

Carmen Covito's 'Tempo parziale'

Mothering and work in Italy in a nutshell

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Abstract

Carmen Covito's short story 'Tempo parziale' (2009) ['Part Time'] can be read as a comment on the peculiarities of female employment and defective social policies in contemporary Italy. Originally written in 2007 for the INAIL campaign *Diritti senza rovesci* [Rights without flip side] against discrimination and disrespect of labour rights, it deploys devices of creative reading and irony to create a narrative of 'labour ethics'. The story's representation of part-time work in the management sector through the testimony of a highly educated mother of twins offers an insight into employers' anxieties around hiring women with children on the one hand, and into the construction of a female worker's resistance on the other. The article proposes that strategies to assert autonomy can only become effective and ironic when the narrative encounters the response of a creative reader.

Keywords: Carmen Covito, creative reading, female employment, feminization, irony, motherhood, part-time work, precarity, resistance

Introduction: women's employment in Italy

Carmen Covito's short story 'Tempo parziale' (2009) ['Part Time'] was originally written in 2007 for the campaign *Diritti senza rovesci* [Rights without flip side] against the discrimination and disrespect of labour rights, launched by the National Institute for Insurance against Labour Accidents (INAIL).^{*} The story takes on directly the peculiarities of female employment and defective social policies in contemporary Italy, with the title striking at the heart of a major problem for women who wish to combine employment and motherhood: the lack of part-time jobs. The story proceeds from, and is informed by, this socio-political context.



Compared with the twenty-seven states of the European Union, Italy's female employment rate is very low. In a 2007 survey of employment rates for women between 15 and 64 years of age, Italy came twenty-seventh, followed only by Malta, with 46.7 per cent of female employment, compared with a European average of 58.3 per cent.¹ Two years later these figures were practically unaltered (cf. Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 485). This means that fewer than one woman in two is employed in Italy, while nearly 70 per cent of the labour force is male. The gap between female and male employment rates has remained unaltered: since 2001 'the gap has remained substantially stable at about 0.73' and the 'reduction in the employment gender gap is due more to the decrease in male activity rate than to an increase in that of women' (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 487). Italy was, and still is, struggling to comply with the Lisbon Treaty's target of full employment for 60 per cent of women and 70 per cent of men by 2010.

Two factors that could explain this difficulty, according to economist Caroline Savi (2010), are the North-South divide in Italy – in the South the gender gap is much more marked – and a generational difference which saw in 2007 a low employment rate for Italian women between the ages of 55 and 64 – only 23 per cent compared with an average European rate ranging between 36 per cent and 50 per cent. This apparent difficulty in complying with the Lisbon Treaty's target of full employment for 60 per cent of women and 70 per cent of men by 2010 could be due to the fact that women's education in Italy reached male levels only in the 1960s. This is borne out by the fact that the growth of female employment during the 2000s was significantly higher among better-educated women (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 488). According to Daniela Del Boca and Anna Giraldo's study of the growth in employment from 1971 to 2009 for women in the 20–34 age group, the fact that women's employment in Italy increased in the first three decades but stopped growing in the last decade of this period, while it continued to grow in most European countries, could be explained by the limited development of social policies aimed at facilitating the balance between work and family (2013: 485). They conclude that, in contrast to other European countries, 'in Italy there have been fewer opportunities of part-time work, shorter and less well-paid parental leave, and less widespread and more costly services for children under 3 years of age' (2013: 497).

This lack of social policies could be the result of ideological positions, as is suggested by a contrastive study by Constanza Tobío on women and welfare in Italy and Spain:

What happened in Italy to explain why women's participation in the labour force has not grown has much to do with how the welfare state developed,

prioritizing pensions rather than education, care or gender-equality policies. Both feminism and social democracy proved incapable of setting a different agenda during forty years of social policies at the state level shaped by right wing parties with the decisive support of the Catholic Church. Compared to the expectations of the 1970s, there is backlash. The story of Spain suggests that this is not inevitable. (Tobío 2015: 14)

The limited availability of part-time work is perhaps the most significant factor in the Italian female employment low growth rates. Despite the increase in the past decade – in 2009, nearly 30 per cent of women aged between 20 and 34 years were employed part time – ‘the number of women in part-time employment still remains much lower than in other European countries, such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, where it ranges between 45 and 60 per cent’ (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 493). This important difference has led some to conclude that women in Italy are not only underrepresented on the labour market, but that the flexibilization of temporary contracts following the introduction of Law 30 in 2003 – the so-called Biagi Reform – made female employment even less stable. Istat statistics show that, in the last ten years, there has been almost a doubling in the incidence of involuntary part-time employment: from 35.7 per cent in 2004 to 61.6 per cent in 2013. Although the rate of involuntary part-time work is high among men as well, it is also high among women (71.5 and 58.1 per cent, respectively) (Istat 2013).

Part-time work can, of course, facilitate female employment, especially when women have children to take care of. However, in Italy the introduction of part-time work ‘meant a reduction of daily working hours, rather than flexibility of hours’, and ‘the difficulties encountered in converting part-time to full-time work made it a type of employment with few chances of career advancement’ (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 493). Furthermore, the so-called ‘atypical’ contracts introduced by the Biagi Reform seem to have further weakened women’s career prospects, because they risk becoming trapped in a kind of involuntary part-time employment or ‘stable precarity’ (Savi 2010: 383). From a feminist perspective this condition of increased precarity, which especially affected women between 2001 and 2006, has become a core issue of female activism in the New Millennium:

Law 30 (2003) had a particularly gendered impact. It aimed to improve flexibility in working conditions, creating new posts and lowering unemployment, opening up opportunities, especially for women, younger people and those seeking to return to work. However, research has shown that it has instead increased precarity for ‘atypical’ workers, including a large

number of women [...] Family commitments [...] mean that women often work part time. The new, 'flexible' system has seen women working longer hours, for lower pay, with little right to complain and extremely uncertain future prospects [...]. Indeed, an increase in 'precarity' has been recognized as a widespread phenomenon in Italy, creating a cohort of 'precarious subjects'.² (Galetto et al. 2009: 193)

Covito's ironic and precarious resistance

If this is the social and economic context in which to situate Covito's story 'Part Time', the title can hardly be neutral. It could be read, instead, as part of an imaginary women's right to work campaign. Some feminist groups which resist precarity recommend the use of irony in order to lift women from their passive position of victim and empower them by encouraging them to take on a performative and transformative role: 'Our strategies of resistance are peppered with irony, with spiritual optimism as opposed to an intellectual pessimism. Rejecting the sense of precarity as pure victimhood and suffering, we try to transform the limitations derived from our generational situation and gender agency' (quoted in Galetto et al. 2009: 199). In other words, if resisting precarity can be achieved through pointing out its ambivalent nature, 'Part Time' expresses precisely the paradox whereby part-time employment, which is aimed at reconciling work and motherhood, ends up instead widening the gap between them. As we shall see presently, irony has also been claimed as a literary device underpinning the type of narrative that Covito deploys.

The literary context in which to situate the short story in its most narrow sense is the volume in which it appeared, *Lavoro da morire. Racconti di un'Italia sfruttata* (2009) [Work to die for: Stories of an exploited Italy], which collects the short stories originally written for the already mentioned 2007 INAIL campaign. Covito's story can still be found online in its original format as Pamphlet number 2 of the campaign, entitled 'Discriminazione' [Discrimination], which was distributed free in such public places as train stations, supermarkets and schools. Introducing the project, INAIL's General Director Piero Giorgini expresses the hope that 'chi legge cambia' (2007: 3) [those who read will change]. This 'act' of cultural performativity attributed to literature resonates with Derek Attridge's study *The Singularity of Literature*, which offers some key elements for a better understanding of the ethical relevance of creative acts and a reading of 'the literary work as an innovative cultural event, both in its time and for later generations' (2004: blurb). According to Attridge, the inventiveness of a text can only be experienced through what he calls 'creative reading' and depends on the reader's receptiveness to its potential challenge:

In its encounter with the other, an encounter in which existing modes of thought and evaluation falter, creative reading allows the work to take the mind (understood in the broadest sense) to the borders of its accustomed terrain. [...] It is only through the accumulation of individual acts of reading and responding, in fact, that large cultural shifts occur, as the inventiveness of a particular work is registered by more and more participants in a particular field. (2004: 79–80)

Like other creative events, creative reading, too, can produce effects that go beyond the mind of the reader: as soon as it becomes public, namely when the readers put their mental and affective responses into words, 'whether it be in the form of a literal act of writing, an inward composition, a speech or intervention in a discussion, a change of [behaviour]', it might in turn inventively 'make possible new ways of writing, new ways of reading' and 'invite further responses' (Attridge 2004: 93).³ Putting the reader in contact with 'the other' is also part of the aims of the INAIL campaign, as is explained by Marco Stancati's afterword to the pamphlet when he refers to linguistic innovation as a means of deconstructing stereotypes and forcing the readers to consider themselves as participants in labour conflicts and incidents concerning others (2007: 18).

In her afterword to *Lavoro da morire*, Viviana Rosi draws attention to the real-life stories, the testimonies, that have been appropriated and rewritten by the invited authors with the aim of reinstating a 'labour ethics' through their exemplarity (2009: 118–19). This ethical relevance of the creative narrative act chimes with Rosi's own definition of the non-fiction novel (2009: 119) and with Bertolt Brecht's epigraph on the narrative pact, which opens her afterword, whereby worlds can be described and represented only as worlds that can possibly be changed (117). In a broader sense, the choice of 'real life stories' is in tune with the international literary turn from postmodernism to realism, which some critics have defined as late postmodern (Van Dijk and Vaessens 2011) or hypermodern (Donnarumma 2011, 2014). Van Dijk and Vaessens observe how 'In the contemporary novel, a search for confirmation about the function of literature is plain to see. It is a search which can explain why so many authors, in their critical reaction to postmodernism, end up with exactly those literary values dismissed by postmodernism: sincerity, authenticity, truth' (2011: 18). Similarly, Donnarumma defines the hypermodern in terms of a 'responsibilization' of postmodern literature when he suggests it should be a form of 'civic participation' (2011: 22).

Yet, this rediscovery of humanist values, which goes against the grain of postmodernist relativism and has been termed 'new realism' (Ferraris 2012), can only be convincing when literature highlights, with the help of

metanarrative strategies and connotative features, a reality that is 'authenticated' by and through fiction (cf. Ricciardi 2011: 179). One of these metanarrative devices could be irony. Claudia Boscolo and Stefano Jossa have proposed irony as a key concept to characterize a politically committed literature 'of resistance', a device that opens an alternative and dialogic space while shifting the gaze and complicating a testimonial rendering of a reality that is evident and narratable (Boscolo and Jossa 2014: 12–13). The ironic dimension of Covito's story functions precisely in this way, as it is not so much intentional as the product of a dialogic situation.

A young mother, in the presence of her twins, tells an unidentified interviewer/listener the story of how, after her pregnancy, she succeeded in having her full-time job turned into a part-time job and how she finally gave it up. The narrative framework is that of testimony, namely a story that, ideally, becomes a form of 'mediated prospective memory' precisely through being told. Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2013) developed the concept to illustrate the role of journalism in collective memory. Mediated prospective memory, in the words of Lindgren and Phillips, is used by Tenenboim-Weinblatt to describe 'the process whereby past memories are harnessed in order to raise awareness and encourage future remedial action' (2016: 159). The desired result of future reparation and reintegration, ascribed by Marianne Hirsch to the work of 'postmemory' entrusted, in the context of the Holocaust, to the second generation which 'adopts' the trauma suffered directly by the first, is not, however, guaranteed in Covito's testimony-turned fiction, because the mother's act of narration seems to be part of a series of compulsive repetitions, which is typical of the effect of trauma (Hirsch 2001: 8). The mother's story, now told for the umpteenth time, is constantly interrupted and commented upon by her twins, whose disruptive acts of 'creative reading' are not yet guided by any 'ethics' or piety towards the 'other' self of their working mother. Asking them to stop interrupting her, the mother tells her two young daughters: 'But I'm not telling *you* the story, you already know it' (Covito 2009: 38) ['Non la sto raccontando a voi, voi la sapete già'].

The high female underemployment in Italy market explains the surprise expressed by the female protagonist at the beginning of Covito's story when she is offered not only a full-time job but also a permanent one: 'Mi presero. Assunzione a tempo indeterminato, addirittura. Stipendio buono. E anche il lavoro non era affatto male' (Covito 2009: 37) ['They hired me. Not only that, they gave me a permanent contract. Good salary. And the work itself wasn't at all bad']. The setting is probably somewhere in Northern Italy: while small businesses are the dominant industrial feature of the Italian economic system, they are more widespread in the North (Giovannini and Minetti

2015: 273). This economic structure is another reason for the limited availability of part-time work (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 493). In our case, the protagonist is hired by a small branch of a multinational company, a significant player in post-Fordist precarization,⁴ as shown in a number of novels, by Sebastiano Nata and Massimo Lolli among others, set in the universe of multinationals whose only law is to generate immediate profit (Chirumbolo 2013: 39). Furthermore, the job for which she is hired matches her qualifications: she has 'un master in gestione d'impresa' ['a master's in management'] and has a 'vasta esperienza nella creazione di business plan a diversi livelli di dimensione aziendale' (Covito 2009: 37) ['vast experience of creating business plans for companies of all sizes']. As we have already seen, female employment rates were significantly higher among better-educated women at the time when the short story was published (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 488). Yet, it is precisely this category of female graduates that makes the least use of part-time work, because it continues to be a type of employment with fewer chances of career advancement (493).

The female character underlines at the very beginning of her narrative that motherhood for her is part of a life project which has to be planned carefully in order to avoid conflict with work and career, her own as well as her husband's: 'ci rendevamo conto che la programmazione è indispensabile per realizzare al meglio anche le strategie amorose orientate a un progetto di durevole felicità' (Covito 2009: 37) ['we knew very well that planning is essential in love, as much as in business, if you want to fulfil your project of lasting happiness']. However, an unplanned pregnancy lands her with twins. It is well known that birth rates in Italy are extremely low. They are influenced negatively by the social vulnerability of women who find themselves in unstable positions without long-term prospects, a situation that makes it very difficult for them to become economically independent from the family of origin (Savi 2010: 383). Therefore, it is not so much women's employment that brings down the birth rates but rather the late transition to adulthood (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 491) and the absence of suitable work or of stable and well-paid jobs (Savi 2010: 384). Furthermore, maternity forces many women to retire from their professional life, because care work still remains the responsibility of women (Ruspini 2015: 67). Between 2006 and 2008 Italian women in their thirties and forties gave voice to their desperation in different media: unable to reconcile motherhood and work, they found themselves in the position of having to give up their life choices and thus their 'right to self-determination' (Galletto et al. 2009: 193). Novelist Aldo Nove published a book of interviews in 2006 which is emblematically entitled *Mi chiamo Roberta, ho 40 anni, guadagno 250 euro al mese...* [My name is

Roberta, I am 40 years old, I earn 250 euro per month...]. The Roberta of the title has a most tragic story to tell, not only about herself, as she has to relinquish her desire to have a child because of her insecure income, but also about her friends who have children but feel unable to be good mothers. Compared with these women, Covito's protagonist and her colleagues are 'happy' prior to her pregnancy: 'Eravamo tre donne: la dirigente, una collega e io. Felicissime. Un lavoro di squadra fantastico' (Covito 2009: 37) ['There were three of us, all women: the manager, a colleague and myself. Three very happy women. Fantastic teamwork'].

The story's opening immediately evokes the bottleneck of mothering and work in Italy. But our protagonist could simply be facing the difficulties that pregnant women in managerial roles encounter internationally. This issue has been analyzed by Caroline Gatrell (2011), who states that 'employers' anxieties around pregnancy go beyond unspecified fears about women's supposedly lowered work orientation, extending to worries that pregnancy might disrupt workplace routines' (2011: 100). Planning motherhood according to the employer's production schedule is believed by the female protagonist of Covito's story to be the most effective method to counter these beliefs:

Sí, certo, i ritmi produttivi erano sostenuti: in queste filiali periferiche il budget è sempre prefissato dalla sede centrale, gli obiettivi di vendita sono quelli e devi rispettarli, ma io sono fatta così, se mi trovo davanti a una sfida mi elettrizzo, mi entusiasmo, dispiego tutte le mie risorse, insomma rendo al cento per cento, e anche di più. Infatti quando poi sono rimasta incinta, con tanti saluti alla programmazione, mi poteva bastare una creatura sola? No, due ne dovevo fare! E due ne ho fatte, due gemelline adorabili. (Covito 2009: 37–38)

[Yes, it goes without saying, we had to work at a very fast pace: in these provincial branches the budget is always set in advance by the main office, the sales targets are what they are and must be met, but that's the way I am: if I'm faced with a challenge I get all fired up, I get enthusiastic, I mobilize all my resources, in brief I deliver one hundred per cent, and even more. So much so that when I later got pregnant, and said good bye to planning, could I be satisfied with just one baby? No way. I must have two! And so I did, I had two of them, adorable twins]

Once she is pregnant she is ironically confronted with the 'flip side' of workers' rights. When the protagonist goes back to work after a period of extended maternity leave (in the 1970s, when feminist movements had their voices heard, some important laws were passed, among which a maternity law that granted a five-month period of leave, the longest in Europe [Tobío 2015: 7]), what strikes us is the total absence of solidarity in a working environment

which is nevertheless female-dominated. Gatrell suggests that female dominance in the workplace could favour well-being in pregnancy (2011: 109). This is not the case in Covito's short story. The 'fantastic' team the female protagonist worked with before her pregnancy has been transferred to another branch: this exemplifies another consequence of flexible contracts: the lack of community-building and therefore a lack of social bonding. Meanwhile the protagonist has come to represent 'lo storico della filiale' (Covito 2009: 40) ['the branch's history']. The new, and younger, colleagues are still women, but when she asks for her contract to be changed to four hours a day, her colleague remains hierarchically bound to her manager and supports the latter's warnings against the protagonist going part time and the possibility of eventually 'essere licenziata' (Covito 2009: 40) ['being sacked']. The fear of female workers that their own productivity rate could be endangered finds support in Gatrell's study, which shows that employed pregnant women are perceived to be less competent than non-pregnant women and that new mothers fare little better than pregnant employees, especially if they work part time (2011: 104).

What is happening here is that the 'feminization' of work turns against the women that are in employment. The feminization of labour is the adoption, in the neocapitalist workplace, of strategies of female subordination which are now extended to men, a process that puts women in a situation of double exploitation if they are unable to use their knowledge of subordination and exploitation to make a difference (Morini 2010). What happens is that the reduction of job security puts the worker – female as well as male – in a position of total dependence. Loyalty, participation and limitless time are required without the assurance of a contract of some kind in return, even if between unequal partners (Morini 2010: 13). In theory the feminization of work should help to realize 'womenomics', a success formula that combines economic growth with women, work, economy and fecundity (Morini 2010: 15). The right to self-determination and choosing one's own job is not, however, contemplated by neoliberal capitalism and, therefore, Morini proposes a general and unconditional basic income to solve the problem of how to reinstate the autonomy of the subject (20). In other words, work flexibility can only be viewed as a productive process of 'feminization' if the condition of women inside and outside the workplace leads to a reflection on precarity and its material and social implications as well as its implications for citizenship (Possenti 2012: 139). Additionally, if 'feminization' is read through the lens of the dominant culture of the family in Italy, a reflection on precarity should also foster 'gender education [...] raising public awareness of gender biases in society' (Ruspini 2015: 71).

Going back to our story, the main character decides to resist unfair treatment with the help of the Equality Adviser, who mediates with Human Resources. Yet, her resistance does not seem to be the result of a feminist act of self-determination, but rather of a necessity: ‘Io invece non mi sono arresa, perché non avevo niente da perdere, per me l’alternativa era licenziarmi, e sono andata avanti come una veramente tosta’ (Covito 2009: 41–42) [‘I didn’t surrender, because I had nothing to lose, my only alternative was to resign, and I soldiered on like a real tough cookie’]. Later on she hears that she has been marked as a bad example to follow for other young mothers working for the same company that dare to ask to go part time (Covito 2009: 41). The protagonist tells us: ‘Ma queste donne si sono rassegnate, magari perché hanno un’alternativa, magari hanno qualche nonno che alle cinque va a prendere i bambini’ (Covito 2009: 41) [‘These women gave up, perhaps because they have an alternative, maybe they have a grandfather who picks up the children at 5pm’]. In her case, a family support network does not exist, and neither can she co-opt her husband: ‘e mio marito, lui, poverino, avrebbe anche voluto aiutare, ma esce di casa la mattina alle sette e quando torna la sera è così stanco che quasi non ha la forza di scollarsi il telefonino dall’orecchio. Quindi organizzazione, organizzazione e ancora organizzazione’ (Covito 2009: 38) [‘and my husband, poor devil, would even have liked to help, but he goes out at 7am and when he comes back at night he’s so tired that he hardly has the strength to prise his mobile from his ear. And so, organization, organization, and more organization’]. Here another weak point of Italy’s social system comes to the fore: the government’s financial aid to families is below the European standard. Compared to France’s 12 per cent, Italy spends only 4 per cent of its budget on family politics (Mello 2007: 93). A problem linked to this is the insufficient nursery facilities: in 2004 they only covered 11.4 per cent of the population aged 0–2 years against the target of 33 per cent set by the Lisbon Treaty for 2010 (Savi 2010: 386) and in 2009 only 12 per cent (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 494). In regions where childcare provisions have increased most, reaching 25 per cent in Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, female employment and birth rates are above the Italian average (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 495).

The narrator tells her story for the umpteenth time. A comic effect is generated by the twins’ comments on how their mother tells and retells it, which, as has been suggested earlier on, signals the presence of a trauma which will probably turn into an ‘open wound’, like so many other unresolved ills in contemporary Italy, if not dealt with on a collective and institutional level. The mother in the story resists her exclusion from the workplace – she is offered the opportunity to take redundancy pay and go home (Covito 2009:

40) – with the help of the Equality Adviser, who is introduced in the story as a kind of Superman or *deus ex machina*: ‘E a questo punto, zacchete! sbadabam! Ta-dah! Che cos’è, che cos’è?! È un uccello! È un aereo! No, è la Consigliera di Parità!’ (Covito 2009: 40) [‘And at this point, bam! shazam! ta-da! What’s that, what’s that?! Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it’s the Equality Adviser!’]. She speaks to Human Resources and everything is fixed in five minutes (Covito 2009: 41).

This intervention from outside provokes another set of questions: why resort to the Equality Adviser and not to some workers’ representative within the multinational or to a trade union? The ironic tone of this magic solution points to a void in the arena of social actors in Italy: the prejudice of the trade unions against part-time work has only changed in recent years (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 493) and in Italy there has been wide consensus, until at least the 1970s, from the right to the left on leaving aside social policies towards the family (Tobío 2015: 9; Ruspini 2015: 68). Resistance, in order to be effective, should be engaged in by a grassroots community, as shown by contemporary reflections on social movements. Feminist groups invest in putting relationships at the centre of an individual’s actions: ‘The continuum of individual–collective has of course been marked by the increased gendered precarity of life, work and self-determination which have emerged as a vital, central issue for Italian feminists’ (Galletto et al. 2009: 198). But, as we have seen, the female workers in this story identify with the employer and not with each other. Moreover, the lack of interpersonal solidarity points towards a phenomenon in which different Berlusconi governments have excelled, the appointment of ‘remarkable’ women as Ministers for Equal Opportunities, a Ministry created in 1996 (Ruspini 2015: 69): Stefania Prestigiacomo, belonging to a family of Sicilian entrepreneurs, in Berlusconi’s second and third government (2001–2006) and Mara Carfagna, an ex-model, in the fourth (2008–2011). These women, according to feminist critics, have become post-feminist role models with ‘neoliberalist’ ways of their own to emancipate themselves from precarity and to perform their ‘female individualism’ (Bonifazio 2014: 55). Thus, they signal the dissolution of ‘the sense of a clearly defined, shared “us” affirmed during the 1970s against institutions of power (Galletto et al. 2009: 192). On the other hand, Berlusconi’s ‘mysoginistic regime and conservative politics’ triggered in 2011 the grassroots women’s and men’s movement *Se Non Ora Quando* [If not now, when?], which mobilized international protests through social networking (Ruspini 2015: 71).

Although the protagonist obtains the part-time job she wanted, she is not as tough as she thought she was and, unable to resist the hostile climate, she

agrees to work more hours. She has become, in Gatrell's terms, an 'abjured' maternal body (2011: 108) and at the branch is seen as 'un peso morto' (Covito 2009: 42) ['dead weight']. She is also tortured by guilt, not only towards her employer but also towards her children: 'Adesso le bambine vanno all'asilo tutto il giorno [...] alle quattro devo uscire per correre all'asilo a ritirare le bambine. E le colleghe mi guardano storto' (Covito 2009: 42) ['Now the girls go to the nursery full time (...) I (...) have to leave at 4 o'clock and rush to the nursery to pick up the girls. And my colleagues look at me disapprovingly']. In the end, she decides to resign. Paradoxically, this seems to be the first 'free choice' she makes, a choice to 'assert autonomy' in feminist terms. But the final lines make clear that maybe this is not a personal victory after all but rather the account of a defeat:

Contente? Io sono contenta. Sì, la vostra supermamma è proprio contenta, perché noi supermamme siamo forti. Siamo vincenti. No, niente, è solo che mi è entrato qualcosa in un occhio. Vai, su, Serena, corri a chiudere quella finestra, che viene dentro polvere. Katia, aiuta tua sorella. Non mi guardate. Non fateci caso. Solo un po' di stanchezza. Ora mi passa. (Covito 2009: 43)

[Are you happy? Well, I am. Yes, your super mum is really happy, because we super mums are strong. We're winners. No, it's nothing, just something in my eye. Go on, Serena, run and close that window, the dust is coming in. Katia, help your sister. Don't look at me. Take no notice of me. I'm just a bit tired. It'll pass]

Conclusion

What may readers conclude from this final sombre note and to whom does the woman deliver her life story? Does she speak to a writer who will turn her story into a narrative that will be of benefit to herself and other women or, instead, to some servant of commodity culture who aims to transform her story of victimhood into mass entertainment? Or to her daughters, whose childhood is marked by their mother's experience: will they reject her 'ironical' resistance or will they follow in their mother's footsteps and become resistant to discrimination? We could imagine this woman telling her story to writer Carmen Covito who, with her specific wording, turns it into an ambivalent but possible world that can be changed by an act of creative reading. This would take us back to the question of how real life and literature relate to each other and how literary texts can shape the debate on mothering and work. If we imagine the twins to be the creative readers embedded in the story, change is entrusted to the next generation, that of the so-called 'Millennials', 'poised to change the world for the better' and more tolerant in their 'social values'

(Ruspini 2015: 70–71) than adults of other generations. And, ideally speaking, the ambivalence inherent in tragicomedy should make the average reader – female and male – reflect on the prejudices and stereotypes with regard to how Italy's familistic culture conditions female employment in today's Italy.

A conspicuous absentee in this story is the protagonist's husband, who seems to play no role whatsoever in his wife's work and living conditions. In order to turn the challenge of reconciling motherhood with work into reality and reach gender equality in Italy, a dialogue has to be opened in this area. Social policies should also improve the provisions for parental leave and childcare (Del Boca and Giraldo 2013: 495). Of course, domestic workers could supply childcare, a trend already emerging in Southern Europe which is introducing a 'migrant-in-the-family' care model (Ruspini 2015: 66) as well as producing new, paradoxical forms of inequality (Morini 2001). Although all women in Covito's story are presumably white and Italian, precarity also affects migrant workers (Contarini 2015), but this is another story.

Notes

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1. Statistics are taken from CNEL, *Rapporto sul mercato del lavoro 2007*, and are reproduced in Savi 2010.
2. An alternative reading of Law 30 is offered by Michele Tiraboschi, Director of the Marco Biagi Centre for International and Comparative Studies: 'If the interpretation of the reform as an attempt to introduce flexibility and precarious employment is misleading, in a market that is as dysfunctional as ours, the key words for interpreting the reform appear to be "employability", "adaptability" and "equal opportunities"' (Tiraboschi 2005: 156).
3. I owe these insights to Sarah Vantorre's PhD thesis on the work of Giuseppe Fava (University of Antwerp, forthcoming).
4. By contrast, Fordist employment refers to full-time permanent work.

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