

# Italian Women and Autobiography



Italian Women and Autobiography:  
Ideology, Discourse and Identity in Female  
Life Narratives from Fascism to the Present

Edited by

Ioana Raluca Larco and Fabiana Cecchini

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P U B L I S H I N G

Italian Women and Autobiography:  
Ideology, Discourse and Identity in Female Life Narratives from Fascism to the Present,  
Edited by Ioana Raluca Larco and Fabiana Cecchini

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## INTRODUCTION

The present collection includes original essays as well as revised versions of the papers presented at the NeMLA Annual Conventions that were held in Boston from February 26 to March 1, 2009 and in Montreal from April 8 to April 11, 2010. On this occasion, the contributors to this volume had the great opportunity to meet, exchange ideas and share their passion for female Italian writers and the complex genre of autobiography.

Female literary production abounding in stories about women's lives and personal experiences became a more constant presence in the cultural landscape at the beginning of the Twentieth century. Critics of the time perceived such tendency as the manifestation of a bothersome and fruitless "autobiographism" (Pickering-Iazzi 1994, 177) which they considered an inferior practice in contrast to the metaphysical and artistic ideal promoted by male texts. Starting with the 1980s, feminist critics began to re-evaluate the work of many female writers, partly attracted by the interdisciplinary richness of autobiography, and also because their interest in the female experience and autobiography overlapped with some of the main themes of contemporary feminist thought (i.e., body, language, identity).

In fact, autobiography—as a category of life-writing and a hybrid genre—has become the literary space where women can experiment with the construction of a gendered—sometimes genderless—or feminist identity. It is also the realm where women question gender representations and the boundaries of traditional roles. Last but not least, autobiography, as the "public act of writing a private life," is where female writers grapple with the "contradictory relationship between the role of women in the public and private spheres" (Parati 1996, 3). From that disapproving "autobiographism" of the previous century to today's vast output of self-narrating and self-constructing lives, we notice numerous changes in terms of reader response and author positionality.

The essays included in this collection examine issues such as identity and ideology which are at play in the female autobiography practice, along with the problematicity that these trigger in terms of self-representation and traditional formal boundaries. The women writers analyzed here through mainly feminist, psychoanalytic, historical and literary lenses cover a long period in the history of Italy, spanning from the Fascist era to our time. In an attempt to organize and connect these texts which are chronologically far apart, we have divided our contributions into two main

parts. The first, “Shapes of Ideology,” explores authors such as Paola Drigo and Ada Gobetti who interact primarily with political ideology in a way that eventually entails the challenge of the official “technologies of gender” (De Lauretis 1987) and implicitly, a reflection on the gendered identity. In the second part, “Reconsidering ideology, negotiating autobiography,” while the political ideology is not completely excluded, it becomes however something more internalized and relevant to the writers’ quest for identity: for Anna Laura Braghetti (in collaboration with the journalist Paola Tavella), Clara Sereni and Elena Ferrante such process bears consequences with respect to the canon of autobiography, as authors experiment with unconventional forms of autobiographical narratives and readers become more and more an integral part of this personal endeavor. In this sense, Chiara De Santi’s discussion of the hybrid quality of Anna Banti’s *Artemisia*, constitutes the link that binds the two parts of the present collection.

## Shapes of Ideology

The perpetuation of a stereotyped female figure in the writings of many of the well-known male authors of the time (i.e., the angel of the hearth, *la femme fatale*), aggravated by the official propaganda during Fascism, contributed significantly to the marginalization of Italian women writers during the first half of the Twentieth century. However, the periods between the wars and later abounded in artistic and especially in literary productions by women, thus making the literary environment less male-dominated than one might deduce by consulting well-respected literary histories where female authors hardly appear. Also, many of these women writers experimented with the artistic possibilities of life-writing. Keeping in mind that in every autobiography, “the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness” (Eakin 1985, 5), the essays included in the first part of the present collection pay particular attention to the interplay between the autobiographical writings and the official ideologies widespread during the time of their authors, and to the consequences that such relationship engenders in terms of self-representation and narrative strategies.

Moreover, these autobiographical writings present themselves in many cases as a counter discourse, thus forming a space of resistance against the dominant ideologies, and give the opportunity for a revalorization of the feminine; such is the case with Paola Drigo and Ada Gobetti, discussed in the first part. Both Ioana Larco and Deena Levy take as a point of departure for their analysis the culturally-constructed notion of a relational

feminine self, as pioneered by Chodorow (1978) and continued by Gilligan (1982, 1993). Chodorow argued that, because women are traditionally the main care-givers in our culture, girls and boys form their sense of the self in a different way: girls define themselves in relation to other women, while boys define themselves against women and develop an autonomous self. However, this concept functions differently in the two authors: Drigo, not having anyone to relate to, is forced to look for new strategies to gain her inner strength and recover her identity, while Gobetti's emphasis on this relational definition of the self assigns socio-political value to the feminine characteristics (i.e., the maternal) and turns them into political action in the public sphere (i.e., the Resistance).

The positioning of the female authors with respect to ideology, along with the perspective chosen for telling their life stories, has a twofold effect: it plays a major role in modeling the identity of the narrating "I" and it can result in the deviation from the canonical literary norms of the autobiographical genre. These issues are analyzed in Anna Banti's *Artemisia*. Starting with Marrone's observations on the impossibility of giving an exact definition for the genre of autobiography—stemming from the difficulties that modern and postmodern literature face when it comes to "the possibility of a unified self, the validity of memory, and the notion of 'truth'" (Marrone 2001, 115)—Chiara De Santi argues that Banti chose to merge multiple genres—autobiography, biography and novel—in order to speak about herself through the figure of the artist Artemisia Gentileschi. Furthermore, by comparing and contrasting, the scholar draws a parallel between the discussion of the father-daughter relationship of Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, and the relationship that Anna Banti herself had with her husband, the famous art historian and critic Roberto Longhi, relationships that could be interpreted in both cases as one between apprentice and master.

## **Reconsidering ideology, negotiating autobiography**

Among others, recent studies conducted by Graziella Parati, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson, and Philippe Lejeune<sup>1</sup> maintain the need to reconsider the definition of autobiography and expand its boundaries, both in terms of the terminology used to describe the features of the many types of existing life-writing and in terms of their content and qualities. In this regard, it is useful to note that already in the 1980s, the scholar Windslow Donald was urging "the need for a reference list of terms that are used in connection with biography, autobiography and other branches of life-writing" (Windslow 1996, 1).

Thus, Windslow compiled a *Glossary of Terms in Life-writing. Biography, autobiography and related forms*, with the aim of portraying the changes and developments in a field of rapid growth. In more recent times, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson took on a similar task in their study *Reading Autobiography. A Guide for interpreting Life narratives* by trying to “define terms and draw distinctions between autobiographical writing and other closely related kinds of life writing” (Smith and Watson 2001, 1); the two scholars identified “fifty-two genres of life narrative,” warning the reader that their list is not exhaustive, but that it simply helps in opening up new interpretations for life-writing and that it should be seen as an invitation to discover the different ways in which the genre can be read (Smith and Watson 2001, 183). In addition, introducing the book as a “guide for interpreting life narratives,” they also highlight the character of intertextuality of autobiography, in which boundaries among literary genres can easily dissolve and merge with one another.

The scholar Max Saunders, in his current study *Self impression: Life-writing, Autobiografiction and the forms of Modern Literature*, offers a stimulating discussion on “the ways in which [the] categories of autobiography, biography, fiction and criticism begin to interact, combining and disrupting each other in new ways” (Saunders 2010, 1).<sup>2</sup> According to Saunders, it is “the way we use the adjective autobiographical” that originates the association between the qualities or content of the text we are reading with the genre of autobiography (Saunders 2010, 4). Consequently, we will notice that the classification of autobiography covers genres not normally thought of as autobiographic and that nevertheless those simultaneously call the autobiographical into question and lead us, as readers, to define that text as an autobiography. So the term “autobiography” is quintessentially ambiguous and is strictly connected to its user, whether writer or reader. Not surprisingly then, many scholars of the field prefer to speak of it as

a space of elusive borders that fluctuate between the real and the imaginary, and which is produced as much as by the interstices as the conjunction of the selves inscribed in the conventions of different genres (Scarpato and Wilson 2004, 2).

Thus, following Scarpato’s and Wilson’s rationalization of the genre, autobiography and any type of writing related to it also becomes a place in which the woman’s identity is not stable and is as elusive as the literary construction that represents her. As a result, borrowing Graziella Parati’s explanation, autobiography can be seen as

a hybrid and malleable genre that partakes of other genres and becomes a literary space where a woman can experiment with the construction of a female 'I,' and sometimes, a feminist identity (Parati 1996, 2).

The editors and contributors to this collection support the scholars' notion of autobiography, the blurring of boundaries, the fusion of forms and we also agree with the difficulty of generating a precise and satisfying definition of autobiographic writing. However in the second part of this anthology of essays, it is the notion of *hybrid genre* that we would like to renegotiate. Instead of the more general conception of life-writing or autobiography, we shifted the focus to the idea of *life narrative*, as theorized by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson:

as somewhat a narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography [...] Life narrative, then, might best be approached as a moving target, a set of ever shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present (Smith and Watson 2001, 3).

Therefore, instead of insisting on the concept of the *hybrid form* characterizing contemporary autobiographies we preferred to attempt a definition, a taxonomy of the authors' life stories to outline some of the terms in which the genre is developing and changing. In so doing, we hoped to investigate the authors' life narratives in order to provide some concrete examples of the way the autobiographical genre can influence the construction of the female identity and vice versa.

Anna Laura Braghetti (in collaboration with Paola Tavella), Clara Sereni and Elena Ferrante are examples of female authors who incorporated the passion for politics in their narratives. If the many scholars of the field convincingly maintain that life writing needs to be understood as a "political practice" (Scarpato and Wilson 2004, 2) in which politics is intended not only as the social commitment igniting personal views in the public sphere and government, but also as the effort of investigating one's life and identity to understand one's place in the world (Scarpato and Wilson 2004, 1), the life stories of the women analyzed in this collection show a tight bond between the political practice and the narrative form they chose to represent them. As they comment and retrospectively re-evaluate their political participation in connection with their personal, family and ordinary life, their self image changes: in fact, their previous life experience and ideological positions accrue as sediments, but instead of being the origin of a static identity, they help in forging an evolving and plastic one. This transformation also shapes the

form chosen by the “narrating I” to tell the story of the “narrated I,” challenging the boundaries of the canonical notion of autobiography. Therefore, in the act of writing their autobiographies, they opted for alternative solutions, generating more unconventional life narratives in which the participation of the reader is actively sought and requested. The reader is not only called on as the judge to verify the authenticity of the events described, but he or she is also asked to contribute to the story either as a listener or as a puzzle solver, gathering together all the pieces of a fragmented story to forge a unified female identity.

In this way, according to Fabiana Cecchini, *Il Prigioniero* by Anna Laura Braghetti written in collaboration with the journalist Paola Tavella (1998) takes the form of a “collaborative life narrative” (Smith & Julia Watson 2001, 191). Tavella’s and Braghetti’s work aims at offering an alternative reading of one of the most tragic political assassinations in Italian history (that of the prime minister Aldo Moro), while forging a new social and public identity for the ex-Red Brigade member. For Braghetti, then, the practice of autobiographical writing is a tool to heal her damaged self (following Demetrio’s conception of life-writing, Demetrio 1996) through relocating her past and present experience in the effort to reinstate her new image in the world through the publication of her life story and through the reader as the “sympathetic listener” who helps her in this endeavor.

For Giulia Po, Clara Sereni’s autobiographical work takes the nature of an intra-textual dialogue that Sereni manages to create with her father, analyzing the development of their relationship. For Sereni, life-writing is the source and the channel in a slow process of reconstruction; it is a source in the sense that it provides the basis to consolidate their diversity and it is a channel in the sense that it becomes the way for a more complete and authentic understanding of both her and her father’s identities. This written intra-textual dialogue with her father, then, becomes the power that allows Sereni to better understand her own identity as Jewish, woman, and daughter, but also a tool that leads to a renegotiation with him, in a bond which ultimately places him within those Jewish roots that had been previously eradicated for political reasons.

Finally, Elda Buonanno’s analysis of Elena Ferrante’s only non-fictional work, *La Frantumaglia*, can indeed be considered a manual on how to read, interpret, and understand *Troubling Love*, *The Days of Abandonment*, and her latest novel, *The Lost Daughter*. *La Frantumaglia* (a Neapolitan word that could be roughly translated as “the act and the state of ‘falling into pieces’”) is a collection of letters written by and to the

author, produced over the decade that begins with the appearance of *Troubling Love* and concluded shortly before the appearance of the film based on *The Days of Abandonment* (1991-2003). It serves as a discussion of the author's themes and protagonists of her novels, but it also reveals Ferrante's position on Italian politics, therapy, writing, and on generic subjects such as love, betrayal, feminism, and the relationships between women and men and among women. In short, it stands for the author. In *La Frantumaglia*, readers confront the prominent confessional nature of these letters, which testify to Ferrante's urge to clarify and justify characterizations and styles adopted in her novels. Plus, it reveals a deep focus on fragmented identity, recovery, and reshaping of the self. The book is structured as a multi-layered gradual disclosure of a critical apparatus of the author's fictional works.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lejeune offers a new discussion and definition of the “autobiographical pact” in Philippe Lejeune *Signes de vie. Le pacte autobiographique* 2. Paris. Éditions du Seuil, 2005: 11-32. The chapter «Qu'est-ce que le pacte autobiographique?» (pages 31-32) is also available on the website edited by Philippe Lejeune: [http://www.autopacte.org/pacte\\_autobiographique.html](http://www.autopacte.org/pacte_autobiographique.html), accessed 30 June 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Max Saunders' literary analysis focuses on the period from the late Nineteenth to the early Twentieth century in Europe. The “Introduction” to the authors examined in his study includes a very interesting discussion of the development of the autobiographical genre and life-writing (Saunders 2010, 1-25).



**PART I:**

**SHAPES OF IDEOLOGY**



## CHAPTER ONE

### A JOURNEY BEYOND FASCIST MODELS: *FINE D'ANNO* BY PAOLA DRIGO<sup>1</sup>

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Despite the liberal and even feminist program of early Fascism—culminating in May 1925 with the right for women to vote in local elections, however, removed for all Italians just one year later, when the government repudiated the democratic administration—the Great Depression and the demographic campaign produced increasingly misogynistic and discriminatory policies starting with the beginning of 1930s. Through explicit laws and constant propaganda, the official ideology promoted more and more persistently the image of woman in the hypostases of Wife and Mother as the only ones politically and socially acceptable. However, numerous cultural productions—including those in literature—authored by women during this period, delineate a female subject that is rather in conflict with the Fascist discourses of femininity, thus engendering—to use the words of Lucia Re—“countertechnologies [that] influence the construction of gender—and its representation—either by deconstructing or destabilizing hegemonic models and discursive practices or by positing new and more or less radically different alternatives” (Pickering-Iazzi 1995, 77). This term, “countertechnologies,” is an adaptation of Teresa De Lauretis’ “technologies of gender” that, in turn, originates from Foucault’s notion of “technology of power” (Foucault 1990, 12) referring to those devices and tactics—besides prohibition and the law—through which power controls sexuality. De Lauretis goes past Foucault by introducing the concept of gender as a sociocultural construct, beyond the limiting categorization based on sexual difference. Furthermore, the gendered subject is perceived as a heterogeneous construct in process, being shaped and reshaped by “a multiplicity of discourses, positions and meanings” (De Lauretis 1987, x) that relate to the institutionalized power which is

capable of influencing or producing specific notions and representations of gender.

This essay aims to analyze the narrative mechanisms and the self-representation mode that make *Fine d'anno* (1936) by Paola Drigo a form of “countertechnology” with respect to the normative demands within the canon of gender roles and the ideology of femininity. I will discuss how Drigo, even though starting with a self-representation that supports rather than defies the patriarchal definitions of the feminine, ends by achieving a process of destabilization of the very same definitions through questioning their validity and reinterpreting them. In this way, she ultimately proposes a revalorization of the feminine within a discourse so predominantly founded on the rhetoric of virility. Although it could be argued that the character’s progression is simplified by the fact that she is neither wife nor actual mother in the story, I think that, in the context of the present discussion on gender roles, Drigo’s merit cannot be denied in her choice to limit this autobiographical narrative to her last years. Thus, she privileges a self-representation centered on her condition and development as a woman over her formation as a young person and writer. In order to give a broader perspective to the ideological context, and thus create an element of contrast, I will start with an overview of the main ideas found in two of the most prominent theoretical writings that are illustrative of the Fascist discourse on women: “La donna nella coscienza moderna” by Giovanni Gentile, published in 1934, and *Politica della famiglia* by Ferdinando Loffredo, published in 1938.

After a short introduction in which he celebrates the death of Feminism, along with the equal rights movement according to which all individuals are endowed with certain fundamental, natural liberties, Gentile continues with a discussion about women’s identity founded on the principle of gender difference. Woman should be valued, the philosopher argues, for her specific and irreplaceable characteristics that assign her particular functions within the family (nurturer, educator, care giver) and assure the dissemination of sound moral and social values, thus allowing her to fulfill a great mission in society. In Gentile’s view, women possess entirely the same humanity as men, “ma in forma diversa: di una diversità che è limite del suo sesso, com’è (si badi) un limite dell’altro sesso” (Gentile 1969, 83). Therefore this difference is perceived as limit although the philosopher clarifies later on that this limit cannot and should not be entirely explained through physiology. Such a limit, that constitutes the otherness, is rather a cultural construct:

[...] questo limite, che non è, ripeto, un limite naturale, ma un concetto, un modo di pensare e quindi di sentire, si viene determinando in funzione

della concezione morale della vita; la quale, a sua volta, si sviluppa con lo svolgimento della cultura (Gentile 1969, 84).

And the culture described by Gentile is the culture of a supposedly well-organized society that places family and religion at the center of its highest principles. Moreover, it is within the family that a woman secures her dignity as the main protector of the family's sanctity.

At the same time, Gentile offers an image of women as the complement to men, explaining that—no matter how paradoxical this might seem—a woman acquires her individuality and freedom only when, and if, she belongs to a man, as his mother, wife, or mother of his children:

Ed ecco la famiglia, il coniugio, la donna che è del marito, ed è quel che è in quanto è di lui; ecco la donna a realizzare in quella di lui la sua propria individualità (Gentile 1969, 92).

At the end of his essay, Gentile embraces an essentialist view of women and adopts a sentimental tone while he focuses in this discussion on maternal love. Motherhood, he says, is indispensable to woman. It is her intrinsic quality, even to the point where every virgin is already a mother by definition, and those who do not respect this “«vergine maternità»” (Gentile 1969, 97) simply destroy the essence of woman and love in the world. Although this limit, in terms of which woman's identity is defined, should not be understood necessarily as a biological and psychological limitation or inferiority, Gentile does depict it as a form of otherness with respect to man, since this is what makes a woman “l'*altro* indispensabile ed essenziale del nostro naturale essere.” (Gentile 1969, 93)

The same principle of gender difference—although in much harsher and pragmatic terms that rather supports the idea of woman's inferiority—is also promoted by Ferdinando Loffredo in *Politica della famiglia*, a work that presents itself as a scientifically sound treatise, with numerous footnotes and external references. Loffredo begins his debate from the premise that the emancipation of women—as a result of political will—has had devastating consequences in modern societies; to be more exact, it has produced a dangerous decline of the birthrate, but also an estrangement of women from home and the family life which ultimately aggravated their physical and spiritual alienation. Fortunately, Fascist Italy, he argues, is protected from similar destructive results of the female emancipation, which afflict countries such as France, the United States and the Soviet Union, given that no Italian minister is willing to consider women as members of political parties, no feminist organization has the ability to

challenge the patriarchal structure of the family, and no law regarding equal rights is likely to be proposed.

Moreover, in the opinion of the Fascist sociologist, only the agitated rhythm of modern civilization, with its hasty economic development, can explain the paradoxical success of such a notion that man and woman, two beings so distinct by nature and endowed with totally different functions, should receive the same education and cultural formation. He says:

la donna, costituita in modo da maturare nel suo corpo il figlio, per i tre quarti di un anno, costituita in modo da potere nutrire il figlio, con una secrezione del suo organismo, per oltre un anno, dotata di qualità che la rendono adatta ad allevare ed educare il figlio almeno fino alla adolescenza, ciononostante riceve, nella nostra civiltà, la stessa istruzione che riceverebbe se le sue funzioni fossero eguali a quelle dell'uomo (Loffredo 1938, 351).

Consequently, according to Loffredo, women's biological characteristics—in addition to their supposedly inferior intelligence and their rather analytical than synthetic abilities—predestine them to intellectual and cultural subordination. Although he admits that the Fascist government still tolerates the perpetuation of an old system that encourages women's cultural emancipation, Loffredo concludes that the only solution able to protect the state and prevent its degeneration, as well as endorse the progress of civilization, is to restore the sociocultural and intellectual subjection of woman to man: “La donna deve tornare sotto la sudditanza assoluta dell'uomo: padre o marito; sudditanza e quindi inferiorità: spirituale, culturale ed economica” (Loffredo 1938, 369). Such claims seem to perfectly echo Mussolini's outlook on women as expressed in an interview from 1932 with Emilio Ludwig. On this occasion, *Il Duce* stated:

‘La donna deve obbedire,’ diss’egli vivacemente. ‘Essa è analitica, non sintetica. Ha forse mai fatto dell’architettura in tutti questi secoli? Le dica di costruirmi una capanna, non dico un tempio! Non lo può! Essa è estranea all’architettura, che è la sintesi di tutte le arti, e ciò è un simbolo del suo destino.’ (Ludwig 1932, 166)

As a final point, Loffredo also expresses his position against allowing women to practice sports because, he declares, not only do they jeopardize women's ability to give birth but, even more dangerously, they divert women's physical and spiritual energies from family and their fundamental mission: child-bearing. Ultimately, women's sports promote “il «culto della maschietta» che vuole il corpo della donna disadatto alla

maternità” (Loffredo 1938, 359). In addition, Loffredo strongly promotes the idea that women’s secondary school and professional education should be forbidden by law and that their education be geared entirely towards making them excellent housewives and homemakers through special programs in which home economics must be the fundamental subject of instruction.

I have outlined up to this point the ideological context in which one of Paola Drigo’s mature works, *Fine d'anno*, is to be placed. Paolina Valeria Maria Bianchetti—her name according to the official records—was born on January 4, 1876, in Castelfranco Veneto, a town in the province of Treviso, daughter of Giuseppe Valerio Bianchetti, republican and enthusiastic admirer of Garibaldi, and Luigia Anna Loro. This was a wealthy aristocratic family that held culture in high esteem and contributed many significant intellectuals and public figures of the time.<sup>2</sup> On October 20, 1898, she married Giulio Drigo, an agriculturist and prosperous land-owner from Padua. This is also where the young couple spent their first years of marriage and where their son Paolo was born a year later, followed by a girl who died prematurely (an event echoed in her *Fine d'anno*). In subsequent years, the family moved to Mussolente, a town in the province of Vicenza, in the historical villa Ca’ Soderini. Here, Paola Drigo welcomed and made friends with important men of letters and writers, among them the poet Giosuè Carducci, who was already a dear friend of her father. But it is during the stays with her family in Rome and Milan that she established her fruitful editorial contacts.<sup>3</sup>

In 1936, only two years before her death in Padua, Drigo published two novels with Treves, the publishing house in Milan that had brought to light many of her works: *Maria Zef*, very much acclaimed by the critics,<sup>4</sup> and *Fine d'anno* which appeared now for the first time in book form. The latter, which is a short autobiographical novel or what might be termed a longer short story, had already appeared with the title *Fine d'anno in campagna* in the pages of the review *Pan*—edited by Ugo Ojetti—in two parts: the first in issue II, 3 from March and the second in issue II, 4 from April 1934. Pontello (1957) draws our attention to the universalizing effect obtained with the elimination from the title of a specific toponym (“campagna”). Hence, *Fine d'anno* becomes the corollary of Drigo’s highest artistic expression and, at the same time, the synthesis of her most profound sorrows and hopes (Pontello 1957, 818). Moreover, it is interesting to note already from the title the author’s decision to focus on her old age. This differs from many of the other women writers of autobiography from the first half of the Twentieth century, who manifested a

nearly universal preference for their childhood and the years of their early youth.<sup>5</sup>

The novel is constructed around the voice of a female “I”<sup>6</sup> who tells her moving story with both emotion and lucidity, in spite of the prejudices of her small community and society on the one hand, and with the painful acknowledgement of her own solitude, flaws and disappointment, on the other. At a deeper and more personal level, this is also the account of a woman, no longer young, who lives an isolated drama provoked by the separation from her son. As a member, by marriage, of an affluent family of landowners, the protagonist, whose name is never mentioned, used to have a wealthy life, away from any working activity or money-related concerns. Upon the death of her husband, she must provide for herself for the first time and put all her efforts into saving her family business and assets from ruins. This completely new and unexpected situation—aggravated by the dishonesty of their now deceased land-agent, *Sior Checo*—forces her to abandon the protected environment of her previous household, and implicitly the gender role assigned to her by a patriarchal hierarchy, in order to face a much more complicated reality. An analysis of her language seems to suggest that she is at first overwhelmed by and unprepared for the new tasks that face her, as the following phrase clearly indicates, and in which the terms “sola,” “poca,” “silenzio” give the idea of precariousness: “Ed a ciò mi accingevo io, *sola*, colla mia *poca* esperienza, colla mia poca salute [...] questo, era il divino *silenzio*” (Drigo 2005, 60).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, she is very much aware not only of the necessity, but even more, of the urgency to acquire the indispensable skills quickly and, most importantly, to penetrate and dominate this new reality with her spirit and intelligence. To her friends’ remarks about how lucky she is to enjoy a life in the countryside, she replies:

Sì, stavo nella bella villa antica cogli stucchi alle pareti e alla torre l’orologio del Ferracina, e, quando c’era, mi godevo tutto il sole, e potevo passeggiare sotto i grandi alberi come Giuseppina alla Malmaison: questa era una delle facce del quadro; l’altra, spoglia di abbellimenti retorici, era che *dovevo* stare in campagna quell’inverno, e forse altri inverni ancora, tutt’altro che per un elegante capriccio o per dedicarmi alla vita contemplativa, bensì per prendere in mano personalmente ed energicamente l’amministrazione disastrosa [...]

Bisognava correre ai ripari al più presto: innanzi tutto *capire*, poi, scernere il guasto dal sano, sistemare, semplificare, salvare (Drigo 2005, 59).

In this fragment, the two words which are written in italics in the text, “*dovevo*” e “*capire*,” are each used in a different phrase, one paragraph



apart from each other, but when read together, compose the aforementioned imperative message.

While trying to get acquainted with the ten families who live and work on her property, she remains surprised by one of them in particular, “i Pigozzi, detti *«le Pigozze»*,” which she immediately labels as “Strana famiglia,” and soon we find out the reason: the men of the household

spazzavano, cucinavano, facevano il bucato e lavavano i piatti, mentre alla vanga, alla falce, all’aratro, stavano le cinque femmine che li comandavano a bacchetta (Drigo 2005, 64).

So, the men take care of the household chores, while the women do the hard work in the fields and represent the authoritative figures in the family. In other words, this family appears “strange” because the traditional gender roles are inverted. This phenomenon is linguistically expressed much more clearly in Italian due to the declination of the definite article and the change of the final vowel. Nonetheless, we soon learn that this form of matriarchy functions with positive results in the end, although she calls them “unexpected”—and the adversative conjunction “però” suggests the antinomy of these two terms (“matriarchy” and “positive [results]”).<sup>8</sup> She describes it as

una specie di matriarcato, che raggiungeva però un risultato imprevisto: il potere delle Pigozze era bello, lucido, ordinato come un giardino, anzi come un ricamo (Drigo 2005, 64).

It is interesting to note here the use of the adjectives “lucido” and “ordinato” that imply a considerable amount of reason, strong will and energy, and are traditionally considered male attributes. In fact, their meaning will be recast later on almost exactly in the three qualities—“metodo,” “energia” and “severità”—that she considers to be the answer to her troubles and part of the correct behavior to adopt in order to succeed. The positioning at the end of the enumeration and at the peak of the tension created by it, of an item exclusively dedicated to female occupation (embroidery) reveals, in my opinion, a “narrating I” still trapped in the patriarchal ideology. It is in reference to this ideology that the case of the Pigozzi family seems out of the ordinary. Even so, given also the positive context in which this term (“ricamo”) is placed, I would argue that Drigo, while informing us about a flaw in the present order of things, is already attempting a reevaluation of the female gender role, although, up to this point in the novel and for a good part of the narrative later on, the

character reproduces and follows somewhat faithfully the official discourse about women.

Applying a reasoning that reminds of Gentile's precise binary logic, the narrator presents her difficulties and failures along the way as a result of her limitations as a woman. For instance, during her everyday interaction with the tenant-farmers, her devastating sensitivity would manifest itself, on the one hand, as a visceral need of their affection and, on the other, as a mortifying shame in front of their repeated disloyalty and lies. Furthermore, by taking the family business into her hands, she is bound to surpass her limits as a woman on two fronts at least, according to the strict hierarchical view on gender roles endorsed by the official ideology. First, she is going way beyond the domestic sphere of action assigned to her and far from all the duties of a good wife and mother and, second, by doing so, she is acting outside of her biological destiny and against her womanly nature. This would explain her conclusion that the *sine qua non* provision for carrying out her plan and solving the financial issues is to overcome her feminine condition, which can be achieved solely by having recourse to qualities customarily considered masculine—such as energy, orderliness and rigor. However, as a consequence, this strategy for conquering her feminine nature also gives rise to a constant struggle and painful fight against herself. She writes:

Grave debolezza, ed elemento di insuccesso, nelle cose d'ordine pratico, (e forse anche non pratico), possedere un'acuta sensibilità; ed io inciampavo in quest'ostacolo ad ogni passo...

Tracciare un programma e svolgerlo, – direi quasi *virilmente*, – con metodo, con energia, con severità, mi era stato possibile, ma la mia natura femminile si vendicava del sopruso e reagiva soffrendo, soffrendo assurdamente, in modo ridicolo, dei risultati stessi che dal mio programma scaturivano (Drigo 2005, 71).

Therefore, such a process implies, in the preliminary stage, a transfer of identities or, more precisely, suppressing the woman in her and acquiring a masculine-like identity.<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon is initially reflected in her new clothing and accessories (“pellicciotto, frustino e stivaloni”) (Drigo 2005, 69), as well as the use of gestures and body language deemed characteristic to or appropriate only for men (“stando colle mani in fianco”) (Drigo 2005, 72), but culminates with her own (potential) physical transformation:

Il vento del Canal di Brenta aveva disseccato e quasi bruciato la mia faccia; in testa avevo un berretto di pelo; alle mani, grossi guanti da uomo.

Mi fossero spuntati all'improvviso due lunghi baffi, non ne sarei rimasta sorpresa (Drigo 2005, 72).

However, the protagonist is not the only one undergoing a metamorphosis; her living space too indicates the signs—rather timid in the beginning—of an identity transfer. In her attempt to transform the cold and severe office, which once was her husband's, into a more welcoming and feminine environment, she displays a few items such as: “un mazzo dei primi calicantus,” “un registrino lungo e stretto, rilegato in carta di Varese a fiorellini gialli, col quale [aveva] sostituito i lugubri e massicci registri maschili” and the famous “*scatola verde*” (Drigo 2005, 74-75), a small green box where she keeps her important documents and keys.

The discussion about the domestic environment necessitates further elaboration at this point, which takes us back to the aforementioned essay, “La donna nella coscienza moderna.” In its second part, Gentile draws a distinction between public and private space, two categories of space that regulate the human existence. According to the philosopher, the former includes all the economic, political and social relations and activities performed by men and which firmly represent their exclusive prerogative; the latter refers to the house, family and household in general, for which only women constitute the authentic moral foundation. Thus, woman belongs with all her energy and individuality to the family which ought to be her sole and ultimate concern in life. In addition to this classification, from Gentile's text, we can infer that men alone have the option to freely commute back and forth between the two spaces. As a reparatory argument—which, however, takes man, once more, as a point of reference—the philosopher concludes by supporting, in a rhetorical language, the importance of the private space, in that this is where man can restore his energies and be himself again in the arms of his wife, after a day

all'accademia o in piazza, dopo aver agito e fatto la sua parte nella scuola o nel tempio, nel mercato o nel parlamento, nel suo gabinetto di governo, nel suo ufficio o in campo di battaglia (Gentile 1969, 90).

In *Fine d'anno*, the house and her strict connection with the house, a recurring *topos* of this novel, are essential to the feminine dimension of our protagonist. More than a physical space cherished for its own beauty or its real worth, the isolated villa in the countryside—La Marzòla—is an heirloom with a highly sentimental value: the container of so many dear memories, as well as the quiet witness of her family's and, implicitly, of her own story. Above all, it is the promise for a potential return of her son

in the future. Additionally, with its large and empty rooms, the house is the constant reminder of her difficult and lonely present.

Ostracized by her tenant-farmers' hostility and ignored by a distant son, the character experiences an infinite weariness and an agonizing solitude. The overwhelming intensity of these emotions is translated into a nearly material burden that we sense throughout the text and for which the narrator gives the impression of seeking relief in the empathy of her readers. For example, while trying to understand the real cause for her financial hardship, she weighs the responsibility of her land-agent against the moral integrity of the other farmers. She asks herself: "Ma era lui il responsabile, e il solo responsabile? La gente che mi stava intorno era migliore o peggiore?" (Drigo 2005, 83) And, a few lines after: "[...] bisognava preparare l'animo a un sacrificio. Quale?" (Drigo 2005, 83) These rhetorical questions, similar to many others scattered throughout the text, not only shed light on the progression of the events from the perspective of the "narrating I," but through them, the "narrating I" seems to reach out to the readers by soliciting their comprehension and participation in the narrated episodes. Structurally, her anguish and solitude are suggestively reflected in the numerous nature descriptions, some of them rather lengthy, on which a considerable amount of the narrative is spent.<sup>10</sup> Among these, the following reveals itself as being extremely relevant and powerful. After a passage in which she vainly waits for the peasants to visit and, according to the custom, present her with gifts on the occasion of the San Martin holiday, the "narrating I" continues:

Nessuno: come se un ciclone avesse disperso tutti gli esseri umani; come se una pestilenza li avesse distrutti. E non un uccello per l'aria; non lo stridere d'un insetto; non alito di vento: l'immobilità e il silenzio assoluti davano alla campagna un senso, non di quiete, ma di sconsolata assenza di vita, quale mi era avvenuto raramente di sentire in mezzo alla natura (Drigo 2005, 78).

Furthermore, such isolation compared to an absolute lack of life ("assenza di vita") is lived with the vehemence of an almost physical fear of being alone, of having no one to relate to or fight for. As long as her son shows no interest in settling at La Marzòla, she believes her sacrifice is useless since it would be only for her own good. Conversely, however, her efforts on behalf of her loved ones would give true meaning to her fight for saving the property; as she states, a piece of land and a house have the value of the sentimental significance that we invest in them ("Hanno il valore cha dà loro il nostro amore, il nostro attaccamento. È il nostro

sentimento, che crea il valore di ciò che possediamo,” Drigo 2005, 98). As a consequence, her loneliness intensifies her struggle when she is faced with the imminence of an important decision dictated by her precarious financial situation.

Carol Gilligan's theories of women's psychological development presented in *In a Different Voice* (1982, 1993) offer useful insights into the more profound reasons that trigger this problematic condition. Gilligan explains that, regardless of their social and economic status, women are more likely than men to identify themselves in relation to others, with those whom they establish a rapport of care and nurturing;<sup>11</sup> in other words, women not only

define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Women's place in men's life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies. (Gilligan 1993, 17)

In the same light, Nancy Chodorow investigates the notion of “affective relationship” (Chodorow 1978) that revolves around the traditional roles assigned to women by society as wives and mothers and that have encouraged their identification in relation to various aspects connected to family life. Thus, unlike men, whose process of identification stems mainly from the “differentiation from others” and “the denial of affective relation” (Chodorow 1978, 176), women's identity is built around “emotional and psychological functions” (Chodorow 1978, 178).

Two specific instances deserve our attention here in support of the previous claims: the need of the protagonist for affection as reflected in her daily contact with the tenant-farmers and her attitude towards her dead land-agent, *Sior Checo*. Although he is supposedly the one and only culprit for her numerous worries and financial problems, she gives proof of contradictory feelings for him, ranging from comprehension to human compassion. We soon learn that the source for this paradoxical behavior is her son. *Sior Checo* not only knew her son since he was a boy, but was also the only person really able to understand the narrator's pain—which she refers to as “«quell'altra cosa»” and “l'altro e più cocente dolore” (Drigo 2005, 95, 99, 105)—because he too had a son who left him and for whom he had suffered enormously. Also, while reflecting on the diffident and duplicitous attitude of the countrymen towards her, the narrator complains about their lack of understanding and unwillingness to establish a human bond with her. She says: “Io ne soffrivo: avrei voluto dire alla mia gente: - Perché invece non mi aiutate? *Perché non mi volete bene?*”

(Drigo 2005, 70) The fervor of her demand for affection is highlighted here also graphically, through the use of italics. Sadly, she will soon comprehend the utopian nature of her request, given the emotional and moral incompatibility between her and the countrymen, as well as the difference in their social and economic status.<sup>12</sup> However, in Drigo's text, this need for relations, and more exactly for affective relations, unfolds throughout the entire narrative, and achieves its highest representation in her constant and almost obsessive longing to be reunited with her absent son. It is exactly this call for affective relations, if not their absence, that constitutes the origin of the main conflict, as I will illustrate further.

The relational identity of the protagonist emerges also in her reasoning when she ponders the two options presented to her for cutting down costs and saving part of her assets. Simply put, selling La Marzòla, the countryside house and property, would involve giving up a space so imbued with her family's past and memories, while renouncing the house in the city would mean becoming increasingly inaccessible to her friends and eventually losing them. During a visit of her family's notary, she describes her strong response to his advice to sell La Marzòla as a debilitating mental reaction, similar in its symptoms to insanity:

Ed io, indifferente, stolta, invece di pensare a quel che mi diceva, all'orribile senso di quello che mi diceva, mi misi a contare i bottoni del paltò lungo e stretto che non si era tolto, e a osservare la forma dei suoi orecchi, e sulla cima del destro c'era un gelone [...] (Drigo 2005, 84).

Only later, after his departure, when she is left alone with her thoughts, does she seem to regain her capacity to reflect clearly on the gravity of the situation, although it is evident that she continues to think with her heart:

Ah, la Marzòla no, non era possibile neppure pensarci!... La cara, dolce *Marzòla*, dove avevo passato la giovinezza, dove era nato mio figlio, dove ogni pietra, ogni zolla, rappresentavano un ricordo, parlavano al mio cuore... Nell'oratorio accanto alla villa, stavano sepolti molti dei nostri: l'ultimo, mio marito, vi era disceso da pochi anni... E la mia bimbetta, che aveva appena aperto gli occhi alla luce, quella che avevo tanto desiderato e tanto pianto, era là anch'essa... Piccola mia!... Ah, non si poteva, non si poteva, cedere ad estranei l'essenza stessa della nostra vita! (Drigo 2005, 85-86).

Yet what seems even more representative of her mind set and mode of identification up to this point is her reflection on the pros and cons of selling the house in the city. Once again, she puts herself in a relational context, and further, I would argue, on a secondary level. Although