

# Editorial

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Stemming in part from the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Graduate Conference in Italian Studies, held at University College Cork on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012, this Special Edition of *Aigne* aims to explore and discuss prevalent issues within Italian studies today. The conference, which engaged with questions from literature, film studies, gender studies, cultural studies, linguistics, history and art history among others, sought new insights into Italian studies today.

The event brought together a skilled and diverse range of scholars from a number of countries—including Ireland, Italy, Great Britain, Germany, Portugal, and United States—and dealt with a variety of issues, shifting the debate from predominantly linguistic-related topics (translation, adaptation, language innovation and new teaching/writing technologies) to key cultural, historical and socio-political issues such as otherness, disability, female politics, collective memory and (post-)war legacies. However, although various research approaches informed these studies, it is the gender perspective, and in particular the spectre of female issues, that emerged as the prominent thematic leitmotif of the conference.

In this light, the articles published here constitute a representative sample of the thematic and rhetorical conversations on display at the conference. Linguistically, the articles echo the diversity in evidence, as one is written in Italian (a first for *Aigne*) and the other two in English. All three are concerned with Italian literature, engaging with themes and issues that dovetail with one another in complimentary fashion, yet nevertheless display innovative, distinctive analyses from three up and coming scholars.

More specifically, by analysing selected novels by three leading contemporary Italian authors, the articles all deal with crucial gender-related questions, such as female representation, motherhood and homosexuality.

In the first article, 'La figura di Penelope in *Itaca per sempre* di Luigi Malerba' (The figure of Penelope in Luigi Malerba's *Ithaca Forever*), Serena Alessi points out that while Odysseus' tales have been the object of numerous rewrites, very rarely have they privileged the figure of Penelope, his faithful wife. An opportunity has been missed therefore, to re-narrate the Greek myth through a female central character. In this sense, Malerba's novel represents a unique piece of work in Italian contemporary literature: for he proposes a 'dual narration' strategy where Ulysses and Penelope's voices are interwoven and recount the same events from two different viewpoints. By analysing *Itaca per sempre* and investigating the complexity of Penelope's mythological figure, Alessi also highlights how Malerba—for the first time in Western literature—re-shapes Penelope according to qualities (such as wisdom, shrewdness and craftiness)

generally put as secondary to Penelope's beauty or considered as more masculine traits.

In 'Naming the Child: Entering the Maternal Genealogy in Valeria Parrella's *Lo spazio bianco*', meanwhile, Paola Benchi investigates the theme of motherhood, specifically focussing on an episode in the novel when the protagonist, Maria, decides to name her female new-born baby. Starting with Luce Irigaray's theory of maternal genealogy, Benchi analyses the mother's act of naming her female child with reference to a number of different feminist studies—including those undertaken by Jessica Benjamin (1995), Nancy Chodorow (1978), Jane Flax (1985), Lisa Baraitser (2009) and Bracha L. Ettinger (1992, 2006, 2010) –, ultimately demonstrating how, in the space of Parrella's novel, the act of naming itself also impacts on the building process of the protagonist's subjectivity. Viewed in this light, Benchi argues that the process of maternal genealogy allows Maria to access 'a new embodied subjectivity', that is a more sophisticated conception of herself as a mother.

In the concluding article of the issue, 'Beyond Duality: the "Choreography" of Gender in Dacia Maraini's novels', Maria Morelli explores a selected body of work by Maraini, questioning the concept of female sexuality. Mostly engaging with Jacques Derrida's idea of a 'choreography' of gender—assumed as a decisive rejection of any essentialist and prescribing interpretation of the concepts of gender and sexuality –, Morelli argues that in Maraini's writings the construction of gender translates into an on-going process, which ultimately reiterates the blurring of the boundaries in-between sexes.

Though diverse in nature, these articles shed a fresh light on existing discourses within the field of Italian Studies while opening up new avenues for lesser-heard arguments. This melding of discourses—old and new, thematic and narrative driven, classic and contemporary—chime with the ever-evolving nature of Italian studies itself, a discipline with a grand tradition that nevertheless must strive to find new modes of relevancy as we move further into the twenty first century and beyond.