Anna Banti and the (Im)possibility of Love

Anna Banti and the (Im)possibility of Love

By

Wissia Fiorucci

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

Anna Banti and the (Im)possibility of Love, by Wissia Fiorucci

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2336-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2336-4

To Carlo, Loredana and Roberto

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to address my sincere gratitude to Dr. Lorenzo Chiesa, whose constant support and invaluable guidance have made this book possible.

Very special thanks go to Alvise Sforza Tarabochia for his endless patience and moral support during the months in which this book was written.

I wish to thank Dr. Ana de Medeiros for her continuous and precious help with different aspects of this project.

I also take this opportunity to thank Krista Bonello, for her kind and very prompt advices.

INTRODUCTION

THE EXCEPTIONAL WOMAN AND THE EXCEPTIONAL MAN

> Then the accusation of feminism, a word that she hated, was justifiable. No, she had just aimed at emancipation and fought for equal opportunities...she had loved few men, actually only one, but even fewer women, bound together in an unchanging fairy tale: the myth of escaping the rule of conformity.[1]

Anna Banti was "a prominent figure in the Italy literary scene for almost fifty years."[2] In the above quote, which is an excerpt from her fictionalised autobiography *A Piercing Cry* (1981), she discusses her position with regard to feminism and concludes by distancing herself from it. The first aim of this book is to problematise and understand Banti's stance on feminism, or –more specifically–Italian feminism. I shall do so by analysing three of her works: *A Piercing Cry*, the 1951 short story "Le donne muoiono" ("The Women Are Dying") and the 1971 "Je vous écris d'un pays lointain" (I am writing you from a faraway land).[3] This will enable me to investigate the question of what I shall refer to as the "(im)possibility of love", a human dilemma that Banti widely explored in her works.

As is apparent in the above quote, in Lazzaro-Weis's words, "Banti did not participate in feminist politics and often expressed distaste for the term".[4] Banti never proclaimed herself a feminist; indeed, she says of her

---

[1] Anna Banti, *A Piercing Cry*, trans. Daria Valentini and S. Mark Lewis (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 74.

[2] Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "Introduction", in *The Signorina and Other Stories* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2001), vii. For a more detailed summary of Banti's life, see Enza Biagini, *Anna Banti* (Milano: Murzia, 1978).

[3] I here refer to the dates of publication.

[4] Ibid., xii.

alter ego in *A Piercing Cry* that feminism was a "word that she hated". However, Banti's work very often deals with women who suffer the inescapable solitude that awaits the woman who makes her artistic creativity felt in a male-dominated domain. This is the *topos*, indeed, of Banti's *magnum opus* –her novel Artemisia (1947)– to which she owed her celebrity. As Lazzaro-Weis clearly points out, feminist discourse now acknowledges *Artemisia* as a feminist novel for its portrayal of an "archetype of oppressed female imagination".[5] Again and again, Banti gives voice, as she does in *Artemisia*, to women struggling against patriarchal society–women who, like its eponymous heroine, refuse to abandon their vocation, regardless of any consequences that may result from this choice. On the other hand, she also "often writes of [other] women who feel betrayed, disparaged",[6] alongside –and in addition to – these exceptional and talented heroines. Possibly much more ordinary, they are nevertheless in need of compassion, having been "abandoned in their romantic or family relationships".[7] Banti never accepted the "feminist" label, yet many women populate the world of her fiction: time and again, these women embody the feminist archetype of subjugated woman.

In this connection, Ursula Fanning categorises three main types of female characters in Banti's works:

> the ordinary woman caught in her traditional role of wife and/or mother; the exceptional, creative heroine; and a third category of women who lack a real vocation and as such bear the brunt of Banti's disdain and contempt.[8]

In other words, if the first two types of women fit into the category of "woman as victim", of which Artemisia is a prime example, the third one embodies a different kind of female subject. Banti despised those women who unthinkingly cast themselves in an archetypal role of intellectual inferiority. In my opinion, these "women without vocation" are those who

---

[5] Carol Lazzaro-Weis, *From Margins to Mainstream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 131.
[6] Lazzaro-Weis, "Introduction", ix.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Louise Rozier, "Review: [untitled]", *Italica* 81, no.3 (Autumn, 2004), 439. See Ursula Fanning, "Sketching Female Subjectivity: Anna Banti's *Il coraggio delle donne* and *Le donne muoiono*", in *Beyond Artemisia: Female Subjectivity, History and Culture in Anna Banti*, ed. Daria Valentini (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 15-30.

abide by the conventions that want them to be not just subjugated to male authority but also, and most importantly, *persuaded* of their inferiority to men; such women reinforce and justify the same undermining principles that limit their freedom. One could say that they are victims of themselves, before becoming victims of patriarchal society. In *A Piercing Cry*, Banti depicts her fictional counterpart Agnese Lanzi as one of these women and, on a less explicitly autobiographical note, this archetype of passive woman also appears in "The Women Are Dying".

Overall, Fanning's categorisation does accurately highlight the emphasis Banti gives to the female side of the world, in terms of her choice of subjects.[9] However, it is particularly accurate, because, although it is specifically meant to describe Banti's female characters, it may be applied to male protagonists as well. Banti's choice of male protagonists, although not as frequent, leads to acute portrayals of troubled men, who happen not to be significantly different from her heroines. To give an example: as is clear in both "Je vous écris d'un pays lointain" and "The Women Are Dying", the quality of being exceptional is, in Banti's opinion, primarily grounded on one's will to overcome social prejudices and constraints. In "Je vous écris d'un pays lointain", Banti describes a man as a victim of both his society and its prejudices, a man who, rather than obeying those dictates that would imply his despising his own nature, accepts the risk of dying. This man, therefore, conforms to Banti's category of the "exceptional".[10]

In the main,

[9] Of course, when applying Fanning's categorisation to Banti's characters, one must always bear in mind that one definition does not necessarily exclude the other: for example, Artemisia is an exceptional, talented artist fighting for recognition and at the same time a woman, daughter and wife, abandoned by the men she loves.

[10] Besides the exceptional woman, Fanning also distinguishes the one whose identity is restricted to being a conventional wife and mother. Domenico, from *Noi credevamo* (1967), is, borrowing Fanning's words, a man caught in his traditional role of husband and/or father. As regards those "women without vocation", Paolo, in "La monaca di Sciangai" (1957), is a prime manifestation of this type. Obedient husband and passive father, he submits to victimisation by his wife, and voluntarily puts himself in a position of inferiority.

> Banti's work is grounded on specific situations, highlighting the reactions ...of her protagonists after they have suffered a real or perceived injustice most often related to their status as a woman,[11]

but sometimes related to their status as man. In other words, these shifts of focus from female to male protagonists, albeit rare, indicate Banti's concern with the *human*, not only the *woman*, subject. In this connection, Banti makes a remarkable statement in *Le signore della scrittura* (1984). She declares that her standpoint is "più una forma di umanesimo che vero e proprio femminismo".[12] This perspective, in her opinion, conveys a moral, not a moralistic, meaning, and implies a profound focus on the most intimate of human problems–as Banti explains in *Ritratti su misura di scrittori italiani*.[13] According to this assertion, Banti's focus on woman as the subject does not necessarily imply a moralistic judgment against men on her part. More precisely, this choice of subject is not an *a priori* instance of radical feminism. As she declares, it should, rather, reveal, from a *woman's* perspective, a preoccupation with the distinction between what is right and what is wrong (what is *moral*), in terms of *being human*. In other words, Banti does not deny that her works privilege female subjectivity, which inevitably constitutes their most apparent autobiographical element. Yet, her introspective efforts do not proliferate in sterile depictions of this autobiographical, hence female, subjectivity. I maintain that, in each and every one of her works, Banti traverses the realm of self-contemplation and through it embraces a wider sphere of analysis, that which has the *human being* as its primary subject. In so doing, she ventures into depictions of male subjectivity as well; and, more often than not, these few men are just as much victims of an unjust society as are Banti's female protagonists.

Banti, in discussing her standpoint and perspective in *Ritratti su misura di scrittori italiani*, also refers to the writer's point of view and claims that an author should speak of what (s)he knows. Furthermore, she adds that this perspective is not only honest but also constructive, because men do not always understand women, and women do not always understand men.[14] This point of view, which Banti deems "honest", would

---

[11] Lazzaro-Weis, "Introduction", xvii.

[12] "...more of a kind of humanism than real and proper feminism". Qtd. in Sandra Petrignani, *Le signore della scrittura. Interviste* (Milano: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1984), 106.

[13] See Elio Filippo Accrocca, Ritratti *su Misura di scrittori italiani* (Venezia: Sodalizio del Libro, 1960).

be the personal perspective that originates, but does not exhaust, her consideration on its subject (the human being). It is honest because, according to Banti, a writer should principally consider those subjects of which (s)he has a constructive knowledge. Therefore, one could say that she is here implying an intellectual kind of honesty. In this context, the use of the autobiographical element, so recurrent in Banti's narratives, would be firstly the product of her moral commitment to intellectual integrity. In turn, the author's truthfulness, implied in an autobiographical perspective, acquires a twofold meaning. On the one hand, because of the clearly autobiographical nature of the narrative voice, it is a self-exposing "I" that emerges from her writings: Banti offers to her readers the unconditional revelation of a lifetime's introspection, as in the case of *A Piercing Cry*. On the other hand, therefore, this honesty also implies an attempt on Banti's part at reaching out to her reader: by confessing her deepest feelings to her audience, she is possibly making an attempt at communication. This in turn clarifies what Banti meant in defining her point of view as "constructive". It is constructive precisely because it aims at establishing a communication with the reader; it aims at delivering a message which Banti herself has defined as *moral*. Further, Banti also declared that the constructiveness of this point of view is in relation to the dilemma that men and women do not always understand each other. It follows that, in order to focus on those innermost human problems that are, as she declares, at the centre of her analysis, Banti needs not only to understand but also to surpass her female subjectivity. Unless one's discourse on human nature includes both male and female subjectivity, one's understanding of the term "human nature" will be imperfect, since "human" includes both male and female. There would be no truthful and complete understanding of the subject matter on the part of either the author or the reader to whom the message is addressed.

To sum up, when Banti says that women do not always understand men and vice versa, she is, arguably, referring to that lack of communication between the two sexes which most affects the relationship between them and which makes love impossible. In turn, as Anna Banti clearly affirms throughout *A Piercing Cry*, a reluctance to be completely open would invariably result in the absence of dialogue. Therefore, Banti's praise for a renewed communication between the sexes–which must first of all stem from mutual openness–would be a moral, not moralistic, message, one which is implied in her works. Considering her focus on what I have referred to as "(im)possibility of love", it becomes clear why Banti would not embrace the Italian feminism of her time, insofar as, in

Wood's words, Banti "distrusts a movement which she believes will further divide the sexes".[15]

During the almost fifty years of her literary career (1937-1981), it was an egalitarian feminism that dominated the scene of women's fight for emancipation. Women's movements in post-war Italy were born as a reaction to the old-fashioned image of woman as wife and particularly as mother, which was promoted by both the leading political party of the Christian Democrats and the Catholic Church. Italian women's movements focused more and more on the role of woman as *victim*, subjected to patriarchal oppression because of her biological function of child-bearing. Therefore, this wave of feminism tried to offset those stereotyped representations of the Italian woman that dominated popular culture, and also to make women aware of their subjugation. This in turn meant that women adhering to movements such as *Demau* went as far as advocating a new "matriarchy", opposed to the existent and loathed "patriarchy", the annihilation of which was one of their primary goals.[16] Given Banti's concern with communication between the sexes, it is no wonder that she would not support this kind of feminism.

Furthermore, when she wrote "The Women Are Dying", Banti was warning against the risk of identifying the subject woman primarily as objectified "victim", when this process of victimisation was understood as deriving from woman's sexual difference. She inserts this note of caution, even before 1960s feminist movements such as *Demau* identified woman's reproductive functions as the source of most of the prejudices of which she was the victim. Indeed, the *Demau* movement even went so far as to urge a "masculinisation of the woman", on the grounds that femininity (and all that defines it) was the determining cause of woman's slavery. This kind of feminism, called "feminism of equality", implied more than the feminists' goal of judicial equality. More precisely, it also came to entail the implication that, in order to attain the quality of being *equal* to men on a judiciary level, women should aim to be equal on an ontological level.[17]

---

[15] Sharon Wood, *Italian Women's Writing, 1860-1994* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1995), 122.

[16] *Demau* was an Italian feminist group whose manifesto was published in 1966. Further details will be given in Chapter Two.

[17] The word "equal" when understood as being synonymous with "just" or "even", is derived from the Latin *aequus*. Interestingly, however, the Latin word *aequalis*, which is formed on the same root, is also translated into English as "equal", but this time in the sense of "identical". In the first case, therefore, the translation into

Hence, woman's quality of being *unlike* man, her being *different*, became considered as the source of women's subjugation. This wave of feminism not only strongly denied the importance of woman's difference, but moreover radically scorned it.

For all these reasons, Banti could not embrace the Italian feminism of her time and always refused the label of feminist. As Lazzaro-Weis rightly claims, "her commitment to exploring the question of sexual difference links her to women writing now":[18] it links Banti with a more recent discourse on sexual difference, since the Italian *femminismo della differenza* (feminism of difference) was systematically theorised only during the eighties.[19] In "The Women Are Dying" (written in 1948, published in 1951) Banti acknowledged the importance of the concept of "sexual difference" many years before Italian feminists theorised it systematically. In "Je vous écris d'un pays lointain" (written in 1969-70, published in 1971), Banti reaffirms her faith in difference by entrusting to a man, and not to a woman, the (im)possible task of reaffirming love on earth. One could say that this is a stance rooted in Banti's self-proclaimed "humanism", insofar as by choosing a male protagonist she declares her faith in sexual difference as a quality to be preserved, whether in men or in women. On the other hand, she distances herself from the Italian feminism of equality, insofar as the cases of both Agnese Grasti and the protagonist of "Je vous écris d'un pays lointain" prompt a renewed communication between men and women that feminism of equality had denied. They are exceptional characters, insofar as they experience feelings and make choices that go beyond conformity and social dictates. In "The Women Are Dying", these social dictates do not just imply the demeaning of woman's difference by a patriarchal society but also, and most importantly, the undermining of their own difference by women themselves. In "Je vous écris d'un pays lointain", the protagonist fights against imposed societal rules that appear precisely as the extreme consequences of this predicament.

Latin highlights the judicial connotation of word "equal", whereas in the second case, "equal" refers to an ontological kind of equality.

[18] Anna Banti, "The Women Are Dying", in *The Signorina and Other Stories* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2001), xxiv.

[19] The so-called *femminismo della differenza* was inspired by Luce Irigaray's *Ethique de la difference sexuelle* (1984), which in 1985 was published in Italian, translated by Luisa Muraro and Antonella Leoni. Luisa Muraro also translated Irigaray's work *Speculum* (1975).

I therefore believe that if there is any marker of feminism in Banti's work, it consists of a feminism of difference *ante litteram*, which reinforces rather than contradicts her stance on self-proclaimed humanism.

Having said this, for the moment I shall defer any further consideration of this question to the analysis that follows. Beginning with Banti's pseudo-autobiography, *A Piercing Cry*, and then continuing with "The Women Are Dying" and "Je vous écris d'un pays lointain", I shall examine Banti's concern with the question of "(im)possibility of love", with "love" understood both as an amorous encounter between man and woman, and as a universal feeling on which one's "being human" is intrinsically grounded.

CHAPTER ONE

A PIERCING CRY

A Piercing Cry is not a proper autobiography, but, as suggested by Guerricchio, "un racconto omodiegetico in terza persona".[1] At the same time the novel contains enough parallels with Banti's life to justify an autobiographical reading. For this reason, *A Piercing Cry* may help us understand Banti's life just as the latter may help us in analysing the former. This double interpretation is, in my opinion, necessary in order to understand Banti's concern with "la solitudine...l'attrazione e insieme la diffidenza verso l'amore",[2] and with the marked pessimism that inevitably infects the world of her female, unhappy protagonists.

To this end, during a 1992 conference on Banti, Cesare Garboli[3] strongly expressed his perplexity concerning this negative attitude toward life, which was unjustified by Banti's enviable popularity and career. Consequently, he could not help wondering, "dove e come potessero trovar posto, in quella vita così ben organizzata …i diavoli che la Banti teneva accucciati dentro di sé."[4]

In his opinion, Banti's successful life as a writer and literary critic did not give any grounds for the pessimism she expressed in her works. In Belotti's words, "Banti, in questi straordinari racconti, parla più volte della

---

[1] "...a homodiegetic story in the third person". Rita Guerricchio, "Vite vere e immaginarie di Anna Banti", in *L'opera di Anna Banti*, ed. Enza Biagini (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 84. Unless otherwise specified, translations from Italian to English are mine.

[2] "...loneliness...attraction and at the same time diffidence towards love". Giuseppe Nava, "I modi del racconto nella Banti", Ibid., 165.

[3] Cesare Garboli was a friend of Anna Banti and her husband Roberto Longhi; since 1962 he was director of their art magazine, "Paragone". His studies on Banti's work are collected in the Garboli anthology, *Ricordi tristi e civili* (2001).

[4] "...where and how, in such a well-organised life...Anna Banti could hide the demons she carried inside of her". Cesare Garboli, "Anna Banti e il tempo", in *L'opera di Anna Banti*, ed. Enza Biagini (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 17.

solitudine come luogo della libertà femminile."[5] The majority of Banti's characters, despite an emerging, increasingly apparent artistic talent, always struggle to follow their vocation–which more often than not leads them to make painful decisions. Given Banti's own success, it is no wonder that Garboli could not understand such a negative perspective on female creativity. A lonely life is always the choice women artists make to embrace their talent, and this pattern does not just repeat itself in most of Banti's works but, what is more, it occurs in those literary artefacts to which Banti owed her success as a writer.

In the very novel that made her famous, *Artemisia*, we read the story of an extremely talented female painter who follows her vocation despite all the predictable consequences that such a choice would entail. On the one hand, she is resolute in her choices, and never really considers the possibility of abandoning her artistic inclinations for the purpose of purchasing a socially acceptable life as a canonical wife and mother. Yet, on the other hand, her choices come at a cost, the never-ending regret of having deserted her husband and destroyed her happy marriage. In the end, Artemisia is free, but this freedom has indeed a bittersweet taste of both artistic fulfilment and emotional loneliness.[6]

---

[5] "In these extraordinary stories, Banti often defines loneliness as the place for women's freedom". Elena Gianini Belotti, "Anna Banti e il femminismo", Ibid., 117.

[6] At one point, Artemisia actually disguises herself as a man in order to be accepted by society and treated with the respect that, in her time, was only accorded to male artists. It could be said that, in so doing, she is further giving up her identity as a woman (after having renounced her role as wife). To this end, a comparison with Virginia Woolf's Orlando may prove very interesting. Anna Banti was the first translator of Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922), and wrote an essay on her, the 1952 "Umanità della Woolf", included in the collection *Opinioni* (1961). Although their works have not been the objects of a systematic comparative study, the parallel with Woolf's most famous character–Orlando–is here most appropriate. The quest for identity is central, in fact, to both works, with the difference being that Woolf's character actually used to be a man. In both cases, however, the protagonist dresses up in men's clothes to find freedom. As Maria Carla Papini claims in "Artemisia ed Orlando", both protagonists attempt to escape their condition of women who are not comfortable in their own bodies. The reason is that they are unable to conform to the established model of womanhood of their times (Orlando lives for five hundred years, but it is in the London of the 18th century that she disguises herself. Artemisia lives in the 16th and the 17th centuries).

Similarly, the renowned "Lavinia fuggita" (Lavinia has fled),[7] set in the 17th century, depicts female talent as it hopelessly faces authoritarian patriarchal society. In this case, patriarchal domination is embodied in the person of the Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi and the negated female talent belongs to the orphan Lavinia. The two of them, who could not be any more different (for social position, age, and so on), do have something in common, namely their indisputable ardour for music. As director of the choir, Lavinia is supposed to scrupulously reproduce Vivaldi's work. Needless to say, she would not be allowed to apply even the most insignificant change to Vivaldi's compositions. However, Lavinia's passion for music is so overwhelming that she cannot refrain from revising his work. Eventually, she goes as far as composing a whole *oratorio* and has the choir performing it. Her dream is fulfilled and the prevailing patriarchal system defeated: as a woman, she would never have been allowed to compose music, but her talent and love for composition are so intense that she cannot desist from offending the rule. Even if this meant punishment, and indeed she has to leave the orphanage in order to avoid castigation.

By and large, the feminine universe depicted by Banti is deeply affected by inconsistencies between the rules of a domineering patriarchal society and the unfulfilled desires of talented women artists. On a more general level, as Magnolfi writes, her literary world is dominated by unhappy female characters living "una vita che scorre...attraverso un tempo governato dalle regole del conformismo...dilatato dalla solitudine e dalla memoria".[8] Social dictates rule the life of Banti's protagonists, whether they chose to respect them or not. Accordingly, *A Piercing Cry* depicts the life of a professionally frustrated woman who has given up her vocation for a man's love. Given that the protagonist of this novel is Banti's fictional counterpart, this work may be taken as a paradigm of her thought with regard to the above-mentioned contrasts between negated female talent and patriarchal society.

In *A Piercing Cry* the protagonist's husband, Dr. Delga, is the fictional transposition of Dr. Roberto Longhi, Banti's late husband. Like the real

[7] I here adopted the translation proposed by Lazzaro-Weis in "Anna Banti (Lucia Lopresti)", published in Gaetana Marrone's Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies, Volume 1 (London: Routledge, 2007).

[8] "...life as a flow of time regulated by the rules of conformism, dilated by loneliness and memory". Beatrice Magnolfi, "Saluto delle Autorità", in *L'Opera di Anna Banti*, ed. Enza Biagini (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), xvi.

person, Dr. Delga is a very famous and renowned art critic (with regard to Roberto Longhi, his reputation was and still is of such prominence that scholars following his influential example, to this day, are referred to as "Longhiani").[9] Agnese is utterly intimidated by his reputation, and so much does she fears a comparison to him, that she does not even try to follow her original vocation as an art historian and critic. For this reason, she never reveals her secret desires, neither to the world nor, more importantly, to the person whom she loved–her husband. Agnese is lonely because she dooms herself to constantly wear a mask; she forces herself be someone else. As a consequence, her profound sense of loneliness is also rooted in the fact that nobody knew her intimately.

Lavinia and Artemisia choose their talent and vocation over society's acceptance, even if this means abandoning the only family they have ever known–her husband Antonio in Artemisia's case, and in Lavinia's case her friends at the orphanage. However, although Agnese consciously opts for a different choice and represses her vocation, the loneliness she experiences still is, as it was in Artemisia's and Lavinia's case, the result of that conventional dictate that deemed woman as intellectually inferior to man. The thing is that in her case this dictate is self-imposed. In deeming herself incapable of equalling Longhi's/Delga's talent, it is Anna/Agnese who denies herself the possibility of a happy relationship with her husband, she is the one who, in the first place, denies herself the possibility of love.

It is just a dream

At the beginning of *A Piercing Cry*, Agnese has a dream about her birth–a "recurrent dream".[10] She describes the newborn as "the lump of flesh that has begun to breathe", and "the lowest of beings, writhing anyway it can, a death and dumb mass".[11] The crudeness of these metaphors suggests not only a disturbing vision of birth-giving, which nearly reaches a level of disgust, but most importantly revulsion for her self. Expressions such as "lump", "lowest" and "dumb mass" produce a violent impact on the reader, and Banti insists on the point by reporting a nurse's comment, which is the opposite of Agnese's impression: "it's a

[9] Prof.ssa Fulvia Vattovani Sforza (Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Università degli Studi di Trieste, Italy), personal communication, 17 December 2009.
[10] Banti, *A piercing Cry*, 1.
[11] Ibid.

beautiful baby girl".[12] The woman's kind words emphasise through contrast Agnese's abhorrence for the little creature that has just been born. Her sense of unease in seeing herself as a newborn leads Agnese to feel relieved when the dream is about to end: "fortunately, death returns".[13]

In her paper "The Abjection of the Female Body: Hell as a Metaphor for Birth",[14] Paola Bono states that a "scene of re/birth (and death) gives voice to the painful feeling which accompanies the loss of self".[15] If we rely on this assumption to construe Agnese's dream, it could be said that she is not merely witnessing her own birth and re-experiencing the turmoil of her birth-trauma–but rather–we could go as far as to say that the birth she describes is metaphorical and it is painful insofar as it precisely describes the emergence of an unwanted new self–hence implying the loss of the former one.

As we shall see, the meaning of this dream is crucial for an understanding of Agnese's real life, insofar as the actual events that she describes at the beginning of the novel may be understood only if considered along with this dream. To this end, we need to focus on yet another aspect of Agnese's recurrent reverie.

There is in fact one point of view that is missing in this scene, which is of course that of the mother. As Bono writes, the role of the mother in a scene of re-birth and loss of the self is obviously crucial, insofar as "death is an essential part of life;...both are inscribed in the maternal power of generation".[16] In *In Spite of Plato: a Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, Adriana Cavarero expresses a similar concept, yet adds something more specific about the womb. She writes the following:

---

[12] Ibid.

[13] Banti, *A Piercing Cry*

[14] The power of the mother who can give or fail to give life is a central and explicit aspect of "The Women Are Dying", where mothering amounts to the ability of transmitting mortality or immortality. In this short story, humankind undergoes an extraordinary change, as men–not women–will come to believe themselves to be immortal. Consequently, the power of the mother to give life will turn into the uncomfortable responsibility of mothering a mortal baby girl or an immortal boy. For this reason, the act of giving birth becomes most problematic for mothers, as too for fathers who, at some point, will begin avoiding women during the nine months of pregnancy.

[15] Paola Bono, "The Abjection of the Female Body: Hell as a Metaphor for Birth", (2005), http://arts.monash.edu.au/cclcs/research/papers/abjection.pdf, 5.

[16] Ibid.

> the power of the mother...is inscribed in all of nature as the power both to generate and not to generate. This is an absolute power that presides over the place from which humans come into the world.[17]

The womb, as the site where life originates, places the woman in an intermediary position between life and death, between "being" and "not being". In "The Women Are Dying" this power will be understood almost in a literal sense, which is why analysing this passage of *A Piercing Cry* is important not only for an understanding of the novel itself but also for the other two works that this present analysis takes into account. In *A Piercing Cry* this maternal power is understood in a metaphorical sense. As we shall see, Agnese allegedly ascribes to her mother the loss (death) of her self, because of her impossibility of identification with the standards the woman establishes. Therefore, my point would be that the question "who am I?", which Agnese will repeatedly ask herself throughout her life, stems precisely from a loss of the self caused by her mother. The depiction of her childhood is very brief and not very detailed, yet we may grasp that the mother's influence on Agnese's life is of deep, if not devastating, impact. Although we know little about Lucia Lopresti's mother, what Agnese Lanzi tells us about her own, will be of help to clarify and possibly understand Agnese's recurrent dream and her endless search for an identity.

Having said this, before moving on to analyse the rest of the novel, I would like to consider its title for a moment: *A Piercing Cry*. As Strocchi suggests, "il grido lacerante è quello della nascita: ma è anche il romanzo della morte, come compiersi di una vita".[18] Agnese's "piercing cry" is the one that she produces as a newborn but it is also the violent scream that decrees the end of life:

> one day–one night–the time will come. The clock will strike and the sound of a piercing cry will resound turning the hour into a minute.[19]

As a matter of fact, as Nava suggests, in this novel (and in Banti's works more generally) the flow of time leads "irreversibilmente verso la

---

[17] Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: a Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 59.

[18] "The piercing cry is that of birth: but it is also a novel of death, as a new life coming into its own". Maria Letizia Strocchi, "Conoscenza di Anna Banti", in *L'opera di Anna Banti*, ed. Enza Biagini (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 150.

[19] Banti, *A Piercing Cry*, 119.

morte" (irreversibly leads to death), and the characters "si chiudono su descrizioni di vecchiaia e di attesa della fine, di premonizioni o epifanie della morte".[20]

This disturbing feeling of death approaching, this constant descent towards death, permeates *A Piercing Cry* from the first page, from the dream, right until the very last one. Therefore, Agnese's nightmare, which depicts her longing for death, might symbolise the symbolic moment that caused the loss of her previous self and, for this reason, marks the beginning of her quest for a new identity.

This interpretation finds further endorsement in Agnese's depiction of her childhood, insofar as this dream may be seen as her symbolic–and disquieting–loss of the self; she also openly tells us of the actual events that caused the emergence of such predicament. Indeed, an analysis of the role played by her mother is essential for an understanding of this process of loss of the self and the consequent need of self-identification.

"Who am I?"

A Piercing Cry begins when the protagonist, Agnese, is in her twenties, but the first part of the novel takes the form of a recollection of childhood memories–the nightmare being the first one.

As a child, "Agnese's world was inhabited by women",[21] to the point that there were no important men in her life and "she did not like [them], she did not think of them as 'people', but rather as things, useless objects".[22] Since she was used to spending all her time with her mother and aunt, she ignored the masculine side of the world, to the extent that she could not even understand for what purpose a man was on earth.

As for her father, he never really influenced Agnese's life: "the intermittent presence of the father did not matter"[23] and, as a consequence, she relates herself to the world through her mother. This is the reason why her mother's opinion becomes of the utmost importance in the child's eyes. Her mother is the messenger between Agnese and the outer world: she introduces her daughter to society, to life in general, hence setting all

[20] "...dwell on depictions of oldness, premonitions, epiphanies of death, waiting for the end to come". Giuseppe Nava, "I modi del racconto nella Banti", in *L'opera di Anna Banti*, ed. Enza Biagini (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1997), 165.
[21] Banti, *A Piercing Cry*, 5.
[22] Ibid., 4.
[23] Ibid., 5.

the "standards" to which Agnese relates and measures herself against as a child.

Interestingly enough, as Agnese explains, even while still a child she feels like a foreigner in her own place, describing herself as "a stranger in a land where she does not belong and from which she is banned".[24] Agnese does not perceive the house or the hometown as hers and, moreover, feels rejected by them. Why so? We do not have to look very far for an answer, because Agnese's mother had always deemed her daughter to be exceptional–she "was convinced she had given birth to a phenomenon".[25] Agnese's mother continually singles out her daughter for her uniqueness, considering the little girl to be exceptionally different from other children. As a consequence, "Agnese...has always thought of herself as different".[26] This predicament has an unbearable consequence for the child Agnese who, despite her young age, eventually finds herself trying to answer a self-addressed, impossible, question: "who am I?".[27] Trying in vain to make sense of an alleged uniqueness that her mother never fails to points out, Agnese screams for normality and says: "I am a little girl, a little girl".[28] The stress on the expression "little girl", which is desperately repeated twice, seems to function as a warning to her own mother, who had always regarded her as exceptional, whereas Agnese claims to be just a (normal) little girl, no extraordinary person. Nevertheless, this is not the response Agnese seeks because "her head becomes void":[29] the answer does not appease her. She experiences a sense of emptiness that grows stronger as she cannot find a satisfactory reply, or a place in the world that she can consider "home".

Therefore, if the recurrent dream of her birth is the symbolic representation of the loss of her previous self, these are the actual events that mark the beginning of Agnese's quest for a new identity. From this moment on, to put it in Lazzaro-Weis's words in "Stranger than Life? Autobiography And Historical Fiction",

[24] Ibid., 2.
[25] Banti, *A Piercing Cry*, 2.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

> history and autobiography are...pitted against one another in a struggle between autocancellazione (self-annulation) and autoaffermazione (auto-affirmation),[30]

which will eventually end with the triumph of Agnese's long-repressed passion for writing. In other words, in *A Piercing Cry*, Banti's

> literary memory serves to fulfil the...generic function of describing the genesis of a writer by representing and re-narrativizing her previous work.[31]

But this writer, whom Banti depicts as her fictionalised *alter ego* Agnese Lanzi, is not only a writer who struggles to recognise herself as such. This writer is also a woman, and this fact, at some point in her life, will strongly demand to be acknowledged. Therefore, when reading and analysing *A Piercing Cry*, we must always bear in mind that, before anything else, this novel is the genesis of a *woman writer*.

"Agnese was letting herself die"

A very long ellipsis separates Agnese's childhood from her twenties, and the few details given in between are of no interest to our present analysis of the novel. Symbolically, the first important episode we need to take into account happens after she graduated, as we find her working as a cultural supervisor in a remote museum in Abruzzo. This job turns out to be not only boring but also exceptionally frustrating, if not even demeaning, for a young graduate with great aspirations. Besides, Agnese seems to be completely alone in the world; there is no mention of any family member, or of a friend. The decisive event is an unpleasant encounter with a priest, which mercilessly underlines the desperate situation of loneliness and frustration in which Agnese is living. The facts, bluntly put, happen as follows: after some time in the new post, Agnese believes to have–eventually–found something interesting in the local church, facing an exciting discovery after months of nothingness. Yet, her eagerness to do her job provokes a humiliating argument with a

---

[30] Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "Stranger Than Life? Autobiography and Historical Fiction", in *Gendering Italian Fiction: Feminist Revisions of Italian History*, ed. Maria Ornella Marotti and Gabriella Brooke (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1999), 42.
[31] Ibid.

clergyman, who stubbornly and ungallantly refuses to cooperate with Agnese and, most importantly, brusquely forces her out of the Church. As a consequence, the episode ends with Agnese found unconscious in her room, starving herself to a point close to death, and being rushed to the hospital as she almost relapses into unconsciousness.

The doctors claim that Agnese "was letting herself die, nearly starving herself".[32]

Lonely ("not even her teacher prof. Delga, to whom she had written, gave a reply"),[33] and professionally frustrated, as Nava suggests, Agnese "scarica la sua oppressione e aridità, la sua impossibilità personale e storica di affermazione, in distruzione e autodistruzione".[34] Yet Agnese is rescued and for the moment there is no escape from that profound sense of loneliness and frustration that had led her to wanting to die.

This is a key passage of the novel, insofar as, in *A Piercing Cry*, Agnese's frustration about her career is one of the primary causes of unhappiness in her marriage. Yet this frustration does not stem from anything but Agnese's lack of determination in pursuing her career as an art historian, of which the encounter with the priest is only a first instance. This is the self-annulation mentioned by Lazzaro-Weis, which momentarily overcomes her desires for self-affirmation. What is more, after this debacle Agnese opts for self-punishment, starving herself close to death, which is a path we shall encounter again in "The Women Are Dying": a pattern that leads from loneliness to frustration, from frustration to self-punishment. Agnese knows that she is as culpable as the stubborn clergyman, because if on the one hand he had shown an inexplicable

---

[32] Banti, *A Piercing Cry*, 16.

[33] Ibid., 14.

[34] "...gives vent to her oppression and aridity, her personal and historical impossibility of achievement, by seeking distruction and self-distruction". Nava, "I modi del racconto nella Banti", 165. In the same work, Giuseppe Nava defines Manzoni's Gertrude, Flaubert's Emma Bovary and Tolstoj's Anna Karenina as archetypes in Banti's works. We must here focus on the parallel between Agnese and Madame Bovary because both are affected by an eating disorder. In "The Power of the Powerless: A Trio of Nineteenth-Century French Disorderly Eaters" Furst observes that Emma's attitude towards food is a self-destructive one, and her eating as well as her non-eating is definable as an attempt at autonomy. See Furst, Lilian R., "The Power of the Powerless: A Trio of Nineteenth-Century French Disorderly Eaters". In *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment*, edited by Lillian R. Furst and Peter W. Graham, 153-166. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.

resolve to abide by non-collaboration, on the other Agnese had done almost nothing to triumphantly counter his obstinacy. For this reason, she must punish herself–rather than going back and making another attempt at doing her job. This single episode is rather interesting if we consider what happens next: half conscious and half asleep, in the hospital where she is taken after the above-mentioned episode, Agnese marries her former professor Dr. Delga. Right after her marriage, she regretfully abandons her career and chooses instead to be a devoted wife with no aspirations whatsoever.

Agnese, despite her passion for art criticism, is not able yet to overcome that socially-imposed belief according to which woman is intellectually inferior to man. This is why she surrenders to the priest's intransigence; this is why, after her very first failure, she prefers to give up a career for which she had dearly longed. Of course the towering reputation of her husband clearly and deeply influences her decisions, yet we have just seen how her lack of self-confidence affected her even prior to being overwhelmed by Dr. Delga's unequalled reputation.

Having said this, it is apparent right from the start that Agnese's relationship with her husband is very complicated, especially if we consider the way in which they got married. Apparently, she was not even fully conscious–this suggests, that as far as her husband was concerned, Agnese never really managed to have, nor to express, a personal opinion. To this end, before moving on to a further analysis of this novel, the next section provides with a closer investigation of Banti's relationship with Longhi that will lead us to further understand her depiction of Agnese's marriage in *A Piercing Cry*.

She called him "*Maestro*"

In *A Piercing Cry*, as Carol Lazzaro Weis puts it, Banti faces feelings of both inadequacy when comparing herself to Roberto Longhi and dependency on him, "which persisted in her despite her own success".[35] Similarly, Garboli argues that, in this novel, Banti "vede e riconosce i suoi diavoli; vede e affronta...i rimorsi che le chiudono il passo."[36] Garboli's

[35] Carol Lazzaro Weis, *From Margins to Mainstream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 43.

[36] "Banti sees and aknowledges her demons; she sees and faces...the regrets that stand in her way". Cesare Garboli, "Prefazione", in *Un grido lacerante* by Anna Banti (Milano: Rizzoli, 1981), i.

comments on Agnese Lanzi rely completely on an insight into Banti's life and specifically into her marriage with Roberto Longhi. To this end, Garboli claims that Banti's sense of inadequacy when comparing herself to Longhi deeply affected their relationship. As he puts it, she considered herself "non...degna del dio Longhi, non...uguale agli dei, non...capace di amare e di essere amata".[37] Roberto Longhi was a famous art expert, and was also Banti's former professor. In "Il punto di vista di un'allieva", Grazia Livi says that Banti accepted to meet her only in the light of her success as a student of the professor's: "mi dava credito solo perchè avevo preso trenta e lode con suo marito, Roberto Longhi".[38] In "Conoscenza di Anna Banti", Maria Letizia Strocchi writes that a comment such as "saresti piaciuta a Longhi",[39] was "il massimo"[40] (the maximum) that one could obtain from Anna Banti. Banti had admired her husband so much that she considered his opinions more important and more valuable than her own. Garboli also suggests that Longhi was a "god" to Banti: needless to say, the use of this term entails a feeling of veneration that in turn presupposes a superiority invested in the godly figure. In addition to this, the fact that Banti used to call Longhi by his surname demonstrates the hierarchical nature of their relationship; as Strocchi comments in "Conoscenza di Anna Banti": "Longhi–sempre e solo Longhi, mai Roberto".[41] The formality implied in using a surname rather than a first name suggests a certain distance between Banti and Longhi.

On the other hand, Strocchi claims that Banti was very close to her husband and that

[37] "...unworthy of the god Longhi, unequal to the gods, unable to love and to be loved". Garboli, "Anna Banti e il tempo", 5.
[38] "She gave me credence only because I had obtained the mark of thirty *cum laude* with her husband, Roberto Longhi". Grazia Livi, "Anna Banti. Il punto di vista di un'allieva", Ibid., 137.
[39] "Longhi would have liked you". Maria Letizia Strocchi, "Conoscenza di Anna Banti", Ibid.,146.
[40] Ibid.
[41] "Longhi, always and only Longhi, never Roberto". Ibid.