

‘Bad Girls’ in the 1970s and 1990s: Female Desire and Experimentalism in Italian Women’s Writing

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with the link between women’s writing and experimentalism in the 1970s and beyond.¹ I begin my discussion with an account of two critical assessments of women’s output in the 1970s published towards the end of that decade, the time when women’s *presa di parola* was approaching its peak in Italy. The first, by Anna Nozzoli, examined a strand of narrative which, finding inspiration in feminism, focused on the condition of women from the urban lower-middle and middle classes. This writing consciously rejected the high linguistic codes of the Italian (male) literary tradition and the harmonic structure of the traditional novel, in favour of a linguistic expressionism and disorganic forms which, being rooted in women’s lives and their own fragmented perception of self and reality, were aimed at freeing women from received stereotypical images and creating new forms and new representations of female subjectivity. While Nozzoli stresses the “capacità di urto e la ricchezza di denotazioni” permitted by the zero degree of style and form adopted by such

¹ This paper is a reworking, with a slightly different outlook on the 1990s narrative, of a longer essay: Adalgisa Giorgio, “From Little Girls to Bad Girls”.

authors as Carla Cerati, Giuliana Ferri, Armanda Guiducci, Gabriella Magrini and Dacia Maraini, she also underlines the ensuing loss in literariness and suggests that their work should be interpreted with reference to its socio-anthropological implications rather than to aesthetic codes.² This type of writing was later broadly referred to as "realismo femminista".³

At about the same time, Silvana Castelli drew attention to a different set of narratives which presented self-willed segregation and silence as strategies for resistance to a reality caught at the point of laceration. The female characters created by Leila Baiardo, Mariapaola Cantele, Rosetta Loy and Toni Maraini succeed in turning 'la gabbia' into 'l'ombra': the cage – the traditional places of female enclosure such as the asylum, the convent, bourgeois childhood, femininity – becomes the shadow, a marginal space of dissidence, from where women are able to overthrow the repressive machine of conformity and escape literal or metaphorical death. The shadow is also a place of transgression for the writer, a workshop in which she can experiment with language and create free forms capable of expressing repressed desire.⁴ Not much critical attention has

² Nozzoli, "Sul romanzo femminista italiano degli anni settanta" (74), reprinted as "Verso l'identità: ipotesi sul romanzo femminista degli anni settanta" (70).

³ Nozzoli later used the phrase "cosiddetto realismo femminista", in "1970-1980: dieci anni di romanzo al femminile" (207 and 223).

⁴ Castelli, "Miti, forme e modelli della nuova narrativa". Her short section on women writers, entitled "La gabbia e l'ombra" (123-32), is suggestive rather than analytical. Castelli's argument is underpinned by a dense, though implicit and unsystematic, web of poststructuralist notions, whose relevance to the texts she quotes is not demonstrated. Carol Lazzaro-Weis later teased out the theoretical issues implicit in Castelli's discussion with reference to Castelli's own novel *Pitonessa* (which I discuss later in this paper) and to the late 1970s-early 1980s Italian debate on women's linguistic and cultural marginality and on the possibility and desirability of creating a feminine

been paid to this strand of writing, while the first strand has come to be considered as representative of Italian women's output in the 1970s.

Both sets of texts deal with women's entrapment in the cage, the struggle to break out of it and the search for a voice. However, while the texts examined by Nozzoli stress the acquisition of voice, those chosen by Castelli focus on the link between language and power and on silence. Both groups of narratives reject the abstract prose of 1960s neo-avant-garde writing and Italian formal literary style in favour of a language and style close to orality, yet the second group uses simple syntactic structures and style to convey a complex signified, one which the (sophisticated) reader must retrieve from beneath the fluid signifier. This discussion of the similarities and differences between the two sets of texts throws into relief the controversial issue of women's relationship with language, writing, reality, realism and experimentation, thus prompting the following questions. Should women choose formal and linguistic experimentation, which is subversive but potentially uncommunicative, or should they opt for communicative representational modes which, however, perpetuate the literary as well as the social and political status quo? But is realism inevitably conservative or reactionary, reproducing women's oppression, and is experimentalism automatically subversive and thus liberating for women? Can/should women's traditional 'attachment' to things and realism be reversed, or can realism, instead, be made capable of producing alternative meanings?

My aim in this paper is to use these complex issues as a critical perspective on four novels which combine a

language/writing practice: Lazzaro-Weis, "From Margins to Mainstream: Some Perspectives on Women and Literature in Italy in the 1980s". Lazzaro-Weis sets this debate into an international context in "Feminism and Its Literary Discontents".

commitment to experimentation (characteristic of 1960s texts) with a commitment to the real and communication (typical of 1970s narrative). These novels also share a thematic focus: childhood and youth as a space/time of female freedom and resistance, which is subsequently erased through the superimposition of orthodox gender roles. Starting with Alice Ceresa's earlier metanarrative *La figlia prodiga* (1967), which laments the non-existence of female 'prodigality', I then examine Leila Baiardo's *L'inseguimento* (1976) and Castelli's own novel *Pitonessa* (1978), to look at the way they start to make inroads into the representation of female rebellion. I conclude with some considerations on the legacy of the 1970s for the young writers of the 1990s and their stories of 'bad girls', focusing on Isabella Santacroce's novel *Luminal* (1998).

Alice Ceresa, *La figlia prodiga* (1967)

La figlia prodiga is an ironic, pseudo-philosophical discussion of the (un)representability of a hypothetical character, the prodigal daughter. The text rests on a paradox: we read a narrative lacking in *récit* entitled *La figlia prodiga* which for 213 pages dissects this character's non-existence or invisibility and thus the impossibility of its being written. The narrator-writer insists on the prodigal daughter's disobedience and deviation, on her duplicity and skills in dissimulation, and, using the same game of concealments and revelations as that which she claims the prodigal daughter has adopted as her way of life, tells us that her prodigality may be invisible simply because "ci viene a bella posta nascosta" (107-108). The ironic, parenthetical closing sentence of the novel acts as an after-thought beckoning the reader to look behind the surface and retrieve the story it conceals:

(Ma a bene pensarci, benché a noi sembri con
ciò di essere giunti alla fine della nostra storia e al

principio della sua, non è detto che anch'essa non sia
stata digià
magari all'inverso, o per negazione, o per
esclusione,
raccontata. Sarebbe necessario,
per sincerarsene,
ricominciare questa storia da capo: il che
e per chi l'ha letta e per chi l'ha scritta
sarebbe certamente
di troppo. Senza contare che si tratterebbe di
un lavoro che caso mai alla sola figlia prodiga, se a
qualcuno rimanesse, rimarrebbe
ed evidentemente rimane benché al difuori dei
libri
da fare). (213)

The prodigality of which Ceresa speaks in such a roundabout way is a daughter's most extreme transgression, homosexuality, a practice that strikes at the heart of patriarchy. Consequently, the text can only be concerned with the modalities of its non-manifestation within the social institutions and linguistic and literary codes which deny it (De Lauretis). Ceresa's unspeakable character can only be represented in negative, and only by means of a non-representational metanarrative. Thus the text underscores the usefulness of deconstructive narrative experimentation for the feminist enterprise. Whether deconstructive experimentalism is a permanent strategy, or only a short-term tactic aimed at bringing about the 'coming out' of female prodigality into 'constructive' experimental or representational writing modes, is not clear. Ceresa herself did not move on to tell us stories of female prodigality 'in positive': in her 1990 novel *Bambine*, the prodigal daughter is still unspeakable.

Leila Baiardo, *L'inseguimento* (1976)

This novel is an ironic take on the ideologies of the late 1960s, which are seen as antithetical yet permeable, with the new drug/music/sexual/anti-capitalist/anti-bourgeois counter-culture exerting an attraction, through its modernizing and liberating thrust, upon figures of the establishment such as church and army people. Agostina, the young narrator-protagonist, is a product of the 1960s youth revolution. She is independent, sexually liberated and committed to a life free from materialism and hypocrisy. The beginning of the novel catapults her into a surreal and protean world, where biological and social expectations are constantly overturned, events defy the 'either/or' logic and people straddle traditional class and gender divides.

L'inseguimento also interrogates itself as a text. During the course of her picaresque adventures, Agostina starts to write a novel whose form and subject-matter she discusses at length, with ironic allusions to the 1960s debate on the role of literature, on Marxism, structuralism and experimentalism. The protagonist of her novel is the pope, a man in the grip of a philosophical and moral dilemma: when/if he assassinates the president of an imperialist power which violates "inviolabili principi etici e religiosi" (72), will he kill as a pope or as a man? This quandary takes him on a search for his identity beneath the clothes (literally) of his holy office and into the concrete matter of life, the body. The pope's search is paralleled by Agostina's own dilemmas as a writer and her own search for the right style and form for her novel: is writing fiction a solipsistic activity which has no political value or can it have the same force as political action and perhaps even a greater impact upon the real world? Through what technical and stylistic means, through which writing modes, can or should the political function of literature be realized? In the following passage, Agostina outlines a poetics of the novel as a vehicle for social and

political change which rejects both obscure, over-technical and uncommunicative neo-avant-garde writing, which bears no relation to life, and straightforward realism which requires no effort of interpretation and no contribution from the reader. Yet, for her, a commitment to communication and reality is paramount:

Azioni vere e proprie non ce ne sono. L'unica azione vera e propria avviene nell'ultimo capitolo, quando il presidente va a rendere omaggio a Sua Santità e Sua Santità lo ammazza [...] Quanto alla tecnica, ho deciso di creare un contrasto tra l'argomento, che è piuttosto classico e ricorrente nella storia, e il linguaggio che dovrà adattarsi, innestarsi direi, nell'arte intesa come vita di ogni giorno, del tempo attuale come astrazione dei significati di questo tempo. Tutto deve essere sfumato e simbolico, così scritto che chi legge non capisca quasi nulla, o meglio capisca tutto ma si secchi perché non sa se capisce bene, e tuttavia non possa fare a meno di leggere e una volta finito il libro dica: chissà se ho capito bene; proviamo a rileggere. E una volta riletto, e una volta convinto d'aver capito, vada subito ad ammazzare qualche presidente di qualche potenza imperialista.

È un libro ambizioso, lo so.

Quanto alla scrittura propriamente detta, allo stile, sono indecisa se usare o no delle virgole, se servirmi di parole come semiologia, tassonomico, poliembronia (ma che cavolo vogliono dire?), oppure usare un modo politico-ecclesiale [...] oppure una forma semplice, come la userebbe un vero papa che si mettesse un bel giorno a parlare cuore alla mano da papa a uomo non tanto ai fedeli quanto a se stesso. Non so neppure se trattare i personaggi reali, presi dalla vita reale [...] col loro vero nome [...] oppure lasciare tutto nel vago. Questa indecisione deriva anche dal fatto che non sono molto ferrata nelle

questioni politiche, e anzi ho dentro una certa confusione (confondo sempre Abba Eban con Feras Abbah e Farah Dibah, il Muro del pianto col Muro della vergogna, i Baschi blu coi Caschi blu e sino a qualche giorno fa ero convinta che El Sadat si chiamasse Elsa Dat e fosse una donna, come cosa, li, Golda). (72-73)

Throughout the story Agostina grapples with the issue of integration vs. marginalization (an important motif in the literature of the period), with the problem of how to preserve her freedom as an individual, a woman and a writer, in a corrupt world that attempts to seduce and control her. Her literary, political and sexual revolution does not quite succeed. She never completes her novel. As for sexuality, she never questions her entitlement to pleasure. Yet, although she overthrows women's sexual subordination to men by practising active sex – to the point of having intercourse with a dead man and being in complete control of the sexual act – and although she chooses to share her life with two men on the threshold of conventional sexualities, she remains a heterosexual woman. Dissident sexualities are the prerogative only of male characters. Sexuality without/beyond the phallus is only adumbrated. The novel thus reflects the coming out of male homosexuality in Italy in the 1960s and early 1970s, but the continued invisibility of lesbians.⁵

Silvana Castelli, *Pitonessa* (1978)

Pitonessa deals with a theme present in many narratives of the period: female childhood as an original time and space of freedom upon which culture inscribes its norms and the need to

⁵ For an analysis of this novel's engagement with sexual, political and novelistic 'dissidence', see Giorgio, "From Little Girls to Bad Girls" (100-03).

challenge the notions of femininity which young girls are trained to accept as natural. In contrast to the more optimistic stance displayed by other novels,⁶ Castelli applies a complex and pessimistic perspective to the issue, suggesting the difficulty of combating highly organized psychological, linguistic, social and political structures which shape women's selves and lives. Like Ceresa, she puts the novel form to the test to convey a critique of language and society. Narrative structure and style highlight, in a graphically aggressive manner, the discontinuities between female childhood and adulthood and draw attention to women's social and linguistic repression. The text consists of unpunctuated paragraphs which stop arbitrarily and of untitled chapters, the beginnings of which are indicated by a new page. The chapters alternate between two different settings and characters – the forays of a gang of six rebellious *bambine* on the verge of puberty and an adult woman segregated in her bedroom – and are skilfully arranged to counterpoint one another. For example, the third one, devoted to the little girls' energetic exploits outdoors, conveys colour, movement and vitality:

ma intanto ormai le bambine sono sole e lontane da casa [...] nessuna di loro ha paura e pedalano piú in fretta gonfiando l'elastico dei loro calzini per fare prima infatti già si vede il posto con la casa del contadino [...] e poi il campo piú avanti tutto circondato dagli alberi da frutta in particolare le

⁶ See, for example, Marina Jarre, *Negli occhi di una ragazza* (1971, 1985) and Gina Lagorio, *La spiaggia del lupo* (1977), best-selling *Bildungsromane* of adolescents who succeed in overcoming constraining societal and cultural expectations. Elena Gianini Belotti's pioneering essay *Dalla parte delle bambine* (1973) should also be mentioned: an extremely lucid analysis of the early conditioning of children into gender stereotypes, it was a very influential international best-seller.

susine gialle e mature con la buccia che a quest'ora è
sottile e ancora tiepida per via del sole del tramonto
ma ormai ci sono
e non devono fare altro che scavalcare con una sola
sgambata le biciclette e coi piedi tutti e due da uno
stesso lato frenano con la suola delle scarpe e una
volta a terra e ferme ognuna cerca il suo nascondiglio
[...] (22)

The *bambine* pursue pleasure, a pleasure which is made all the more intense by prohibition and danger and by the awareness that it is limited. Against the moderation, modesty, propriety, cleanliness, beauty and silence preached by their mothers and by the priest, the little girls keep pushing the boundaries of their freedom, revelling in the intense feelings produced by their bodies employed in forceful and forbidden activities. They just cannot be reduced to “obbedienza” and “silenzio” (157). By contrast, the fourth chapter, detailing the adult woman's lethargic isolation, suggests non-colour, stasis and asthenia. The colour grey which dominates the chapter – the cigarette ashes (a symbol of ruin and death), the protagonist's colourless face and lips, the grey telephone – throws a hue of suspension and indeterminacy over both her existence and the narrative. The young and bold warriors have given way to a woman in the grip of anxiety and phobias.

We are able to identify a progression towards individuality in the negative (as in the traditional female *Bildungsroman*) in the three discrete times/stages of life portrayed in the text: between the *bambine*'s free childhood and the segregation of the adult woman, an intermediate stage is represented indirectly, showing the transition to young adulthood and the incarceration into femininity. This incarceration is strongly contextualized, with allusions to women's exploitation and silencing by a patriarchal and authoritarian society bent on war, violence, blood and terror.

The novel appears to point to the possibility of finding the means of overcoming this male-dominated culture in women's community and exchanges.

Legacies: the 1990s and the bad girls

Female childhood continued to be an important aspect of women's writing in the 1980s, but only as a layer of the older character's self, recovered through memory and revisited within the context of family relationships, especially the mother-daughter connection. It was not until the 1990s that young women came back on the scene. Much attention has been paid recently by feminists to the phenomenon of the presence of female children and youth, as producers, protagonists and readers, in literature, comics and other cultural productions of the 1990s, in a way that suggests a continuity between the 1970s and the 1990s 'girl power'.⁷ Yet, the new generations do not recognize themselves as part of any tradition of Italian women's writing. Silvia Ballestra (b. 1969), Rossana Campo (b. 1963) and Isabella Santacroce (b. 1968) claim such neo-avant-garde writers as Arbasino, Balestrini and Tondelli as their antecedents and forefathers, thus negating and bypassing Italian women's writing of the 1970s and 1980s.⁸

⁷ See *Leggendaria: Bambine*.

⁸ In Giuseppe Caliceti (ed.), */baobab/. Autodizionario*, they talk about the writers they have read: the only women writers mentioned are Virginia Woolf and Joyce Lussu. Ballestra appears to have felt the need for literary mothers after becoming successful: see her book-long interview with Lussu, a writer, political activist and feminist from her own area: *Joyce L. Una vita contro* (1996). Ballestra is strongly committed to making Lussu's work better known (personal communication). Campo demonstrates an interest in feminism: in her preface to *Bad girls. Scelte, pensieri, stili di vita delle ragazze italiane*, she speaks of the value of feminism for contemporary young women. Since I wrote this essay, more work has been done on these writers which reveals their engagement with an Italian and non-Italian female

Yet, their work reveals that women's social, cultural and literary conquests in the 1970s and 1980s constitute a collective legacy taken for granted by the young generations. The protagonists of many short stories by Ballestra and Campo feel comfortably part of a female lineage of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts and cousins.⁹ Writing/language and female identity do not pose problematic exclusions for these writers nor for their characters: their 'bad girls' are adult sexual versions of Castelli's rebellious *bambine* in search of love, sexual fulfilment and money, preferably by means of becoming successful writers. Whereas the free life of Castelli's *bambine* stops at puberty, the terms of reference of the subjectivity of the 1990s young protagonists are almost exclusively sexual. This is invariably the case in the ironic short stories of mild rebellion in *Bambine cattive* (1994), in the black-humour novel *Benzina* (1998) by Elena Stancanelli (born 1965) with two young lesbians as protagonists, or in the neo-gothic story of extreme sex in Santacroce's *Luminal* (1998). It appears that female desire has finally 'come out' in the new generations of women writers.

There are formal and stylistic continuities between the work of the new generations and women's writing in the 1970s, both of the experimental and the more representational kinds. In Santacroce's *Luminal*, we can see the contamination of genres and styles, the attempt to explode gender and sexual stereotypes, the focus on sexual relationships as the basis of human relations, the prominence given to the senses, to the vocal/aural as well as to sight, recalling the voyeuristic attitude of much avant-garde writing. Cameras, photographs and mirrors enable Santacroce's protagonist to 'peep' at and love her own body, in a

literary tradition: see Claudia Bernardi, "Recalcitrant Daughters: The Search for Literary Mothers in Italian Women's Fiction of the 1990s".

⁹ See Ballestra, "Cari, ci siete o no?", in her collection *Gli orsi* (1994), and Campo, "La volta che Mina mi ha baciata", in *Racconta 2* (1993).

‘revolutionary’ twist which makes the female eye that watches coincide with the body that is watched. *Luminal* also reflects 1980s and 1990s themes in Italian feminism and women’s writing, for example in its representation of a deep passion between women which is now sexual besides being symbolic,¹⁰ and its placing the source of female subjectivity in the (highly sexual) body – one’s own, one’s mother’s and other women’s. Santacroce breaks through many taboos, among which the daughter’s sexual desire for the mother’s body. In the same vein as 1970s women’s writing, the new writing has not relinquished its commitment to communication, even though the codes of youth subcultures which underlie it exclude large sections of the reading public. *Luminal* succeeds in combining everyday language, music and youth jargons with a lyrical register, resulting in a breezy and fluid style despite the crass sexual vocabulary and the employment of English words, a style which almost succeeds in diverting our attention from – and alleviating the shock of – the violent sexuality practised by the characters. The novel’s opening is exemplary:

A volte penso sia stata la luna a partorirmi tra spasmi di cosce pallide sapientemente allargate tra le stelle proprio in alto. Così appesa sopra un concerto di David Bowie lei si apriva lasciandomi cadere.

Io sono Demon e la luna è mia madre.

Ci sono pareti bianche e angeli dalle piccole ali in volo attorno a noi abbracciate nello stesso letto con poca luce e il suo respiro sopra che ascolto stringendola in una

¹⁰ See the practice of *affidamento* and the activation of a maternal symbolic within the female philosophical community Diotima. For an introduction on these practices, see Adalgisa Giorgio, “Mothers and Daughters in Italian Feminism: An Overview”.

delle tante notti-luminal con Davi-dolce accanto che ora avvicina le sue labbra alle mie sussurrandomi saremo amiche per l'eternità.

Questa è la storia di Demon e Davi.

Non conosco la luce di Zurigo. Quella vera. Vivo da anni in questa mia realtà capovolta che non conosce luce. Passo ore zurighesi nei locali più bui con la forte convinzione che siamo nati tutti per farci fottere. (11)

To return to the question of the relationship between writing and the creation of new forms of female subjectivity and desire, *Luminal's* self-conscious narrator-protagonist reveals Santacroce's writing project: "Romanticamente ingravidiamo discorsi con progetti di struggente voglia" (33). Although Santacroce does not set out to produce *écriture féminine*, she seems to have created a writing which comes close to that invoked by Castelli and by the French writers and theorists Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous, a type of writing that, in speaking an embodied language of radical female desire, cements together signifier and signified, form and content. Interestingly, the more experimental texts by the young writers also deploy characters whose rebellion to middle-class provincial mediocrity is more radical and who choose death as the ultimate form of resistance.¹¹ However, can one define a female desire which expresses itself through abuse and violence, both self-inflicted and inflicted upon others, as female *jouissance* and a celebration of female sexuality?¹² Perhaps not.

¹¹ Suicide seems to have become a topos of the new narrative, a trend possibly set by the film *Thelma and Louise* (see, for example, the spectacular suicide, in front of the police, of Stancanelli's protagonists in *Benzina*).

¹² On Santacroce's representation of female desire, see Lucamante.

Conclusion

The 1970s narratives examined in this essay inherited the 1960s neo-avant-garde's commitment to experimentation with narrative form and language which 'feminist realist' writing consciously rejected. Yet the two strands of 1970s women's writing shared the project of breaking the stronghold of patriarchal literary language and capitalist bourgeois ideology which silenced women. Both types of writing also initiated the process of producing a writing founded in the body and expressing female desire, a desire which has finally come out in 1990s youth narrative. The suggestions I have put forward in this paper need to be further explored. More texts from the 1970s must be brought to light in order to draw a more articulated panorama of women's writing in that decade and to test my hypothesis that there is a tradition, otherwise neglected or denied by critics, of consciously anti-realist writing by women which originates in the 1960s and the 1970s and finds its point of arrival in the 1990s.

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