similitudini con le narrazioni di tortura e stupro; l'obiettivo della scrittura, mirata non solo a superare un'esperienza traumatica ma anche a impedire che si ripeta; infine, l'utilizzo di una forma narrativa ibrida che permette di veicolare più efficacemente il messaggio da trasmettere.

Introduction

Birth trauma is recurrent around the globe with dramatic repercussions on mental health issues, with increasing medical and social costs in our society, and a distinctly negative effect on childbirth experiences. It is estimated that nearly one third of childbirths are experienced as traumatic across countries, with negative outcomes on mothers' mental and physical health, and on the long-term wellbeing of their children and families (GAMBLE ET AL.: 2005; SOET ET AL.: 2003; DEFORGES ET AL.: 2020; COST Action 18211). As usual, society informs literature and, vice-versa, texts have the potential to bring awareness and social change. In fact, in the last few years, several memoirs and hybrid genre texts were written with the aim of addressing, processing, denouncing, and overcoming traumatic birth experiences.

Literature on pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum, with a focus on choice, abuse, and mistreatment – sometimes written with a specific feminist intent (GARRES: 2018) – has recently exploded across languages, cultures, and genres. In the last decade, authors around the globe have focused, among others, on gestation (BARRERA: 2020), surrogacy (RAMOS: 2019), pregnancy loss (HEINEMAN: 2014; FRASER 2020; ZERBINI: 2012), and postpartum physical and psychological disorders (MILONE: 2018; MARINO: 2019), to mention only a few.

Some of these writings, based on autobiographical experiences, are more than just personal accounts of childbirth: they also provide detailed evidence-based information, denounce outdated and disrespectful practices – often performed without the patients' consent – and address a widespread paternalistic culture where misinformation, violence, and coercion towards pregnant and laboring women are considered normal. As will be shown, these texts are meant to help readers to make informed and empowered decisions to achieve a more positive birth experience and challenge the current culture of birth.

In my essay, I will compare three contemporary cross-genre texts published between 2018 and 2019 in the United States, the United Kingdom and in Italian-speaking Switzerland from a transnational perspective: Rebecca Dekker's *Babies Are Not Pizzas: They're Born, Not Delivered* (2019), *Give Birth Like a Feminist* (2019) by Milli Hill, and Isabella Pelizzari Villa's *Volevo andare a partorire in Olanda. Storia di un taglio cesareo annunciato* (2018). Despite been produced in different countries and contexts, the narratives considered in this essay are all written by

white authors who experienced some forms of trauma and mistreatment during childbirth. In this regard, it is important to mention that recent research around perinatal care has clearly shown how black women (and their babies) are more at risk of dying during childbirth than their white counterparts.¹ Moreover, regardless of their social status, concerns expressed by women of color are more likely not to be addressed and the pain they suffer not to be believed or taken seriously by their health care providers.² Because of systemic racism during pregnancy, birth, and postpartum, the lives of BIPOC are more at risk and the care (or lack thereof) they receive can easily lead to traumatic outcomes.³

BIPOC are not silent: texts written by Afro-American writers (WARD: 2011; SEALS ALLERS: 2017) and by authors of immigrant origin (GARBES: 2018; RAMOS: 2019) address issues of reproductive justice, systemic racism, and feminism, among others. Moreover, in the last years, advocacy groups and professional associations were created to offer specific assistance and improve health care for women of color.⁴

The corpus of texts considered in this essay has been selected specifically for some shared characteristics: the topics addressed, the hybrid-genre used, and the dates of publication. At the same time, the authors provide an overview of the experience of traumatic childbirth across three different contexts (the US, the UK, and Switzerland), in two distinct languages (English and Italian). This selection is not meant to be representative, but it allows to consistently compare the texts by showing how traumatic childbirth is a recurrent topic in autobiographical accounts across languages and cultures in women's and mother's contemporary writing.

I will adopt a matricentric feminist standpoint (O'REILLY: 2016), by focusing on narratives written by mothers to highlight the strategies

¹ «Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause than White women. Multiple factors contribute to these disparities, such as variation in quality healthcare, underlying chronic conditions, structural racism, and implicit bias» (CDC: 2022).

² The experience mentioned by Serena Williams is a significant example of how black women are not listened or believed by health care providers, regardless of how prominent and wealthy they are (DAWES GAY: 2018).

³ Report on Systemic Racism: <https://www.birthrights.org.uk/campaigns-research/racial-injustice>.

⁴ The National Black Doula Association: <https://www.blackdoulas.org> and the National Black Midwives Alliance: <https://blackmidwivesalliance.org> are just two of numerous examples.

adopted by the authors to overcome trauma and bring change in our society. The methodology adopted in this chapter draws inspiration from Ruhman et al. (2020) and Lambert and Lambert (2012): through close reading, I use qualitative descriptive approach and textual analysis to shed new light on how the trope of trauma shapes contemporary mothers' writing from a feminist standpoint.

In my chapter, I will focus on three main aspects. First, I will investigate how traumatic childbirth is represented by stressing how narratives of birth trauma are closely linked to other types of traumatic outcomes, including those portrayed in war and sexual violence accounts. Second, I will show how writers not only aim at processing and overcoming a traumatic experience, but also at preventing it from happening again. Finally, I will highlight how the authors succeed in finding an effectively hybrid genre form to convey their message, by intertwining personal account, data, and evidence-based research.

Literature and trauma

To better frame the context in which the narratives taken under scrutiny were produced, I will briefly introduce the authors who will be compared in this chapter by giving short bio-bibliographical information. Rebecca Dekker is a US childbirth trauma survivor. A former university professor in Nursing, Dekker founded Evidence Based Birth®, whose mission is to raise the quality of childbirth care globally, by putting accurate, evidence-based research into the hands of families and communities, so that they can make informed and empowered decisions.⁵ She is also the author of the book *Babies Are Not Pizzas: They're Born, Not Delivered* (2019) that will be discussed in my contribution.

Milli Hill founded the global Positive Birth Movement in the United Kingdom.⁶ A writer and freelance journalist with particular interest in women's health, she published *The Positive Birth Book* (2017), *Give Birth Like a Feminist* (2019), and *My Period. Find Your Flow and Feel Proud of Your Period* (2021).

Isabella Pelizzari Villa teaches ancient Greek and Latin in high school in Lugano (Switzerland). After a traumatic birth, she felt the

⁵ Evidence Based Birth: <https://evidencebasedbirth.com>.

⁶ Positive Birth Movement: <https://www.positivebirthmovement.org>.

urge to write a therapeutic memoir to speak out and recover from her negative experience. Her book titled *Volevo andare a partorire in Olanda. Storia di un taglio cesareo annunciato* (2018) retraces the story of her pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum, by denouncing mistreatment, coercion, and obstetrical violence. Isabella – who defines herself as a childbirth activist and feminist – is a steering committee member of the Associazione Nascere Bene Ticino⁷ and facilitates a peer-support group for childbirth trauma survivors.

As it is very well known, literature is a particularly effective tool to address, understand, negotiate, and cope with trauma (CARUTH: 1996; LUCKHURST: 2008). In this essay, I chose to focus exclusively on a series of memoirs and cross-genre texts based on personal experiences. For this reason, all testimonies discussed here rest on autobiographical and biographical accounts written by trauma survivors and their associates:

Literary authors have [...] attempted to convey the particularity of the event, to engage the reader with the characters so that they feel something personal for them, that this is no longer something that happens to other people, in some other place but something happening widely, repeatedly, to your neighbor, your colleague, your friend, your sister, your brother – to you – now (MILLER: 2018, 228).

Following this line of thought, autobiographical accounts may play an even more influential role in conveying this message. As Rebecca Dekker argues: «I tell this story of my first daughter's birth because I'm not alone. When I share this story with others, about half the time, the person I'm telling the story to, starts crying. Why are they crying? Because they identify with my story» (DEKKER: 2019, 12).

Hence, the act of writing has multiple aims: it may support to overcome a traumatic experience by denouncing obstetrical violence and abuse in childbirth, and, by doing so, it can help other people identify with the story, creating awareness and acknowledging a silenced women's experience.

Representations of trauma in childbirth

Narratives of traumatic childbirth, obstetrical violence and coercion during pregnancy, labor and delivery address similar topics and share

⁷ Associazione Nascere Bene Ticino: <https://nascerebene.ch>.

common representations across languages and cultures. In this section, I will compare texts written by Dekker, Hill, and Pelizzari Villa to highlight themes and perceptions that clearly show how trauma narratives of childbirth are experienced and represented in analogous ways.

First, birth trauma testimonies can be linked to accounts of rape and war since obstetric violence, sexual abuse, combat, and torture are closely intertwined and equally perceived by the victims. I argue that in transnational contemporary women's and mother's writing we are currently assisting to a similar phenomenon to that characterized in the 1970s, when «women's liberation movement brought to public awareness the widespread crimes of violence against women. Victims who had been silenced began to reveal their secrets» and tell their stories (HERMAN: 1997, 2). Herman has shown how the study of psychological trauma alternates periods of active investigations to oblivion. From the end of the nineteenth century, this «forgotten history» has clearly resurfaced on three distinct occasions in affiliation with political, anti-war, and feminist movements in relation to hysteria, war, and to sexual and domestic violence (HERMAN: 1997, 7-9). Similarly, in the last years, in the wake of #metoo and other social movements denouncing sexual and obstetric violence such as #bastatacere in Italy,⁸ *El parto es nuestro* in Spain,⁹ and *Birth Monopoly* in the US,¹⁰ just to mention a few, women and mothers have started to reveal their stories of abuse, coercion and violence during pregnancy, birth and postpartum. Some testimonies are anonymous, while others are identified by name and face, and shared on blogs and social media or published in the form of memoirs, hybrid genre texts, and novels.

Parallels can be drawn between sexual violence and obstetric violence. First, «[c]urrent statistics seem to indicate that females remain more at risk of sexual violence than men» (MILLER: 2018, 236). The same stands for violence in childbirth: since women give birth, mothers (and their children) are more at risk of incurring in some form of mistreatment and coercion during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum.¹¹ Second, if

⁸ Osservatorio sulla violenza ostetrica: <https://ovoitalia.wordpress.com/bastatacere>.

⁹ *El parto es nuestro*: <https://www.elpartoesnuestro.es>.

¹⁰ *Birth Monopoly*: <https://birthmonopoly.com>.

¹¹ The term 'female' refers here to a biological body who can become pregnant, give birth, or lactate because it owns ovaries, uterus, vagina, or milk ducts, and is therefore at a higher risk of obstetric violence. It is important to stress, though, that birthing people may not identify themselves as 'female', 'women', or 'mothers'.

sexual violence is one of the most likely causes of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (TOLIN AND FOA: 2006, 959), mistreatment in childbirth can also easily lead to PTSD (COST Action 18211).¹² Finally, both victims of sexual and obstetric violence are regularly silenced, not believed, and may feel ashamed to speak out publicly to face their perpetrators and denounce the assaults.

Moreover, like «memory wars», autobiographical texts on childbirth talk about personal experiences of hardship (MILLER: 2018, 233). In several personal accounts of labor and delivery, mothers are depicted like prisoners: they are trapped in their beds, the care they receive is experienced as torture, and their freedom of movement, choice, and rights appears to be limited and restricted. Dekker states:

I was transformed from a healthy pregnant woman to a patient in a hospital gown, lying on my back in a hospital bed [...] I was beginning to feel a little bit trapped – realizing that I was about to undergo labor without food, drink, movement, or permission to use the bathroom (DEKKER: 2019, 5-6).

She retrospectively denounces forms of mistreatment endured in childbirth that are described like torture, and clearly show signs of sexual and psychological abuse: she was not allowed to eat or drink during labor, she «was hooked up to fluids that dripped into a vein in [her] arm» (DEKKER: 2019, 21), she was forced to lay on her bed, had to endure frequent unnecessary vaginal exams, was coerced to have a cascade of unrequired interventions, she was not offered comfort measures besides epidural, she felt unsupported by her healthcare providers, and ultimately her baby was taken away from her for several hours for no real medical reasons.¹³

Obstetric violence and mistreatment occurring to transgender people, member of the LGBTQ+ community, non-binary people, among others, will not be specifically treated in this chapter.

¹² Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects 4% of women after birth and up to 18% of women in high-risk groups (COST Action 18211).

¹³ In her book and articles published on her website, Dekker provides information about protocols and procedures that are routinely performed in hospitals around the globe – such as recurrent vaginal exams to monitor progress of labor – showing that they are not evidence-based. She suggests that protocols should be changed, and procedures avoided, limited, or refused. According to Dekker, «researchers have found that it takes, on average, 15 to 20 years after something is proved in medical research before it becomes used routinely in hospitals. This time lapse even has a well-known name – the ‘evidence-practice gap’» (DEKKER: 2019, 20).

Before delivering her twin daughters, Isabella Pelizzari Villa goes through a similar experience. Her OB strips her membranes without asking for her consent.¹⁴ Later, a midwife routinely breaks the first amniotic sack by slipping two fingers and a crochet in her vagina and cervix, without informing her of the procedure (PELLIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 3234). After these intrusive and painful interventions, Isabella – like Rebecca – undergoes several uncomfortable vaginal exams. The words chosen to describe her countless dilation checks recalls sexual assault and rape in the imagination of the reader:

I controlli della dilatazione sono più dolorosi delle contrazioni. Sono invasivi e provo vergogna. Sono seduta sul lettino con lo schienale semi rialzato, le gambe divaricate e piegate con i talloni appoggiati alle cosce, i genitali esposti per agevolare la procedura, il mio sesso 'offerto' al mio ginecologo. Non c'è un lenzuolo che protegga la mia intimità. La necessità di un telo è sentita soltanto durante l'episiotomia, per evitare che la donna sia traumatizzata dalla procedura. Grazie a questo 'accorgimento' alcune partorienti scoprono che la loro vagina è stata incisa solo dopo l'intervento. Sono visitata a turno dal mio ginecologo e dalla levatrice. Mi irrigidisco ogni volta che mi toccano (PELLIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 3454).¹⁵

In Pelizzari Villa's story of abuse, mistreatment continues all the way through labor, abdominal delivery, and postpartum. Like in Dekker's account, her daughters – despite being safe and sound – are taken away from her without explanations or apparent medical reasons. She is not allowed to see them until the day after, adding trauma to an already trying experience:

¹⁴ «Membrane sweeping is a mechanical technique» commonly used to induce labor «whereby a clinician inserts one or two fingers into the cervix and using a continuous circular sweeping motion detaches the inferior pole of the membranes from the lower uterine segment» (FINUCANE ET AL.: 2020, 1). Informed consent should be asked before performing this procedure.

¹⁵ «Vaginal exams are more painful than contractions. They are invasive and I feel embarrassed. I am sitting on the bed with the backrest semi-raised, legs apart and bent with the heels resting on the thighs, the genitals exposed to facilitate the procedure, my sex 'offered' to my gynecologist. There is no sheet that protects my privacy. The need for a sheet is felt only during the episiotomy, to prevent the woman from being traumatized by the procedure. Thanks to this 'trick' some pregnant women discover that their vagina was incised only after the surgery. Vaginal exams are performed in turn by my gynecologist and the midwife. I stiffen every time they touch me». All translations from Italian into English are mine.

Chiedo loro di poter vedere S. e V. non appena sento i loro primi vagiti. Qualcuno mi risponde di no senza fornire spiegazioni. Ho il magone. Mi sento spogliata. Non ci sono valide ragioni mediche per non mostrarmele [...] Alla nascita le mie bambine stanno bene. L'indice Apgar di entrambe è 8/9 su 10. V. pesa 2,500 kg e S. 2,600. Sono messe entrambe nell'incubatrice per ore, perché sono gemelle o per ammortizzare il costo del macchinario. Non le rivedrò fino al mattino (PELIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 3748).¹⁶

Trauma «is portrayed as a haunting repeated image that continues to linger in the victim's mind long after the tragedy has occurred» (RUHMAN ET AL.: 2020, 99-100). This is particularly true for pivotal experiences such as childbirth and its subsequent memories since, according to Dekker, «what happens in birth stays with you for the rest of your life» (DEKKER: 2019, 12). As in the Freudian idea of *Nachträglichkeit*, moreover, trauma cannot be processed at the very moment in which it is experienced, but only belatedly: «an event can only be understood as traumatic *after* the fact, through the symptoms and flashbacks and the delayed attempts at understanding that these signs of disturbance produce» (LUCKHURST: 2008, 5). In fact, Rebecca acknowledges only later that she indeed experienced «birth trauma» (DEKKER: 2019, 13) and that such trauma is quite recurrent in contemporary society:

Birth trauma is defined as a birth event with actual or threatened serious injury or death *or* when the person giving birth feels they have been stripped of their dignity or treated inhumanely. Birth trauma is estimated to occur in 33% to 45% of all births in the US and Australia. These numbers are astoundingly high and explain why it's so common to hear 'horror stories' about childbirth from family and friends (DEKKER: 2019, 12).

Starting from the narration of her own singular experience, the author refers to data and research, showing a pattern of abuse and trauma in how childbirth is experienced. By intertwining her subjective narrative

¹⁶ «As soon as I hear S. and V. crying, I ask them to see my daughters. Someone answers it is not possible without providing explanations. I have a lump in my throat. I feel empty. There are no valid medical reasons not to show them to me [...] At birth, my girls are fine. Their Apgar index is 8/9 out of 10. V. weighs 2,500 kg and S. 2,600. Both are placed in the incubator for hours, either because they are twins or to amortize the cost of the machinery. I won't see them again until morning».

with facts, in what is an effectively hybrid genre, she successfully manages to generalize her own personal account so that it can no longer be dismissed or considered as non-relevant by her interlocutors.

Similarly, Milli Hill refers to the relevance and recurrence of trauma and PTSD as consequences of negative childbirth experiences. Despite different healthcare systems and protocols, the outcomes in the UK are very similar to the US and Australia:

Currently we are not getting birth right. This matters primarily because birth is a key human experience that will be remembered in great detail by a woman, and her partner, for the rest of their lives [...] Feeling of trauma, shame, guilt, powerlessness, violation, and regret pervade the postnatal experience and reach far into the future mental and emotional well-being of women, and by default their relationships not just with themselves, but with their partners and children too. Statistics vary, but traumatic birth in the UK alone is estimated to affect nearly one in three women a year with many of those – between 4 per cent and 18 per cent – going to develop PTSD (HILL: 2019, 10-24).

As previously mentioned, rape, torture, and war are listed among the events that most likely lead to PTSD:

Feminists and antiwar activists in the 1970s and 1980s developed a theory that linked rape with torture and combat as traumatic events which break down and disorganize the self. The psychosocial model of trauma purported to scientifically establish that rape, torture, combat and other conditions that render the individual helpless caused profound psychological damage, in the form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (HARRINGTON: 2010, 97, quoted in MILLER: 2018, 232).

Childbirth trauma should be added to the abovementioned list, since violence and abuse are experienced and perceived in similar ways, and the psychological consequences are comparable to those that occur in the event of rape, torture, and combat. Moreover, women in labor experience conditions that render them helpless, causing profound and lasting psychological damage.

Feelings of helplessness and loss of control are key points in negative accounts of childbirth. The act of writing can help to regain control – *a posteriori* – over an experience that was endured passively. As a matter of fact, Pelizzari Villa states that: «Grazie alla scrittura mi sono riappropriata di un'esperienza sulla quale non avevo avuto il

controllo» (PELIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 66) («Writing about it helped me to regain possession of an experience over which I had not had control»).

Banalization of trauma can invalidate maternal pain and jeopardize a faster recovery (NADAL AND CALVO: 2014, 7). This is particularly true and recurrent in childbirth experiences: if there is no tragic outcome, traumatic childbirth is rarely acknowledged in our culture. What matters in our society is that mothers and babies are alive and healthy. Dekker states:

Women who experience birth trauma often describe cold, unsupportive, or degrading and inhumane care. Their care providers don't communicate with them – they may talk over them as if they're not there. The woman may fear for their safety or that of their baby, especially if they're told they must comply "so we can keep your baby safe". And in the end, their experience is almost never validated. Everyone tells them, "But you have a healthy baby" (DEKKER: 2019, 13).

Similarly, Pelizzari Villa's pain is not acknowledged by society, family, and doctors:

Avevo l'impressione che gli altri non vedessero la mia ferita. Non mi sentivo riconosciuta nel mio dolore. Non mi sentivo amata [...] Quando ho partorito il mio dolore non è stato preso sul serio. Mi sono sentita ripetere che ero fortunata e dovevo essere felice perché le mie figlie erano sane e belle. Le obiezioni dei medici e dei miei familiari mi facevano male, perché sembravano liquidare in fretta e togliere valore a ciò che precedeva, invece io avevo bisogno di soffermarmi sul 'prima' [...] Per la società la nascita di un bambino sano legittima a posteriori tutti gli interventi del medico e rende assurdo il dolore materno (PELIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 84, 274).¹⁷

According to Judith Herman, it is impossible to fully recover from trauma, since its «[r]esolution [...] is never final; recovery is never complete» (HERMAN: 1997, 152). This is confirmed by Pelizzari Villa

¹⁷ «I had the impression that others did not see my wound. My pain was not acknowledged. I didn't feel loved [...] When I gave birth, my pain was not taken seriously. I was told that I was lucky, and I had to be happy because my daughters were healthy and beautiful. The objections of the doctors and my family hurt me because they seemed to quickly liquidate and take away the value of what preceded, instead I needed to focus on what happened "before" [...] For our society, the birth of a healthy child legitimizes a posteriori all doctor's interventions and invalidate maternal pain».

who argues that, even though she managed to process her experience, she still needs to cope with her loss:

Ho impiegato quattro difficili anni a elaborare il mio taglio cesareo [...] La scrittura mi ha aiutata a combattere i sintomi del trauma e a comunicare le cose che ritenevo importanti sul mio parto, ma quando ho finito il libro ho provato l'inanità di chi ha fatto tutto quello che poteva fare. Avevo elaborato il trauma, ma dovevo convivere con la mia perdita (PELIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 66, 132).¹⁸

Preventing trauma from happening again

Culler (2011) argues that literature has the potential to allow individuals to know the terrible state of the world and motivates them to make changes (cit. in RUHMAN ET AL: 2020, 99). Accordingly, Dekker, Hill, and Pelizzari Villa's writings are not only meant to process and overcome a traumatic experience but are also intended to bring change in our society, particularly on how perinatal care is performed and experienced. As Berger states: «Stories should be heard and remembered, and mistreatment must be denounced to prevent from happening again» (BERGER: 2016, cit. in RUHMAN ET AL: 2020, 99). Therefore, childbirth activism and feminism are integral parts of these authors' writings and actions. Isabella Pelizzari Villa defines herself as an activist and childbirth feminist (PELIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 448). Her book was written specifically to inform and empower other women so they could reach a more positive and fulfilling experience, possibly avoiding trauma:

Per elaborare il trauma del proprio parto alcune donne rimangono di nuovo incinte, altre diventano doule, levatrici, attive nella nascita e attiviste della nascita, rinnovando la solidarietà e l'autocoscienza femminile [...] Io ho scritto un libro *per* le donne [...] La rabbia è movimento. Le emozioni, come indica l'etimologia della parola, spingono gli individui all'azione. Il dolore vivo e vitale del parto, quando è bonificato dagli aspetti aggressivi, distruttivi, ostili, rappresenta uno stimolo socialmente utile a cambiare e migliorare il sistema natale (PELIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 440-448).¹⁹

¹⁸ «It took me four difficult years to process my C-section [...] Writing helped me fight the symptoms of trauma and communicate what I thought was important about my birth, but, when I finished the book, I felt the inanity of someone who has done everything she could. I had worked through trauma, but I had to live with my loss».

¹⁹ «To process the trauma of their own birth, some women become pregnant again,

A feminist intent is also present in Milli Hill's writing, as the title of her book clearly shows. In *Give Birth Like a Feminist*, Hill addresses the importance of women's empowerment in pregnancy and childbirth. She strongly believes that «birth is a feminist issue. And it's the feminist issue nobody is talking about». Therefore, she invites women to «take charge, take control, and make conscious choices» about their own experiences (HILL: 2019, 8), drawing a clear comparison with the #metoo movement: «We now need to turn the #metoo spotlight on the experience of childbirth [...] Little ripple of recognition that we might need a #metoointhebirthingroom have already begun» (HILL: 2019, 36, 99). The power of storytelling to bring change in our society is also clearly stressed by the author: «If women begin truly to voice their discontent, and say "this is what it was like for me", then this will surely help in the construction of empathy; there is huge power in storytelling» (HILL: 2019, 100). In addition to this, Hill advocates for a feminist sisterhood in motherhood, hoping that her book will bring women together: «I sincerely hope that this book will pull women together to work on this problem by truly listening to each other and in the true feminist spirit of solidarity» (HILL: 2019, 11).

Dekker mentions that her evidence-based research and dissemination on pregnancy and childbirth was originally meant to help her own children to receive better care in the future, since «[t]he future health of [her] children depended on [her] ability to fix the maternity care system before they had children on their own», but she soon realizes that her «readers [...] also depended upon the work [she] was doing» (DEKKER: 2019, 74). Like Hill, she hopes that her book, her research, and her experience will bring mothers together to change birth narrative and culture, and empower women in childbirth:

I charge you to follow in my footsteps [...] I do want you to find the courage [...] And know that you are not alone! We're all in this together! Take heart, and envision this: long after you and I are gone, future generations will look back and remember what happened here. They will remember that we were the ones who stood up and said: No more.

others become doulas, midwives, active in birth and birth activists, renewing solidarity and female self-awareness [...] I wrote a book *for* women [...] Anger is movement. Emotions, as the etymology of the word indicates, push individuals to action. The living and vital pain of childbirth, when it is cleared of the aggressive, destructive, hostile aspects, represents a stimulus that can be used in a productive way to change and improve the birth system».

We will no longer tolerate poor care and preventable harm in childbirth. A new cycle of empowerment and compassion during childbirth begins with us, and it begins today (DEKKER: 2019, 222).

The authors' feminist intents are not limited to the act of writing: it goes far beyond. Besides sharing their own experiences through narratives of trauma, they become childbirth activists and disseminators. They either quit their job, start a new business, or create and facilitate a peer-support group. Through narration (of personal experiences), scholarship (research and dissemination of evidence-based information), and activism (by supporting, educating, and empowering women) these writers aim at bringing change in our society to prevent trauma from happening again.

A literary genre to better address childbirth trauma

Narrative medicine is a discipline meant to improve empathy and better communication between health care providers and their patients (CHARON: 2001), and overall promotes a more comprehensive and humanistic care in the spirit of the Medical Humanities. A peculiarity of narrative medicine is that:

Unlike scientific knowledge or epidemiological knowledge, which tries to discover things about the natural world that are universally true or at least appear true to any observer, narrative knowledge enables one individual to understand particular events befalling another individual not as an instance of something that is universally true but as a singular and meaningful situation (CHARON: 2006, 9).

For the same reason, however, singular accounts of mistreatment are not always considered with the attention they deserve. They are hastily dismissed by healthcare providers as personal and subjective stories that lack universal relevance. This attitude perpetrates a recurrent response that victims of sexual violence must face when they are not believed, and struggle to convince their audience that violence has indeed been perpetrated. Similar questions arise when the relationship between literature and sexual trauma is discussed. According to Miller, the debate on representation of sexual trauma in literary texts is complicated by «conflicting expectations regarding the role of literature» (MILLER: 2018, 229). In fact, if literature «has a

political or social function as art, then how do we determine if aspects of these works were gratuitous or if they are meant to challenge us with a representation of violence that many people do experience?» (MILLER: 2018, 229).

The perspective offered by the close reading of three books may probably not be considered representative enough to discern if a form of violence is routinely performed on women. However, the authors' choice to discuss similar and recurrent topics, and the description of procedures performed without consent, show that a pattern of mistreatment and trauma is indeed experienced by contemporary women in childbirth across the globe.

To convincingly address the topics of violence and trauma and avoid having their complaints dismissed as merely personal accounts with no universal relevance, the writers do not choose to engage with memoirs but publish innovative cross-genre texts instead. This hybrid narrative form allows them to better integrate personal accounts, data, reference to most recent evidence-based articles, testimonies from other people, and practical advice in the same book. In her essay on *Trauma and Sexual Violence*, Miller says that a new narrative and interdisciplinary form was necessary to be understood and respected while addressing the topic of sexual violence in writing:

as scientific work continues to evolve, and cultural and legal understandings of the scope and nature of sexual violence also change, so must the literary creative output and the critical response. The importance of true interdisciplinary, transparency, and dynamic interactions between the sciences and the arts has never been so evident [...] Indeed, debates over truth of memories and the ability to voice trauma may affect the reportage and criminalization of sexual crimes. The emphasis is on finding a narrative form that will reflect and illuminate the true experience but that will be understood and respected by external authorities (MILLER: 2018, 237-238).

The three writers discussed in this chapter have successfully mastered this challenge and managed to find the appropriate hybrid genre form to convey their message. Personal, intimate accounts of trauma are corroborated by references, data, statistics, and quotations from scientific articles pertaining to different fields and disciplines and published in renowned peer-review journals. The duality of the genre chosen for her book is clearly acknowledged by Pelizzari Villa:

«avrei potuto pubblicare due lavori separati, il diario intimo e il saggio teorico. Il mio libro ha due anime unite nello sforzo della guarigione» (PELIZZARI VILLA: 2018, 491) («I could have published two separate works, a personal memoir, and a theoretical essay. My book has two souls united in the effort of healing»).

Some readers will empathize with the authors' personal stories while others will consider them subjective, non-representative or even biased. However, evidence-based references, data, and practical information are less questionable and less partial. Dekker, Hill, and Pelizzari Villa convey their message through emotions and scientific facts. By doing so, they succeed in showing how mistreatment and non-evidence-based practice are still currently and routinely performed in our health care systems, and advocate for a change.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed three cross-genre texts published in recent years pertaining to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds that address trauma and mistreatment in childbirth. The analysis has shown how similar patterns, topics and intentions are shared and developed in the books taken under scrutiny and has highlighted how narratives of obstetric violence and their dramatic outcomes are analogous to those expressed in the accounts of sexual abuse and war stories.

Dekker, Hill and Pelizzari Villa are writers and scientific disseminators who define themselves as childbirth activists and feminists. Hence, their aim is not only to address, denounce, and overcome a personal traumatic experience, but is also intended to bring change in our society and healthcare systems. Their goal is to provide scientific evidence-based research to enable women to make informed and empowered decisions to avoid trauma from happening again. To do so, they develop a new hybrid narrative form that combines personal, intimate, and first-person accounts with scientific research, data, and statistics. This innovative genre is particularly appropriate to convey their message in a more effective and influential way. It appears that these writers successfully managed to find a narrative form that not only reflects the emotional aspects of their private dramatic experiences but is also understood and respected by external authorities. Their final goals are to be considered as serious interlocutors in discussions revolving around pregnancy, childbirth,

and postpartum, to move their readers to action, bring awareness and change in society, and, by quoting Rebecca Dekker, «fix» the maternity care system.

This chapter has addressed the power of telling stories in three books that discuss childbirth trauma by raising similar questions, denouncing analogous problems, and sharing near experiences. Storytelling allows us to discuss trauma and other controversial topics, commonly silenced and considered taboos in our society. While the corpus of texts chosen for this analysis is not meant to be representative, the concerns expressed and the extent of the problem pertaining abuse and trauma in childbirth are confirmed by scientific research, and data collected so far are alike around the globe. However, it is important to note that these authors – despite coming from distinct developed countries, speaking different languages, describing, and denouncing diverse health care systems – share some other characteristics: they are all white, of similar age, educated, heterosexual, in a stable relationship, and somehow privileged. If it is surprising to learn how often trauma and mistreatment occur in white, educated women from the middle class, it would be urgent to focus our attention on BIPOC, teenagers, single women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, and people from less privileged milieus, among others, to better understand if and how childbirth trauma and mistreatment in labor and delivery are perceived, represented, and voiced, by adopting an intersectional approach.

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11. Scalpels, Tweezers, and Eloquent Wounds: Tools of the Trade in Three Italian Tales of Women's Trauma

Maria Massucco

Abstract

This essay considers three literary accounts of traumatic experiences (*Un ventre di donna*, 1919; *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 1969; *La figlia oscura*, 2006) in which woundedness is used both to indicate a site of trauma and as the point of departure for radical self-knowing. In asking why woundedness is not experienced in these stories as purely negative, it also asks into the authors' assertions about the relationship between victimhood and agency. Through the use of surgical imagery, the works tap into the culturally inherited correlation between the opening up of the female body and the promise of acquired knowledge. At stake in this study is therefore both a more nuanced understanding of affective variety in the narrative treatment of trauma, and the identification of a concrete trend in the representation of the insidious trauma of sexism.

Questo saggio prende in considerazione tre racconti letterari di esperienze traumatiche (*Un ventre di donna*, 1919; *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, 1969; *La figlia oscura*, 2006) in cui la ferita è usata sia per indicare un luogo di trauma sia come punto di partenza per un processo di autoconoscenza. Nel chiedere perché la ferita non è vissuta in queste storie in senso esclusivamente negativo, esplora anche cosa affermano le autrici sulla relazione tra vittimismo e *agency*. Utilizzando immagini chirurgiche, le opere suggeriscono una correlazione ereditata tra l'apertura del corpo femminile e la promessa di acquisire nuove conoscenze. Questo studio offre una comprensione più sfumata della varietà affettiva nella narrazione del trauma, identificando una tendenza concreta nella rappresentazione dell'*insidious trauma* del sessismo.

Introduction

This essay departs from a simple premise – that woundedness often functions as a marker of trauma suffered – and engages with a difficult complication: in several literary accounts of traumatic experiences written by women, woundedness is used both to indicate a site of trauma and as the point of departure for a radically new self-knowing. In asking why woundedness is not experienced in these stories as purely negative, I am also asking what these authors are asserting about the relationship between victimhood and agency. At stake in this study is both a more nuanced understanding of affective variety in the narrative treatment of trauma, and the identification of a concrete trend in the representation of the insidious trauma of sexism: the three works I will discuss all tap into the culturally inherited idea of a correlation between the opening up of the female body and a sense of possession and acquired knowledge.

The bulk of my study is devoted to the work *Un ventre di donna* [*A Woman's Belly*]¹ by Enif Robert and her 'co-author' Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, which insists that there is something constructive folded into the narrator/protagonist's horrible experience as the victim of medical maltreatment.² In this extraordinary work from 1919, where the glittering tools of surgical incision and extraction appear to the protagonist Enif as both menacing and fascinating, the discourses of female inferiority, anatomical mystery, and war trauma all meet on the site of Enif's ailing body. The work tells a rare early tale of gynecological treatment from the point of view of the patient and foregrounds the similarity between surgery and violent wounding. In light of these observations, I then follow the same surgical imagery into selected scenes from *Il filo di mezzogiorno* [*Midday Thread*]³ by Goliarda Sapienza (1969; 2015) and *The Lost Daughter* by Elena Ferrante (*La figlia oscura*, 2006). The three texts work together as a testament to the persistence of an inherited cultural obsession with the alleged

¹ This work has not yet been translated into English.

² According to Robert's accounts, the co-authorship with Marinetti is not indicative of a collaborative writing process. Marinetti encouraged her to write the work, but other than the inclusion of a few of his letters and the insertion of the grotesque final chapter as a means of hasty conclusion, he had no direct hand in composing it. He demonstrated his full endorsement of her text by attaching his sensational name to its publication (PERSONÉ: 1988).

³ This work has not yet been translated into English.

mystery of female interiority and as a challenge to the idea that there is only one legitimate way to experience woundedness.

Un ventre di donna

The surgical novel *Un ventre di donna* gives an account of Robert's experiences with inflamed ovaries, a laparotomic hysterectomy at the hands of a cruel surgeon, and a torturously prolonged convalescence. While representations of female maladies, sick uteruses, and nervous illness were ubiquitous in European literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the narrator/protagonist Enif cannot be categorized according to Catherine Ramsey-Portolano's two types of decadent sick women characters: either languid victims or agentic malingerers (RAMSEY-PORTOLANO: 2018, 4). Rather, in Enif's experience, the surgical wound that refuses to heal gradually replaces the reproductive organs and the nerves as the seat of malady, which redirects the lines of blame away from feminine frailty and towards the incompetent doctors.

Many scholars who study the lives and works of women artists involved in Futurism have pointed out Robert's embrace of the Futurist tactic of depicting violence and destruction with a positive spin (RE: 2015; MEAZZI: 2016; RELLA: 2019). For example, Robert recasts her fear of surgery as «una inspiegabile attrazione verso il terrore, il fremito di un'ora grave da attraversare, il giuoco del pericolo fin sull'orlo della vita, il diversivo cruento alla noia» («an inexplicable attraction to terror, the thrill of a grave hour to go through, the game of danger at the brink of life, the bloody diversion from boredom»),⁴ which fortifies her will to undergo an operation in the first place (ROBERT AND MARINETTI: 1919, 39). But what proves most revelatory in the narration of her trauma, and what will go on to determine Robert's unique mode of departure from the tropes of any one stylistic school, is the cumulative characterization of Enif's body as a site of indelible memory and evocative discovery.

In early doctor's visits, Enif's insistence on the confluence of sex and technical medicine during her pelvic and vaginal exams allows her to retain a degree of involvement in an otherwise objectifying and uncomfortable experience. By the end of a passage describing an exam

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

by her family doctor, she even works her way into a description of the scene in which she effectively penetrates the doctor with her evaluative gaze and sums up the male in him. When the doctor concludes with a diagnosis of surgery, the introduction of the threat of the scalpel instigates a new level of crisis and creativity through the menace of mechanical violence and bloodshed. Enif melds the medical terminology with the colors and textures of the gulf and mountains outside her window to form a vast anthropomorphic synonym for the grandeur of her fear and fascination. Her involvement in the representation of her condition is cut short, however, by the first meeting with the surgeon («professore») she will come to call 'Jack the Ripper':

Il mistero intimo delle sue indagini su di me, detto come una lezione. Mi sento sezionata da loro, conservando l'indifferenza di un cadavere. Visita interna del professore, collo stesso procedimento dell'altro. Mani che frugano con delicatezza brutale gli organi interni. Enunciazione precisa: – Utero intatto: ovaia infiammata, gonfia: annessi colpiti. Le dita continuano, dentro, l'attento esame: indicano il male. Identico modo di esplorazione. Ma, diverso il medico, diverso l'uomo, profondamente diverse le sensazioni. Adesso, i miei denti scricchiolano per la ripugnanza. Sento che i due medici, nell'andarsene, dicono a bassa voce: Essere stravagante... anormale.... Resistenza fisica meravigliosa. Operazione necessarissima.... Intelligenza che influenza il sangue... (ROBERT AND MARINETTI: 1919, 37-38).⁵

Enif describes feeling dissected by the doctors, uses the word «cadaver» to describe the quality of her forced indifference, and piles up details about the invasive and explorative nature of the encounter with her physiological interior, an area that remains an «intimate mystery» to Enif herself. All of these elements add to the building tension between Enif and the medical professionals. There is also a weakening, the beginnings of a breakdown, in Enif's prior return of

⁵ «The intimate mystery of his investigations into me, delivered like a lesson. I feel dissected by them, retaining the indifference of a corpse. Internal visit by the professor, with the same procedure as the other. Hands that poke around internal organs with brutal delicateness. Precise announcement: - Intact uterus: inflamed, swollen ovary: affected adnexa. The fingers continue the careful examination, inside: they indicate the ill. Identical mode of exploration. But, different doctor, different man, profoundly different sensations. Now, my teeth grind with repugnance. I hear that the two doctors, as they leave, say in a low voice: An extravagant being... abnormal.... Wonderful physical stamina. Operation extremely necessary.... Intelligence that influences the blood...»

the penetrative gaze: the surgeon's aggressive and accusative approach and the introduction of the word «brutal» foreshadow the violent and nonconsensual nature of the encounters to come. As Cressida Heyes would put it, «[t]his is not a Merleau-Pontian form of chiasmic intercorporeality, in which to see is always also to be seen» (HEYES: 2020, 66). Rather, Enif begins to sense the oppressive powerlessness of being a patient, and the doctors stand well clear of the risk of being interpellated by the gaze of this ill woman, whose very intelligence they find to blame for the weakening and inflaming of her feminine organs.

The surgeon's sexism is soon confirmed when Enif requests that, during the operation, he ensures she can avoid future pregnancies: they would be risky considering her damaged organs, yet she would like to be able to continue to live her life fully. He answers her viciously in a «cutting voice» («la voce che taglia»; ROBERT AND MARINETTI: 1919, 54) that he plans, rather, to leave any salvageable piece of her reproductive organs intact. On the one hand, he attributes her poor state of health to her inflamed reproductive organs, which he understands as connected to her nasty temperament, but on the other hand, he refuses to fully relieve her of the gestational threat of these damaged organs, believing that her primary function as a woman (reproduction) should be safeguarded even at the expense of her own wellbeing. The surgeon and the blade are henceforth inextricable in Enif's mind, presumably due to his unveiled antagonism and his complete and dangerous control over her body, its health, and its future functions. His voice as well as his gaze are repeatedly characterized as cutting and explicitly reminiscent of the surgical scalpel: «Il professore mi lancia ogni tanto delle lame di sguardi che tagliano odiosamente, prima del bisturi» (ROBERT AND MARINETTI: 1919, 62) («The professor shoots me blades of glances every now and then that cut hatefully, before the scalpel»). The blade, an object that is introduced into the narration by medical necessity, takes on a menacing metaphorical quality linked to interpersonal hostility and Enif's sense of being excluded from, even assaulted by, the surgeon's approach to her gynecological care.

Enif then rallies herself for the preparations: she coldly ignores her lower half as she is undressed, shaved, and marked with iodine. She instead engages the assisting doctor in lively conversation. This emptying of significance from a zone over which she no longer has any control proves a successful tactic for Enif, and the surgery occurs without narration due to the function of unconsciousness granted to

her by general anesthesia. The dominant plot of struggle around Enif's body continues when, rather than improving after the removal of her inflamed organs, her condition worsens around the site of the ever-open incision wound. The surgeon refuses to share any information about her illness or prognosis with Enif herself, insisting rather on communicating only with her husband. He denies the validity of her concerns over the prolonged fever, he forbids the nurses to let her know her temperature, and he advises them to force-feed her despite her post-op nausea. Several days after the surgery, things come to a head:

Mi sfasciano. Finalmente potrò vedere il mio ventre! [...] Appena buttato lo sguardo sulla ferita, il professore, voltandosi un poco, ordina: Un bisturì. Mi prende una follia di terrore, di ribrezzo, di spasimo.... No! Sveglia, no!... Assassini! Macellai! Sveglia, no! Tagliare, no! La mia carne è mia! [...] Il mio medico, atletico, immobilizza le mie contorsioni. [...] Urlo. Mordo la mano che mi serra la bocca. Le suore mi tengono le gambe. Un gomito del dottore mi preme il petto. Il ventre può contorcersi, nudo, malato, gonfio... Altre mani lo inchiodano. Vigliacchi! Assassini! Macellai! Durano a fatica a tenermi. Urlo ancora sotto la pressione della mano che torna a imbavagliarmi. Sento il freddo della lama che affonda nella carne floscia...sento un getto di pus caldo sul ventre ghiacciato. È fatto! La stretta si allenta, insieme colle mie forze. Possono lasciarmi. Non mi muovo più (ROBERT AND MARINETTI: 1919, 81-82).⁶

The connection to rape throughout this scene is clear: from Enif's terror and screaming pleas («La mia carne è mia!») to the insertion of an instrument that sinks into her flesh. In fact, the episode fits neatly into the definition of rape provided by Ann Cahill as «the imposition of a sexually penetrating act on an unwilling person, which includes the penetration of any bodily orifice by any bodily part or nonbodily object» (CAHILL: 2001, 11, in HEYES: 2020, 56). The ambiguity of sexual

⁶ «They unwrap me. I will finally be able to see my stomach! [...] As soon as he looks at the wound, the professor, turning a little, orders: A scalpel. A madness of terror, of disgust, of agony takes me.... No! Awake, no! ... Assassins! Butchers! Awake, no! Cut, no! My flesh is mine! [...] My physician, athletic, immobilizes my contortions. [...] I scream. I bite the hand that clenches my mouth. The nuns hold my legs. A doctor's elbow presses my chest. The stomach can still wriggle, naked, sick, swollen... Other hands nail it down. Cowards! Killers! Butchers! They hardly manage to hold me. I still scream under the pressure of the hand that comes back to gag me. I feel the cold of the blade sinking into the limp flesh... I feel a jet of hot pus on the frozen belly. It's done! The grip loosens, along with my strength. They can leave me. I don't move anymore».

versus medical penetration is the sticking point, and it brings to mind Bessel van der Kolk's reflections on the traumatic potential of care-coded actions:

After [a patient named Sylvia] refused to eat for more than a week [...], the doctors decided to force-feed her. It took three of us to hold her down, another to push the rubber feeding tube down her throat, and a nurse to pour the liquid nutrients into her stomach. [...] I realized then our display of 'caring' must have felt to her much like a gang rape (VAN DER KOLK: 2014, 25-26).

Just as van der Kolk is able to imagine what other kind of experience the 'care' encounter might have felt like to Sylvia, Robert's construction of the scene of Enif's unanesthetized incision intentionally highlights the similarity to an experience of sexual assault. Being conscious and cut into is the ultimate of Enif's fears, and its realization despite her best display of physical resistance seems to drain her of even of her sense of muscular control. The parallel between this aggression and her earlier surgery complicates the elision of pain previously provided by the veil of anesthesia and worsens the surgical experience retroactively: rather than a site of healing, Enif's body becomes one of accumulated trauma through repeated incisions. Heyes' description of «women experienc[ing] their bodies "given back to them sprawled out, distorted" by a differently sexualized gaze» seems disturbingly literal in Enif's experience; we are left with the sense that she struggles to know what to do with the mutilated flesh she has been handed back (HEYES: 2020, 62). In fact, the alternately despondent and obsessive state into which Enif sinks following this episode might be anachronistically described as a trauma response. It is dominated by the persistently open wound, which is at once a concrete source of unrelenting physical suffering, a synecdoche for her trauma of sexist medical abuse, and a marker of the traumatic non-passage of time.

After this episode, while the doctors insist on the weakness of Enif's feminine flesh and the damaging impact of her aggressive intelligence on her reproductive organs, Enif grows ever more adamant in her conviction that medical science, with its violent practices and sexist excuses, is not to be trusted, and is thankful for the letters sent to her by Marinetti from the front lines of the war. In what has become the most famous excerpt of the novel, Marinetti compares the imminent closure of Enif's wound to the military clinching of territorial contentions in

trench warfare. Though reductive and abstract, his comparison in fact intuits an affinity between trauma responses which, in the years since WWI, has been historically revealed:⁷

Voi non sapete, per esempio, che ciò che accade al vostro ventre è profondamente simbolico. Infatti, il vostro ventre somiglia a quello della terra, che oggi ha un'immensa ferita chirurgica di trincee. L'ossessione che attira e concentra i vostri sguardi sulle labbra della vostra ferita è identica alla nostra [...] Simboli... analogie... Sono sicuro che la gran ferita sarà chiusa presto da una nostra nuova operazione. Auguro altrettanto alla vostra ferita (ROBERT AND MARINETTI: 1919: 113-115).⁸

Despite the popularity of this image in its excerpted form, Enif's wound is not in fact hastily closed by a new operation within the context of the novel, and Marinetti's bombastically optimistic prediction as to the resolution of the geographical wound proves similarly misguided. Rather than remain fixated on the idea of a brisk closure, Enif dedicates herself to the recuperation of her experiences of incision and to the recharacterization of her woundedness. She sets out to compose a Futurist rendering of her surgical experience by articulating the taking up of writing tools like a surgeon calling for surgical instruments: «Quale scopo? Eccolo: il più assurdo, il più difficile, quello di diventare... una scrittrice futurista! [...] Subito al lavoro "Suora! della carta! un calamaio!" E avanti!» (ROBERT AND MARINETTI: 1919, 134). («What purpose? Here it is: the most absurd, the most difficult, that of becoming... a futurist writer! [...] Immediately to work "Nun! some paper! an inkwell!" And away!»). Her poetry then conjures the very sounds, smells, and sense of delirium that constitute common causes of medical trauma, but she casts them with the clear

⁷ In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman observes that «three times over the past century, a particular form of psychological trauma has surfaced into public consciousness»: the first was hysteria at the end of the nineteenth century; the second was 'shell shock', the study of which emerged after WWI. Herman reconstructs the nineteenth century failure of the study of hysteria to accept the fact that «violence is a routine part of women's sexual and domestic lives» and concludes that «rape and combat [...] are the paradigmatic forms of trauma for women and men respectively» (HERMAN: 1992, 9, 28, 61).

⁸ «You do not know, for example, that what happens to your womb is deeply symbolic. In fact, your womb resembles that of the earth, which today has an immense surgical wound of trenches. The obsession that attracts and focuses your gaze on the lips of your wound is identical to ours [...] Symbols... analogies... I am sure that the great wound will soon be closed by our next operation. I wish your wound the same».

intention of highlighting a parallel between surgery and war (HALL AND HALL: 2013, 6-8). Laura S. Brown's feminist discussion of psychic trauma helps draw out the stakes of Robert's poetic choice:

The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class [...]. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other. War and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumata [...]. Public events, visible to all, rarely themselves harbingers of stigma for their victims, things that can and do happen to men, all of these constitute trauma in the official lexicon (BROWN: 1985, 121).

Poetically linking the medical experience to a scene of war analogically validates her surgery as, like war, a traumatic event. While Marinetti jumps casually from one metaphor to the next in his comments on Enif's wound, Enif takes seriously the unsettling stakes of being compared to both a mutilated terrain *and* to the soldiers who are obsessed with it. It is from her position of *both*, and through her determination to scrutinize her experience, that Enif takes up the investigative tools of metaphorical incision and extraction; she does so not with the intention to turn them against her sadistic doctors – not in a gesture of counter-attack – but in order to wield them, concertedly and repeatedly, upon herself. Once she tears free of the hospital setting, Enif positions herself on a balcony and exposes her wounded abdomen to the sun: she turns her attention to the many visual and social connections the wound suggests, from murder mysteries to a sense of curiosity about the bodies of other women. She ultimately finds her wound to be «certo più eloquente della mia bocca» (ROBERT AND MARINETTI: 1919, 147) («certainly more eloquent than my mouth»).

Though the plot is open-ended, the form and style of *Un ventre di donna* offer three major takeaways for our understanding of the narration of trauma. First, Enif's tale includes multiple instances of experiencing the same thing but having it register as an entirely different experience: she undergoes the same exam, but the sensations and provoked reactions are entirely different; she is cut open with the same incision, but the circumstances of consent and the provoked reactions are entirely different. Second, Enif's transformation into an artist – of and through her suffering – posits a connection between trauma and creativity, characterizing her as adaptive rather than

pathological (Root: 1992, 249). Third, the work attends to Enif's obsessive consideration of her own body as creative source and traumatic location. She both *is* her wounded body and orbits it intellectually as the site of interpretive contentions, and the work's layering of her feelings and thoughts within her sights and sensations deepens the validity of her attribution of evocative power to her body's deformity. In this way, the work prioritizes a peculiar logic of trauma, whose most urgent goal is not to punish an offender but rather to understand the self as site of the offence.

Il filo di mezzogiorno

The second work in Goliarda Sapienza's autobiographical production, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, counterbalances *Un ventre di donna's* insistent engagement with the wounded body by emphasizing a re-sacralization of the body's intimate inaccessibility. In the work's opening, the protagonist Goliarda is a patient recovering from memory loss caused by electroshock treatment. She finds herself sprawled out and drifting in a sea of confused reminiscence, unable to distinguish between past and present, thought and speech, the dead and the living. Through conversations with her psychoanalyst, she begins to piece the outline of her life back together again. At first, the pain and difficulty of the analyst's insistent questioning inspire only diffidence and caution in Goliarda, but when he begins to harshly criticize her attachment to figures from her past and place a great deal of blame on her mother, Goliarda's experience of the analysis changes key:

La sua voce [dell'analista] [...] si faceva più tagliente, come lama affilata entrava nelle connetture più profonde dei miei nervi segando tendini, legamenti, vene... [...] Ha smontato, ha scalzato col suo coltello le mie difese... ma solo questo? Forse mi ha staccato anche la pelle, la prima carne, la seconda, col suo bisturi psicanalitico (SAPIENZA: 2015, 93).⁹

Both Bazzoni and Wehling-Giorgi have pointed out the importance of the blade in Goliarda Sapienza's poetics. Wehling-Giorgi describes

⁹ «His voice [of the analyst] [...] became sharper, like a sharpened blade it entered the deepest connections of my nerves, sawing tendons, ligaments, veins... [...] He disassembled, he undermined my defenses with his knife... but only this? Perhaps he also peeled off my skin, the first flesh, the second, with his psychoanalytic scalpel».

the «lama» as a Sapienzian motif that «synechdochically hint[s] at the perpetrator of the abuse/incest-rape»; the image finds its most appalling manifestation in the description of the incestuous rape of the nine-year-old Modesta at the opening of Sapienza's novel *L'arte della gioia* as the butchering of a lamb with a kitchen knife (WEHLING-GIORGI: 2016, 217). Bazzoni further identifies the unsettling link established by the blade between sexual violence and the work of the psychoanalyst: «[...] a blade cuts the woman's body into pieces, and leaves it suspended between life and death. Through the use of the same image, the narrator suggests a representation of psychoanalytical therapy as a relationship of power and even abuse, deeply implicated in patriarchal power» (BAZZONI: 2014, 37). Bond further connects psychoanalysis to the menace of cutting the self to pieces in her reading of the relationship between *Il filo di mezzogiorno* and Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* as one of literary transference; she notes in fact that the texts are «attempts to suture up the gaps in personal narratives» which were not resolved but rather worsened during analysis (BOND: 2014, 103).

I would add to these points that the specifics of Sapienza's employment of the blade as a metaphor for psychoanalysis and sexual harm evoke not just any cutting action, but surgery in particular. The direct connection between surgery and therapy emerges from a dream Goliarda has in which a horse is skinned alive before her eyes as it cries big silent tears. When she shares this dream with the analyst, he finds it to be a promising sign that the sick and corrupted layers of the flesh of her psyche are not too deep, that it will not take too much skinning to reach a healthy layer; he also applauds her having realized, as the dream reveals, that analysis is not a comforting process but rather «una vera e propria operazione – giustamente come lei ha sognato una laparatomia...» (SAPIENZA: 2015, 84-85) («a real operation – as you have rightly dreamed, a laparotomy...»). Despite the analyst's optimism, Goliarda's attention remains arrested by the violence and harm of the cutting, which she continues to depict not as cure but as injury. If the blade synecdochally conjures the specter of sexual abuse in Sapienza's literary universe, the surgical blade brings with it a layer of deception due to its purported well-meaning.

When she perceives the analyst as wielding his voice and his method like a physical scalpel, the anatomical specificity in Goliarda's description emphasizes her experience of violation as having to do with bodily mutilation. She makes clear the power dynamics of the

relationship: as his patient, she is helpless and trusting, and she is unable to understand his motivation for carving so deeply and violently into her most basic structural systems, beyond a realm of curative care and into a realm of gratuitous harm. Goliarda accomplishes this characterization of the experience of analysis also by means of an accumulated series of memories in which cruelty and violence are acted out in surgical terms along heavily gendered lines. The most obvious example is her memory of Lino, a cruel playmate from her childhood:

«Vieni giochiamo al medico e all'ammalata...[...]» La bambola usciva da sotto la gonna. «È malatissima sua figlia, signora: bisogna operarla immediatamente...» col coltello tagliava ora la pancia, e ne tirava fuori fili e fili. «Ecco gli intestini: bisogna tagliarli... Ed ecco il cuore...» Tremando gli volevo strappare quel cuore lucido che schiacciandolo diceva mamma mamma. [...] «Scema...femminuccia... se continui a piangere opero pure te!...» «Iuzza, scendi a giocare?» «No, non voglio farmi operare.» «Non ti voglio operare. Ti voglio dare la bambola. L'ho risanata: guarda.» Infatti la pancia era cucita, ma quando la presi fra le braccia non diceva più mamma. «Ma non parla più!» «Certo, dopo un'operazione c'è sempre qualcosa che non va a posto» (SAPIENZA: 2015, 42).¹⁰

The triangulation in this scene presents a sense of the perpetual inevitability of medical and surgical intervention into the female body: Lino designs the game and takes it as a matter of course that he will deliver the baby and need to open her up to destroy/rearrange her insides. The young Goliarda's sense of horror and helplessness is linked both to her desperate desire to save the mutilated doll, which she loves, and her sense of being mirrored in the doll and being threatened with similar treatment. It is Lino's vicious nonchalance, his sense that it is only a game, that connects to the analyst's disregard for Goliarda's sense of

¹⁰ «"Come on, let's play doctor and patient... [...]" The doll came out from under my skirt. "Your daughter is very ill, ma'am: she must be operated on immediately..." now he was cutting her belly with a knife, and pulling out threads and threads. "Here are the intestines: you have to cut them... And here is the heart..." Trembling I wanted to grab that shiny heart that, when you pressed it, said mamma mamma. [...] "Fool... sissy... if you keep crying I'll operate on you too!..." "Iuzza, come down and play?" "No, I don't want to be operated on." "I don't want to operate on you. I want to give you your doll. I healed her: look." In fact, her belly was sewn up, but when I took her in my arms, she no longer said mamma. "But she doesn't speak anymore!" "Of course, after an operation there's always something that's not quite right"».

harm and his pursuit of his ideas at the expense of her wellbeing. What for Lino is a game, for the doll is a permanent mutilation (resulting in the loss of its ability to 'speak'), and for Goliarda is a lesson in the way one person's game can be another's demise.

Similarly, the violence inflicted on Goliarda's psychic body during analysis, though it starts by helping her extricate herself from a state of disorientation, overcorrects along prescriptive lines, violates the precious realm of her personal mythology, and leads her back to a point of crisis:

[...] con terrore mi accorsi che il vecchio nodo di pudore, paura ed odio, come lo chiamava quel medico, si era aperto in una piaga sanguinante. [...] ora la vista di quella piaga suscitava nei miei sensi disgusto e nausea e vomito, se mani maschili mi spogliavano e in quella notte di vomito e smarrimento capii che quel medico, nello smontarmi pezzo per pezzo, aveva portato alla luce vecchie piaghe cicatrizzate da compensi, come lui avrebbe detto e le aveva riaperte frugandoci dentro con bisturi e pinze e che non aveva saputo guarire... mi ricordai la fretta, quanta fretta di richiudere, ricucire quelle piaghe alla meno peggio... e in quella fretta spastica aveva dimenticato dentro qualche pinza. Il torace e il ventre, mi dolevano... (SAPIENZA: 2015, 178-179).¹¹

In this tumbling description of the results of psychoanalysis, Goliarda establishes the objects and images of her trauma: what for the analyst was a process of addressing and recalibrating her complexes of shame, fear, and hate, for Goliarda served to dismantle her sense of cohesion, rip open old emotional scars, and inflict deep and lasting psychological wounds. She communicates her sense of lingering harm through the image of surgical instruments, not only wielded on her as weapons but also forgotten inside of her aching torso. The damage done by the analyst extends beyond the metaphorical realm and impacts Goliarda physically – she is nauseous, in pain, and unable to sleep or be touched. At the other end of a process that

¹¹ «[...] with terror I realized that the old knot of modesty, fear and hatred, as that doctor called it, had opened into a bleeding wound. [...] now the sight of that wound aroused in me a sense disgust and nausea and vomiting, if male hands undressed me and in that night of vomiting and bewilderment I understood that that doctor, in disassembling me piece by piece, had brought to light old wounds scarred over by compensations, as he would have said and had reopened them by rummaging through them with scalpel and forceps and he had not known how to heal them... I remembered the haste, such haste to close those wounds again... and in that spastic haste he had forgotten some forceps inside. My chest and my stomach, ached...».

was supposed to draw her back into herself from the unmoored and disoriented realm of memory loss, she feels herself violently dissected into a state of extreme physical vulnerability. Analysis as surgical assault has «render[ed] her bodily schema “all surface” [...], leaving nothing for her to retreat to» (HEYES: 2020, 63). As she moves towards her lyrical conclusion, Sapienza does not deny the accuracy of the analyst's pursuit – Goliarda does indeed have baggage, scars, and coping mechanisms; rather, she challenges the assumption that such intimate elements of a person's existence should be subjected to systematic scrutiny and investigation:

Ogni individuo ha il suo segreto che porta chiuso in sé fin dalla nascita [...] se morirò per la sorpresa di qualche nuovo viso-incontro nascosto dietro un albero in attesa, se morirò fulminata dal fulmine della gioia, soffocata da un abbraccio troppo forte [...] vi chiedo solo questo: non cercate di spiegarvi la mia morte, non la sezionate, non la catalogate per vostra tranquillità, per paura della vostra morte, ma al massimo pensate – non lo dite forte la parola tradisce – non lo dite forte ma pensate dentro di voi: è morta perché ha vissuto (SAPIENZA: 2015, 185-186).¹²

In her final instructions, Sapienza allows woundedness to take on different qualities: there is a woundedness common to the peaks and valleys of human experience, which works in cycles of injury, learning, recovery, and relatability. And there is another kind of wounding, which pounces on human error, seeks out the evidence of other wounds and rips them back open in search of fault. By describing the precious secret of individual life as «carried inside», Goliarda acknowledges the validity of the sense that perceived interiority is a potential site of revelation. Yet, in her desperately euphoric reclamation of the right to human woundedness, and in her distinction between the pains of living and the pain of being reprimanded for how one lives, Goliarda refutes the idea that anyone might have the right to possessively interpret or explain the inner life of another.

¹² «Every individual has their own secret that they carry closed within themselves from birth [...] if I die from the surprise of some new face-encounter waiting hidden behind a tree, if I die struck by the lightning of joy, suffocated by an embrace that is too strong [...] I ask you only this: do not try to explain my death to yourself, do not dissect it, do not catalog it for your own peace of mind, for fear of your own death, but at most think – do not say it out loud, the word betrays – don't say it out loud but think inside yourself: she died because she lived».

The Lost Daughter

In Elena Ferrante's third novel, *The Lost Daughter*, the protagonist Leda's woundedness is once again the root of the narrative impulse, but this time it reaches beneath her immediate experiences into the haunting nature of trauma passed from mothers to daughters across generations. The inexplicability of a wound in Leda's abdomen is the point of the story's departure, and its infliction is the scene of the novel's conclusion: these images bookend the tale and center Leda's body as the site upon which trauma leaves its mark. Because of this framing, the complex web of memories and encounters that make up the novel also seem contained within Leda's body and mind, which creates a matryoshka-like literary form that is reinforced and specifically gendered by the work's many instances of mirroring and identification between mothers, daughters, and dolls.

The infliction of the wound in *The Lost Daughter* constitutes an eruption of pure violence with none of the elements of care or attempted healing that accompany the scenes of incision in *Un ventre di donna* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*. Yet episodes of wounding in Ferrante's *oeuvre* are not without their own degree of affective ambiguity: Milkova has discussed the abundance of scenes of stabbing, severing, and piercing in Ferrante's works, and she identifies them as both «the literal and symbolic disfigurement and fragmentation of the female body or mind», and as part of an «inverted logic of feminine insemination» (MILKOVA: 2021, 30-31). She points out that the wielding of lethal objects (like scissors, hat pins, burins, safety pins, and paper cutters), and the violent surveillance, testing, and punishing that Ferrante's women and girls practice on each other and themselves connects to their being «rent by overwhelming emotions, often in relation to the normative forms of womanhood foisted upon them» (MILKOVA: 2021, 30-33). I understand Milkova's analysis in combination with Brown's description of insidious trauma as «the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment, but which do violence to the soul and spirit» (BROWN: 1991, 128). Ferrante's scenes of stabbing erupt from just such a tension of intolerable spiritual harm, and they offer a dark degree of relief through their physical manifestation of an otherwise illusory and difficult to articulate sense of oppression.¹³

¹³ De Rogatis has shown that in Ferrante's early fiction, rites of passage give structure

In *The Lost Daughter*, scenes of woundedness occur at the end of Leda's lines of thought, which repeatedly lead her into the triggered return of traumatic experiences. But she herself instigates the start of these thought processes in a way which suggests a compulsion and a need to understand. Haaland describes Leda's childhood and motherhood trauma as «an unresolvable but ultimately manageable component of a permanent existential condition» (HAALAND: 2018, 156). In managing her trauma, Leda is guided by the suggestive power of mirroring and memory, but the gestures and tools with which she carries out this management are those of surgical exploration. While a stab wound opens and closes *The Lost Daughter*, the work's most climactic scene of self-confrontation takes the form of a pseudo-surgical intervention played out on a child's doll. If the episode of surgery performed on a doll in *Il filo di mezzogiorno* was reminiscent of the fear of operation and the handing back of the mutilated female body as thematized in *Un ventre di donna*, in Sapienza and Ferrante the doll serves a common purpose of projection in eerie acts of play:

Nani che sputa nero assomiglia a me quando restai in cinta per la seconda volta. [...] Scoprii piano piano che non avevo la forza di rendere la seconda esperienza esaltante quanto la prima. [...].

Nani, Nani. La bambola, impassibile, seguivava a vomitare. [...] Le aprii le labbra, allargai con un dito il foro della bocca, le feci scorrere all'interno l'acqua del rubinetto e poi la scossi forte per lavarle ben bene la cavità cupa del tronco, del ventre, e far uscire infine il bambino che Elena le aveva messo dentro. Giochi. [...] Io stessa ora stavo giocando, una madre non è che una figlia che gioca, mi aiutava a riflettere. Cercai la pinzetta per le ciglia, c'era qualcosa nella bocca della bambola che non voleva uscire. [...] Avrei dovuto prendere atto subito, da ragazza, da questa enfiatura rossastra, molle, che ora stringo tra il metallo della pinza. [...] Povera creatura senza niente di umano. Ecco il bambino che Lenuccia ha inserito nella pancia della sua bambola per giocare a renderla pregna come quella di zia Rosaria. Lo estrassi delicatamente. Era un verme della battigia, non so qual è il nome scientifico: uno di quelli che i pescatori improvvisati del crepuscolo si procurano scavando un poco nella rena bagnata [...]. Li guardavo, allora, con un disgusto incantato. Prendevano i vermi con le dita e li trafiggevano sull'amo come esca per i pesci che, quando abbocavano, liberavano dal ferro

to the protagonists' re-encounters with the past; traumatic memories expose Leda to raw guilt, which «scaturisce alla fine un forte effetto catartico per Leda e per la sua parabola esistenziale» (DE ROGATIS: 2019, 108).

con gesto esperto e se li lanciavano alle spalle lasciandoli ad agonizzare sulla sabbia asciutta.

Tenevo aperte con il pollice le labbra cedevoli di Nani mentre operavo piano con la pinzetta. Ho orrore di tutto ciò che striscia, ma per quel grumo di umori provai una pena spoglia (FERRANTE: 2012, 491-493).¹⁴

Leda's prying into the belly of the doll constitutes one of the most climactic, symbolic, and repulsive sequences of the novel. The scene carries implications of birth, exorcism, and surgery in a way that intentionally highlights the overlapping territory of all three. Ferrante does not shy away from the fascination factor of the mysterious cavity of female interiority and its promise to yield forth answers to the secrets of the origins of life. Rather, in asking «What's in there?», Leda's probing of the pregnant doll's insides helps her probe her own depths of memory and sensation by providing a dummy on which to 'operate'. Because Leda recognizes herself in Nani, the scene includes a metaphorical plane on which Leda is operating on herself. The theme of identical situations being experienced in radically different ways returns through Leda's discussion of the difference between her first and second pregnancies. The unsettling mystery of this difference, the sense of failure it contains, and a form of recuperated control over a body are all part of the subplot of Leda's operation on the doll. Here the doll's body might be read as standing in not only for Leda's own body

¹⁴ «Nani spitting black looks like me when I was pregnant for the second time. [...] I slowly discovered that I didn't have the strength to make the second experience as exciting as the first. [...].

Nani, Nani. The doll, impassive, continued to vomit. [...] I parted her lips, with one finger held her mouth open, ran some water inside her and then shook her hard to wash out the murky cavity of her trunk, her belly, to finally get the baby out that Elena had put inside her. Games. [...] I myself was playing now, a mother is only a daughter who plays, it was helping me to think. I looked for my eyebrow tweezers, there was something in doll's mouth that wouldn't come out. [...] I should have noticed right away, as a girl, this soft reddish engorgement that I'm now squeezing with the metal of the tweezers. [...] Poor creature with nothing human about her. Here's the baby that Lenuccia stuck in the stomach of her doll to play at making it pregnant like Aunt Rosaria's. I extracted it carefully. It was a worm from the beach, I don't know what the scientific name is: the ones amateur fishermen find at twilight, digging in the wet sand [...]. I looked at them then spellbound by my revulsion. They picked up the worms up with their fingers and stuck them on the hooks as bait; when the fish bit, the boys freed them from the iron with an expert gesture and tossed them over their shoulders, leaving them to their death agonies on the dry sand.

I held Nani's pliant lips open with my thumb as I operated carefully with the tweezers. I have a horror of crawling things, but for that clot of humors I felt a naked pity» (FERRANTE: 2021, 123-125).

in pregnancy but also for that of her mother, who was unwilling to have her body played with by the young Leda, and Leda's own daughters, whose soft young bodies have slipped away from her with time.

When Leda identifies the creature pulled from the doll's mouth, she calls it a worm, but she also uses the phrases an «enfiatura rossastra» («reddish swelling»), a «povera creatura senza niente di umano» («poor creature with nothing human about her»), and a «grumo di umori» («clot of humors»). Leda's words draw the encounter into the realm of the articulable by connecting the womb to the mouth and mechanically extracting that which is impossible for the doll to dispel on its own, but, as her concertedly monstrous descriptions imply, the linguistic realm has only a tenuous hold on the scene that is playing out. The shifting name of the creature at the heart of this scene seems to repeat the notion of 'same, but different,' this time highlighting the fact that there is no single or uniform affective response to giving birth. Rather, by connecting the worm to its use as bait, describing the agonizing fish tossed upon the sand to die, and emphasizing Leda's «pena spoglia» («naked pity») at the sight, Ferrante gives primacy to emotion, over reason and speech, in confronting the innocent mass of cells. Leda *does* find answers by wielding tweezers on the doll's pregnant body, but her answers are not about the miracle of life, but rather about the unpredictability of the experience of motherhood, and the extreme vulnerability of the creature over which the mother has control. Coming face to face with the dark side of the caretaking relationship – the potential to harm or kill rather than care – is the truth from which Leda proposes to start: «Ricominciare da qui, pensai, da questa cosa» (FERRANTE: 2012, 493) («Begin again from here, I thought, from this thing»; FERRANTE: 2021, 124). The incongruous nature of Leda's feelings at the scene's conclusion crystallizes a reading of the embodiment of maternity as simultaneous horror and pity.

The dark tangle of interconnectivity embodied in Leda's operation provides her (and readers) with a sense of representation, with a way of thinking through, but it does not explain or resolve her anguish, nor does it make her trauma any more communicable to those around her. There is a reason the maternal choice to provide care has long been portrayed as an instinct, and Leda is promptly punished for her 'unnatural' maternal behaviors by Nina's curse words and stabbing in the novel's closing scene. Leda reacts in shock to the stabbing, with an understated description of her feelings: «Sentivo un poco di

freddo e avevo paura» (FERRANTE: 2012, 508) («I felt a little bit cold and I was afraid»)¹⁵. Most hauntingly, with these words Leda aligns her experience of being stabbed with the death of her own mother, who died eaten up by the pain of Leda's accusations: «L'ultima cosa che mi ha detto, qualche tempo prima di morire, è stata, in un dialetto sfranto: sento 'nu poch'e friddo, Leda, e me sto cacanno sotto» (FERRANTE: 2012, 457) («The last thing she said to me, some time before she died, was, in a fractured dialect, I feel a little cold, Leda, and I'm shitting my pants») (FERRANTE: 2021, 89). On the one hand, the echo of her mother's language in her own moment of pain amplifies the sense of trauma passed from mother to daughter across generations. On the other, the visible fact of the physical wound allows for a sense of temporary release from that cumulative trauma, allowing it to escape from the realm of psychological inheritance as if through the pressure valve of the body's experience.

Conclusions

All three of the works discussed above grapple with the cultural inheritance of the female body both as a site presumed to hold great mystery and as a terrain whose long history of being penetrated, opened up, and dug into has done little to provide answers to questions that the women themselves would like to ask. In their insistence that perceived experiences vary even when situations seem the same, all three authors draw attention to the element of violence that lurks beneath invasive care. In highlighting the significance of woundedness in each of these works, I am not arguing for a valorization of the act of wounding; rather, I recognize the works as saying that wounding and woundedness are always already a part of the experience of insidious trauma. Given this woundedness, a recharacterization of the function of the wound becomes instrumental in reconstituting a sense of participation in the interpretation of the body as the self. In other words, the women recognize the suggestiveness of a portal of access onto the mysterious interior of the female body, and it becomes an opportunity to engage in self-exploration against the dictates of gendered socialization. The recurrence of scalpels, forceps,

¹⁵ This phrase is inexplicably absent in Ann Goldstein's English translation; the translation provided here is my own.

pins, and tweezers seems to mark both an intergenerational sense of vulnerability to the trauma of nonconsensual penetration *and* the women's desire to wield these instruments themselves in order to redirect the investigation of their own flesh.

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12. Mean Girls and Melancholics: Insidious Trauma in *The Lying Life of Adults* by Elena Ferrante and *Conversations with Friends* by Sally Rooney

Rebecca Walker

Abstract

This chapter expands a discussion of insidious trauma in Elena Ferrante (CAFFÈ: 2021) in a cross-cultural direction. It offers a comparative reading of unlikable women in Ferrante's *The Lying Life of Adults* (2020) and Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017). It is argued that a feminist understanding of emotional trauma (BROWN: 2004) and the meanness and melancholy of female characters are closely linked in contemporary women's writing across borders, where a complex relation between agency and masochism is unfolded. Foregrounding the ambivalence of the traumatized female subject in the texts, it is argued that Ferrante and Rooney's confrontation of what is gained and what is lost by the performance of female unlikability places them as astute commentators on the traumas of everyday life.

Il presente capitolo contribuisce ad una discussione del trauma «insidioso» all'interno delle opere di Elena Ferrante (CAFFÈ: 2021) con uno sguardo interculturale. Si offre una lettura comparativa della donna «spiacevole» ne *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* (2019) di Ferrante e *Conversations with Friends* (2017) di Sally Rooney. Si sostiene che una discussione femminista del trauma emotivo (BROWN: 2004) si possa intrecciare con la meschinità e malinconia di personaggi femminili nella scrittura femminile contemporanea, all'interno della quale si sviluppa una relazione tra l'agire femminile e il masochismo. Puntando sull'ambivalenza del soggetto femminile traumatizzato, si afferma che Ferrante e Rooney, nell'affrontare i successi e i punti deboli della spiacevolezza femminile, rivelano di essere abili commentatrici dei traumi della vita quotidiana.

Ultimately, cynicism is the great mask
of the disappointed and betrayed heart.
bell hooks, *All About Love*, 18

Italian and Irish writers Elena Ferrante and Sally Rooney, avowed admirers of one another's work, are bestsellers whose novels about women's lives and relationships have gained global traction. Ferrante's writing, spanning three decades, explores the difficulty of articulating a female subjectivity in a society which precludes women's flourishing; Rooney's three novels address the emotional lives of a generation of young women whose circumstances are relatively comfortable, but who nevertheless suffer intensely in their inner psychology and in relationships. In both writers' work, female characters are traumatized by feeling devalued or unseen, and respond by progressively harnessing the power of the bad, the ugly, and the false to restore something of their dignity and preserve themselves from further harm. In the present chapter, I expand a discussion of cumulative trauma in Ferrante (CAFFÈ: 2021) in a cross-cultural direction by offering a comparative reading of the figure of the unlikable woman in Ferrante's *The Lying Life of Adults* (*La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, 2019) and Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017). Paying attention to the «relational and process components of trauma» (BROWN: 2004, 465-466) resulting from inhabiting a repressively bounded subject position in Ferrante and from dysfunctional relationships with self and other in Rooney, I argue that a feminist understanding of trauma and the meanness or melancholy of female characters are closely linked in contemporary women's writing across borders.

La vita bugiarda degli adulti (2019c), translated by Ann Goldstein as *The Lying Life of Adults* in 2020, follows the middle-class teenager Giovanna Trada, between the ages of twelve and sixteen. Raised in the well-to-do Neapolitan neighborhood of Rione Alto, Giovanna's life changes when she overhears her beloved father describing her as «facendo la faccia di Vittoria» (2019c, 11) («getting the face of Vittoria»; 2020a, 13), taking on the appearance of his estranged sister in whom «combaciavano alla perfezione la bruttezza e la malvagità» (2019c, 12) («ugliness and spite were combined to perfection»; 2020a, 14). Insisting that she must meet Vittoria and see the resemblance for herself, Giovanna discovers by degrees that the adults around her are liars with shallow and selfish motivations, and that she must make her

own way in the world. In *Conversations with Friends*, Sally Rooney's debut novel, she presents the fraught inner life of Frances, a twenty-something, queer, left-wing humanities student at Trinity College Dublin who writes poetry, reads critical theory, and regards the world through a deconstructivist lens. Frances is at times highly reactive and at others supremely passive, and is consistently self-loathing. The novel charts her affair with a married man, Nick, and the emotional distress which this provokes. Frances' cruelty to others – but, above all, to herself – provides a literary exploration of the traumatic impact of parental and romantic bonds upon self-formation.

The narrative voice in these novels oscillates between pain and petulance, melancholy and meanness. In the alternation of these characteristics, Frances and Giovanna can be read as examples of the emerging post-feminist figure of the «unlikable woman». As recently as 2020 a study of workplace interactions concluded that likability as a quality is still affected by a gendered imbalance: «men react to likability only when they interact with women; if men interact with men, they don't care» (GERHARDS AND KOSFELD: 2020, 716). Female unlikability remains subversive, refusing the double standard of a requirement to be pleasing to men which most men do not, apparently, require of one another. Parsing the increase in negative forms of femininity in contemporary cultural production, Rebecca Liu (2019) sums up this trend as follows: «We are now supposedly in the era of the "unlikeable woman", which means that we celebrate that women too can be dirty, repulsive, mean, cruel, and flawed». This is a «victory» (it shows that women are appropriating the right to say they, too, don't care) and yet Liu insists that we are also at risk of a «premature celebration» and «a divestment of power». She remarks that «[i]t is rarely asked to whom these women are cruel, what engineered this cruelty, and what ends this cruelty serves». Try as they might, she argues, the unorthodox female characters who populate our screens and libraries, from Lena Dunham's HBO series *Girls* to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and Sally Rooney's narrators, are always on a rocky road to self-determination which «re-routes towards melancholic self-destruction» (LIU: 2019). The present reading of Elena Ferrante and Sally Rooney follows a similar path, preserving the power and the pitfalls of unlikability as it surfaces in contemporary narratives of female subjectivity where a complex relation between agency and masochism is unfolded.

The reasons for which women are cruel to themselves and others are a central preoccupation for Ferrante and Rooney. In their novels, the emotional traumas which lead women to negative thoughts, words, and actions distinguish themselves from psychoanalytic theories, elaborated in literary studies in Cathy Caruth's influential study from 1996, of a singular traumatic event which shatters the ego, fragments consciousness, and must be narratively re-elaborated in order to be defused. In a later study, Adriana Cavarero (2008) coins the term «horrorism» to conceptualize the disfiguration and dehumanization which have often been the basis for an understanding of trauma as an effect of war, genocide, and other forms of grotesque violence. Here, the typology of trauma at work is primarily *insidious*, borrowing from a framework developed by feminist psychologists including Laura Brown and Maria Root which accounts for «the banal cruelties to which they [traumatized individuals] have been subjected by people whom they loved and trusted» (BROWN: 2004, 469). Indeed, in words about Ferrante which also ring true for Rooney, Tiziana de Rogatis observes how «the constituent parts of our 'I' are found in the cracks produced by the ordinary traumas of our relationships» (2019, 43). The words and actions of others, not simply extremes of violence, have a tangible, *traumatic* impact on how we view ourselves and our bodies, re-shaping the relationship between the individual and her world.

Sara Ahmed further insists that «the histories that bring us to feminism are the histories that leave us fragile» (2017, 162), acknowledging that these histories are not always cataclysmic singular events that change the course of a life, but also a gradual wearing down of strength and diminishing of joy for those who are marginalized or feel oppressed. In Maria Root's understanding, a pluralistic vision of trauma such as this comprises «traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to soul and spirit» (1995, 107). Without diminishing the severity of more grievous forms of gender-differentiated or other violence, such a distinction allows us to view emotional weariness or woundedness as an experience which has a profound impact on the sufferer's self-image. It also allows us to address what Emanuela Caffè, discussing Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels, calls a «complex and social, rather than biological, problem» (2021, 33), which is drawn out in the present discussion through a reading of negative femininity as a trauma response in recent literary texts.

I begin with a discussion of the power associated with adopted unlikability as a mode of approaching the world in *The Lying Life of Adults*. Here, the performance of female unlikability rejects an image of ideal femininity associated with goodness, beauty, and intelligence, and leans into the uglier parts of the self as a mode of responding to a paternally mediated shattering of the narrator's identity. Following this, I explore the open-ended nature of destructive behavior towards self and other as it appears in *Conversations with Friends*, where unlikability is engaged as a mechanism of emotional self-preservation, but nevertheless fails to facilitate the genuine human connection for which the protagonist longs. Lastly, I reiterate the ambivalence of the traumatized female subject in the texts, arguing that, without discounting the power of performances which upend received narratives of femininity, Ferrante's and Rooney's confrontation of both what is gained and lost by the performance of unlikability places them as astute commentators on the challenges of human relationships and the traumas of everyday life.

Defacing patriarchy in *The Lying Life of Adults*

The narrator of *The Lying Life of Adults* reminds us of a feminine heritage of sadness and inhibition in the patriarchal setting of Naples: her mother's «lunga depressione» (2019c, 21) («long depression»; 2020a, 23) and loss of a sense of independent selfhood after childbirth, which inhibited the progression of her career. Nella, the mother, is subject to *frantumaglia*, the word in Ferrante's «feminine imaginary» (MILKOVA: 2021) which she employs neologically to describe the «dolorosissima angoscia» (FERRANTE: 2016a, 95) («excruciating anguish»; 2016b, 100) of women when faced with traumatic events such as abandonment or bereavement, and when made aware in discrete instances of their oppression. As Emanuela Caffè (2021) and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi (2021) remind us, Elena Ferrante's novels represent both singular highly traumatic events and a progressive traumatization of female characters who are subject to heartbreak and disillusionment.

There is, moreover, a precedent in Ferrante's writing for female badness. In the Neapolitan Novels, which begin in a poverty and crime-stricken suburb of Naples in the 1950s, Lila Cerullo's supposed malevolence is localized in her refusal to be defined by the dictates

of a father who forbids her education and a husband who desires her body but not her consent. When neither can break her, and when she fails to fall pregnant and fulfil the feminine biological destiny of the neighborhood, she is consigned as a bad daughter and a bad wife. In her husband's framing, Lila becomes «malefic[a]» (FERRANTE: 2012b, 86) («maleficent»; 2013, 86), one who was «nata storta» (2012b, 21) («born twisted»; 2013, 21). She is an emblem of how, in a context of marginalization (for Lila the intersection of gender and social class), «emotionally and psychologically wounded individuals» are sometimes «blamed for their experiences and subsequent symptomatology» (ROOT: 1992, 323). The meanness assigned to Lila by men who erase her trauma is later weaponized to destabilize those same patriarchal presences, but also remains an effect of the traumas of a curtailed education and a violent marriage. Lila, more than any other character, realizes that «c'è una miseria in giro che ci rende tutti cattivi » (FERRANTE: 2011, 257) («There is a poverty which makes us all cruel»; 2012a, 261) – that violence is socially conditioned. In *The Lying Life*, set in the 1990s, Ferrante expands upon what Lila and her friend Elena gradually discover: that wealth and education do not preclude suffering, but redefine it. Giovanna and her friends are well-off, secular, educated, and are told «che bisognava sentirsi orgogliose di essere nate femmine» (2019c, 23) («that we should be proud of being born female»; 2020a, 25). Yet the novel exposes how this is not linked to real belief on the part of these families in the emancipation of women, but rather one facet of a curated progressive identity which privileges word over action. Naples remains, as it did in the Neapolitan Novels, a «città senza amore» (2011, 184) («city without love»; FERRANTE: 2012a, 188) in which women remain disproportionately affected by lovelessness which, bell hooks points out, is not purely «a function of poverty or material lack» (HOOKS: 2018, 55). The non-structural trauma of the novel shows violence and affective suffering as ubiquitous, and exposes how those boundaries, class among them, which serve as supports for self-construction are flimsy.

Giovanna's choice to become vulgar and unbiddable responds to this knowledge and to her own *frantumaglia*: the fracturing of her self-image at the hands of her father and the subsequent loss of her ability to tell a cohesive, happy story about her life. In response to this breakdown, Giovanna's performance of unorthodox, iconoclastic femininity is intended to free her from an insidious patriarchal web,

at the centre of which lurks the Father, human or divine. At the novel's opening, Giovanna is «in un periodo di grande fragilità» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 12) («going through a period of feeling very fragile»; 2020a, 14), experiencing puberty as a disorientation and performing poorly in school. She is vulnerable to the emotional withdrawal of her parents, «un uomo straordinario» and «una donna assai gentile» (2019c, 22) («an extraordinary man» and «a really nice woman»; 2020a, 24) whose wealth, apparent joy, and attractiveness is supposed to guarantee her own. The decisive snap produced by the father's comparison of his daughter to the «sagoma secca e spiritata» (2019c, 13) («demonic silhouette»; 2020a, 15) of his estranged sister opens up a «vuoto dolorosissimo» (2019c, 36) («painful void»; 2020a, 38) and is figured as a simultaneous corporeal and temporal rupture: «si spezzò in quel momento qualcosa in qualche parte del mio corpo, forse dovrei collocare lì la fine dell'infanzia» (2019c, 36) («something somewhere in my body broke, maybe that's where I should locate the end of my childhood»; 2020a, 38). Like a revelation from God, the apparently irrefutable paternal pronouncement marks a before and an after, exiling Giovanna from the aesthetically pleasing, pliant, and articulate femininity, embodied by her mother and family friend Costanza, which carries currency in the cultivated world of her parents. As Sara Ahmed writes: «What happens when we are knocked off course [...] can be traumatic, registered as the loss of a desired future» (AHMED: 2017, 47). Giovanna is left to obsess over the biological fatalism of «il mio stesso futuro di femmina brutta e perfida» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 37) («my own future as an ugly, faithless woman»; 2020a, 39). The disobedient body, refusing to be pretty, thus becomes a «corpo avvilito» (2019c, 60) («depressed body»; 2020a, 62). The disobedient mind, refusing to perform well academically, instead allows that «cattivi sentimenti mi si allungavano per le vene» (2019c, 27) («bad feelings» course «through my veins»; 2020a, 30) like a noxious liquid. With monstrous images of Vittoria filling her imagination, Giovanna, failing to take on the elegant form which she had assumed would one day be hers, states: «mi sentivo sempre più mal fatta» (2019c, 28) («I felt deformed»; 2020a, 30).

As well as an effect of adolescence, which Ferrante describes in a 2020 interview as a time in which nothing seems «to possess the right form for you» (*The Elena Ferrante Interview*; 2020b), the narrator's sense of herself as deformed is mediated through a paternal mythology in

which he takes control of the narrative of the women around him, positioning Giovanna as a failure and Vittoria as a malevolent «aunt-witch» (2020a, 132) to be feared and despised, a receptacle for hatred of the past he has repudiated. It is significant that the deformity with which Giovanna becomes obsessed in the novel's opening chapters is the *imagined* one of a person she has never met: what it means to «get the face of Vittoria» is not clear to her, since Vittoria «in tutto il suo orrore» (2019c, 21) («in all her horror»; 2020a, 23) is *faceless*. Her face has been scored out of family photographs, leaving Andrea Trada free to cast her as the possessor of a «disgustosa scompostezza» (2019c, 17) («repulsive unseemliness»; 2020a, 19) which is an offense to proper feminine form and behavior. Vittoria is «la sorella cancellata di mio padre» (2019c, 20) («the sister my father had obliterated»; 2020a, 22). His explicit comparison of this excised woman with Giovanna makes of his daughter another of his «cancellature» (2019c, 19) («deletions»; 2020, 21) in «an insidious form of erasure as domination» (MILKOVA: 2021, 169). Indeed, so entwined is any remaining representation of Vittoria with the violent handiwork of her brother that «dove una volta ci doveva essere stata la testa di Vittoria fu una macchiolina che non si capiva se fosse un residuo di pennarello o un po' delle sue labbra» (2019c, 20) («Where once Vittoria's head must have been was a spot, and you couldn't tell if it was the residue of the pen or a trace of her lips»; 2020a, 22). Though the mutilated image of Vittoria remains «un corpo evidentemente femminile» (2019c, 19) («an evidently female body»; 2020a, 21), it has been literally defaced, removing any trace of the uniquely human. Perturbed by these violent marks, Giovanna fears that she too will be scrubbed from the narrative, becoming the faceless residue of a malicious paternal pen.

Olivia Santovetti confirms the novel as one which is «staging the trauma of separation» (2021, 3) proper to all coming-of-age narratives. Santovetti also explains, however, that Giovanna is not necessarily growing uglier, but growing *up*, ceasing for her mother and father to be «an extension of themselves which they can shape, dress, exhibit, and make plans about» (3), and passing into the stage of life when she will hone faculties for critical thinking. From Vittoria, who is not considered «una donna presentabile» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 101) («a presentable woman; 2020a, 103), Giovanna learns to look beyond the superficiality of a pleasant appearance. The aunt-witch refuses every requirement for the sort of womanhood her brother has presented as acceptable,

embracing a vulgar, profane, irreverent, and overtly sexual femininity. Vittoria is altogether «arcigna» (2019c, 51) («grim»; 2020a, 53), echoing the description of Giovanna with this word by family friend Mariano. As Mariano explains, attempting to lessen the blow, «Arcigna non è un insulto, è la manifestazione di uno stato d'animo» (2019c, 25) («Grim isn't an insult, it's the manifestation of a state of mind»; 2020a, 27). Indeed, the visual grimness of unhappy faces confirms how «[a]n affective disposition can speak for you, on your behalf» (AHMED: 2017, 53). In keeping Vittoria faceless and in insisting that in his own house negative emotions be suppressed in order to *save face*, Giovanna's father also conveniently elides the «rammarico, avversione, rabbia, malinconia» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 53) («remorse, aversion, rage, melancholy»; 2020a, 55) which render women's grimness an indictment of his own actions.

In Brown's exposition, insidious trauma produces in the subject «a capacity to think critically about dominant culture», and a «specific resilience» which comes from «lessons from family or culture» (BROWN: 2004, 466). Furthermore, for Sara Ahmed female unlikability and the grim female countenance carry political weight. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), she inaugurates the figure of the «feminist killjoy» as someone who is unwilling to ratify the status quo where it is perceived to be traumatic, declining to follow a pre-ordained cultural path to happiness and social success which is an existential dead-end (a single script for femininity, for example). Where «[f]eminist consciousness can be thought of as consciousness of the violence and power concealed under the languages of civility, happiness, and love, rather than simply or only consciousness of gender as a site of restriction of possibility» (2017, 62), the killjoy's internal and external grimness is a revelation of false categories and violent narratives. Looking through new eyes, channelling the killjoy gaze of Vittoria who tells her that «[i] tuoi genitori t'hanno detto solo falsità» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 54) («Everything your parents told you is false»; 2020a, 56), Giovanna realizes that it is her father who is *defaced* when it is revealed that for decades he has been having an affair with Costanza, Mariano's wife. All are «fatti della stessa pasta» (2019c, 133) («made of the same clay»; 2020a, 133), then, and each face is ugly in its own way. Seeing brutality everywhere, Giovanna decides she will be brutal herself, engaging in a performance of unlikability which partially frees her from the tangled net of her upbringing and exposes the lying lives of others. Thus, she discovers that to reveal the true face of things, becoming a «sore point»

(AHMED: 2017, 159) which demands to be addressed, is one way to combat erasure.

Once Vittoria upends Giovanna's life, the unlikable woman is no longer the villain of the story but its driving force. Giovanna develops «una smania di sentirmi eroicamente turpe» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 163) («a yearning to feel heroically vile»; 2020a, 163), to be the protagonist of a story of desecration and destruction. She subverts the Trada family lexicon, uniting herself to «l'eventualità del male», which is synonymous with «quello che lui e mia madre nel loro gergo di coppia sostenevano di chiamare Vittoria» (2019c, 41) («the possibility of evil [...] what he and my mother in their couple's language claimed to call Vittoria»; 2020a, 42). Indeed, Vittoria approves of Giovanna and insists upon their similarity, reappropriating gendered insults as virtues in the description of her niece as «una puttarella intelligente come me» (2019c, 71) («an intelligent little slut like me»; 2020a, 73). Internalizing the dissenting voice of the aunt, Giovanna moves to mute her father altogether: «Andrea soprattutto, ah, tacesse» (2019c, 244) («Andrea especially, ah, let him be silent»; 2020a, 242). Referring to the father by his Christian name acts as a form of symbolic parricide, confirming the withdrawal of love and respect from this former giant who now «[m]i sembrò un ometto fragile» (2019c, 245) («seemed to me a small, frail man»; 2020a, 243). Accordingly, Giovanna decides that «parlavo come e quando mi pareva» (2019c, 168) («I would speak how and when I liked»; 2020a, 168), privileging her own perspective over the voices and narratives of others. In a particularly visceral scene, Giovanna, Ida, and Angela (Mario and Costanza's children) imagine defiling images of their parents. Angela declares she would spit on a picture of her mother; Giovanna declares she would urinate on a picture of her father; Ida declares she would write a story about it, preserving this collective iconoclasm in «sboccatezza» (2019c, 155) («foul language»; 2020a, 155). In the mooted defacing of her father's photograph, Giovanna delights in the untethered, self-actuating image that Ida's narrative will contain of «[q]uell'esiliarsi delle due sorelle nella loro stessa casa, quel recidere i legami si sangue» (2019c, 155) («two sisters exiling themselves in their own house», erasing «blood ties»; 2020a, 155).

In the same scene, Giovanna claims the right to self-identify, triumphantly, as a «troia» (2019c, 156) («whore»; 2020s, 157), chastizing her friends for their compliance with societal norms and expectations. From Giovanna's new position as observer, she comes to understand

that sex is the site at which a great deal of human ugliness is rendered visible. Indeed, in the sexual dynamics of the novel all lose face in view of the character of sex as something base and entirely animal, the point at which all identities collapse, especially those of loving father, loyal partner, and good friend. Even Roberto (the Christian theology student with whom Giovanna falls in love) and his girlfriend Giuliana, a new «extraordinary man» and «really nice woman», are not saved from sordidness by «la bellezza e l'intelligenza di chi ha la fede» (2019c, 110) («the beauty and intelligence of those who have faith»; 2020a, 114). The Gospels, too, have received Giovanna's iconoclastic treatment: God, figured as neglectful parent and merciless executioner, is to her more culpable even than a failed human father (2019c, 199; 2020a, 198). Moreover, Roberto's devotion to this other Father, whom Giovanna spurns alongside her biological one, has not rescued him from the passions of the flesh nor made him unwilling to betray Giuliana.

What Roberto reveals himself as willing to give Giovanna prompts a further shattering of hopes: not the respect she craves, but his body, reducing her, like Giuliana and her own mother, to a depersonalized «animalina graziosa o addirittura molto bella con cui un maschio di grandi pensieri può distrarsi giocando un po'» (2019c, 305) («small animal with whom a brilliant male can play a little and distract himself»; 2020a, 302). The stark closing scene in which Giovanna gives her virginity not to Roberto but to the lecherous Rosario is thus a corporeal realization of what she has come to accept about the unpalatable character of life and relationships. Moreover, it is an explicit betrayal of Vittoria, who, like all adults, has revealed herself to be a charlatan, and who insists on a link between sexual purity and young women's worth, telling Giovanna that if she is not wise in bestowing herself «non vai da nessuna parte» (2019c, 317) («you'll go nowhere»; 2020a, 313). Though not the faceless monster Giovanna once imagined, Vittoria is nevertheless *monstrous*: she has cannibalized the children of Enzo, her dead lover, and dominated his widow, living out of a well of «odio che ti fa campare anche quando non vuoi campare più» (2019c, 71) («hate that makes you go on even when you don't want to live any longer»; 2020a, 73). Giovanna's final act of self-determination scores through the fictitious sexual script given to her by this aunt, who declares: «Se tu questa cosa, in tutta la vita, non la fai come l'ho fatta io, con la passione con cui l'ho fatta, con l'amore con cui l'ho fatta [...] è inutile che campi» (2019c, 73) («If you, in all your life, don't do

this thing as I did it, with the passion I did it with, the love I did it with [...] it's pointless to live»; 2020a, 75).

Finally, Giovanna takes pleasure in the confirmation of the character of sex, like all human behavior, as «qualcosa di ripugnante e insieme ridicolo» (2019c, 94) («something revolting and at the same time ridiculous»; 2020a, 96). The same becomes true of faces, the source of so much soul-searching: «Quanto alla faccia, sì, non aveva nessuna armonia, proprio come Vittoria. Ma l'errore era stato farne una tragedia» (2019c, 260) («As for my face, it had no harmony, just like Vittoria's. But the mistake had been to make it a tragedy»; 2020a, 258). The novel's final *defacement* and greatest iconoclasm is that which destroys the patriarchal story of sex, a bodily activity which stands for the intersecting discourses of pleasure and pain, goodness and badness, beauty and ugliness which Giovanna has progressively deconstructed. In a novel peppered with revelations which mark traumatic before and afters, Giovanna's first time cannot be counted among their number. Rather, it becomes a mere «azione volgare» (2019c, 304) («vulgar act»; 2020a, 302), refusing a phallogocentric system of cause and effect in which the woman is changed by «un sesso pendulo o ritto» (2019c, 304) («a penis, limp or erect»; 2020a, 302). Throughout the scene, Giovanna unwrites the text which Rosario is trying to follow: he asks to kiss her, she refuses; he asks her to undress, she does not. For the «cosetto penzoloni tra le gambe» (2019c, 323) («little thingy dangling between his legs»; 2020a, 320) she reserves a sympathetic look. The sex itself is perfunctory and unsentimental, creating the «racconto femminile che, pur dicendo dettagliatamente del sesso, non sia afrodisiaco» (2019a, 34) («female story that, while its subject is sex, isn't aphrodisiac»; 2019b, 38) which Ferrante elsewhere calls for. «Era proprio così che lo volevo fare» (2019c, 325) («That was how I wanted to do it»; 2020a, 322) Giovanna tells Rosario, implying that this is the kind of sex which should be had, just as a grim expression is the best of faces. The (non-) event kills patriarchal joy and overturns established narratives about intimacy and pleasure, leaving «lui scontento, io allegra» (2019c, 326) («him dissatisfied, me delighted»; 2020a, 322). Most importantly, it does not seek to hide its essential lewdness, its readiness to destroy as well as create. Immediately following this, Giovanna and Ida board a train for Venice. She will indeed, then, in defiance of Vittoria and all who have sought to shatter her, go somewhere, believing nothing and no-one can stop her.

The text of entanglement in *Conversations with Friends*

In Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*, Nick gives Frances a script for their dysfunctional on-off relationship: «You say cryptic things I don't understand, I give inadequate responses, you laugh at me, and then we have sex» (ROONEY: 2017, 199). Though said in jest, the cycle is one which causes pain to both, and which is never fully broken. Rooney's primary preoccupation across her novels is with the fragility of relationships, the timing of encounters between individuals, and the power of words spoken too hastily or too late. Rooney, interviewer Emma Brockes tells us, is «more interested in the echo of trauma» than in representing trauma in the moment of its occurrence because, Rooney comments, «the aftermath is what so many of us experience as life itself» (2021). The ways in which we relate to one another bear the marks of how we have been and continue to be hurt. «It seems to me like almost everyone», Rooney continues «has endured some kind of pain or suffering that has changed their life. That change can take the form of "damage", or of learning and growth, or some combination of the two» (BROCKES: 2021). The result of these everyday traumas of human relationships is the persistent belief her narrators harbor that they do not deserve to have their emotional needs met by a parent or partner. Their instability spills out onto the page, upsetting the relationship with the self, the other, and the world. Rooney's is thus a phenomenological preoccupation with the ways in which people respond to forms of trauma reflexively in the present, set in a vision of capitalist contemporary culture in which consistency and decency are the rarest and most precious commodities of all.

As a literature student, Frances has already done the work of deconstructing the patriarchal script for women's lives. She has read the texts and attended the seminars, but is unable to live out of this theoretical knowledge. Though she flirts with the right feminist sore points, her grandiose declaration to Nick that «I wanted to destroy capitalism and [...] I considered masculinity personally oppressive» (ROONEY: 2017, 75) whilst working unpaid for a publishing house, holidaying at rich people's houses, and viewing herself primarily through the eyes of men to whom she is attracted reveal a Marxist feminism which is often as performative as her spoken word poetry gigs. Frances consults critical texts simply to be able to boast, commenting to herself whilst reading Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial*

Reason that «I'm going to become so smart that no one will understand me» (94). In social situations, she instrumentalizes gender for comedic benefit in low-stakes interactions which are not meaningful feminist interventions but an occasional party piece (75). As Madeleine Gray observes: «conversation becomes a performance piece in which Frances can be ascendent» (2020, 77) – it is the only area in which she feels in control of her life and dominant over men. If the novel contains a feminist killjoy, it is not Frances but Bobbi, the best friend and ex-girlfriend who reminds Frances of her «disloyalty and ideological spinelessness» (ROONEY: 2017, 63), that «you have to do more than say you're anti things» (180), and that her infatuation with Nick is «devaluing our friendship» (81). In contrast to Giovanna's destruction of the patriarchal face of Naples as a mirror of her own paternally mediated disintegration, Frances' conversational prowess is a grasp at power which often lapses into confirming her own powerlessness. It highlights instead the ways in which her sense of self continues to be tied to the need for «acclaim» (41), as well as what Orlaith Darling calls «her passivity in the face of a cannibalistic system, and her dependence on men» (2021, 541). Frances repudiates women's subjugation and pliant femininity in a rhetorical sense, but fails to fully transform this into the text of her life.

Alongside the weaknesses of Frances' feminism and the «petulant gesture» (ROONEY: 2017, 121) of her interpersonal interactions, she is subject to intense physical and emotional suffering. Indeed, this suffering is at the root of her unpleasantness, and can be read as a product of the cruelties of people whom she has «loved and trusted» (BROWN: 2004, 469). She is wary of her father, an alcoholic whose behavior communicates greater investment in his addiction than his child. As the narrative voice veers between the expression of acute pain and complete detachment, it is understood that this is the legacy of a child who had «learned not to display fear», opting to appear as an emotionless «cold fish» (ROONEY: 2017, 49) for self-preservation. Anxiety – which de Rogatis reminds us can itself be traumatogenic (2021, 7) – associated with Frances' father's unpredictability is projected onto images of her body as damaged or destroyed, a passive object detached from the self. In particular, the image of the face surfaces again as something which is removed, suggesting the dehumanizing effect on women of paternal failure which is common to Rooney and Ferrante. Remembering a past incident in which her father tossed one

of her school shoes into the fire during a drunken rage, Frances states that «I watched it smouldering like it was my own face smouldering» and that, given the chance, «I would have let my real face burn in the fire too» (ROONEY: 2017, 49).

As Giovanna does, Frances eventually responds to this trauma by rejecting her father, distressing her mother by talking about him as someone with whom she has no connection (176-177). She refers to him by his Christian name, and allows herself to wonder whether the kindness her mother expects of her towards him is a gendered expectation, «another term for submission in the face of conflict» (177). Nevertheless, the revelations about herself, rather than those about the condition of women (a topic on which Frances and Bobbi consider themselves experts) are those which prove most shattering. If Frances is a «leaky container» as Ahmed states of killjoys (2017, 171), it is past hurt and present pain, not righteous anger, which spill out of her as a cumulative effect of a life in which she is «playing a video game without knowing any of the controls» (ROONEY: 2017, 77). During a rupture with Nick which is a catalyst for negative self-reflection, she figures her body as «an empty glass», from which, along with his lost affection, have tumbled forth «all my delusional beliefs about my own value» (287).

Throughout the narrative, the body speaks in ways that Frances herself cannot, despite her articulacy. In moments of shock or distress, Frances traumatizes her own skin, expressing on the body the effect of unspoken words, deleted texts, and unfinished phone conversations. In her grief over Nick's undemonstrative attitude she pulls her hair out, picks her skin, and asks him to hurt her during sex. At the same time, she concludes that «I need to be fun and likeable», conceiving of the relationship's success as connected to her ability to be beautiful and witty regardless of what is going on behind the scenes (30). The awfulness she feels inside and projects onto acts of bodily cutting and pulling is more viscerally mirrored in her undiagnosed endometriosis, which erupts periodically in frightening episodes of excruciating pain, circumscribed by her tendency to self-censure. «Everybody suffers», she declares to Bobbi, pressing a scalding hot water bottle to her stomach (23). The worsening symptoms of this condition, which doctors initially fail to diagnose, are a symbol of the failure to take women's pain (of any sort) seriously, and a physical counterpart to the emotional lacerations by which Frances has been affected since

childhood. The masochistic part of her, indeed, sometimes welcomes bodily pain as a «psychologically appropriate» (84) companion to feelings of distress.

Frances is accustomed to attuning her behavior to her father's «moods», alternating between «humouring him and ignoring him» (49). With Nick, she inscribes herself willingly within a similar framework, shifting between engaging him and «writing only terse responses to his messages, or not responding at all» (83). The first time they have sex, she feels so overwhelmed that «I thought: I might never be able to speak again after this», and yet she «surrendered without a struggle» (71). The language of silencing is significant. Though the narrator is speaking of pleasure, Stephen Marche argues that sex in Sally Rooney's work is «only peripherally about pleasure or even lust; it is about articulating and achieving the correct position, in every sense» (2021). The sexual dynamic (in which Frances is submissive) is a mirror of the broader silencing effect which Nick's ambivalence unintentionally has on Frances as a young creative. When they are having communication difficulties, she finds herself swallowed up in self-loathing, unable to write, and in doubt of her identity. In response, she continues to subjugate herself, thinking of her body «like he owned it» (ROONEY: 2017, 205) and situating the violence she asks for as something she has merited as a «damaged person who deserved nothing» (214). Most significantly, Frances dictates the terms of this unequal dynamic. It is she who says «You can do whatever you want to me» whilst Nick refuses, asking for consent in sexual situations and declining to be forceful with her (213).

The blueprint for the relationship that Frances thinks she is following is one of calculated disinterestedness, yet it is she who is active and Nick passive. As Olga Cameron Cox notes (2020, 421), Rooney is striking in her portrayal of male passivity and its potential to damage the female characters who desire active confirmation of a partner's investment. In response to Nick's verbal inhibition, Frances latches onto a protective vision of herself as an unpleasant «plain and emotionally cold» woman (ROONEY: 2017, 83), facilitated by her offhand and confrontational mode of communicating online. In her online messages, she is acerbic, controlling the conversation in a manner not possible during face-to-face interactions, where Nick frequently disappoints her. Attempting to transpose the aloof online persona into real-life exchanges, she assures Nick when they resume

their affair that «we can sleep together if you want, but you should know I'm only doing it ironically» (114). As in *The Lying Life*, sex is the scene of an elaborate power play: detaching from it, insisting that it is «just sex» (79) are techniques to keep a partner guessing and to avoid forming a risky attachment. Sex is also, however, a site at which craving for connection and reassurance emerges. Without the overt ugliness it possesses for Giovanna, sex is one of the few tools of unfiltered communication Rooney's highly articulate protagonists possess, and yet it is a dangerous tool, because it presents the possibility of speaking, bodily, something that is true but otherwise withheld. Frances discovers to her dismay that, for all her rhetorical posturing, the body keeps the score: «it was impossible now to act indifferent like I did in the emails» (71). More than this, that Frances is not sleeping with Nick ironically, as though it were another of her self-deprecating feminist jokes, and that the texts are just texts, constructions, is the source not of an agentic femininity but of further suffering.

Frances' adopted unlikability is a performance which makes it hard for others to engage with her on an equal footing because they «never have any idea how you feel about anything» (89). Yet unlike Giovanna and Rosario, rather than forcing Nick to follow a script that *she* is writing, the conversations and experiences which Frances herself has sabotaged leave her feeling «spiteful» (86), consumed by the pain of negative emotion where Giovanna is electrified by its power. Frances retains only surface control over the narrative of her emotional life by her practice of detachment: «although I could decide to fight with him, I couldn't decide what he would say or how much it would hurt me» (134). In fact, once laid bare before herself, Frances realizes she has severely underestimated her vulnerability to fresh affective traumas, and it is only after much lashing out and self-flagellation that she is willing to confront the extent of her «melancholic self-destruction» (LIU: 2019). Ultimately, the person to whom she is cruelest, whom she likes the least and whom she is most willing to abandon is herself, in a surrender of control which is also a refusal of responsibility and a lingering attachment to a false narrative. «You underestimate your own power so you don't have to blame yourself for treating other people badly», Bobbi tells her, «*You tell yourself stories about it. I can't hurt these people. If anything, they're out to hurt me and I'm defending myself*» (ROONEY: 2017, 302, emphasis mine).

Mean girls and melancholics

In *The Lying Life of Adults* and *Conversations with Friends*, the narrators Frances and Giovanna engage in a performance which centers bad or ugly aspects of personality to expose the good and beautiful as empty signifiers (Giovanna), or to protect against the vulnerability of total self-exposure in ill-defined romantic relationships (Frances). Where past or present emotional suffering disrupts the ability to tell a coherent story about one's life, Giovanna and Frances try to tell new stories in which they feature as autonomous agents with the capacity to structure their relationships and personalities as they see fit. At the same time, both allow themselves to be used by others in ways which belie a continued desire for love and acceptance. Their unlikability is not simply a reaction to the expectations and the failings of others (a feminist response to an unjust world), but a product of progressively unfolding personal and interpersonal traumas. Speaking from a place of hurt, their wounds are cultural *and* personal, reflected narratively in the quality of their engagements with themselves and the world.

By the end, the narrators are not necessarily free or securely happy. The killjoy, indeed, is not promised joy. Within the theoretical framework of insidious trauma, space is left both for «unique coping strategies» and «unique vulnerabilities» in the lives of those affected (BROWN: 2004, 466). Frances and Giovanna are often convinced they are «incapable of any achievement» (FREUD: 2001, 246 [1916-1917g]) and that they and their bodies are «garbage» (ROONEY: 2017, 93). Alongside the meanness they manufacture, they fit the profile for a Freudian melancholic, which is to say one whose trauma is loss of self. For Freud, melancholia characterizes itself by

a profoundly painful dejection, a cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings... (2001, 244).

Giovanna's distress is propelled by the conviction that she is ugly and stupid and that her father's love — and, the novel suggests, women's value in a patriarchal culture — is contingent and conditional. She recounts how «Mi sento brutta, di cattivo carattere, e tuttavia vorrei essere amata» (FERRANTE: 2019c, 191) («I feel ugly, like I'm a bad person, and yet I'd like to be loved»; 2020a, 189). Frances worries that love must be earned,

and is motivated by a desire to fashion herself as «someone worthy of praise, worthy of love» (ROONEY: 2017, 41). This lack of self-esteem is not structurally informed, a social shift for which the contemporary trauma novel has sometimes come under fire (see ROSENFELD: 2019). Giovanna and Frances are broadly emancipated products of a middle-class post-feminism, remain largely untouched by material suffering, and might be justly critiqued for complacency and for a certain complicity in their own objectification. Nevertheless, their emotional experiences confirm that, even outside a context of explicit marginalization, «one of the prominent wounds of trauma is the crushing of the human spirit [...], which may indeed be the hardest wound to heal» (Root: 1992, 238).

The question of healing is therefore deliberately left open. If a link is to be drawn between female unlikability, trauma, and subversion, we might see Giovanna as freer than Frances. Regardless, this must be acknowledged as a bitter freedom. Indeed, de Rogatis has called *The Lying Life* Ferrante's most «bitter» novel to date (2020). Giovanna escapes with childhood friend Ida to Venice, resolving her relationship to Naples in flight. But if we know anything of Ferrante's novels, it is that neat conclusions are illusory: «Il lieto fine ha a che fare con i trucchi della narrativa, non con la vita e nemmeno con l'amore che è un sentimento ingovernabile, mutevole, pieno di brutte sorprese estranee all'happy ending» (FERRANTE: 2016a, 232).¹ In that suffering in Ferrante's work is navigated «senza approdi trascendenti» (2016a, 73) («without transcendent results»; 2016b, 78), Victor Zazar reminds us that «alongside progress always lurks regress» (2020). Vittoria is no uglier than anyone else. In fact, Ferrante reveals, the face of Vittoria is the face of us all, except that Vittoria's peculiar blend of beauty and violence, like Naples, has «the merit of always having presented itself without a mask» (JACOB: 2018). Despite this, even Vittoria, unrefined and unrepentant, does not possess the truth—she merely has another story to tell, with different heroes and villains. One doubts whether wicked Vittoria has «tutta l'arte di strega che ci serve» (FERRANTE: 2021, 117) («the witchcraft we need»; 2022, 87) or is simply under the spell of self-delusion. Giovanna is forced to acknowledge that beneath it all «sarei stata pur sempre io, un'io malinconica, un'io sventurata, ma

¹ «The happy ending has to do with the tricks of the narrative, not with life, or even with love, which is an uncontrollable, changeable feeling, with nasty surprises that are alien to the happy ending» (2016b, 241).

io» (2019c, 42) («I would still be me, a melancholy me, an unfortunate me, but me»; 2020a, 44). She never completely resolves her sense of «lo sforzo insopportabile di esistere» (2019c, 201) («the unbearable effort of existing»; 2020a, 199), confessing from the outset her suspicion that she remains «un garbuglio» («a tangled knot»), and that any story she writes about herself will be reducible to «un dolore arruffato, senza redenzione» (2019c, 9) («a snarled confusion of suffering, without redemption»; 2020a, 11).

Like Giovanna's departure from Naples with another girl, Frances rekindles her romantic relationship with Bobbi, suggesting an eventual circumvention of the heterosexual frameworks by which both narrators have felt oppressed. However, she is also drawn inexorably back into what can only ever be a half-relationship with Nick. Without resolving the difficulties which led to the breakup, she tells him blithely that «[i]f two people make each other happy then it's working» (ROONEY: 2017, 320). There is no indication that the text of their entanglement will be written anew. Often, Nick and Frances' interactions are not really conversations in the sense of two people who see and understand one another; most of the people in the novel, battling for control of the text of their own and others' lives, struggle to be friends in the sense of bearing disinterested affection for one another. Frances' illusion of impermeability doesn't hold, and life becomes «the distracting tasks undertaken while the thing you are waiting for» – to feel whole and happy – «continues not to happen» (289).

Women's unlikability in these texts is not, then, a good (or an evil) in itself simply because it defies gendered expectations. It is rather what the unlikable personalities at the heart of these narratives stand for which is ethically inflected. Alongside feminist practices of redefining the contours of femininity, we might see female unlikability in contemporary literary texts which deal with emotional trauma as asking a broader question of how it is that we become or fail to become the people that we wish to be, acknowledging that this is in part governed by the sorts of suffering we have faced. Via disruptive moments in the life of her protagonists, Ferrante's ethical undertaking, Barbara Alfano states, is to «stir in the reader specific sensations that will lead them to choose between (what feels) good and (what feels) bad» (2018, 25). The power of Ferrante's writing is that the line between the two is disconcertingly blurred, defying those who insist «la protagonista di una storia deve essere simpatica, non deve avere

sentimenti orribili, non deve fare cose sgradevoli» (FERRANTE: 2019a, 40) («the protagonist of a story should be nice, shouldn't have terrible feelings, shouldn't do unpleasant things»; 2019b, 44).

Similarly, Sally Rooney shows how unlikability, avoidance of moral didacticism, and readerly empathy are drawn together in her fiction:

I certainly can't say I love these characters because of their likeable personality traits. [...] Many readers will doubtless find some or all of them "unlikeable." That's okay. I wasn't trying to create characters I approved of or looked up to – but equally I wasn't interested in writing about people I considered morally beneath me. [...] I believe that, while not everyone is "likeable", everyone is loveable. Part of what motivates me as a novelist is the challenge implicit in this belief. I want to depict my characters with enough complexity, and enough depth of feeling, that a reader can find a way to love them without liking them. Or even like and love them despite everything – as I do. (LYSTER: 2021).

It is clear that Frances and Giovanna elect to become unlikable because they feel *unlovable*. The progression from apparently unlovable to deliberately unlikable is insidious: the cumulative result of the ways in which others have shown disregard for the narrators' full humanity, creating a «cynicism» that comes from the «pervasive feeling that love cannot be found» (HOOKS: 2018, 18). In other words, likability and unlikability do not here flow from some corresponding source of inner goodness or badness, but are culturally and, I have argued, traumatically informed.

As we accompany Giovanna and Frances in their successes and failures, one issue which their attempts to re-write the script of their engagement with themselves and others raises is how the cultural and individual texts that we are reading from can trap us, and how we can trap ourselves in them. For some, unlikable women are feminist killjoys, meaning that they refuse to be happy in the ways their society expects of them, disrupting dominant cultural narratives. On the flipside, there are those who ask what we gain from «young female protagonists [who] insist on their agency – even if it's the agency to seek out their own debasement» (ROSENFELD: 2019). If the unlikability of female characters is partly a response to emotional experiences which are felt to fragment identity and restrict possibility, then a faithful reading of these novels makes room for an intermingling of resistance with regress. Indeed, the framework for insidious trauma

as applied to Elena Ferrante and Sally Rooney is properly feminist in that it invites us to ask the difficult question of why someone might feel the need to become untouchable in the first place. Asking this question, we are led to consider meanness, melancholy, and the pain of the disappointed heart as intertwined, and are invited to empathize with the sometimes frustrating, even unsympathetic voices of female characters who meld self-creation with self-destruction. Answering it, we are invited to do something yet more transgressive: to «like and love them despite everything», Rooney nudges us, «as I do».

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Biography

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Tiziana de Rogatis is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the University for Foreigners of Siena. She has published widely on Montale, Eliot and Valéry, and on Morante, Ferrante, Adichie and Atwood. She is the author of *Elena Ferrante's Key Words*. Her most recent research focuses on the connection between trauma and narrative structures in World Literature, with a specific attention to women writers, translingual narratives and the Global Novel. She is Principal Investigator in the international project Traumas of Migration and Public Health Industry (PNRR 2022/2025).

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