Editorial

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Stemming in part from the 5th Annual Graduate Conference in Italian Studies, held at University College Cork on February 4th, 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.

Naming the Child: Entering the Maternal Genealogy in Valeria Parrella's *Lo spazio bianco*

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Naming is usually seen as the first action that inscribes the newborn in a patriarchal genealogy, assigning to the subject a role, a position, and an identity in the symbolic order. However, it is possible to find ruptures that allow for a different signification, shifting the emphasis towards a maternal genealogy. The passage from a paternal to a maternal genealogy offers a perspective for a reading of Valeria Parrella's *Lo spazio bianco* (2008).

Maria, the 42-year-old protagonist of this book, gives birth to a premature baby girl after only six months of pregnancy. The baby is put in an incubator in the hope that she can grow and survive. At one point in the story, Maria decides to name her baby. I suggest that Maria's act of naming her baby girl can be seen as an event which subverts the traditional mother/daughter role assigning Maria and her daughter their new subject-positions according to a maternal genealogy.

Starting with an analysis of a number of feminist theorists' take on naming, I will then examine the process of naming in *Lo spazio bianco* in the light of some of the theories on maternal/feminine subjectivity. I will integrate Luce Irigaray's theory of maternal genealogy with notions derived from object-relations psychology such as Jessica Benjamin's "intersubjective space", Nancy Chodorow's and Jane Flax's different ideas of mother/daughter relationships, and Christopher Bollas' "unknown thought"; Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters* will provide the focus for my analysis, while Bracha L. Ettinger's "matrixial borderlinking trans-subjectivity" will be the final key for the reading of Maria's delayed maternal subjectivity.

Introduction

Naming is usually seen as the first action that inscribes the newborn in a patriarchal genealogy, assigning to the subject a role, a position, and an identity in the symbolic order. However, these are never fixed and the subject will always be in search of a positionality that gives him/her an identity which helps to recompose, albeit momentarily, a self which, according to Jaques Lacan, is always fragmented. For Lacan (1956-57, 1958, 1966), the "Symbolic Order" marks the child's subjection to the father's law as a result of Freud's Oedipus stage. This allows the child to enter the binary system of signification based on the Phallus, and to assume its own subject-position. The pre-Oedipal union with the mother is, therefore, erased and the consequent unconscious desire for this lost union is kept under control by the symbolic order. It follows that the

Phallus does not allow for a representation of the feminine, which *is* the desired phallus for man who *has* the phallus (Lacan, 1958).

Arguing against both Freud and Lacan, Luce Irigaray (1974, p.133) claims that in patriarchy woman can only assume the role of object "of representation, of discourse, of desire" because the false and apparent neutrality of disembodied philosophical discourse is actually based on male subjectivity; woman is represented as a castrated, or lacking, man (Freud, 1933) or she cannot be represented at all, because "there is not such a thing as Woman" (Lacan, 1972-1973, p.72). The symbolic cannot find a system of representation for femininity, since in its binary signification the feminine is seen as the "other" in support of male subjectivity (Irigaray, 1977). Patriarchy needs the two identities of mother and woman to be conflated, so that the reproductive function of the female body can be debased to the merely natural and be assumed symbolically by the father; the father, then, hands down his name to his son excluding, thus, a female genealogy: "The whole of western culture is based upon the murder of the mother" (Irigaray, 1981, p.47). The patriarchal logos starts with the erasure of the body of the mother, which entails that the relationship between mothers and daughters remains unsymbolised. The restoration of the maternal, which necessitates the definition of a new genealogy of women based on a new language and a new social order, can have a political subversive function. Irigaray believes that relationships between women must be encouraged, so that a new language can be found (Grosz, 1989, pp.122-123).

Irigaray's idea of a female genealogy is further developed by the Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro in *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (1991), where she advances a theory called *affidamento* (often translated as "entrustment"), which sees as a universal model the ethics of the maternal function.[1] A female genealogy is a means to distance the maternal from the exclusive association with its biological reproductive function. The maternal is based on exchange, and, for Muraro, exchange is at the basis of feminine desire (Parati and West, 2002, p.21). *Affidamento* is a means of re-inscribing the mother's body into signification: similarly to the pattern found in the mother/daughter relationship, a more "experienced" woman becomes the mediator between another woman and society, according to a maternal ethics that, as I said above, is based on exchange and solidarity. In this way, maternal power becomes an alternative to the patriarchal symbolic order: "As a guiding concept of feminist practice, in the relationship of entrustment, the notion of the symbolic mother permits the exchange between women across generations and the sharing of knowledge and desire across differences" (de Lauretis, 1990, p.11).

The passage from a paternal to a maternal genealogy offers a perspective for a reading of Valeria Parrella's *Lo spazio bianco* (2008). Born in Torre del Greco, near Naples in 1974, Parrella is perhaps the most prominent among the young generation of Neapolitan writers. She has written short stories and novels and *Lo spazio bianco* was made into a successful film in 2009. Maria is a 42-year-old unmarried teacher of adults who are studying to obtain school qualifications.

The story starts with Maria, who gives birth to a premature baby girl after only six months of pregnancy. The baby is put in an incubator in the hope that she can grow and survive. At one point in the story, Maria decides to name her baby. I suggest that Maria's act of naming her baby girl can be seen as an event which subverts the traditional mother/daughter role assigning Maria and her daughter their new subject-positions according to a maternal genealogy. Starting with an analysis of a number of feminist theorists' take on naming, I will then examine the process of naming in *Lo spazio bianco* in the light of some of the theories on maternal/feminine subjectivity. I will integrate Irigaray's theory of maternal genealogy with notions derived from object-relations psychology such as Jessica Benjamin's "intersubjective space", Nancy Chodorow's and Jane Flax's different ideas of mother/daughter relationships, and Christopher Bollas' "unknown thought"; Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters* will provide the focus for my analysis, while Bracha L. Ettinger's "matrixial borderlinking trans-subjectivity" will be the final key for the reading of Maria's delayed maternal subjectivity.

The Act of Naming: a Normative or Subversive Action?

Baraitser's anecdotal introduction to her *Maternal Encounters* (2009) provides an enlightening reflection on the act of naming. She recounts how surprised she was to be asked to name her baby immediately after the delivery. She describes humorously her wonder before a name that did not "stick" to her baby: "The child is a stranger to his name" (p.24). She becomes aware that it was a choice arbitrarily made by someone else for the child (herself and her husband in this case) and compares this to the arbitrariness of language itself that was already there before the birth of her son (p.24). Naming a child is for the baby the first move into the name-of-the-father, when culture wins over nature and starts to shape the identity of the newborn according to models already chosen for the child. Baraitser (2009, p.46) refers to Lacan when she states that proper names place subjects in a fixed point within the symbolic - though in constant flux - and that the "*Nom-du-Père*" signifies the final severing of the child from the mother's body and its attainment of Oedipal identity. This act of naming is particularly meaningful for Maria whose daughter is still in the incubator fighting between life and death: she needs the premature baby to become real.

The question of proper names is discussed by Lacan (1964-1965) and Julia Kristeva (1979). In seminar XII (1964-1965, p.52), referring to those who find no meaning in proper names – John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell – Lacan writes: "To say that a proper name [...] is without meaning, is something grossly erroneous. On the contrary it carries with itself much more than meanings, a whole sum of notices". Signification is, in fact, also linked to its foreclosed desires, or "sum of notices". Criticising Bertrand Russell, who compares names to demonstratives,[2] Lacan affirms that proper names serve to reinforce the fabrication of an identity that would remain formless if it did not enter the name-of-the-father: "It [the proper name] is designed to fill the holes, to be a

shutter, to close it down, to give it a false appearance of suture" (Lacan, p.59). In these words, it is indirectly indicated that the "holes", or the fissures through which the unconscious might emerge, will never be completely "sutured".

Similarly, demonstratives and proper names are also discussed in "The True-real" by Julia Kristeva (1979, p.216) who sees them as examples of the "instability and ambiguity" of language. The right way to approach them is from the point of view of the "speaking being" (p.235). A proper name helps to give boundaries to a particular sign, so that it can emerge from its indefiniteness: "The proper name therefore surfaces as an indeterminate elaboration on the separation of a particular sign from the general set of signs, but also of a signifier from its signified and its referent" (p.235). In other words, naming is an act that subtracts the subjects from the "unnameable" space of the semiotic chora, that is to say, the repressed pre-verbal union with the mother when the child utters babbles and does not see any borders between itself and the mother. The chora belongs to the unconscious and becomes the site or receptacle of all the mother-oriented energies that, when they re-emerge, challenge the patriarchal language with their subversive power (Kristeva, 1974).

Judith Butler's theories reinforce the idea that the norm always contains that which is able to undermine and resist the Law (1990, p.55). She writes in the introduction to *Bodies that Matter*: "Naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (1993, p.8). Because a subject is constructed through language, her/his identity is reinforced by the reiteration of superimposed practice and consequently a girl, for instance, is "girled" beforehand by the name assigned to her (p.7). For Butler, bodies materialize thanks to the performative repetitions of norms that "over time produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface" (p.9). The norms are meant to repress anything that is likely to disrupt the social rules in order to maintain the subject far from the danger of what Butler calls "the *un*symbolizable, the unspeakable, the illegible" (p.190, Butler's emphasis). Proper names as signifiers do not refer to a pre-given object but they shape it "retroactively", unifying elements under the common denominator of the presumed identity (p.210). To become a subject means to undergo a process of "subjection", a word that is also reminiscent of an imposed power; this power is imposed on us, but it is also accepted by us because we depend on it in order to be a "subject" (Butler, 1997, p.2). The subject needs to be recognized through the "interpellation" of an other who, in turn, has already been positioned in her/his performative social role.[3] However, even though acts are repeated, they always repeat differently sometimes transforming performativity into parody: subversion lies in "how to repeat" (1990, p.148) because parody can reveal the artificiality and arbitrariness of the norm.

Irigaray (1977) considers the act of naming to be a traumatic event that usurps women of their generative function in order to subjugate them and to ensure men's hold on their offspring, otherwise it would make paternity very

uncertain: "According to this order [symbolic order], when a child is given a proper name, it already replaces the most irreducible mark of birth: the *navel*. [...]. A proper name, even a proper name, is slipped on to the body like coating – an extra-corporeal identity card" (p.39, Irigaray's emphasis). Losing their maternal genealogy, women will not find their subject-position in the symbolic, and their identities remain linked to the role of objects which pass from father to husband, whose possession is ensured by the change of women's surnames: from the father's surname to that of the husband.

It appears, therefore, that female theorists concur that naming a child is the first move away from the mother: it is the beginning of the process of forming boundaries ensured by the surname that binds the baby to a paternal genealogy. On the other hand, we have seen that the name-of-the-father is never able to erase the foreclosed mother, which emerges through desire. For example, Kristeva's bodily experience of maternity and the meeting with another being, her son, inserts her in a lost female genealogy. In *Stabat Mater* (1977, p.172) she writes: "Recovered childhood [...], opaque joy that roots me in her bed, my/ mother's, and projects him, a/ son, a butterfly soaking up/ dew from her hand, there,/ nearby in the night. Alone:/ she, I and he". In the bed that she shares with her son, Kristeva also establishes a connection with her mother by means of her own maternity, an experience that leads to *jouissance* – that is to say, her expression of a maternal bodily pleasure linked to the semiotic chora.

Building up maternal subjectivity

Naming the baby girl is the turning point in *Lo spazio bianco*: here, it is not an action of separation but rather an exchange, the creation of the relation between two subjects. As Irigaray argues in *The Way of Love* (2002, pp.71-75), the "interweaving of relations", where a "whole" being is in connection with another "whole" being, is something that goes back to the "foundation", to the origin, that is to say, to the relation with the mother. It is the Law of the Father that transforms it and cuts it off from its "connection with life" and with other beings. The focus of *Lo spazio bianco* is on the mother, or better, on motherhood as the construction of a new maternal subjectivity, based on "the experience of self-discovery through strangeness" (Baraitser, 2009, p.157). Here, the act of naming becomes the act that starts the building of Jessica Benjamin's "intersubjective space" (1995) for the encounter between two newly forming subjects, still strangers to each other: Irene and Maria as a mother.

Benjamin's theory shifts the focus from subject-object to subject-subject encounter, thus casting the mother-child relationship in a different light. Psychoanalysis traces the beginning of identity formation back to the splitting from the mother/other, centring on the infant who internalizes the mother as an object. But if the mother is recognized as a subject, the early development of psyche must take into account the mother's autonomy as well, because it is by

experiencing the mother's subjectivity that the infant experiences and develops its own self.[4] From a feminist perspective, this different approach lays the foundation for the recognition of the mother's subjectivity, in fact "denial of the mother's subjectivity [...] profoundly impedes our ability to see the world as inhabited by equal subjects" (Benjamin, 1995, p.31). In Parrella's novel, the intersubjective space is the *spazio bianco*, the white space or gap, formed through the juxtaposition of two images. The first image is provided by the gap that Maria experiences between her former self and the new motherly self, a process that is slowed down by her daughter being in the incubator. The second image is linked to another aspect of her "relational self": her work as a teacher of Italian for adults. Here, the *spazio bianco* is the double-line spacing that Maria suggests to her student to represent a change in his own life in the essay that he is writing for his final examination. The time of the diegesis is the 40 days during which the baby is in the incubator; the narrator's time is suspended, while humdrum everyday life flows around her on her journey between work and the hospital.

This suspension is immediately felt by the protagonist, who, in the prologue to the novel, says: "Il fatto è che mia figlia Irene stava morendo, o stava nascendo, non ho capito bene".[5] The narration starts with the unexpected event of the baby's premature birth as an "event-encounter". Following Benjamin's theory of "intersubjective space", but focussing her interest on the formation of the mother's subjectivity when confronted by the child's alterity, Baraitser (2009, p.6) describes the "event-encounter" as the event that marks the beginning of two new subjectivities: "Irene era arrivata".[6] Irene had arrived unexpectedly when Maria was already forty-two, when she thought she had already become the person she wanted to be, when she had already developed her own self (p.15). Maria describes her identity before the *spazio bianco* by listing the acts and roles she used to perform preceded by the repeated personal pronoun I, and indirectly drawing attention to the fact that they do not conform to the patriarchal norm: "Io al cinema a quattromila lire, io a letto con chi volevo, io chiusa per ore in biblioteca come un'investigatrice a cercare libri [...]. Io con la sigaretta in mano pronta a smettere quando avrei voluto".[7] With the birth of her daughter, two new subjects are about to form out of herself and she does not know who she is, because her own new subjectivity can be shaped only by sharing Benjamin's "intersubjective space" that implies the co-existence of another subject; but the other subject, the baby, is not fully there yet: "Pensai al mio comodino, su cui si alternano gocce di ansiolitico e tazzine di caffè, [...], allo psicologo che da anni mi restituiva *la stessa immagine di me* che io gli lanciavo, solo deformata in modo diverso".[8]

Maria tries to find meaning in what is happening and she also tries to explain it scientifically: "Un feto sta dentro un utero, un bambino nasce dopo nove mesi di gravidanza".[9] However, this is not what "nature" is doing in her case, because her daughter is born after only six months and is in a machine now. Her appeal to science makes Maria realize that the baby needs to become real, namely she needs a name and to enter the name-of-the-father: "Allora mi accorsi

dell'*urgenza* del nome. 'Si chiama Irene', - dissi, - 'e scrivetelo'".[10] The male genealogy is soon disrupted and replaced by a matrilineal genealogy that is emphasized by the lack of the baby's father, who had left Maria as soon as he had heard about her pregnancy: "Qualche giorno dopo una burocrazia borbonica che non aveva nessun legame con la vita registrò anche il suo [Irene's] cognome, il mio".[11] Even though the baby girl takes her mother's surname only out of bureaucratic exigencies, nevertheless, the baby girl enters into a female genealogy. In this context, naming seems to be the parody of a performative action; mimicking it, although not deliberately (Irigaray, 1977) unmasks the inconsistency of the patriarchal law.[12]

In this suspended *spazio bianco* names do not yet constitute identities. A new subjectivity is realised after the event has taken place, retrospectively, as Baraitser suggests (2009, p.158),[13] but time is suspended and the event, or encounter with another subject, has not fully become an event yet because Irene was still in a state of suspension between life and death: "E Irene non c'era. Lei non era nessuno".[14] Moreover, Maria herself is not a mother yet, because she is also in a state of suspension: "E io non ero sua madre, non ero una madre, io ero un buco vuoto che ogni mattina prendeva una metropolitana".[15] Maria's memory of her own mother does not help her to better understand her newly forming self, because her mother seems not to have a definite self either. Her life was limited to the house; she was so fully dependent on her husband that she was not able to get her driving licence because, during her driving lessons, he kept on saying that driving did not suit her (p.49). In other words, her mother performed the role assigned to her by patriarchy, the same role that Maria is trying to dismiss: "Avevo 16 anni quando mi ero impiegata nello sforzo piú capillare della mia esistenza: rimuovere la corona di spine. Era stata un'eredità di mia madre: lei era una suora in borghese".[16] Her mother had been brought up as a *mater dolorosa* with no desires and no body.

The relationship between Maria and her mother can be understood through theories of object-relations which focus on the familial environment, especially the theories of the feminist psychoanalysts Chodorow and Flax, and those of Bollas. The notion of object-relations idea is based on the study of the infant in its first year of life, during which it experiences the earliest sense of self in relation to the outer object/person that will form the blueprint of its future relationships in adult life. Because at such an early stage of human life the first object is the mother or the mother's breast, the infant internalizes an interaction between itself and the good or bad mother that will shape its adult psyche and connections with the outer world. From a feminist point of view mothering is not biologically determined but rather is the result of socially induced "choices". Names and naming, in fact, remind us that identities are primarily established in the name-of-the-father, even when they can be subverted and shifted towards a maternal genealogy. Social structures, Nancy Chodorow (1978a; 1978b) underlines, are important because subject-formation occurs firstly in the ambit of the family, which is itself a social

structure at the service of patriarchy: "These object-relations grow out of contemporary family structure and are mutually created by parents and child" (1978b, p.139). According to Chodorow's reworking of Freud's theory, boys need to separate themselves from the pre-Oedipal mother and reject her in order to acquire their "masculine" heterosexual gender and recuperate her symbolically: they will try to repossess the mother through their heterosexual relationships. Boys must be more differentiated than girls from their mothers and in differentiating themselves they develop a stronger sense of autonomy and individuality. On the contrary, the girl will never separate enough from the mother in order to retain feminine traits; for this reason, she will become more dependent on others and keen to establish social relationships.

Differently from Chodorow, Jane Flax (1985) sees this lack of separation between mother and daughter as a hindrance for her identity formation: "[T]he development of women's core identity is threatened and impeded by an inability to differentiate from the mother" (p.3). Consequently, women cannot solve their problems if they do not come to terms with their relationship with their own mothers: "Women patients often feel as if they must rescue their mother in order to and before they can work on their own problems" (p.14). Although Flax and Chodorow see the mother/daughter relationship from two different angles, they both offer perspectives for a better understanding of Maria's relationship with her own mother which contributes to delaying the acquisition of her maternal subjectivity: Maria had rejected the patriarchal role that her mother had assumed; nonetheless, her newly forming motherhood has stirred up the memory of her relationship with her own mother. In the *spazio bianco* where Maria meets her daughter, the phantom of her own mother makes it difficult for her to find an identity different from her mother's. In fact, Maria is burdened with her mother's own grief. Her idea of motherhood is contaminated by Bollas' "unthought known" (1987) that has its roots in Maria's early psychic development and has become part of her being. The object-relations theorist Bollas has expanded Donald Winnicott's idea of "transitional phenomena", which are the links between psychic development and the familial environment: these phenomena are neither forgotten nor mourned (Winnicott, 1953, p.7). Consequently, because the transitional object par excellence is the mother, in the adult woman the presence of the mother will haunt her also during her own search for an identity as a mother. According to Bollas, the "unthought known" is the experience of an object at an early stage of life when cognitive skills are not yet developed. This object produces a change in the infant and leaves a trace in its forming ego, a trace that will emerge in adult life especially when she/he is experiencing transformation. Thus, it is necessary for Maria to shape this "unthought known" into an idea before she can start to metabolize it and see herself as a different mother.

From Bracha Ettinger's post-Lacanian psychoanalytical point of view (2006a; 2006b), the "unthought known" belongs to the matrixial feminine, that is to say, to the pre-natal, pre-Oedipal bond with the mother. Because it is pre-linguistic it is not part of the phallic order of signification; therefore, when it surfaces it

appears "mad" or "toxic" (Mulhall, 2011, p.78). That is the reason why Maria's "buried" mother, that emerges when she herself experiences motherhood, is first perceived as the Oedipal mother, an object to be distanced, even rejected, in order to become a subject. On the contrary, the pre-Oedipal feminine matrixial is exactly what links her to her not yet well-defined maternal genealogy that powerfully emerges through the gaps re-opened by Maria's delayed event-encounter with her daughter. It is the powerful "link-o" with the matrixial feminine that will be recuperated. The "link-o" is a more positive idea than Lacan's object (a) - or the fantasy of an unobtainable lost object of desire (Lacan, 1973) - because the desire for it leads not to the death drive but to the pre-natal, pre-life encounter with the maternal. It is formed of "borderlinking strings" which are the traces left by the pre-maternal/pre-natal matrixial event-encounter with the feminine (Ettinger, 2010, p.12). It is provided by the matrixial feminine which "[...] corresponds to a feminine dimension of the symbolic order dealing with asymmetrical, plural, and fragmented subjects, composed of the known as well as the not-rejected and not-assimilated unknown, and to unconscious processes of change and transgression in borderlines, limits, and thresholds of the 'I' and the 'non-I' emerging in co-existence" (Ettinger, 1992, p.177). Ettinger's matrixial model ascribes the maternal to an idea of life free from the fear of being dissolved back in the mother's womb. Although associated with the idea of origin, the Latin etymology of the word matrix, in fact, does not mean "womb" and it is not Kristeva's chora. The term "matrix" is used by Ettinger with its modern meaning of generating and originating power (Pollock, 2009a, p.12). In this new light, the object-relations concept of "intersubjectivity" becomes a *trans*-subjective encounter. The shift from the prefix "inter-" to the prefix "trans-" is fundamental because "intersubjectivity" is post-natal, that is to say, when two full subjects encounter each other; "trans-subjectivity", instead, is pre-natal, that is to say, it occurs during the encounter "between partial subjects, *unknown to each other* as in the primordial case of pre-maternal/pre-natal co-emerging partners-in-difference" (Pollock, 2009b, p.48, Pollock's emphasis).

The debunking effect deriving from the representation of Maria's and Irene's uncertain identities and the difficulty for Maria of finding an alternative construction of her self do not end up in a hopeless bleak future precisely because this process is ascribed to the maternal genealogy. Initially, Maria has to go through the stage of recuperating the lost affective strings that had been severed by the *Nom-du-Père* and this is offered by the strategic value of the maternal, which is – in Baraitser's words - "generative, surprising and unexpected" (p.7). Then, the final regained *jouissance* which links Maria to both her mother and Irene allows the protagonist to leave her state of suspension: she is now able to go out and buy for little Irene that which Baraitser calls "maternal stuff", that is to say, those mothering objects which encumber a mother: "'Ho parlato con la dottoressa. [...] Devo comprare una culla.' 'Una culla con le ruote voglio dire: un carrozzino, un fasciatoio, forse lo sterilizza biberon e un sapone neutro, pure, penso. Mi serve un catalogo Chicco e delle lenzuola,

piccole.' 'Quanto tempo hai?' 'Piú o meno quindici giorni.' 'Ce la possiamo fare, persino con i tuoi gusti'".[17] The "surprising and unexpected" Irene – but she is also "generative", because she has "generated" a mother – will finally be able to leave the hospital. It is the beginning of a new embodied subjectivity: Maria is eventually a mother.

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[1] For more about the theory of *affidamento* in English, see Muraro (1994) and (2002). The theory is also mentioned by Irigaray (1985).

[2] Bertrand Russell deals with proper names in "On Denoting" (1905). Discussing proper names in "The True-Real" (Kristeva, 1979, p.237, note 20), Kristeva cites Bertrand Russell's: "The philosophy of Logical Atomism" (1918).

[3] For Althusser, "interpellation" is what changes individuals into subjects. See Butler (1997, chapter 4).

[4] For Benjamin (1995), the "subject-subject encounter" is a mutual recognition based on an attunement between the two parts which subverts the binary system of identification made of subject/object and man/woman. The encounter occurs in the "intersubjective space"; borrowing from Winnicott the term "transitional space", Benjamin maintains that the "intersubjective space" is where the two contrasting forces, intrapsychic and intersubjective, meet and create a tension that she calls the *Ideal*. Here, the infant learns that the mother is not only the "good" mother, the object to be internalized, or the "bad" to be destroyed; their relationship is based on a love bond, a shared *jouissance*, where the mother's smile, for example, is returned to the child's joyous experience. The mother-child dyad is, thereby, demystified: the repudiated mother, who is either denied or idealized, is recuperated in the symbolic intersubjective space that creates "a sustained tension" (1995: 23), that is to say, a common ground for conflicts and negotiation, recognition and repudiation, recuperation and love. A love object can be recognized as such after it has been recognized as "an outside differentiated being" (Benjamin, 1995: 18), a discovery that brings pleasure to the subject (Benjamin, 1995: 32).

[5] "The point is that I couldn't really understand whether my daughter Irene was dying or she was being born" (Parrella, 2008, p.9). All translations from *Lo spazio bianco* are mine.

[6] "Irene had arrived" (p.15).

[7] "Me [in Italian "I"] in four-thousand-lire cinemas [that is, cinemas screening quality films], me in bed with whom I wanted, me hidden away in the library like a detective in search of books [...]. Me holding a cigarette ready to stop [smoking] when I decided to" (p.15).

[8] "I thought of my bedside table, on which tranquilizers alternate with cups of coffee [...], of my psychologist who, for years, has been returning to me the same image of myself that I threw to him, only deformed differently" (p.21, my emphasis).

[9] "A foetus is inside a uterus, a baby is born after nine months of pregnancy" (p.25).

[10] "Then, I realised the urgency of a name. 'Her name is Irene,' - I said, - 'and write it down'" (p.25, my emphasis).

[11] "A few days later, a heavy and slow bureaucracy which didn't have any connection with life, also recorded her [Irene's] surname, mine" (p.25).

[12] Irigaray (1977, p.76) introduces the idea of "mimicry" in order to encourage women to deliberately assume the role assigned to them by patriarchy. In this way, the symbolic order is destabilized and subverted.

[13] For Baraitser, an event is an encounter after which one emerges changed, retaining something of the other. In Baraitser's words: "Subjectivity is understood as the remainder, of what is returned to the self through the encounter with the Other, a self necessarily different than before" (Baraitser, 2009: 35).

[14] "And Irene was not there. She was nobody" (Parrella, 2008, p.28).

[15] "And I was not her mother, I was not a mother, I was an empty hole that got on an underground train every day" (p.28).

[16] "I was sixteen when I did the most difficult thing of my existence: to remove the crown of thorns [symbolizing the Virgin mater dolorosa]. I had inherited it from my mother who behaved like a nun but in civilian clothes" (p.88).

[17] "'I spoke to the doctor. [...] I must buy a cot.' 'A wheeled cot, I mean: a buggy, a changing-mat, perhaps a sterilizer and a baby bodywash as well, I think. I need a Mothercare catalogue and some little bed sheets.' 'When is the deadline?' 'About a fortnight.' 'We can make it, even with your taste'" (Parrella, p.105).

Beyond Duality: the 'Choreography' of Gender in Dacia Maraini's novels

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Dacia Maraini has created a body of work that questions the mechanisms of oppression and manipulation at play within the economy of a heterosexual regime. This means challenging the role of women inasmuch as they are primarily identified as wives and mothers, a challenge linked to and emerging from the questioning of the notion of the (female) body as performing certain gender roles which are, in Judith Butler's words, 'a legacy of sedimented acts' (Butler, 1988).

Following this line of enquiry, in this article I will be looking at the question of female sexuality as tackled in three works by Dacia Maraini: *Donna in Guerra* (1975), *Storia di Piera* (1980) and *Lettere a Marina* (1981). I shall posit that, although at odds with the gender roles patriarchal society would expect them to fulfil, the female characters portrayed in these texts do not seem willing to embrace an exclusive sexuality either. Rather, they would appear more inclined to perform what Butler defines as a 'process' or a 'becoming' (Butler, 1988) or, in my reading, Jacques Derrida's utopia of a 'choreography' of gender (Derrida and McDonald, 1982), understood as an adamant rebuttal of any essentialist, prescriptive, interpretation of gender and sexuality.

In Maraini's narratives gender formation translates into an on-going process which—resonating with a Derridean utopia—becomes less a matter of seeking a unifying subject than of expressing the blurring of the boundaries of a single, unitary category.

> '*What if we were to approach…the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating?*'
>
> —Choreographies, Jacques Derrida

An acute observer of and an active participant in Italian reality, Dacia Maraini has created a body of work that gives an insightful account of the plight of women through different epochs.[1] Hers is an opus which questions the mechanisms of oppression and manipulation at play within the economy of a heterosexual regime while promoting the idea that the re-appropriation of one's identity begins from *within*: a new politics which starts from the body, understood as a site of agency charged with subversive potential.[2] But she is also, at the same time, always looking to effect change in the real world. Indeed, as she herself has pointed out in a recently published interview, in all her works, "the relationship between the person[al] and the collective—meaning

the political, not political in the sense of parties but *ethical*—those fundamental values are there" (quoted in Seger, 2011, p.29; Maraini's emphasis).

In the first instance, this means challenging the traditional role of women inasmuch as they are primarily identified as wives and mothers, a challenge linked to and emerging from the questioning of the notion of the (female) body as performing certain gender roles which are, in the words of American philosopher Judith Butler, "a legacy of sedimented acts" (Butler, 1988, p.523). Namely, they are gender scripts which, being passed down from generation to generation, women are called to constantly re-enact. Ever since the publication, in 1990, of her influential *Gender Trouble*, issues of gender, sexuality and performance have always been central in the work of Butler, whose main goal is the destabilisation of the traditional notion of the subject, aimed at exposing its performative nature. For stressing how, far from being a cause, the subject is rather a *result* of a series of Foucauldian structures of powers—"identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses, with multiple and diffuse points of origin"—, Butler's argument proves to be illuminating here (Butler, 1990, pp.viii-ix; Butler's emphasis).

Following this line of enquiry, in this article I will be looking at the question of female sexuality in three works by Dacia Maraini written between the mid-1970s and the beginning of the following decade: *Donna in guerra* (1975), *Storia di Piera* (1980) and *Lettere a Marina* (1981). My analysis will highlight the subversion of the socially prescribed gender roles allotted to women within a male-defined perspective. I will suggest that, although at odds with the gender roles patriarchal society would expect them to fulfil, the female characters portrayed in these texts do not seem willing to embrace a 'pure', exclusive sexuality either. To this end, I shall turn to the work of French feminist Monique Wittig and her formulation of a "third gender" (the lesbian) to suggest that, although radically departing from patriarchal heterosexuality and being virtually contemporaneous with the novels under scrutiny, her postulations cannot encompass Maraini's *oeuvre*.[3]

Wittig starts from the assumption that lesbians are not women. In order to be a woman, in her view, one ought to have a relationship of dependence with men. Thus, the category of women as we understand it is but a product of the straight (heterosexual) mind (Wittig, 1992). Indeed, and in diametrical opposition to this, Maraini's characters would appear more inclined to perform what Butler defines as a "process" or a "becoming" (Butler, 1988, p.523) or, in my reading, Jacques Derrida's utopia of a "choreography" of gender (Derrida and McDonald, 1982) which he develops in a 1982 interview whose title 'Choreographies' one might find particularly suggestive in the context of a work dealing with notions of the fixity of gender and the (de)construction of identity.

The passage where the French philosopher speculates on the implications of the erasure of socially discriminating sexual markers reads as follows: "I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this [shifting scenario] of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can

carry, divide, multiply the body of each 'individual', whether he be classified as 'man' or as 'woman' according to the criteria of usage" (Derrida and McDonald, 1982, p.76). In this sentence, the ontological roots of gender identity are called into question. Derrida's "choreographies" unmask and deconstruct the mechanisms of power at play in the definition of gender, namely, Butler's "sedimented acts" which are attributed to masculine or feminine bodies, in short, how subjects are created and which ones, to recall Butler again, do or do *not* matter (Butler, 1993, p.v). Similarly, in the works which constitute the object of the present study, normative gendered codes are subverted and disrupted; after all, the deconstruction of heterosexual hegemony is for Maraini first and foremost a political strategy, a tool to which she resorts in order to extricate her female characters from a rigid patriarchal frame. Gender becomes an on-going process *à la* Butler which, resonating with a Derridean utopia, encompasses polymorphous manifestations thus eluding pre-existing social scripts.

Current criticism on the novels under consideration has focussed primarily on the theme of female identity, most notably in the analysis of *Donna in guerra,* (Tamburry, 1990; Cavallaro, 2007), or the mother-daughter bond (Dagnino, 1993), a bond that has also been read as transcending biological motherhood thus proving to be instrumental in the carving out of a space, for women, within patriarchy (Picchietti, 2002). Not a great deal of criticism has been produced that scrutinises the treatment of gender relations in Maraini.[4] This article aims to go some way towards rectifying this imbalance by illustrating that Maraini's work underscores the restrictiveness of codified gender roles and explores possible alternatives. I shall do so by engaging in an exploration of the sexualities as depicted in her texts in order to assess their potential for subverting the heterosexual norms of patriarchy.

Frequently regarded as Maraini's most feminist text,[5] *Donna in guerra* charts the trajectory of the extrication of the protagonist, Vannina, from the mechanisms of subjugation which are at work within the economy of a heterosexual regime. Carol Lazzaro-Weis successfully illustrates, in a few lines, the author's intent: "In *Donna in guerra*, Maraini confronts the theme of accepting responsibility for one's life, as difficult as that may be, in her depiction of the transformation of a withdrawn, dependent female who hides behind her traditional subservient role into a woman ready to accept the risks involved in taking charge of one's self" (Lazzaro-Weis, 1988, p.300). Written in the form of a diary, the story begins with an account of Vannina's monotonous daily routine while she and her husband are holidaying on a fictitious Italian island. In her relationship with Giacinto, the two characters re-enact, emblematically, the archetypal wife-husband hierarchy. Not only does the compliant Vannina not dare question Giacinto's authority, she also perceives her position of subservience as a natural consequence of her role as 'wife': "È vero", she once concedes to herself in reply to her husband's asserting her dependence upon him, "ha una forza terribile in quelle sue braccia bionde e con questa forza tiene in piedi il nostro matrimonio".[6] For his part, Giacinto is

unable to come to terms with his wife gradually developing a stronger self-awareness. When this happens, he accuses Vannina of violating what he sees as her 'true nature' (and thus, by extension, the 'true nature' of women as a category): "Tu di natura sei buona, calma, affettuosa, paziente, remissiva; oggi invece fai la stravagante, vai contro natura".[7] He tells her this after she has voiced her intention to join her friend Suna in a trip to Naples to investigate the condition of women working illegally at home in exchange for miserable wages. Maraini is very careful in unmasking, behind the protagonist's mock repetition of her domestic chores, the patriarchal construction of the female subject. Drawing on Derrida, Butler advocates deconstruction as a tool for recognising the mechanisms of exclusion of the phallocentric system that lead to how the female subject is constructed as such. It is Butler's assumption that "there is a matrix of gender relations that institutes and sustains the subject".[8] Simply put, "construction is neither a subject nor its act" but "a process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface" (Butler, 1993, p.9). Thus, what remains implicit at this stage of the narration is indeed a parodic element to Vannina's actions: the protagonist performs her duties as a housewife in a compulsive manner which suggests submission to the norm. Vannina *is* what the system expects her to be. As such, her diary opens with a list of her housework tasks, which she records in a somewhat telegraphic, and obsessive, way: "Mi sono messa a sparecchiare. Ho lavato i piatti. Ho sgrassato le pentole. Ho sciacquato i bicchieri".[9] When Vannina refuses to give her husband a child, he goes as far as to rape her while she is asleep. Giacinto, thus, emblematically comes to embody patriarchy's imposition of the institution of motherhood upon women that American critic, novelist and poet Adrienne Rich so passionately denounced in *Of Woman Born* (Rich, 1976).[10] But Vannina terminates her pregnancy. Following Derrida's formulation, then, Maraini's protagonist has subverted the encoding logic which would have her be a wife and a mother, but she has also (and here resides the author's political strategy) carved out her own alternative sphere to the constrictive one bestowed upon her, an "alternative relational space of sisterhood as a feminist revision and extension of the relationship between mother and daughter" (Picchietti, 2002, p.14).

It is only thanks to the bond that she develops with emblematic female figures, that the protagonist can reconnect to a female experience and find the strength to embark on the road towards self-awareness. With the island laundress Giottina and her friend Tota, Vannina replays the mother-daughter bond. With a taste for gossip and scabrous stories, the two matrons return Vannina back to the pre-symbolic (semiotic) sphere. As has already been noted by Pauline Dagnino, the secluded and dark space of the launderette, where their relationship develops, acts like the Kristevan "chora" (2000, pp.232-245).[11] Pre-dating the Symbolic, the "chora" is, for French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva, the place of the mother; it knows no language but only a chaotic mix of rhythmic pulsions, needs and feelings—a blessed sense of unity with the maternal figure (1974, pp.93-94). And indeed, the erotically charged language

that Tota and Giottina create, at times seems to be a non-language. Dense with symbolism, it both attracts and repels Vannina who, through these symbolic mothers, is nevertheless initiated into female complicity. But it is only thanks to her "social sisters" (Picchietti, 2002, p.119), that is the rebellious figure of Suna and the unconventional Rosa Colla (the latter helping Vannina through the process of undergoing an abortion) that our protagonist will find true liberation.[12] It is to the figure of Suna, Vannina's paraplegic friend, and especially to her polymorphous sexual identity,[13] that I now wish to devote some attention.

Giacinto's contemptuously calling Suna "half woman", which in turn recalls the epithet "crippled" which the Neapolitan women also address her, has been positively recast by critics as the outward mark of the character's subversive gender identity (Gabriele, 2002, p.246). This is a process that, I would contend, follows the Butlerian trajectory of resignification (or "resigni-fication", as Butler writes it) of *hate speech* (Butler, 1997, p.41)*.* Suna's defining herself as "half man half woman" complicates things even further and casts doubt on her sexual orientation. Indeed, if we agree with Wittig that lesbians are not women, then Suna—for seeing herself as a (half) woman—would be "instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality" (Wittig, 1992, p.30). For Wittig there is no such thing as being a woman, or a man, as the category of sex has been created as a consequence of patriarchal oppression and has then become an alibi for social, economic, psychological differences between two artificially constituted sexes.[14] While Wittig's position, for its formulation of the "third gender"—the lesbian—might be judged as tinged with essentialism, Maraini's somewhat less radical conclusions demonstrate an equal awareness of the pitfalls deriving from a reduction of the sexes to two available possibilities. In overt opposition to this, Maraini's Suna seems to embody the subject advocated by Derrida that goes "beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bisexuality as well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing" (Derrida and McDonald, 1982, p.76).[15] At the beginning of *Donna in guerra,* Suna is in love with Santino, who at the same time is in a relationship with Mafalda. Eventually, the two women will find themselves in love with each other. However, as a response to the group's coercive reaction to her and Suna's coming out, Mafalda agrees to give up living their homosexual relationship openly, her fear of losing her place in the movement quite possibly becoming a metonym of her fear to lose her place in society.

It may be hard to resist the temptation of seeing in Suna the image of the advocate feminist. She is an active member of a Marxist movement, on whose behalf she conducts a survey of the exploitation of female workers in the South of Italy and it is she who awakens Vannina from her state of passivity and subservience to her husband. And yet, upon closer examination, some inconsistencies in her character will soon come to the fore. The reader will discover that she is no less dependent on her father than Vannina is on Giacinto, although for different reasons. Suna's dependency on the paternal

figure is merely of an economic nature. Also, and for a sort of law of retaliation which can be interpreted as a note of irony on Maraini's part, she is, in turn, financially exploited, first by her male lover Santino and then by the movement itself. What is more, despite preaching liberation from restrictive gender roles and not approving of Mafalda's complicity with the homophobic views of the political group, after being expelled from this, Suna gives up not only on her lesbian lover, but also on *life*, since she commits suicide.

Suna's tragic fate leaves the reader in something of a quandary with regard to the outcome implicit in the defiance of codified sexual roles (that is, the subversion of patriarchy that she herself embodies) and calls for several considerations. I shall advance my own by returning to Wittig's theory on the figure of the 'lesbian' as a third gender transcending any form of categorisation. This is a position with which Butler herself concurs, at least inasmuch as the performative character of the same is concerned (Kirby, 2006, p.27). This idea of the subject as a *social* being, that is, deeply enmeshed into the intricacies of cultural demands is, it seems to me, very much present in Maraini's *oeuvre* where, despite presenting us with exemplary instances of transgressive sexualities (of which Suna is certainly the most notable example), the author is also equally preoccupied with making us aware of the inevitable repercussions deriving from defying the patriarchal order, thus looking into alternative, possible ways, of confronting the norm. In this connection, I agree with Virginia Picchietti when she asserts that Maraini's texts provide a space for the investigation of those models put forward by feminist groups in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which are now referred to as "entrustment".[16] Finally, I would contend that Maraini's strategy as we see it at play in the novel succeeds in promoting female solidarity as a key weapon for women within patriarchy while at the same time, and even more importantly, escaping the trap of essentialism. Not only does Vannina disentangle herself from a patriarchal net of expectations and impositions, but also, on more than one occasion, she herself displays a sexuality that goes against sexual norms. I refer here to Vannina's seduction scene with Orio, Santino's adolescent brother, which will end with the two of them having sexual intercourse and, back to Vannina's teaching memories, the attraction she feels for one of her pupils—both instances underscoring the destabilization, carried out by our female protagonist, of socially prescribed sexual behaviours.

Exclusion deriving from non-compliance with societal expectations is also the price paid by another of Maraini's characters: the controversial mother in *Storia di Piera.* Written in the form of a dialogue between the author and stage actress Piera degli Esposti, the book is a biography of sorts; in Maraini's own definition, this is "the story of a highly complex relationship between mother and daughter [...] deeply pagan [...] scabrous" (quoted in Bongarzoni, 1980). It is the chronicle of Piera's turbulent life, the sexual abuses she suffers as a child, the pulmonary illness that afflicts her and her acceptance of her mother's subversive nature. Undoubtedly the most emblematic character in the novel, the latter epitomises non-conformity to the Law of the Symbolic order, the

primordial forces of nature against culture, against patriarchal society and the influence it exerts upon women. Her unconventionality and extraneousness to convention, but also, at a metaphorical level, the clash between the Semiotic (Nature) and the Symbolic (Culture), is well exemplified by her behaving according to the cycle of the seasons: "d'estate era degli altri [...] d'inverno si chiudeva, dormiva".[17] Here, the reference to the goddess Demeter, with whom the flourishing of the earth and, therefore, the cycle of the seasons is associated, is inescapable. As the Greek myth goes, when her daughter Persephone is abducted and taken to the underworld, Demeter, upon whom the fruitfulness of the earth depends, renounces her divine functions to look for her, thus bringing about winter. Even more relevant to our analysis is the revision of the myth by Italian philosopher of sexual difference Adriana Cavarero in her ground-breaking work *In Spite of Plato* (1995). In Cavarero's hands, the myth of Demeter translates into a timeless narration standing for women's power (and right) to generate, or not to generate, life; in other words, it becomes a cry for women's re-appropriation of their own body and, in turn, its disentanglement from the constraints of the institutionalised reproductive function to which it has been confined in patriarchy. Similarly, Piera's mother, like a modern Demeter, is attuned to the cycle of nature, refusing to identify with socio-cultural gender scripts. Furthermore, she loves both men and women, collects lovers and instigates her daughter's sexual initiation. Piera's mother fails to conform to the social order, exhibiting instead her unbridled sexuality or—as Kristeva would probably have it—*jouissance.*[18] Culpable, in the eyes of society, and her husband, for defying the Symbolic order, she is declared mad. Marginalisation (and electroshock therapy) is the exacted price for subverting the norm. Curiously though, what others perceive as an illness, for Piera, who will always turn a deaf ear to everybody else's judgment, is just "una forza meravigliosa" that possesses all the power of attraction.[19] Imperturbable when faced with people's dirty looks and scorn towards her mother, the latter acquires in her eyes a somewhat mythical dimension as a victim of society: a "persona tragica in Piera's own words.[20]

Piera's own sexuality is far from unproblematic. At times verging on incestuous drives towards both parents (by her own admission she shares with the mother the same sexual partners out of a wish to possess her through their bodies), she is obsessed with the male organ and fantasizes having it. Her androgynous looks, as opposed to the more effeminate appearance of her brother, lead her to imagine herself in a man's body. Thus, just as has been said *à propos of* Suna in *Donna in guerra,* Piera too is "half man, half woman" and such is how her father perceives her: "Ho l'impressione che delle volte mio padre credesse di aver fatto una specie di uomo: metà uomo e metà donna".[21]

The defiance of a prescriptive sexuality in the novel is exemplified by an account Piera herself gives of her mother: "Mia madre è una persona così vasta che non saprei come definirla, ogni descrizione la limiterebbe".[22] Piera's mother recalls the figure of Suna, and not just because of her ambiguous sexuality, but

also for her tragic fate of marginalisation. Lacking female support, her subversive nature cannot lead her beyond a mere critique (deconstruction) of patriarchal ideology. Her cry against non-conformity will thus remain unheard and she will spend her last days in the seclusion of a mental hospital—her punishment for defying the Symbolic order. In the same way as Vannina, who aborts the pregnancy that her husband has, quite literally, imposed on her, Piera's mother also refuses to obey a patriarchal system that requires her to be mother and wife. But unlike the protagonist of *Donna in guerra,* who will eventually manage to free herself from the confining ties of patriarchal motherhood through a series of encounters with emblematic female figures, Piera's mother will meet Suna's similar tragic fate of isolation. And it is perhaps no coincidence that both characters who subvert patriarchal sexual norms are made to die by Maraini. In this respect, what has been argued about the reasons of Suna's defeat by the patriarchal system that oppresses her, a defeat which has been seen as imputable to the lack of the support from a community of women, may also be applied to Piera's mother. However, I would like to advance an interpretation of the novels that refutes a negative reading of the same, as if, to borrow Itala T. C. Rutter's words, "explorations of new ways of being must generally end, for women today, inconclusively" (Rutter, 1990, p.570). Following on from this premise, and as will become clearer after my analysis of *Lettere a Marina*, by bringing the three works into dialogue with each other I shall put forward a positive interpretation of Maraini's message as a call for female solidarity which, however, does not renounce the possibility of "incalculable [gender] choreographies" (Derrida, 1982, p.76). Piera's description of her mother is insightful, in that it encapsulates the notion of a 'challenge'—in the sense of subversion—of the system, and is therefore consonant with an analysis of female sexuality in Maraini's work. It will thus serve the function of introducing the last of the three novels under discussion.

Thematically related to the other two works as far as the re-appropriation of one's identity is concerned, and virtually contemporary to *Storia di Piera,*[23] *Lettere a Marina* consists of a string of unsent letters which Bianca, the first-person narrating voice, writes to her lesbian ex-lover Marina, a process which will lead the protagonist into an introspective journey. Bianca's name is reminiscent not only of a blank piece of paper waiting to be written upon but also, through a sliding metonymy of references, the idea of the body as understood by Foucault—namely, a medium where cultural values are inscribed. "Dire di me donna con una lingua maschile è una miserabile contraddizione", one of the female protagonists of *Lettere a Marina* warns us.[24] Such is, in Adriana Cavarero's formulation, the condition of woman, who "in this speaking her own alienation from language, […] reproduces, in action, alienation itself" (1993, p.190). If the universal is masculine, and heterosexual, then it follows that Bianca as woman, and a lesbian, is marked off by the system twice over. Used as a tool to discuss differences between the sexes, in Maraini's literary production the narration often becomes a privileged means of self-discovery. Indeed, it might be seen as a device used by women to free

themselves from the constraints of a society modelled on a master (father, husband, son?) / slave (mother, wife, daughter?) dialectic.

Bianca is constantly reminded of the need to escape a binary system and the imposition of rigid sexual categories. This is exemplified by the recurring obsession of people surrounding her with her being 'alone': "Il giornalaio mi chiede: è sola? Non capisco bene cosa vuol dire sola senza figli sola senza marito sola senza madri padre sorelle?".[25] In what seems to be an echo of Bianca's concerns, Butler asks why it should be that marriage or legal contracts become the basis on which health care benefits, for instance, are allocated—namely, the basis for social recognition. It is her contention that, in a society where heterosexuality is the norm, "the belief is that culture itself requires that a man and a woman produce a child". And it is this 'man' and 'woman' binarism that ought to be stressed here: in *Lettere a Marina* the woman who loves men also loves women. She is not—as Butler would have it—socially intelligible. Bodies generate (and, if we agree with Foucault, are generated by) power relations, which, in turn, translate into incarnated binary constructs. Interestingly though and in line with the above, not only is the protagonist of the novel at odds with the gender roles patriarchal society would expect her to fulfil, but she seems equally unwilling to embrace a monolithic homosexuality. Rather, she appears more inclined to perform what Butler defines as a process or a becoming, thus resisting an essentialist, prescriptive interpretation of sexuality—a position that resonates with the principle that gender is but a "free floating artifice" (Butler, 1990, p.9).

On the other hand, it is also true that the coexistence of lesbianism and bisexuality in the text remains far from unproblematic. The remark of Bianca's friend, Chantal, that "amare il corpo dell'uomo è un atto di intelligenza col nemico" is just an example.[26] For Chantal, the only true lesbian in the novel, to be bisexual is to negotiate with heterosexual society. The implications of such a predicament are not difficult to foresee. Indeed, one is here faced with the paradox that the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality is carried out through the perpetuation of the very same binary structure which lies at its foundations. On the contrary and if we align ourselves with Derrida, action is required to move beyond those binary dichotomies which would all, inevitably, come down to the master (man)/slave (woman) dialectics. But this does not mean privileging the feminine side of the debate either, as it would be but a repetition of the hierarchy—however reversed. In other words, the point is not displacing a dominant discourse (which we have said is recognised as marked as masculine) with its feminine counterpart. Indeed, to say that women love men, and cannot love women, is the same as to say that women love women, and cannot love men. It is only the terms of the equation that change, not the effect. This also raises a point on the ambiguity which lies in the use of language and the limitations intrinsic to language itself—namely, its undecidability. And is it not perhaps significant that, at odds as he is with the logocentrism of the Western world, Derrida has chosen dance—that it to say, a non-verbal form of

art—for his metaphor? Following on from this premise, it would be too tempting to deduce that the novel ends in a reaffirmation of heterosexuality, a view taken by Beverly Ballaro (1996, p.185) from Bianca's statement that "ho preferito il figlio per una tendenza malefica colpevole all'abbraccio con l'altro da sé il diverso".[27] Indeed, however ambiguous Bianca's claim is, such a view is unnecessarily simplistic. If it is true that Bianca, having given up on Marina, starts a relationship with the barman Damiano, it is also true that, towards the end of the novel, she feels an impulse to kiss his stepmother (who is also his lover). This reading finds further endorsement in a dream scene. Bianca is lying in bed and falls asleep; she starts dreaming about Damiano but soon after, between their bodies, an unidentified female figure makes an appearance, and Bianca finds herself fantasising about this unexpected presence.

By renouncing an arbitrary resolution of the sexuality of her female protagonist, then, Maraini seems to be warning the readers against the relativity of culturally determined gender roles, reminding them instead of the infinite spectrum of permutations gender might take. The author's stance on the question of female homosexuality would seem to encourage this interpretation: "Io dico che l'eterosessualità, così come viene vissuta oggi, non è né 'normale', né 'naturale', né 'sana'" (Bellezza, 1981).[28] And again, on the same topic: "Diciamo [dell'omosessualità] che è deviante rispetto alla norma, ma che norma sessuale abbiamo quando scambiamo la pornografia per libertà e riduciamo i corpi a degli oggetti?" (Bonanate, 1981).[29]

Bianca lives her sexuality in a way that is far from unproblematic for her, as exemplified by the anxiety which always accompanies, in the text, the erotic encounters with her lesbian lover (to the point of seeing the reflection of her own mother between her lover's legs) and which one critic has aptly called "decisive moments of freaking out in the text" (Ballaro, 1996, p.184). Yet, this ambivalence notwithstanding, a resolution of the protagonist's sexuality is clearly not the intention of the author. As such, all throughout the novel Bianca's "fraught sexuality" (Gabriele, 2002, p.250) remains as fluid as the sexual identities portrayed within. Bianca's sexual identity becomes a *non-identity*, one which evades any form of encoding. The very last scene would reinforce this interpretation. Her resolution not to go to bed but instead to take a late-night train to Sicily, would thus come to epitomise an adamant rebuttal of all that the "grande letto dai buoni odori di vita coniugale" signifies—namely, the constraints of marriage and of marital life as the only option for women within patriarchy.[30] The sentence reads as follows: "ho deciso di non andare a dormire. Non sopporto più l'odore del vecchio letto matrimoniale'.[31] Here the Italian language better conveys the opening up of a whole series of metaphorical associations linked to the image of the bed,[32] which more than once appears in the novel as a reminder of the compulsory reproduction already denounced by Rich and which, through the adoption of a Marxist approach, Wittig has linked to the exploitation of the category of women by the heterosexual society (Wittig, 1982).

I would now like to briefly call for a comparison between the three works on the theme of female solidarity. My starting point is the character of Basilia, Bianca's next-door neighbour, who lends itself to a feminist reading focusing on the mother-daughter bond as a fundamental presence in women's lives. From Julia Kristeva to Luce Irigaray to Luisa Muraro (not to forget American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich), feminists have focussed on revising the role of the maternal and the recuperation of a maternal symbolic order. Their return to the mother is not "regressive, as Freudian psychoanalysis would have it, but rather progressive: it represents a defiant move forward to the recognition of both the mother as primary female figure and the role she plays in shaping a woman's life" (Picchietti, 2002, p.76). In *Lettere a Marina*, through Basilia, Maraini prompts us to look at how beneficial the redefinition of women's bonds with their mothers (and not necessarily a biological one) might be. Bianca's neighbour, a mother of two, embodies female subjugation within a patriarchal society, quite tellingly exemplified by the macabre stories she often recounts, which tell of women as victims of a distorted societal and familial system. It is thanks to Basilia that Bianca can recuperate her past relationship with her mother, and by extension with all women, in a climactic moment when she hears Basilia sing just as, in Bianca's memory, her peasant mother would have done—thus prefiguring the re-enactment of a female oral tradition. Read in this light, Basilia massaging Bianca's shoulders while singing translates into a metaphorical act and denotes the inscription into Bianca of ancient values and beliefs which pertain to a genealogy of women, a far too long forgotten female authenticity; a chain in which Basilia is but a link. And in so doing, "Basilia helps Bianca replant her roots in the dark recesses of women's history" (Picchietti, 2002, p.133), and retrieve her past (the story of her own self she had forgotten) which is mirrored in the protagonist being able to finally complete the novel she was striving to finish, thus, metaphorically, she re-appropriates her own voice. Bianca finds in Basilia that tenderness that Marina seems incapable to provide her, being obsessed as she is with the wish to possess her lover. And through this nurturing lovingness Bianca has also (re)discovered a bond with the figure of her mother. Because motherhood, as we perceive it in the text, not only transcends biological constraints, it also reaches out to women across generations. As such, Basilia's passing down an oral tradition to Bianca appears to be consonant with Luce Irigary's description, in 'Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother', of the mother/daughter relationship as "an extremely explosive core in our societies", which "leads to shaking up the patriarchal order" (Irigaray, 1993, p.86).

Bianca, seen as a more mature, self-conscious version of Vannina, shows us that patriarchal libidinal economy has to be challenged from *within* the system. Indeed, *Donna in guerra* recounts the process of the consciousness-raising of the protagonist and concludes with her embarking on a journey towards self-awareness of whose outcome, however, we are given no account. Following this logic, and tracing some continuity between the two works, Bianca could rightly be seen as the 'new' Vannina as we have left her after she has freed herself from

the constraints of conjugal life. In the same way as Vannina with the female figures she encounters along her path, Bianca proves to be receptive to the offer of allegiance from her mentor Basilia, an allegiance which she uses as a Trojan horse to oppose a phallocentric system that wants to silence her, her condition being represented, on a metaphorical level, by her inability to finish the novel she is working on as a professional writer. Thus, unlike the mother in *Storia di Piera*, silenced by a phallocratic system which does not recognise her, she is able to find her own voice (again, metaphorically, resuming her own story). This is a call, on Maraini's part, for the recuperation of a female genealogy that transcends biology but also, it should be borne in mind, any prescriptive interpretations of female sexuality, celebrating instead its ineffable nature. As such, the suggestive formulation of the choreography of gender which opened this article becomes the key to the reading of the sexual identities portrayed in the three novels. Gender—seen as a dance—is reminiscent of a Derridean process which reminds us of the infinite spectrum of permutations it might take. This might not provide feminism with a final answer on how to move from resistance into action, it is just the first step of the political programme which is called into question, but is a step nonetheless. It exposes a logic of exclusion and calls for the construction of alternative spaces. It suggests that neither biology nor social constructs can define such a thing as the female sexed body. Only by evading an encoding logic will it be possible to recognise and celebrate both the male *and* female sex, defined not in relation (opposition) to one another but to each of their own intrinsic specificities, which are as 'incalculable' as the choreographies of Derrida's dream.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler questions the mutual exclusivity of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Butler, 1993). This is hardly a discovery, if one considers Freud's understanding of the polymorphous nature of human desire which led him to the assumption that "a very considerable measure of latent or unconscious homosexuality can be detected in all *normal* people" (Young-Bruehl, 2002, p.265; emphasis is mine). Maraini seems in agreement with these notions on sexuality and, in what could be read as a prefiguring of Butler's concerns, in these works herein discussed, she presents heterosexuality and homosexuality as far from being mutually exclusive. By staging non-normative sexualities, Maraini provides, through her characters, a call for the understanding of gender roles as a product of rigid mechanisms of power which result in patterns of behaviour that, consolidated through time, translate into the political, social and cultural supremacy of the male over the female gender. Moreover, if we return to Butler's critique of Wittig's theories, the author can be seen as advocating for a refusal of the idea of a fixed, monolithic sexual essence—be it heterosexual or homosexual. Far from falling into the trap of an essentialist discourse, Maraini's characters, through their irreducible sexualities, could be read as opposing "radical disjunction between straight and gay [that] replicates the kind of disjunctive binarism that she herself [Wittig] characterises as the divisive philosophical gesture of the straight mind" (Butler, 1990, p.165). Finally, as for how deconstruction can help feminism move from a

mere critique of patriarchal ideology into political action, as the present analysis has sought to demonstrate, the answer in Maraini's texts would reside precisely in the relationship between women and the connection between their everyday lives and the socially codified roles they are called to perform. The author's subversive narrative calls for a revolution which starts from within (within one's body but also our mother's, symbolic or not) and it does so while challenging rigid discourses on gender and eluding the traditional hetero/homo dichotomy. Such is the message that underpins the three texts, and which is condensed in Bianca's reasoning over "a more fluid way of being sexed" (Maraini, 2008b, p.87). In short, Maraini's genealogies are less a question of seeking a unifying subject (or a "label", in Bianca's words[33]) than an expression of the blurring of the boundaries of a single category in depicting, as Maraini does, continuous ways of becoming.

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[1] Maraini's literary and theatrical production dates from the Sixties to the present. Not only has she since been interested in women's position at the time of her writing, but also in earlier periods. See for example her Campiello prize winner novel *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990) which, following the life of a mute duchess living in the eighteenth century (the inspiration for the character came to Maraini from a portrait of an aristocratic Sicilian ancestor of hers, Duchess Marianna Alliata Valguarnera), can be read as a *timeless* narration of the silencing of women in patriarchy. Similarly, it is worth mentioning her 1985 novel *Isolina*, based on Maraini's own investigation and reconstruction of the murder of Isolina Canuti, a young woman brutally murdered while pregnant and whose remains were found in the Adige river, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the main suspect was a member of the army and he accused the socialists of manipulating the news, the case soon acquired political implications.

[2] Maraini's position can be said to align itself to that of art historian and feminist Carla Lonzi—perhaps the most influential voice of Italian 'feminism of difference'. The title of Lonzi's best known pamphlet *Sputiamo su Hegel: La donna vaginale e la donna clitoridea* (Let's spit on Hegel: the clitoral and the vaginal woman) quite tellingly underscores how the body had become, for 1970s Italian feminists, a starting point for the advocacy of sexual liberation.

[3] The essay 'The Straight Mind', read by Wittig in 1978 at the MLA Convention in New York City, was first published in 1980.

[4] A notable exception is Tommasina Gabriele's illuminating study on the subversion of gender identity in *Donna in guerra* and *Lettere a Marina,* the play *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente* and a crime story from the collection *Buio*: 'Chi ha ucciso Paolo Gentile?' (Gabriele 2002, pp.241-56).

[5] This is a position with which the author herself concurs. In an interview released the same year of the publication of the novel, she stated: 'Questo è il mio romanzo più coscientemente femminista' ('This is my most conscious feminist novel', quoted in Ruffili 1975).

[6] "It's true"; "Those blonde arms of his have an incredible strength and with this strength he supports our marriage". This and all subsequent translations are my own (Maraini, 2008a, p.142).

[7] "By nature you are good-hearted, calm, affectionate, patient, submissive; but today you are being a freak, you are going against nature" (Maraini, 2008a, p.141).

[8] The term 'phallogocentrism', which stems from the merging of 'logocentrism' and 'phallocentrism', is a neologism that Derrida himself coined to designate the maleness of Western metaphysics which, being based as it is on binary pairings, contains the premise for woman's debasement.

[9] "I started to clear the table. I did the dishes. I scoured the saucepans. I rinsed the glasses" (Maraini, 2008a, p.4).

[10] Butler 1993, p.8. Having made clear the distinction between motherhood as a 'potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children' and the 'institution' that secures male control over it, in the introduction to her work Rich contends: 'this book is not an attack on the family or on mothering except as defined and restricted under patriarchy' (Rich 1976, pp.13-14).

[11] This is also the position implicit in Virginia Picchietti's argument: 'the return to the maternal realm Tota and Giottina represent can actually lead to the re-evaluation of the pre-Oedipal mutuality in the daughter's life' (Picchietti, 2002, p.119).

[12] The importance of the concept of 'sisterhood' in this and other works by Maraini, and, specifically in connection with *Donna in guerra,* the instrumental role of the characters of Suna and Rosa Colla in Vannina's liberation, have been aptly discussed by Picchietti (Picchietti 2002, pp.105-137).

[13] My choice of the adjective 'polymorphous' applied to the character's unclassifiable sexuality is in agreement with Tommasina Gabriele's views on the restrictiveness implicit in the term 'bisexual' (as in any other term attempting at defining sexual identity). The critic distances herself from what she sees as the limitations intrinsic to the notion of an immutable, fixed gender identity and, in her study of *Donna in guerra*, she applies her conclusions mainly to the analysis of Suna's sexuality (Gabriele 2002, pp.241-56).

[14] Wittig indeed makes it clear that 'this mark', namely sexual difference, 'does not predate oppression 'but is rather the logical *outcome* of the same (Wittig 1992, p.11; my emphasis).

[15] With reference to this point, it ought to be mentioned that other characters in *Donna in guerra* blur gender boundaries. One example, and this time a male one, is Vannina's husband, who will end up developing a (on his part) morbid relationship with the much younger Santino, with whom Giacinto willingly spends most of his time fishing and whose presence (and absence) dictates Giacinto's mood. Although their bond never acquires openly homosexual connotations, it nevertheless goes beyond fatherly love, acquiring instead, I would contend, a *queer* twinge.

[16] Picchietti, 2002. The practice of 'affidamento', developed within the Milanese feminist group 'Libreria delle Donne', sees a woman (usually the less experienced and younger one) relying upon another woman, who will act as her mentor. A bond of (symbolic) motherhood-sisterhood, which transcends the biological sphere, is thus established. For a more detailed account of this practice, see Luisa Muraro's influential *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Muraro 1991, 2006).

[17] "In the summer she belonged to others […] in winter she would lock herself away, sleep" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.22).

[18] First used by Lacan during his seminar of 1953-4 in relation to Hegel and his master-slave dialectic, the term has been largely reappropriated by French feminists, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva among others. In particular, Kristeva sees '*jouissance*' as a form of specifically feminine pleasure associated with the semiotic flow and the maternal 'chora'. For a more detailed exploration of the polysemy of the word, see Introduction 3 by the editors of the volume in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron where *jouissance* is defined in the following terms: 'This pleasure, when attributed to a woman, is considered to be of a different order from the pleasure that is represented within the male libidinal economy often described in terms of the capitalist gain and profit motive. Women's jouissance carries with it the notion of fluidity, diffusion, duration. It is a kind of potlatch in the world of orgasms, a giving, expending, dispensing of pleasure without concern about ends or closure' [p.36, n. 8].

[19] "A wonderful force" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.108).

[20] "A tragic person" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.15).

[21] "I have the impression that at times my father thought he had made a sort of man: half man and half woman" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.37).

[22] "My mother is a so complex person that I would not know how to define her, any definition would limit her" (Maraini and Esposti, 2006, p.108).

[23] *Storia di Piera* was published in 1981, after Maraini had been working on it for four years.

[24] "Speaking about myself with a masculine tongue is a miserable contradiction" (Maraini, 2008b, p.39).

[25] "The newspaper vendor asks me 'are you alone'? I do not quite understand what it means alone without children alone without husband alone without mothers fathers sisters?" (Maraini 2008b, p.39).

[26] "To love the male body is a sign of connivance with the enemy" (Maraini, 2002b, p.22).

[27] "I turned to my son, yielding to a baleful and guilty inclination to the other sex, the different other" (Maraini, 2008b, pp.114-115).

[28] "I say that heterosexuality as we live it today is neither 'normal' nor 'natural' nor 'sane'".

[29] "We say [of homosexuality] that it is deviant with respect to the norm, but what sexual norm do we have when we take pornography for freedom and reduce bodies to objects?"

[30] "Big bed with its good smells of conjugal life" (Maraini, 2008b, p.21).

[31] "I decided not to go to bed. I can't stand the smell of the old double bed any more" (Maraini, 2008b, p.203).

[32] In the text we find 'letto matrimoniale' ('double bed'), which in English literally translates with the less used, and far more evocative, 'conjugal bed'.

[33] "Eppure ci deve essere un modo più ricco e fluido di essere sessuati senza cacciarsi dentro un destino da etichetta" ('still, there must be a richer and more fluid way of being sexed without stuffing oneself into a label-like destiny') (Maraini 2008b, p.87).

La figura di Penelope in *Itaca per sempre* di Luigi Malerba

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L'articolo esaminerà la figura di Penelope nel romanzo *Itaca per sempre* di Luigi Malerba, pubblicato da Mondadori nel 1997.

Itaca per sempre è il solo romanzo all'interno delle riscritture italiane del mito di Ulisse ad avere messo l'accento sulla figura di Penelope e sulle sue caratteristiche. Conformandosi col modello omerico, dove l'eroina è sempre descritta come saggia, Malerba propone una Penelope forte e determinata, che conduce l'azione della storia e inganna un Ulisse non più così astuto come nell'Odissea. Malerba ha il merito di scrollare da Penelope quell'apparenza di noiosa casalinga che la tradizione le ha erroneamente attribuito: con lei siamo di fronte, per la prima volta nella letteratura occidentale, non solo a un'eroina "bella al pari delle dee", ma a una donna che possiede qualità normalmente considerate virili, come l'astuzia e la furbizia, capace di gestire da sola un microcosmo maschile. Il momento del riconoscimento è occasione per Malerba per una profonda indagine sui personaggi mitologici, che ora, a differenza dell'Odissea, non si riconoscono più e dubitano dell'altro e di se stessi. La complessità dei personaggi, il racconto a due voci, la sfasatura tra realtà e finzione, indagata già dallo scrittore nei suoi precedenti romanzi, inseriscono a pieno titolo Itaca per sempre nella più innovativa produzione malerbiana.

> *Certe ego, quae fueram te discedente puella,*
>
> *Protinus ut venias, facta videbor anus.*

—Ovidio, *Heroides*, 1.115-116

I multiformi aspetti del mito di Ulisse, specialmente la sua sete di "canoscenza", non hanno mai smesso di attirare scrittori, poeti e filosofi. L'*Ulysses* di James Joyce, *Capitan Ulisse* di Alberto Savinio, *The Penelopiad* di Margaret Atwood sono solo alcuni tra gli esempi più celebri che attestano quanto il XX secolo sia stato affascinato dal mito di Ulisse.

Penelope è sempre presente nei testi in prosa e poesia che esplorano il mito in questione; tuttavia solo raramente questa figura femminile è stata la protagonista di una riscrittura. Nella produzione letteraria italiana sarà nel 1997, col romanzo *Itaca per sempre* di Luigi Malerba, pubblicato da Mondadori, che la sposa di Ulisse avrà finalmente un ruolo decisivo.
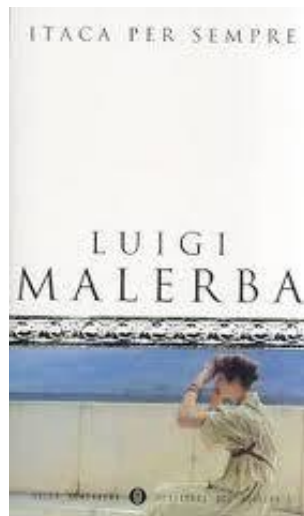
Itaca per sempre: la trama

Malerba narra le vicende di Ulisse una volta approdato a Itaca, travestito da mendicante, dopo la permanenza nel regno dei Feaci. Nell'*Odissea*, al momento dell'arrivo alla reggia, Penelope non riconosce immediatamente Ulisse, ma i suoi dubbi non durano a lungo; è sufficiente, infatti, che il mendicante riveli il segreto della costruzione del loro letto per avere una prova della sua vera identità e, nel giro di pochi versi, Penelope lo accetta come suo marito: "Diceva così: a lei di colpo si fiaccarono ginocchia e cuore riconoscendo i segni inconfutabili che le richiamò Odisseo e scoppiando in lacrime corse dritta verso di lui e gli gettò al collo le braccia e gli baciò la testa" (Omero, *Odissea*, 23.205-208).

L'interpolazione innestata da Malerba sul mito classico consiste nel fatto che Penelope, in cuor suo, riconosce subito Ulisse, ma vuole punire il marito per aver indugiato nel lungo viaggio e, soprattutto, per non essersi fidato di lei e non averle rivelato la sua vera identità una volta apparso alla reggia. Penelope, la sola che possa veramente e intimamente riconoscere Ulisse, si chiede perché le stia celando la sua vera identità, ma decide di stare al 'gioco delle finzioni', che diventa così una vera competizione: "E va bene, starò anch'io al gioco delle finzioni e vediamo chi saprà condurlo con maggiore profitto" (Malerba, 1997, p.60). Penelope rovescia allora il travestimento del marito e trasforma la sua volontà temporanea di non farsi riconoscere in impossibilità per l'eroe di essere intimamente riconosciuto.

Diversamente dall' *Odissea*, dove il tempo non sembra aver cambiato più di tanto i tratti di Ulisse, Malerba immette il divenire nella dimensione psichica e fisica dei personaggi che, così, non si riconoscono più. In *Itaca per sempre*, infatti, affinché avvenga il riconoscimento, l'uso esclusivo della memoria non è più sufficiente: a essere messo in scena non è il riconoscimento dell'identico, ma il riconoscimento di ciò che nel tempo cambia, e che deve essere riconosciuto per ciò che è diventato, non solo per ciò che è stato (Mesrica, 2008, p.135).

Il gioco di finzioni, tuttavia, si spinge al di là di dove la coppia effettivamente prevedeva di arrivare. Penelope dubita di Ulisse: possibile che sia il suo amato marito, l'uomo che ha inondato la reggia di sangue uccidendo brutalmente Proci e ancelle?—"Questo è l'eroe che ha occupato i miei pensieri per venti lunghi anni?"—si chiede incredula. Ulisse dubita di

Penelope: possibile che sia la sua moglie fedele questa donna che sembra così sicura nella sua bellezza, come se la sofferenza non l'abbia neanche sfiorata?

Ulisse non può più restare lì senza essere riconosciuto e pensa ad una soluzione alternativa. La risposta viene dal mare:

> Andrò a mettermi sulla costa e aspetterò il passaggio di una nave di mercanti e con essi viaggerò fin dove li portano i loro commerci. […] Il mondo è quasi infinito e io sono un ottimo navigatore. […] In fondo non sarà un grande sacrificio perché la mia indole mi spinge alla avventura, al vagabondaggio, alla scoperta di terre e genti lontane, portato dai venti e dalla fortuna amica. (Malerba, 1997, pp.162-169)

Penelope è disperata per la nuova perdita del marito, offeso dalla moglie a sua volta offesa da lui, e implora Telemaco di trattenere il padre. Nel dubbio tra un eroe che non conosce più e l'uomo che ama Penelope sceglie: "Perché, che sia vero o no, ormai io l'ho riconosciuto come Ulisse, ed è ciò che conta per me" (p.160).

Dopo il riconoscimento, il lieto fine. La coppia si ricongiunge, ma la tentazione di partire di nuovo per altre avventure è sempre forte nel cuore dell'eroe. Inoltre, resta il problema della profezia di Tiresia, che aveva predetto a Ulisse una morte εξ αλòς (*ex alòs*). L'indovino intendeva dire "dal mare" o "lontano dal mare"?

> No, amici marinai, non verrò con voi. Vi invidio, ma non verrò con voi. La tentazione del mare è terribile, ma ho resistito anche al canto delle Sirene e ora non mi lascerò sedurre da una nave di mercanti. (p.179)

Ulisse fa la sua scelta, torna al palazzo e annuncia a Penelope: "Resterò a Itaca per sempre". La riconciliazione con Penelope coincide, così, con una riconciliazione col mare. Il mare, finalmente, non è più un elemento negativo, né per le sue tempeste, né per le sue tentazioni. Ora il mare si può guardare, ora si può anche vivere. La maniera in cui viverlo gliela suggerisce Penelope stessa, che sa bene che le invenzioni del marito "arricchiscono e danno colore a ogni cosa": "Ho suggerito a Ulisse di non disperdere i ricordi delle sue avventure a cominciare dalla guerra di Troia fino al suo ritorno a Itaca e alla nostra riconciliazione dopo la strage dei Proci" (p.175).

Ulisse potrà rivivere le sue avventure nella scrittura, dare finalmente libero sfogo alla sua fantasia, alla sua arte di raccontare che già aveva dimostrato di possedere alla reggia dei Feaci: scriverà due poemi, a cui affiderà la memoria sua e quella di Penelope.

Ulisse, Penelope e la questione del riconoscimento

L'interesse di Malerba per un abile mentitore quale è Ulisse non dovrebbe sorprendere il lettore abituato a frequentare il testo malerbiano. Nel 1988, nove anni prima della pubblicazione di *Itaca per sempre*, Maria Corti scrive in *Autografo* (1998, p.4) che il diffidare di qualsiasi resa realistica del mondo è una constante nella produzione letteraria di Malerba.

Itaca per sempre potrebbe sembrare un outsider rispetto alle opere precedenti: in particolare se si pensa ai romanzi "post-moderni", soprattutto alla trilogia composta da *Il serpente* (1966), *Salto mortale* (1968) e *Il protagonista* (1973), *Itaca per sempre* sembrerebbe essere il più "lineare" e "reale" romanzo di Malerba. Ma, qualora non bastasse già la fonte mitica che fa da sostrato alla storia ad allontanare ogni dubbio di realismo, è nella

complessità dei personaggi, nella questione del riconoscimento, nella narrazione a due voci, nell'intervento del dubbio e della finzione, che ritroviamo le caratteristiche della scrittura malerbiana. Lo conferma anche Rocco Capozzi, che nella sua recensione a *Itaca per sempre* scrive:

> In Itaca per sempre il genio narrativo di Malerba è riconoscibile ad ogni livello della narrazione: nel linguaggio, nelle descrizioni e nella struttura degli appassionanti drammi psicologici tra marito e moglie, tra padre e figlio, e tra madre e figlio. […] Con Itaca per sempre Malerba dimostra ancora una volta che per oltre tre decenni non ha mai smesso di fare il mestiere di narratore da abile maestro. Malerba si è sempre distinto per le sue arguzie linguistiche e per il suo inimitabile wit (comico, ironico, e parodico) nel presentare delle menzogne narrative con tale naturalezza da farle apparire come parte della realtà che ci circonda. Si pensi ad alcuni dei suoi romanzi quali Il serpente (1966), Salto mortale (1968), e Il protagonista (1973). Nella narrativa di Malerba rimane sempre la difficoltà di dover/poter distinguere tra realtà e finzione, e tra assurdità e comicità. (Capozzi, 1997, pp.184-185)

La trama del romanzo è intrecciata e, come in una sorta di diario, le pagine del libro alternano i pensieri di Ulisse e quelli di sua moglie, che ripercorrono gli stessi eventi dalle loro diverse prospettive. Ad esempio, quando Telemaco invita Ulisse a indossare i suoi vecchi abiti, il lettore legge due volte lo stesso episodio, prima dal punto di vista di Ulisse:

> E allora di nuovo è intervenuto Telemaco. 'Ti chiedo, madre mia, di offrire al nostro ospite, che io riconosco come mio padre, gli abiti di Ulisse che conservi nelle stanze alte della casa dentro una profonda cassapanca. […] Ho indossato a fatica la tunica che mi stava stretta sulle spalle e mi stringeva in tutto il corpo. Ho cercato di nascondere sotto il manto di porpora la tunica troppo stretta e mi sono presentato timidamente a Penelope. (Malerba, 1997, pp.134-135)

E poi da quello di Penelope:

> Ho accettato l'idea di Telemaco, ma dovrei dire l'imposizione, di fare indossare a Ulisse la tunica e il manto di Ulisse. […]. Ora Ulisse era lì davanti a me, con indosso quei vecchi abiti tirati fuori da una cassapanca, quella tunica troppo stretta che cercava di nascondere sotto il manto di porpora. (p.135-137)

Il lettore segue così le avventure dei personaggi e il gioco di suspense è così ben strutturato da Malerba che quasi ci si dimentica che la storia è tratta dal mito greco, fonte irreale per eccellenza.

Se nei precedenti romanzi erano la lingua e la struttura ad essere portatori di sperimentazione letteraria, in *Itaca per sempre* è, quindi, a livello contenutistico, e in particolare nella resa dei personaggi, che l'innovazione malerbiana è più visibile. Ovviamente ciò non significa che i personaggi dei precedenti libri di Malerba siano tutti "canonici": basta pensare al Giuseppe di *Salto Mortale*, alla protagonista femminile della *Superficie di Eliane* o al personaggio principale del *Protagonista* per capire come Malerba abbia sempre giocato con la funzione-personaggio. Il caso di *Itaca per sempre* è diverso perché i personaggi non sono alienati esempi di uomini post-moderni, ma archetipi incisi nel mito greco con ruoli ben cristallizzati dalla tradizione.

L'Ulisse di Malerba è un uomo che dubita e che piange. Anche la lingua di Ulisse risente delle sue perplessità e delle sue paure: fin dalle prime pagine del romanzo le sue frasi sono piene di negazioni ("non ho mai trovato […] non riconosco […]non mi sono mai fidato […]

non so"), punti interrogativi (tredici solo nel suo primo discorso), domande dirette ("da dove viene? […] Da dove vengono? […] dove mi trovo?") e indirette ("mi sono domandato […] e mi domando [...] chissà se qualcuno raccoglierà […] chissà se potrò contare […]"). Ulisse dubita perfino delle sue glorie passate sotto le mura di Troia: "La chiamo vittoria ma chissà se si può chiamare con questa parola la distruzione di una città e i fatti atroci che sono avvenuti sotto le sue mura e che io stesso ho raccontato cento volte come eventi gloriosi durante le soste lungo il mio ritorno" (p.9).

Le lacrime che già avevamo incontrato sul volto della Penelope di Omero, qui sono copiose anche in suo marito. Lo stesso Ulisse non se ne capacita: "Come può succedere questa pioggia improvvisa di lacrime all'astuto e forte Ulisse, al mentitore sublime, all'abile tessitore di inganni?" (p.17). Ulisse, senza un riconoscimento da parte della moglie, dubita anche di se stesso e non ritrova più nell'uomo sofferente che è diventato il forte guerriero di un tempo. Questo non riconoscersi rappresenta la novità che Malerba apporta al mito.

Tuttavia non è la prima volta che lo scrittore offre una riflessione sul problema del riconoscimento, che infatti è presente anche in un altro suo scritto, pubblicato in *Allegoria* nel 1991 col titolo *Un fantasma di nome Andrea*. È la storia di un uomo e una donna che non si riconoscono, esattamente come Ulisse e Penelope, una "storia sul nominalismo" come la chiama Francesco Muzzioli, che nel suo commento al testo scrive:

> Nel racconto si perviene al riconoscimento di una sfasatura che impedisce la pacifica corrispondenza delle cose nei nomi. Il racconto in prima persona è stato spesso messo in atto da Malerba per produrre trucchi e giochi di identità, puntando sulla possibilità che l' "io" non dica tutta la verità, o si smentisca e scopra infine le carte di una diversa anagrafe […] Quale fiducia merita uno che ha già mentito una volta? (1991, pp.102-104)

In *Itaca per sempre* la "sfasatura" di cui parla Muzzioli è superata solo superficialmente: l'eroe acheo cade nella sua stessa trappola del gioco delle identità e ora è veramente Nessuno, come aveva cercato di far credere al Ciclope. Non si riconosce più nel suo nome, esattamente come il Luigi-Andrea del racconto del '91 (ed è singolare come per entrambi i personaggi ricorra l'invenzione di un nome falso per sfuggire a un potenziale pericolo: Ulisse dice di essere Nessuno per ingannare il Ciclope, Luigi si fa chiamare Andrea per non lasciare prove della sua relazione extraconiugale). "*Je est un autre*", come scrive Muzzioli, e lo stesso Ulisse di Malerba ammette: "ho raccontato tante menzogne che ora io stesso non riesco più a districarmi nel groviglio che ho creato con le parole intorno alla mia persona" (Malerba, 1997, p.169). Ed anche: "Penelope era riuscita con la sua ostinazione a farmi dubitare perfino di me stesso" (p.134).

Penelope, invece, diversamente da altre figure femminili malerbiane dalla frammentaria identità (ad esempio la misteriosa protagonista della *Superficie di Eliane*, la Miriam del *Serpente*, o la donna di *Salto Mortale* con i suoi molteplici nomi), è un personaggio saldo e forte, consapevole delle sue azioni e desideroso di vendetta: "Ho imparato a destreggiarmi anch'io alla maniera di Ulisse e aspetto con lo sguardo fisso all'orizzonte l'ora della vendetta come premio per la mia pazienza" (p.29).

La Penelope di Malerba è più forte del suo Ulisse. Mentre quest'ultimo è lontano, Penelope governa il palazzo e l'isola, sforzandosi di essere una buona regina nonostante il suo intimo dolore:

> Quando visito le grotte dove si fa e si conserva il vino, i contadini vogliono ogni
> volta farmi assaggiare il mosto, che non mi piace, e ogni volta io devo

incoraggiarli e fare i miei complimenti per il frutto delle loro fatiche come farebbe Ulisse. I contadini sono felici di queste visite e poi ne parlano fra loro per lunghi giorni. […]. Sono la loro regina e non posso rimanere perennemente rinchiusa nelle mie stanze, devo farmi vedere dai miei sudditi, scambiare qualche parola con loro, offrire dei piccoli doni. (pp.42-43)

Penelope, che già nell'*Odissea* era chiamata ad autenticare la vicenda di Ulisse, induce ora il lettore a uno sguardo anamorfico, quello dalla sua parte (Mesirca, 2008, p.137). Lo sguardo di Penelope interroga il mito, arrivando addirittura a dubitarne, per ricercare una verità finale. Rimette in questione perfino i consolidati epiteti che hanno sempre accompagnato il nome di Ulisse: "Ma quanto è ingenuo l'astutissimo Ulisse", dice Penelope, commentando gli inutili sforzi dell'eroe nel non farsi riconoscere.

Nel ribaltamento degli epiteti e nella capacità di Penelope di ingannare Ulisse è chiaro il desiderio malerbiano di sovvertire i ruoli prestabiliti dal mito, di "desacralizzare i miti fondanti della letteratura borghese" come scrive Ronchini in un illuminante articolo (2010, p.181). Se già con *Capitano Ulisse* (1934) di Savinio, in piena epoca fascista, Ulisse era diventato un anti-eroe stanco di avventure, ora con Malerba l'eroe diventa un uomo normale, con paure e debolezze, mentre è la donna la protagonista che conduce l'azione.

La standardizzazione dei ruoli imposta dalla tradizione, che nella precedente produzione malerbiana "post-moderna" era sovvertita dall'innovazione linguistica, è ora sovvertita di nuovo usando la solida materia mitologica, che è stata riscritta in modo da far venire alla luce una nuova intensa figura femminile.

Spunti per una riflessione di genere

Capozzi si chiede se *Itaca per sempre* non rappresenti semplicemente un mero *divertissement littérarie*: "E perché no!" conclude il critico, riconoscendo che non è certo disonorevole per uno scrittore il voler dilettare il proprio pubblico (1997, p.221). Tuttavia appare chiaro a chi scrive che nel presentare Penelope come un personaggio chiave c'è qualcosa di più profondo e interessante del semplice desiderio di giocare con la mitologia.

Itaca per sempre fa la sua comparsa nel 1997. Non è un caso che proprio alle soglie di un nuovo millennio venga pubblicata un'altra riscrittura dell'*Odissea*. Il mito di Ulisse è quello

con cui l'Europa ha narrato e narra la sua identità culturale, è il certificato di nascita delle civiltà mediterranee. Tale narrazione si è via via adeguata alla cultura che l'ha rielaborata e che ha cercato nel testo omerico il garante della propria appartenenza (Moll, 2006). Il ri-scrivere è tipico di un tempo che guarda al passato e che, dalla conclusione di un percorso, cerca le origini a cui appartiene e da cui ripartire. Questo sguardo all'indietro non è un mero ritorno circolare a ciò che è stato già detto, ma si potrebbe piuttosto rappresentare come una spirale che, tornando al punto di partenza, aggiunge sempre del nuovo (Guardiani, 1997, p.290). E la novità della riscrittura odisseica del XXI secolo è la donna. È Penelope che nulla sottrae a Ulisse e al suo ingegno (il punto di partenza della spirale), ma dimostra la sua parità e si presenta al nuovo millennio che fa capolino a *Itaca per sempre* come rivendicatrice di un'intelligenza nuova e femminile (il nuovo livello della spirale).

Non è un caso che anche un'altra Penelope estremamente determinata appaia nei primi anni del duemila, quella di Margaret Atwood. E anche *The Penelopiad*, come *Itaca per sempre*, propone un racconto a più voci: alle parole della regina di Itaca questa volta si alterna, a modello delle tragedie greche, il coro delle dodici ancelle che Ulisse ha fatto impiccare dopo la strage dei Proci. Atwood analizza molto più in profondità di Malerba il rapporto di Penelope con le sue origini, con i genitori e con la cugina Elena. Al contrario dello scrittore italiano, però, non si sofferma sulla questione del riconoscimento, che sembra proprio la marca caratterizzante delle riscritture italiane del mito di Ulisse (un esempio tra tutti: *Capitan Ulisse* di Savinio).

L'attenzione data al femminile dalle riscritture mitologiche che appaiono sulla soglia tra i due millenni è chiara. È vero che la scelta di Penelope come portavoce di una nuova intelligenza muliebre all'inizio di un nuovo tempo potrebbe stupire se ci si limitasse a considerare la sua staticità fisica come priva di interesse rispetto alle peripezie marine del marito. Lo spazio di Penelope è la sua reggia, la sua stanza, simbolo del non viaggio acutamente analizzato da Adriana Cavarero: è da lì che la regina aspetta la vela che ritorna. Il viaggio appartiene alla mobilità e all'infinitezza del mare; lei, invece, si chiude nella sua stanza a tessere il sudario. Se si limitasse a questo, Penelope risponderebbe all'immagine che gli uomini le assegnano, quella della donna che, aspettando, si occupa del lavoro tipicamente femminile della tessitura. Ma Penelope disfa di notte quello che ha tessuto di giorno, rendendo il tempo intoccabile dagli eventi e la sua stanza mondo impenetrabile dove la donna radica e custodisce la propria appartenenza (Cavarero, 1990, pp.13-32). L'alterità, il nuovo, la "canoscenza" che Ulisse cerca per mare, Penelope ce l'ha già con sé. Penelope è l'approdo, la casa in cui fermarsi e non ha bisogno di girovagare per il mondo per trovare la sua identità. Lei non l'ha mai persa, è una donna determinata e saggia, come scrive già Omero (Farnetti, 2007, pp.47-58).

La prospettiva teorica proposta dalla Cavarero è ribadita dalla riscrittura malerbiana. Malerba afferma nel *post scriptum* al romanzo che Penelope è "un carattere sicuramente meno passivo di quanto la lettura superficiale dell'*Odissea* ci possa indurre a credere e che ha accreditato una idea errata e un po' noiosa di questo sublime personaggio" (Malerba, 1997, pp.184-185). Personaggio talmente forte da suggerire lei stessa a suo marito l'accattivante idea di cui Malerba si fa portavoce: Ulisse come autore dell'*Iliade* e dell'*Odissea*. Idea che, più che fondarsi su pretese storiche, restituisce al lettore il senso più prezioso del mito: la trasformazione di noi stessi in poesia. La stessa Penelope ce lo dice: "Ulisse non riesce a distinguere tra verità e finzione: "E del resto quando mai la poesia ha parlato della verità? La poesia ha dentro di sé una verità che non sta nel mondo ma nella mente del poeta e di chi lo ascolta" (p.181).

Malerba si pone come epigono di Omero nella sua rappresentazione del personaggio di Penelope, e sceglie come caratteristica principale della sua protagonista proprio l'aspetto che in Omero è più evidente: la saggezza. Delle ottantasei volte in cui è citato il nome di Penelope nell'*Odissea*, infatti, per cinquanta è accompagnato dall'epiteto περίφρων (*perìfron*), 'saggia' (Mactoux, 1975, p.21). Stupisce che non sia quasi mai stata qualificata come πιστή (*pisté*), 'fedele', la caratteristica che le è sempre stata assegnata come peculiare. Sembra quasi che la tradizione abbia messo in rilievo le qualità dell'eroina che più si confanno all'esaltazione del mito di Ulisse, piuttosto che di quello suo: quelle della brava moglie fedele. Penelope, insomma, è una donna, diremmo oggi, psicologicamente forte. La sua forza non si misura in omeriche battaglie e colpi di lancia, ma in una più complessa fermezza d'animo, senza che questa qualità sia messa al servizio di una fedeltà troppo poco presente nel testo classico per essere divenuta così celebre.

Penelope fa del suo meglio: governa la reggia da sola, respinge con astuzia i pretendenti e prega gli dèi. Ma gli Itacensi, quando sentono canti e balli provenienti dalla reggia (dovuti, in realtà, alle celebrazioni per il ritorno di Ulisse), subito dicono: "Oh sì, qualcuno ha sposato l'ambita regina! Stolta, non riuscì a custodire fino al suo ritorno la grande casa del legittimo sposo" (Omero, *Odissea*, 23.149-51). Penelope ha fatto esattamente il contrario. Ha custodito la casa, ha rimandato fino all'ultimo un eventuale matrimonio (che, nel caso fosse stato celebrato, avrebbe risposto più al compimento di un volere di Ulisse che a una sua scelta personale)[1] e ha pianto per il marito. Gli Itacensi e il mito non le rendono una giusta testimonianza. Il dramma di Penelope è paradossale perché il suo eroismo le richiede il coraggio di non essere riconosciuta come eroina. Penelope è un'eccezione all'interno della mitologia greca: tra tutte le donne "belle al pari delle dee", lei è saggia e governa una reggia in un microcosmo fatto da uomini. Eppure la sua figura è legata solo a un telaio e al mito di suo marito. Nessun altro nell'epica omerica è chiamato a un sacrificio così grande (Heitman, 2005).

Malerba rafforza ancora di più l'elemento della saggezza nel personaggio di Penelope, ne fa una donna forte e consapevole del suo dolore, che arriva addirittura a rivendicare la possibilità di adulterio anche per le spose:

> Non capisco con quanta presunzione Ulisse abbia sospettato della mia fedeltà.
> Non mi ha forse ripetutamente tradito durante i suoi viaggi? È forse meno doloroso per una donna il tradimento del suo uomo di quanto non sia doloroso per un uomo il tradimento della sua donna? Chi ha stabilito che una donna debba soffrire e perdonare? (Malerba, 1997, p.154)

Ma attenzione: l'intenzione di Malerba non è quella di creare una moderna Penelope. L'autore stesso si preoccupa di specificare, in un'intervista a Paolo Mauri, che la sua protagonista è una donna del suo tempo "con mentalità e comportamenti che ignorano sia la psicoanalisi che i modelli psicologici del romanzo moderno" (1997, p.36). Non siamo di fronte a una moderna trasposizione del personaggio, che ha un nuovo nome e assume un nuovo linguaggio (come, ad esempio, Molly Bloom nell'*Ulysses* di Joyce). Ma, come dice Malerba al suo intervistatore, "ciò non toglie che i suoi gesti, i suoi sentimenti, le sue oneste menzogne, le sue astuzie registrate nel mio racconto a due voci siano dei tratti che appartengono anche alle donne di oggi".

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[1] È stato, infatti, Ulisse stesso a dirle prima di partire: "qui curati tu di ogni cosa: pensa a mio padre e a mia madre in casa come ora, o anche di più, mentre io sarò lontano, e quando vedrai spuntare la barba al nostro ragazzo sposa chi vuoi e lascia questa casa" (Omero, *Odissea*, 18. 266-270).

Penelope possiede delle qualità normalmente considerate virili, come l'astuzia e l'intelligenza, prerogative non comuni per le donne della letteratura arcaica (in quanto non erano sicuramente le caratteristiche di una moglie ideale, che doveva essere bella, feconda e possibilmente ingenua), ed è per tali qualità che Penelope, nonostante sia spesso considerata una noiosa casalinga, è uno dei personaggi del mondo classico più affascinanti da indagare e un ottimo esempio per una riflessione di genere.

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Review—*Mediterranean Travels: Writing Self and Other from the Ancient World to Contemporary Society* by Crowley, Patrick, Noreen Humble, and Silvia Ross (eds)

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Oxford: Legenda, 2011.

Hardback 256pp. ISBN -13: 9781907975256, £45.

This volume is the fruit of an interdisciplinary module on travel writing taught at University College Cork in 2004. Through pilgrimages, diplomatic reports, epistolaries, diaries, and fictional narratives, written from antiquity to the present, this book chartographs the *mare nostrum* of alliances, imperial projects, conflicts, and irreconcilable differences contesting Euro-centric/Occidental perspectives. The contributions by international scholars are arranged chronologically, effectively covering the main periods and regions around the centre and periphery of the Mediterranean. This study does not exhaust the topic but provides a comparative context that generates further debate and intercultural reflection on modern notions of identity, belonging and hospitality.

The first two chapters depart from ancient Greece, in order to explore the emergence of the self-reflective subject filtered through the Greek portrayal of the Self and Others (*barbarians*). A welcome feature here is that Noreen Humble bypasses yet another analysis of *The Odyssey* or *Histories* to talk about Xenophon's *Anabasis,* a work seldom associated with ancient travel writing. Maria Pretzler's (chapter 2) interest in the ways Pausanias's *Description of Greece* subverts and reinterprets the ethnographic tradition of reporting about unfamiliar territories raises pertinent questions on contemporary understandings of the East/West identity trajectory. Both Humble and Pretzler are also careful in their examination of the fluidity of the composite Greek cultural identity. Attention to the role of Islam in the formation of the Mediterranean identity is given by Suha Kudsieh in chapter 3. Her reading of pilgrims' accounts before and after the Crusades argues for the need to bring the historical circumstances that lead to the present fear of the Muslim Other into the discussion. The hermeunetics of otherness that Kudsieh's study establishes, undergird Daria Perocco's sophisticated essay on Venetian ambassadors travelling around the Mediterranean. More valuable insights into the Mediterranean polyphony emerge from Zweder von Martels's study of the epistles of Flemish humanist Augerius Busbequius (chapter 5). Martels demonstrates how modern Europe's skeptical attitude towards Turkey's inclusion in the European Union derives from a historically tense relationship between Ottoman empire and Christian Europe. His arguments serve as a basis for a current political and ethical discussion on modern Turkey's role in Europe and Christian Europe's interests in the

Islamic world, especially in the context of the European Convention of Human Rights. He also reads Busbequius's letters as diplomatic reports rather than as a humanist plea for a broader understanding of Turkish culture. Italian travels are the focus in Nathalie Hester's essay on Pietro della Valle's entertaining *Viaggi,* which documents the traveller's adventures to Turkey and Northern Africa during the Italian Baroque (chapter 6). Here the traveller's aspiration for cultural exchange allows for a receptiveness to otherness through language learning, costumes and customs. Particularly compelling is Hester's decoding of the multicultural caravan scene where the coexistence of Muslims, Christians and Jews metaphorizes the integration of self with others into a unified group, stressing the multicultural environment of the Mediterranean as a Tower of Babel. The question of the subaltern writing back is raised by Roxanne L. Euben in chapter 7. Her highly informative and lengthy essay discusses the perspective of the Muslim traveller Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi to Paris in search of knowledge in the nineteenth century, and Euben illuminates the account by juxtaposing the peaceful visit of the Muslim traveller to Paris to contemporary representations of the mobile *mujahid* in the context of the violent global jihad as an agent of disruption, terrorism and death. Equally engaging is Susan Bassnett's essay in chapter 8 whereby Victorian England's upper middle-class female travellers assert their Englishness against the Italian other. Apart from bringing in the issue of gender in travel writing, Bassnett's analysis offers a well-researched survey on the emergence of the distinction between traveller and tourist in the nineteenth century. Eugène Fromentin's experience in colonial Algiers (chapter 9), informs a popular reading of the Orient as a source of aesthetic inspiration in art and literature. Patrick Crowley's call for a trans-Mediterranean re-thinking of cultural difference and re-making of its global relationality is tied with pictorial force to the unnamed and muted Arab accompanying Fromentin and Vandell as a trope for the silent, excluded subaltern. Characterized by hybridization and traversed by competing and conflicting journeys, Forsdick (chapter 10) focuses on the writings of Jacques Lacarrière to forge the humanist idea of travel as coming in direct contact with others. The last three chapters deal with late twentieth-century travel writings and journeys at the dawn of the new millennium. Silvia Ross returns to modern Italy through the writings of two American authors of the 1990s, Mayes (F.) and Nabhan (G.P.), to explore the interplay between identity, alterity and food in a perceptively-written essay. Chapter 12 by Martín Veiga analyses R. Chirbes's extensive travels as a journey oscillating between past and present, childhood memories and belonging elsewhere. Saving the best for last, the book concludes with what in my opinion is perhaps the most significant contribution in this edition. Documenting a "different" journey as an itinerary of desperation to reach 21st-century Europe with the hope of a better life, Derek Dunkan's masterly essay on illegal migration to Europe scrutinizes the idea of a democratic West. Based on Bellu's (G.M.) *I fantasmi di Portopalo,* Dunkan provides *a thought-provoking and provocative figuration of the Mediterranean as a site of a postmodern* vacuum: the sinking of the boat carrying immigrants from Africa

to Southern Italy and the silence following the tragedy meditates on cultures of silence and forgetfulness while challenging constructions of the civilized Western subject vis a vis marginal others.

Readers will find a great deal to engage with in this book that has most notably achieved the difficult task of being both readable and scholarly. One weakness is that the book, in terms of postcolonial theory, too often quotes Edward Said. Offering compelling insights into what seems a familiar territory, this masterly edition on Mediterranean travels will delight you on your own journey to rethink about self and others in new ways.