

Remembering World War II in 1970s Italian Women's Writing

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Introduction

By the 1970s, Italians had swept away the dusty remains of World War II. Coupled with the drive for physical reconstruction, the decades that immediately followed the war had been characterized by the desire of a nation to clean up this reminder of those treacherous years. However, memories of a past under Fascism and Nazism could not be swept away like so many other dusty ruins. Instead, the memories of those years settled in the consciousness of the Italian people in the form of so many fragmented episodes of a life of despair. The slow reemergence of difficult memories of World War II that had been repressed by its victim in the immediate aftermath, would ceaselessly cast doubt on the way the past had heretofore been remembered and represented. Early historical and literary accounts of the war that focused on binaries of good and evil, innocence and guilt, or victim and oppressor, would soon be replaced by accounts that would take into consideration a broader range of wartime experiences. The subject of war could now be returned to and examined within a new context that took into account individual, rather than merely collective, experiences during the war.

These shifts in mentality were reflected in a linguistic change, specifically the increase in the number of terms used to express an individual's social position.¹ The demand for such terms demonstrated that there was an increased interest in, and number of, marginal figures who were able to voice publicly their concerns and demands with regard to their own social and political agendas amidst a public that had until now, not considered them a voice that could or should be heard.

Though many of the physical reminders of the war were eventually cleared away, the collective memory of a nation was a constant indication of the cultural, social, and political residue left behind by the Fascist dictatorship. Shaped by images and ideas about the war already in circulation in the form of literature, film, newspapers, and magazines, the collective memory of many Italians included both their own personal experiences as well as events known only secondhand. Accounts of the violence of fighting, bombing, casualties, hunger, hiding from the Fascists, and the horrific experiences in concentration camps all contributed to how the war years were remembered. In many ways, Fascism continued to maintain its stronghold on the memory of a nation. After 1968, Fascism would begin to emerge as a literary and cinematic theme, demonstrating how the regime had not been completely wiped away in 1945, leaving behind many laws, institutions, public buildings, and even some Fascist officials in office (Bosworth 174 and 236; Torriglia xii).

For Italians who quickly rejected Fascism, either during the war or following the liberation, there was now a sentiment

¹ According to Lumley in *States of Emergency* these terms included: "Marginals (emarginati), emergent groups (ceti emergenti), proletarian youth (giovani proletari), minorities (minoranze), the unprotected (non garantiti), the precarious (precari), and plebians (plebe)" (341). According to the *Dizionario di parole nuove, 1964-1984*, the word *emergente* was used for the first time in 1978 to mean a person or class who was in the process of acquiring greater importance in some sector of activity (Cortelazzo and Cardinale 68).

that they had been victims of Fascism instead of active participants. For many Italians who experienced the war firsthand, the memories of Fascism could not be easily compartmentalized after the war. Instead these memories invaded the collective consciousness of a nation that was yet unable to understand their own role in the events of the recent past. Some authors writing during the postwar period who had a need to express their personal experiences under Fascism, wrote about how the war was now being integrated into the collective consciousness. The neorealist films and literature of the immediate postwar years aimed to disclose the hidden Italy that had fallen victim to violence, poverty, hunger, and unemployment (Caesar and Hainsworth 28).

By the 1950s, a growing sense of defeat was emerging, and with it, a greater willingness to write and think about those who were victimized during the war. Positive memories of Fascism were unpopular and had practically been erased in literary accounts of the wartime (Forgacs 221). Stories appeared that told of personal experiences and confrontations with evil during the war. Some of the most striking examples were written by a group of authors who came of age under Fascism. In Primo Levi's (b. 1919) autobiographical accounts of his experiences written shortly following the end of the war, *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) and *La tregua* (1963), he examines his experience of evil and man's ability to survive a life of struggle and victimhood. Alberto Moravia (b. 1907), wrote *Il conformista* (1951), a story of a man, Marcello, who confronts his own violent tendencies as well as the corruption that he inherits from his mentally deranged father and the experience of living under a Fascist dictatorship. Another of Moravia's novels, *La ciociara* (1957), which was loosely based on his own experience of fleeing the Fascists and going into hiding in the mountains, confronts the daily hardships and struggles of life during World War II. Giorgio Bassani's (b. 1916) *Storie ferraresi* (1956) and

Il giardino dei Finzi-Conti (1962) are further examples of a greater need and willingness to tell and read stories about the war (Hallamore Caesar 251).

During the 1950s, however, there was still an unwillingness of many Italians who had been involved in the war to take responsibility for their action, or inaction, under Fascism. Thus, literature dealing with the realities of Italian involvement in the oppression and destruction wrought by Fascism was rare at best. However, among the war stories that were being written and published during this time, the majority were written by men.² Notable exceptions, Renata Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire* (1949) and Ada Gobetti's *Diario partigiano* (1956), told stories of women's involvement in the Italian Resistance. However, of the stories written about the war by women, there remained, in many cases, an unwillingness or inability to recognize and confront difficult memories of the past. An example of this type of writing can be seen in Natalia Ginzburg's works during this period. Ginzburg's *Tutti i nostri ieri* (1952), though set during the fight for Italy's liberation, does not attempt to recount the history of Fascism, war, or the resistance effort (Wood 142-43). Hallamore Caesar points out that even after Ginzburg had become quite well established as an author, she still did not include very much information about how her husband had been captured, imprisoned, tortured, and killed by the Fascists in her autobiographical novel *Lessico familiare* (1963) (Hallamore Caesar 252). It would not be until the following decade that a group of women writers would

²In Sharon Wood's *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994*, she comments that although Renata Viganò wrote *L'Agnese va a morire* (1949) and *Donne della resistenza* (1955) during this time, both dealing with themes of the Resistance, "Neorealism remained a largely male enterprise. Already defined and prescribed for by the various ideologies of post-Unification liberalism and Fascism, women showed themselves in no hurry to line up behind another flag, of whatever colour" (114).

emerge who would begin to examine the difficulties of not only their own personal and private memories of the war, but additionally the way that these memories could be articulated through a language and style relevant to their own types of wartime experiences.

The Social and Political Aftermath of 1968

The social movements of 1968 and the following decade helped transform the way the past was remembered and recorded. In particular, the student and worker movements of 1968 were essential to the emergence and expansion of the women's movement during the 1970s. Among a new group of Italian intellectuals that had emerged in the PCI, the sense of crisis that resulted from the political events of 1968, as well as the increase in terrorist activity that followed during the 1970s, was an organic crisis which subjected long existing structures to a series of critiques (Chambers and Curti 117; Chambers 179). The PCI, which spoke of Marxism as "founded on a loss of organicity, on fragmentation, and the confused drives and desires of metropolitan society" (Chambers and Curti 117) was an example of this plurality of opinions and cultural expression. The new proliferation of diverse cultural experiences that became more prevalent in Italian society was in conflict with those conventions that had already been accepted as daily realities (Chambers 179).

This new vocabulary of crisis further demonstrated how after 1968, the public discourse included new marginal voices that spoke of diversity in ways that had previously not been publicly critical. Iain Chambers has observed that the effect of these shifts in Italy's social ordering was a refusal to accept the notion that history was based on some type of "metaphysical truth or finality" (Chambers 180) that could explain the present moment in Italian politics and culture. Instead, there was a sense that history was merely a compilation of stories told by those in

power to promote their own self-interest. From this crisis in thought emerged the necessity to reexamine the fragments and remnants of the past in order to understand the present situation in a way that better reflected the needs and concerns of the new cultural climate.

These shifts in mentality were reflected in a linguistic change, specifically the increase in the number of terms used to express an individual's social position. The demand for such terms demonstrated that there was an increase in interest in, and number of, marginal figures who were able to voice publicly their concerns and demands with regard to their own social and political agendas amidst a public that had until now, not considered them a voice that could or should be heard. The rewriting of history had to take into account the "shifting interpersonal and political contexts"³ that were taking place in Italy. The marginal subject could be understood as what feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis has described as a conglomeration of many different voices and ideas, "neither unified nor singly divided between positions of masculinity and femininity but multiply organized across positions on several axes of difference and across discourses and practices that may be, and often are, mutually contradictory." (Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects," 137). The margin's adoption of the slogan "History is killing us" became a clear indication of this new contestation of the manipulation of national memory (Fraser 241). After 1968, many Italians began to question their own individual and familial identities in relationship to a troubling Fascist past.⁴

³Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to do With It?" cited in Teresa de Lauretis, p. 136.

⁴ "Rapporto sulla situazione sociale del paese," 1977 on 1976, cited in John Fraser, p. 116. Bertolucci's back-to-back films, *La strategia del ragno* (1969) and *Il Conformista* (1970), are strong examples of this type of questioning of familial identity. Bertolucci has commented, "Both films share the theme of betrayal, the weight of the past and of the father-figure." Enzo Ungari, p. 71. In *La strategia del ragno* (1969), the son of an anti-Fascist hero seeks

The past was now reopened to the interpretation of many different groups of people, none of whom had experienced the war in the same way.

The Women's Movement

The notion that there was not simply one acceptable version of the past allowed for those on the margins of discourse, women in particular, to express publicly a multiplicity of views and ideas about the wartime. Historian Luisa Passerini observes that "there was a complex interplay between these dimensions [cultural movements and the increase in women's writing], a matter not of causal relationships but of common participation in the process which was creating language, values, and consciousness" (Luisa Passerini, "Gender Relations" 151). The relationship between the personal and political was central to the social movements that allowed women to rethink their relationships and positionality, both in the public arena and at home. In order for many women to understand the ways that the prevalent social and political power structures functioned, they examined how these constructions of power were already at play in their private lives. Since there were women who could not identify with the political parties and unions that claimed to represent them, they expressed a need to explore new ways of living (Robert Lumley, "Social Movements and the Ecology Question" 120). Female activists set about challenging laws that kept them in subordinate positions, both politically and within their families. The subsequent emergence of the feminist

information about his father's death thirty years later. In a disturbing twist, the son discovers that his father was likely a traitor. Therefore, the truth, instead of comforting the son, encumbers him even more. In *Il conformista*, the protagonist attempts to overcome the troubling moments of his childhood by conforming and becoming entrenched in the Fascist party. Throughout the film, he seeks a replacement for the authority figure of his father who has been institutionalized.

movement in Italy during the seventies found strength by mobilizing around female experiences and created a demand for books by and about women. In the 1970s, the exploration of areas of experience that had previously been ignored by literature became a way of challenging “the political and moral status quo.”⁵ Many women found new ways to express themselves in their writing by showing an awareness of the past and present cultural and political climate. Bookstores and publishing houses set up by activists created new outlets for these texts born of the necessity to explore a female identity formed from multiple experiences (Lumley, “Social Movements and the Ecology Question” 118).

Though many women authors had already been writing about their experiences for many years, including under Fascism, it was not until the 1970s that a group of women authors used writing as a way to make political connections between their own need to tell their stories publicly and the need of other women to hear these accounts. The changes and challenges brought forth by the social movements of 1968 made these women, as well as other marginal groups who had not been able to voice publicly their concerns, rethink the way they had been examining the past. Following the current trend of challenging the historical truth of existent histories of the past, this group of authors now looked at their experiences under Fascism in different ways. There was now a political atmosphere that underscored the value of a wide range of experiences and discarded the notion that there was a definitive version of the past. This made way for women, and others with stories yet untold, to fashion their accounts of the past in a way that was not merely a part, or secondary, to previous historical accounts. Instead, these marginal authors redefined the historical

⁵ Sharon Wood, “Rosetta Loy”, p. 121. Wood further explains that in the 1970s, women’s writing “moved away from an overtly feminist stance which took the real lives of women as material for short stories and novels.”

novel for themselves, with an emphasis on narrating the past in a way that better represented their own personal experience of the war. The personal and political were interdependent in their writings, because implicit in writing women's experience was the context of women's 1970s political and cultural activism.

War Stories

Many feminist novels were published during this time, however, there was also a group of women writers writing about their experiences during World War II who were not self-proclaimed feminists. Yet even women authors who did not have any interest in becoming politically active and participating in the movements of 1968, were nonetheless affected by the political and social changes being brought about in Italian society. These texts: Rosetta Loy's *La bicicletta* (1974), Elsa Morante's *La Storia* (1974), Francesca Duranti's *La Bambina* (1976), Giuliana Morandini's *I cristalli di Vienna* (1978), and Luce d'Eramo's *Deviazione* (1979), all feature female protagonists, sometimes the author herself, who experience life at the margins during World War II. These authors were of different generations, each one experiencing the war during a different life stage, ranging from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Therefore, each of these authors did not, and could not, be said to have experienced the war from a similar generational perspective. Their varying ideas and attitudes about the war and the current changes taking place as they were writing these novels can be observed through their relationships to the women's movement and how they perceived themselves as writers. Therefore, their perspectives on the society in which they live is one characterized by distance, resulting not only from societal constraints, but also due to their own identity as marginal figures. At times the voice is demonstrative of more than one type of liminality, for example, both female and Jewish. They attempt to reappropriate their

buried histories by re-writing their past as a series of discontinuous moments.

For this group of women authors, telling their stories was a way for them to take ownership of their past and consequently rewrite history in a way that demonstrated how women in particular experienced and remembered those years. For some of these women authors, this meant revisiting everyday wartime experiences, while for other authors, this involved the process of becoming conscious of overwhelming experiences that continued to disrupt their present. The experience of such traumatic moments can take the form of a personal injury or painful psychological experience. It is not until the individual or community is able to confront and work through the memories of the past that they can integrate those memories into their present identities. Together these remnants, leftover from past difficult moments or personal physical and psychological injuries, form a collage of experience that is then figured in a text rooted in a traumatic moment. The trauma event itself is an eternal present, one that defines its history as an unassimilated residual moment that cannot be overcome.⁶ Trauma allows for the possibility of a history that is not based on “simple models of experience and reference” but resituates understandings of the past (Caruth 11).

The historical experience becomes recognizable only in connection to another time and place due to the latency period that must pass before the trauma can be re-experienced (Caruth 17). It is in this way that the crisis of the 1970s takes on a particular relevance in that World War II traumas can be seen as resurfacing during this period. In retrospective accounts, the texts revisit the stories and lives of victims through a return to

⁶ Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart’s “The Intrusive Past” explains that trauma memories are unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences that must be integrated with existing mental schemes and be transformed into narrative language.

the time of the trauma in order to locate memories that had been repressed for about thirty years. They are texts of memory that rely heavily on traces and remnants to reconstruct the events of the past, and to reveal the state of upheaval and guilt that remained a presence in Italian society in the seventies.⁷

Women's 1970s stories about their experiences during World War II took shape through an innovative use of language and technique that demonstrated the particular ways that they remembered and experienced the past. The atmosphere of social and political change in Italy after 1968 opened up a space for women to tell about personal experiences in ways that challenged previous versions of the past. Whether intentionally or otherwise, their stories became political because they spoke of the need to understand how Fascism was experienced, not just by men fighting the war, but additionally, by little girls, women, and families living the reality of war at home.

While it is impossible to make any sweeping generalizations about women's literature of the 1970s, it is reasonable to suggest that what have been termed by many literary critics as novels of memory, might be more accurately discussed as novels of remembering.⁸ What this slight alteration in terminology suggests is that these stories do not conjure up past images and tell stories of the war or some other significant moment in time, but instead these stories are conscious reassessments of particular memories in ways that now factor in a 1970s sensibility of a determined search for self-knowledge. Literary theorist Judith Ryan explains that remembering the past is a way of reconstructing the past, "searching for missing

⁷Luisa Passerini's *Fascism in Popular Memory: the Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* discusses how shame, guilt, silence, and injury become recurring themes in the memoirs following the fall of Fascism.

⁸Ann Hallamore Caesar observes how women's literature has "given enormous importance to memory" (259).

pieces, filling in gaps, re-creating lost images” (13). Therefore, events that might have already been recounted numerous times, are now told in ways that demonstrate their relationship to the current social and political situation. As stories of the war are remembered from the perspective of a decade of social change, relationships that were perhaps previously looked over as insignificant now emerge as defining moments. Traumatic memories of personal or collective injury and violation are no longer relegated to some marginal meta-space in memory. These moments are confronted, worked through, and most importantly, considered in relationship to present conceptions of truth and identity. The text’s actual structure thus becomes emblematic of the social and political changes of 1968 and the way that women viewed themselves and each other. The emergence of a new vocabulary and stylistic models that broke with traditional forms, meant that women now had new ways to express their experience at the margin: visually, audibly, and psychically. Just as women sought a relationship with their wartime past, they also sought to reassess their current relationships with both other women and men, and to understand how the individual pieces of their histories could be rearranged in a new order that more appropriately demonstrated the way they remembered and envisioned their lives.

The novels discussed here show a self-conscious awareness of the necessity to narrate the past in a way that at least aims to approximate some of the types of experiences shared by women during the war. In examining what Linda Hutcheon has called “truths in the plural” these authors raise the question of whether or not it is possible to know the “past other than through its textualized remains” (18, 20). By unearthing fragments of memory and placing these individual shards of the past into a larger frame, those difficult memories can be placed in a present collage composed of remembered pieces. The picture that emerges is then a recontextualized representation of a past that can no longer find meaning apart from the present.

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