“Who Am I?”: Historical Narrative and Subjectivity in Anna Banti's *Camicia bruciata*

“Who Am I?”: Historical Narrative and Subjectivity in Anna Banti's *Camicia bruciata*

By

Lucy Delogu

Translated by Steven Haire

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

“Who Am I?”:
Historical Narrative and Subjectivity in Anna Banti's *Camicia bruciata*,
by Lucy Delogu

This book first published 2012

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): 1-4438-4050-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4050-7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

THE *WOMEN'S QUESTION* IN ITALY

During the 1900's, there were, despite everything, positive revolutions […] I'm thinking of the emergence of the fourth estate, of the women who, after centuries of repression, were able to come to the fore.[1]

> European history is marked by social differences between men and women whose roles, whether in the private or public spheres, were incorporated and interpreted in different ways by society: In Europe, political power was legitimized only by paternal and patriarchal authority, expressed by the combining of the theological, political and even linguistic, especially in German, terms *Hausvater* (head of the family), *Landesvater* (father of the nation) and *Gottvater* (God, the father). The governing of the home and of the family became the model for all forms of legitimate dominance; authority, whether secular or ecclesiastical, was considered patriarchal.[2]

The *war of the sexes*[3] lasted for centuries "in the form of complaints or accusations, of what and how both women and men were, must and can be,"[4] following a non-rectilinear path with periods which gave women's place in society, as Michela De Giorgio affirms, greater resonance as opposed to others, that seem to have dwelled less on theoretical and practical questions arising out of the divisions between the sexes. According to De Giorgio, "periods in which the contradictions between the sexes are expressed in more explicit tones alternate with calmer ones, in which women seem to live their individual and collective conditions with no reference to a *women's question*, political or cultural, proposing

---

[1] Paola Agostini e Giovanna Borgese, *Mi pare un secolo: Ritratti e parole di centosei protagonisti del Novecento*. Torino: Einaudi, 1992, 76.

[2] Giselle, Bock, *Le donne nella storia europea*. Roma: Laterza, 2000. Trans. di *Frauen in der europaischen Geschichte Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*. Munchen: Verlag, 2000, 50-51.

[3] *La querelle des sexes* is a definition used by Giselle Bock in *Le donne nella storia europea*, 7.

[4] Giselle Bock, *Le donne nella storia europea*, 52.

their social existence as problematic."[5] When the term feminism appears for the first time, in 1895, the movement for the revendication of women's rights had already existed for a few decades. Toward the middle of the 1800's, in fact, women in the more advanced western countries (Great Britain, France) began to organize and to challenge. In the early years of the Italian women's movement, we can identify two fundamental trends: the liberal trend and the socialist trend. The liberal trend is made up of middle class women who are in a privileged condition compared to working class women, in that they are not obliged to peddle their labour on the new industrial market, but are "maintained" by fathers and husbands. They live, however, with a frustrating lack of autonomy: they have no access to higher education, they cannot work as independent professionals, they cannot manage their own affairs if left widowed and they cannot vote. Working women, who find themselves in a situation of competition and conflict with men and among themselves in the working world, cannot organize independently, but must organize within the broader organizational and cultural structure of the socialist movement.

At the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century in Italy, the history of Italian women was also marked by the *women's question*. Within groups and associations, they struggled to redefine society; the Italian women's movement,[6] during the intense period from 1870-90, "engaged in culture and politics with passion: magazines, pamphlets and conferences sustain the battle for the vote and women's education."[7] As in other European countries, the Italian emancipation movement was significantly present, most of all, in the socialist arena, but also in the liberal one. The two most important figures in the socialist trend in Italy were Anna Maria Mozzoni and Anna Kuliscioff. While in the liberal area, Ersilia Majno Bronzini in Milan in1899 founded, along with other women, the National Women's Union, an expression of the philanthropic and enlightened bourgeoisie. The Union conducted the first survey on women's suffrage among famous personalities. Nearly all of the men questioned declared themselves against it, as were also many Italian women. Italian women's emancipation not only had to confront the battle for the vote and education, but also with the main idea behind these restrictions, namely that women were part of a "human *underclass*,"[8]

---

[5] Michela De Giorgio, *Le italiane dall'Unità a oggi: modelli culturali e comportamenti sociali*. Roma:Laterza, 1992, 4.
[6] See, Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, *Alle origini del movimento femminile in Italia, 1848-1892*. Milano: Einaudi, 1963.
[7] Michela De Giorgio, *Le italiane dall'Unità a oggi*. 8.
[8] Ivi, 9.

whose role is that of the "angel of the hearth" devoted to the care of her husband, her offspring and of the home. One of the principal issues the Italian liberal movement confronts is the fact that Italian women are still imprisoned in a cult of motherhood and family which is a source of pride for most women who don't feel the need to change: "[Italian women] don't yearn for emancipation. They are the vestals of a family religion and remain very much alive, especially in the countryside, unshakeable and moral, heedless of fatigue, frugal at table. The few signs of change come from the women of the aristocracy, the vanguard of female social comportment."[9]

Fin de siècle scientific discussion contributes to this image of the Italian woman, based on the theory of positivist thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Cesare Lombroso, Paul Julius August Moebius and Otto Weininger, who place women on the lowest rung of the human evolutionary ladder; the positivist thinkers assert the intellectual inferiority of women on the grounds of their biological characteristics. These theorists claim to show proof of how maternal instinct has the upper hand in female nature, precluding them of any intellectual and artistic capacity[10], twisting natural and biological factors to justify the social conventions that influence women's lives: "intelligence in the animal kingdom varies inversely with fertility."[11] This pseudo-scientific reflection in Italy and in Europe portrays the woman as an inferior being, whose only aspirations are maternity and domestic life. These ideas are reinforced by the theories of *fin de siècle* positivist scientists who seek to offer to patriarchal society concrete proof of this inferiority: the weight of the brain and the length of the teeth of a woman, to cite some. The French philosopher, Auguste Comte, considered the father of positivist philosophy, affirms the natural inferiority of women in *Cours de philosophie positive* (*Course on positivist philosophy*, 1830) and in *Système de politique positive* (*The positivist political system*, 1852). In Italy, Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero in, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (1893) and Raffaele Gurrieri

[9] Ivi, 18.

[10] Lombroso, Gurrieri e Fornasari were convinced of the physical and psychological inferiority of women. See: Raffaele Gurrieri ed Ettore Fornasari, *I sensi e le anomalie nella donna normale e nella prostituta*. Torino: Bocca, 1893; Cesare Lombroso, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*. Torino: Bocca, 1915. Their theory, advanced by the mosst important literary reviews and journals of the time, such as *Nuova Antologia*, *Vita Internazionale* and *L'idea liberale*, seek to provide turn of the century bourgeois society with scientific proof of the inferiority of women.

[11] Cesare Lombroso, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, 132.

and Ernesto Fornasari in *I sensi e le anomalie nella donna normale e nella prostituta* (1893), analyse the intellectual and moral capacity of women based on their physical characteristics. In 1900, the German physicist, Paul Julius August Moebius published *Uber die Verschiedenheit mannlicher und weiblicher Schadel* (*The mental inferiority of women*). In 1903, the Austrian philosopher, Otto Weininger, in his book, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (*Sex and Personality*) asserted the superiority of male physical characteristics over those of women. The collaboration of Lombroso in *L'idea liberale*, a Milanese journal in which appeared contributions by authors such as Neera, Emilio De Marchi and Vittoria Aganoor, allows us to better understand how easily these theories spread among the various Italian cultural environments.

Fin de siècle literary critics, approached women's literary production, affirming that biological and natural functions, such as maternity, limit the intellectual and creative ability of female writers; besides, according to Italian critics, the occasional success of some female authors depended on the male attributes they possessed and on their ability to imitate male literary models. Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, at the beginning of the twentieth century, defined his female literary contemporaries thus: "Look again at Neera, at Grazia Deledda, at Matilde Serao, or at any other illustrious Italian female novelist: they are Amazons and are worthy inasmuch as they are capable of imitating male artistic models."[12] For Borgese, as for Lombroso, women were incapable of giving form to an artistic work by nature and, furthermore, of creating literary masterpieces. But his words may reveal a sense of anxiety toward women writers and women in general, "Our society tends ever more decisively toward the maternal aspect, gradually abandoning the counsel of the intellect for the drunkenness of sentiment."[13] Men offer society "the counsel of the intellect," while the female effect can be compared to a substance which alters the normal state of intellectual and moral capacity; Borgese and the positivist philosophers thus associate man's reason with all that is irrational and emotive in women, aligning themselves with the traditional dichotomy between *intellect/man* and *body/woman* which will continue to imprison women within the role of wife and mother into the twentieth century.[14]

---

[12] Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, *La Vita e il libro. Terza Serie*, Bologna: Zanichelli, 1928, 192. *La Vita e il libro* was published in a 3 part series, from 1910-1913.

[13] Borgese, *La Vita e il libro. Seconda Serie*, Torino: Bocca, 1911, 360.

[14]Catherine Ramsey-Portolano, The Woman Writer's Experience in Late Nineteenth Century Italy: from the Literary Dimension to the Epistolary Reality in the Work of Neera." Diss. University of Chicago, 2002, 24-25.

Italian critics avoid using the adjective "female" in evaluating works by women: "What I like most about your book is the masculine note one senses. Well done!"[15] They exhibit a hostile and denigrating attitude toward women writers who, for example, are attacked for sentimentalism, grammatical form, weak style, and, above all, imitating the themes of the great male authors: "When literary content is impoverished and haggard, women, who always arrive late to the perception of historical movements, take possession of them, plucking them alive and fresh from the past: they rediscover them when their brethren have already buried them and they compose these elements about to be dispersed into a sonorous epilogue."[16] At the same time, though, Benedetto Croce dedicated chapters in *Letteratura della nuova Italia* to Contessa Lara, Annie Vivanti, Ada Negri, Alinda Bonacci, Vittoria Aganoor, Enrichetta Capecelatro, Matilde Serao and Neera. This receptiveness toward these women authors demonstrates that Croce, on one hand, recognizes their importance and their qualities such as tenderness, compassion and enthusiasm while, on the other hand, highlights the errors and imprecision in women's writing; for the first time, women's literary production is analyzed from a more objective point of view, even if Croce is reluctant to abandon his negative preconceptions as to women's nature and continues to consider women ill-suited to any role save the maternal one:

> It seems that women, capable of carrying within her the seed of life for nine months, of giving birth with great effort, of nurturing it with the patient intelligence she has in abundance, are usually incapable of ordinary poetic gestation: their artistic parts are almost always premature: rather, *dèliverance* follows conception, and the neonate is then tossed into the street, deprived of all it might need.[17]

With these beliefs, women could not but be represented in the various artistic genres as the "angel of the hearth:" the virtuous woman, submissive and dedicated to eternal sacrifice for the good of the family, for which Lucia in *Promessi Sposi* is the model *par excellence.* In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar affirm that the model of women in nineteenth century western society arises from the imaginary ideal that man has of her, which is expressed in literary pretence:

---

[15] Luigi Capuana, *Letteratura femminile*. di Giovanna Finocchiaro Chimirri. Catania: CUECM, 1988, 185.
[16] Borgese, *La Vita e il libro. Seconda Serie*, 169.
[17] Benedetto Croce, *La letteratura della nuova Italia*. Bari: Laterza, 1948.

> Male authors have also, of course, generated male characters over whom they would seem to have had similar rights of ownership. But further implicit in the metaphor of literary paternity is the idea that each man […] has the ability, even perhaps the obligation, to talk back to other men by generating alternative fictions of his own. Lacking the pen/penis which would enable them similarly to refute one fiction by another, a woman in patriarchal societies has historically been reduced to *mere* properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because they are generated solely […] by male expectations and designs.[18]

In this atmosphere of complete mistrust and negation of social and moral rights, a few Italian writers and activists, such as Anna Maria Mozzoni, Anna Kuliscioff, Emilia Mariani, Giulia Cavallari and Gualberta A. Beccari struggle to affirm the social, moral, intellectual and political equality of women. They are cultured women of the bourgeois class who demand the right to an education, to vote, to a free and independent life and, most of all, who want Italian women to become aware of their condition:

> the wages of women were irresponsibility, perfectly convinced of the necessity of the preservation and the dignity of idleness […] Latin women [should] involve themselves a bit more in public affairs than they do now and see themselves for what they really are, not only members of the family but citizens, individuals in the nation, producers of the social fabric and mothers of generations of humans.[19]

Women's equality was lacking, first and foremost, within the family because with marriage, a woman lost her individuality: "the woman, in whatever conjugal regime, is a slave or worse. To possess maternal rights, she should not be the mother of illegitimate offspring and to have real control of herself and of her belongings. She should never bend to the yoke of marriage."[20] In Italy, a married woman required the consent of her husband in order to work, to enrol in university, to open a bank account, to request a passport or to be admitted to hospital. Regarding this, Victoria de Grazia writes:

---

[18] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, 12.

[19] Letter from G. Rossi Savio, *Memorie*, vol. II, 146; cited by Paola Blelloch in "Studio tematico delle scrittrici italiane contemporanee." Dissertation. Rutgers University,1982.

[20] Citation by Anna Maria Mozzoni found in in Maria Corti, "C'è un fantasma sotto lo scialle," La Repubblica, 19 March (1992): 25.

> The negligence of liberal Italy reached its apex regarding women, to whom were denied even economic and civil rights recognised by law for men. An example was family law, regulated since 1865, based on the Pisanelli code and inspired by the Napoleonic Code. The State affirms its own interest in the good order of the family, delegating all authority to the male head of the family. Wives were obliged to take the surname of the husband and to reside with him. Without the authorization of the husband, women were denied nearly all legal and commercial activities, including access to loans and the signing of cheques. The law, moreover, excluded her from the guardianship of her children and even from "family counsel" which, until 1942, had sole decision making power over family assets, inheritances and dowries in case of the death or disability of the male head of the family.[21]

In Italy, industrialization was late in arriving by a generation compared to other European countries and, to keep up with the competition, massive, low cost exploitation of female and child labour ensued. At the turn of the century, women represented half of the industrial labour force but no laws were enacted for the regulation of their labour and salaries. These social and juridical limitations reinforced the belief that women, from a physical and psychological point of view, were inferior to men and, consequently, her life should be conducted within the domestic walls. No sooner had Italian women understood themselves to be "confined to their homes, excluded from history and protected by their "relative immutability"," than they sought to break free of all of the restrictions that regulated her existence. But these attempts were seen by the patriarchal society of the time as attempts to overturn the established social order and, as a consequence, were decisively blocked:

> When women resisted with greater determination men who, in the name of progress and evolution, wanted to impose upon them behaviour according to a role required by civil society, the frustration caused by their "perverse wilfulness by refusing to conform to the proposed model, degenerated into hostility toward women, into a war against them, so that to say "woman" meant to contradict one of the fundamental premises of anti-feminist thought of the time.[22]

However, the Italian emancipation movement for equality between the sexes didn't stop and found in the Milanese activist, Anna Maria Mozzoni,

---

[21] Victoria De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista.* Venezia: Marsilio, 1993. Trans. from *How Fascism Ruled Women. Italy, 1922-1945.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992,40.

[22] Bram, Dijkstra, *Idoli di perversità*, Milano: Garzanti, 1988, 1.

its champion[23]. Mozzoni departed from the fact that differences in gender needn't influence the relationship between citizen and state. She fought to gain the same rights as men had in society, such as the right to an education, to vote and access to the professions for all women. For Mozzoni, a free and democratic state couldn't exist without equality between all citizens: a theory which the activist unveiled in her book, *La donna e i suoi rapporti sociali* in 1864, with the objective of resolving the *women's question* in the new Italian state. However, the revised Italian Civil Code of 1865 contained no reference to the needs and rights of women, such as the ownership of property or the right to earn the same salary as a man. Mozzoni understood that she needed to join with the women's working class to fight for the right to vote and for better working conditions: "The first to speak of emancipation were working and lower middle class women, mostly factory workers, labourers and teachers in the northern industrial cities. Many were influenced by the radically egalitarian concepts of Anna Maria Mozzoni."[24] In 1881, Mozzoni, together with Paolina Schiff, founded the *Lega Promotrice degli interessi femminili* which joined with *Partito Operaio Italiano* in 1888. In 1903, thanks to the work of Mozzoni and the feminist and socialist activist, Anna Kuliscioff,[25] the Italian Parliament passed the *Legge Carcano*,[26] the first law dealing with female and child labour. For the right to vote, however, Italian women had to wait a long time yet. First of all, the National Council of Italian Women was founded in 1904 (liberal and Catholic) and joined with the International Council of Women to coordinate the struggle for suffrage. Italian suffragists were mainly inspired by the English suffragette movement guided by Emmeline Pankhurst. In 1906, the famous educator, Maria Montessori drafted a proclamation directed at women, exhorting them to stay true to the struggle, which was posted along the streets of Rome. Also in 1906, *Una donna* was published by Sibilla Aleramo (pen

[23] For a detailed study on the role of Anna Maria Mozzoni in the Italian emancipation movement, see Piero Bortolotti, *Alle origini del movimento femminile in Italia* and Maria Linda Odoriso and Monica Turi, *Donna o cosa? I movimenti femminili in Italia dal Risorgimento a* oggi, Torino: Milvia Carrà, 1991, 17-66.
[24] Victoria De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista*,42.
[25] Anna Kuliscioff was a Russian immigrant who became a principal figure in the Italian socialist party. Kuliscioff sought to place the women's vote at the centre of the party's platform; despite the resistance of her companion, Filippo Turati, who feared that such a demand would have damaged the possibility of gaining the vote for male workers.
[26] The Carcano law limited the length of the working day to 12 hours for women and minors, and the return to work after giving birth to one month.

named Rina Faccio), considered to be the first Italian feminist novel. Parliament, however, continued to resist proposals for laws on women's suffrage. Also negative was the opinion formulated in 1907 by a commission made up of only men ("the Solons"), charged by Giolitti to evaluate the question of women's suffrage. In that year, Finnish women were the first in the world to obtain the right to vote. In 1908, it was Denmark's turn and, beginning in 1910, a few states in the United States (in all of the USA by 1920) and then, other countries in Northern Europe. In 1912, the so-called "universal suffrage "law was promulgated in Italy. In reality, women were totally excluded from the vote, which was reserved for male citizens who had reached 30 years of age and who had performed military service. With the advent of fascism, Italian feminism faded out and Italian women had to wait until 1946 to obtain the right to vote.

Italian feminist activists were also able to awaken women's consciousnesses through the publication of newspapers and journals geared to the female public.[27] Italy, from 1860 to 1900, witnessed the birth of a great many women's periodicals, such as, *La donna, La Cornelia, Cordelia, L'Aurora, Il giornale delle donne, La missione della donna, La Rassegna degli interessi femminili, Vita femminile, Italia femminile* and *L'Unione*.[28] The scholar, Annarita Buttafuoco, highlighted the social, rather than the political and cultural, importance of the development of the female press; such a large and diverse offering of information allowed Italian women, in fact, to become aware of the actual situation and to emerge from a state of passiveness.[29] One of the journalists, Gualberta Alaide Beccari, founder of *La donna* in 1868, was also involved in the political life of the country and, as a consequence, in the *women's question*: "*La donna* functioned as an organizer and coordinator during a period completely lacking in national women's organizations, posing itself as a necessary point of reference for anyone interested in the *women's question*."[30] The fact that Beccari accepted articles written only by women

[27] The end of the 1800's saw the development of newspaper publishing in Italy, which was centred in Milan. Among the new publications could be found ample space, even for female editorialists, dedicated to the discussion of women's issues in the new Italian society.

[28] For more information on *fin de siècle* female editorialists, see Annarita Buttafuoco, *Cronache femminili. Temi e momenti della stampa emancipazionista dall'Unità al Fascismo*, Siena: Dipartimento di Studi Storico-Sociali e Filosofici Università degli Studi di Siena, 1988.

[29] Annarita Buttafuoco, *Temi e momenti della stampa emancipazionista dall'Unità al Fascismo*, 21-22.

[30] Ivi, 20.

reflects her wish to present a new point of view of reality to society and not that of men.

Women such as Mozzoni, Kuliscioff, Schiff and Beccari are important because they propose a new model for women, far from the traditional one of obedient wife, daughter and mother; they fight for women's equality so that women can even aspire to traditionally male professions[31]. This vision of society and the right to equality was rejected by patriarchal society, but also by some female authors, such as Neera and Serao.[32] Neera is, perhaps, the only Italian female author who portrays "motherhood" positively, not considering it an unfavourable element, but a source of independence for *fin de siècle* Italian women.

One can comprehend, then, the unique conditions of Italian women and of women writers in particular, victims for centuries of unfavourable historical and social conditions. In the advanced western countries, especially France, England and the United States, divided between the liberal and socialist trends, feminism was born in the wake of a reforming tradition, with the Protestant Reformation as its ideological source, and represented an anti-conformist movement and a break with tradition. In Italy, the awareness of a *women's question* was late in developing and, subsequently, came to be associated with *social issues*. The first changes in Italy can be seen during the period of the Italian Reunification, when an atmosphere of rebellion also involved women who had begun to participate actively in the political and social life of the country. The period which followed the Reunification became the fulcrum of women's literary activity and was an era of much activism.[33] However, the demands of women collided head on against prejudice, economic backwardness, cultural provincialism and bigoted traditionalism. The fight for Italian unity helped Italian women to become aware of the submissive role they played in society, as Franca Pieroni Bortolotti notes: "1848 signals the revival of the idea of independence all over Europe, even among women,

[31] When one speaks of women's equality, one must remember that the battle, primarily, was for the rights of women of the bourgeoisie. The objective of this social class was the liberalisation of the professions.

[32] Antonia Arslan affirms that for *fin de siècle* writers, it was the norm, and not the exception, to publicly oppose the feminist cause. Regarding this, see Antonio Arslan, *Dame, galline e regine. La scrittura femminile italiana fra '800 e '900*. Ed. Marina Pasqui. Milano: Guerini, 1998, 49-50.

[33] The Reunification is the other great period in Italian history that witnesses interesting female literary activity with poets such as Vittoria Colonna, Gasparra Stampa and Veronica Franco.

bringing women's energies to the fore and operating later in various directions."[34]

Liberal Italy, which emerged with the unification of Italy, did not confront the *women's question* in social or juridical terms: "Women were mothers and workers, they may have been soldier's widows, they taught in elementary and middle schools, they were active in volunteering or in charitable associations and often they were even contributors. But the State never gave them any particular recognition for these services."[35] With the First World War, women assumed absolutely central roles because the State realised it needed them: they were workers in munitions factories, in commercial as well as public offices and they worked in the fields. Some upper class women enrolled in the Red Cross and joined in the National Council of Italian Women, in the spirit of emancipationist patriotism. This active participation in the productive and social life of the country resulted in Italian women acquiring greater professional competence, experience with institutions and the State and, above all, more confidence in their own abilities. A sense of confidence and hope was in the air among women, convinced of their ability to advance along the road to emancipation: "Everything led one to believe that, at the end of the war, in return for the sacrifices and services rendered, they would have acquired the same rights of citizenship as men, from the vote to equality in the workplace, as public recognition of the great and numerous contributions offered to Italian society as a group."[36]

By the 1930's, Italian women came of age, but further progress was blocked by the actions of the State and the fascist regime,[37] which cast her back to her traditional role of wife and mother: "The fascists meant to return women to the domestic hearth, confine them to their destinies as mothers and to restore patriarchal authority."[38] During fascism, feminism, viewed as a threat, was attacked with the imposition of threats which dragged Italian women back to the preceding century. The role of wife and mother became the foundation of the patriarchal structure of fascist Italy, which idealised and celebrated the "heroic" mother, begetter of sons for

[34] Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, *Alle origini del movimento femminile in Italia, 1848-1892*, Milano: Einaudi, 1963, 78.
[35] Victoria De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista*, 39.
[36] Victoria De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista*, 25.
[37] Mussolini rose to power in 1922 and the fascist regime lasted until the end of the World War II.
[38] Ivi, 17.

the fatherland[39]. The regime thus tried to circumscribe female creativity within the domain of the home. Her profile was returned along traditional lines, even from a legal point of view. The Rocco code (28 October, 1930) sanctioned the inequality between spouses. It allowed for "honour crimes and punished adultery and abortion as serious crimes; women, "for the exaltation of the greater good, in service to the Fatherland, even accepted Fascist policies meant to keep them from working, enclosed again within the walls of their homes and stripped of any economic independence."[40] This position was formalised as soon as Mussolini became Prime Minister in 1922; only three years later, in 1925, the fascist government enacted the first reform on the *women's question*, with the creation of ONMI (National Project for Motherhood and Childhood), for the so-called protection of mothers and children; and in 1935, laws were passed aimed at removing women from the work force.

Fascism, however, was sending mixed messages to women; leaders of youth organisations extolled domestic virtues and the role of the mother, but involved young girls in out of school activities in the interests of the party, of the Duce and of the nation, thus threatening, the authority of the traditional family and tempting young people with a more active and satisfying life. Victoria De Grazia affirms that this two-facedness drew its origin from the dualistic conception of the role of women in fascism. As perpetuators of the race, women had to embody traditional roles, to be stoic, silent and always available; as citizens and patriots, they had to be modern, that is combative and present in the public arena, ready to be mobilised if needed.[41] Although the fascist regime recognised the importance of women[42], it mustn't be forgotten that their duty to the nation was above all to have children. Despite the rhetoric on women, angels of the hearth and pillars of domestic economy, the decision making power of the family rested in the hands of the man and of the State.

---

[39] Toward the mid-1920's, the regime initiated the pro-birth policy, identifying women as a vital National resource. In his famous Ascension speech on 26 May, 1927, Mussolini placed the nation "at the head of his destiny" and placed the"defense of the race" at the centre of the nation's domestic policy.

[40] Antonietta Macciocchi, *La donna nera*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976, 36.

[41] Victoria De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista*, 204.

[42] Women participated in public meetings and in the Saturday fascist processions. There were, besides, significant increases in women's level of education beyond the elementary level and,it was established in the *Carta dedicata alle donne* that there would be no impediments for women who seriously intended to continue their studies to a high level. Da Victoria De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista.*

The social and economic framework in Italy was characterised, since unification, by great differences between the North and the South; these social inequalities impeded a unified strategy for resolving social and women's problems. To speak of Italian women as a single subject, even during fascism, was impossible because women themselves approached the *women's question* in different ways, based on what region and social class they came from: "class differences among women were never clear-cut under fascism, which exploited differences in customs and sexual behaviour in order to isolate women from the upper classes from those in the lower class."[43] At a time in which the anti-feminist policies of the regime affected all women, feminist associations of the bourgeoisie, although lacking strong organisation or broad consensus, were able to survive for about a decade after Mussolini came to power. They were, however, forced to renounce the battle for women's suffrage and to advance their interests through social voluntarism or cultural activities. On the other hand, the behaviour of even non-organised women demonstrates that Italian women weren't passive victims or deprived of hope because they were able, in the family and personal spheres, to make difficult choices.

Italian women, though limited by fascist conventions, were able to change their own lives. Lucia Lopresti (1895-1985), whose pen name was Anna Banti, began her writing career during the "black" period of fascism with the novel, *L'itinerario di Paolina* (1937), and immediately collided with the vision of the submissive woman, creating talented and rebellious female characters. Even before she became a writer, Anna Banti challenged social conventions, enrolling in university and advancing in her profession as an art critic. In taking this decision, Banti was supported by her father, who had always guided his daughter toward humanistic studies and the search for independence. The presence of Anna Banti in the history of Italian literature is linked to her vast body of work, which extends from her first work to *Un grido lacerante*, in 1981. The protagonists of her narrative works are women who rebel against the established role of mother, wife and daughter in the name of their social and intellectual independence. Although Banti doesn't define herself as a feminist author[44], her works certainly support the feminist cause and feminists recognised the importance of her role as an author and the feminist nature of her texts. Banti is one of the most prolific Italian authors of the second half of the twentieth century, but her works are barely

[43] Victoria De Grazia, *Le donne nel regime fascista*, 32.
[44] Regarding Anna Banti and the definiton of a feminist writer, see Chapter 2.

known to the public, which ignores them, or by critics, who have forgotten them, although in recent years some critics have rediscovered them; finding one of her books still in print is practically impossible, with the sole exception of her novel, *Artemisia*.

In Italy, "literary studies have always been articulated within a discriminatory system"[45]: Rebecca West notes that "contributions by women to Italian literature and culture have not in the past gone entirely unnoticed, but they have for the most part been evaluated according to traditions and criteria that made of them "secondary" or "minor" in the dominant context of canonical, male-authored works."[46] This female niche, at the total expense of the authors, was recognised by numerous female critics, such as Giuliana Morandini, Elisabetta Rasy, Anna Nozzoli and Lucienne Kroha, whose studies sought to investigate and stimulate interest in the works of women writers.[47] These investigations, which principally date from the '70's and '80's and coincide with the peak period of activity of the Italian feminist movement, point out the characteristic aspects of women's writing, with the objective of constructing a women's literary tradition. In *The Woman Writer in Late 19th Century Italy: Gender and the Formation of Literary Identity*, Lucienne Kroha, for example, bases her analysis on the search for exclusively female characteristics, or rather, that which describes "being a woman." Studies by Antonia Arslan and Sharon Wood, instead, are based on the analysis of women's production in a wider cultural and social context, looking for women's contributions to Italian literature. The analyses of Antonia Arslan and Sharon Wood reveal a preoccupation with studies which place women's literature within its own category, tending toward the "self-ghettoization" of the authors; according to them, it is probably this type of study which limits the discussion on the works of these authors and precludes them from being included in the wider literary tradition of the nineteenth and

---

[45] Rinaldina, Russell, ed. *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian Literature*, Westport: Greenwood, 1997, 42.

[46] Rebecca, West, "Women in Italian." *Italian Studies in North America.* Eds. Massimo Ciavolella and Amilcare A. Iannucci. Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1994, 199.

[47] See Kroha 1-6, Nozzoli 1-40, Morandini 5-24 and Rasy 7-36. Other studies include Biancamaria Frabotta, *Letteratura al femminile* (Bari: De Donato, 1980), Natalia Costa-Zalessow, ed., *Scrittrici italiane dal XIII al XX secolo* (Ravenna: Longo, 1982), Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, *Scritture, scrittrici* (Roma: Longanesi, 1988) and Sandra Petrignani, *Le signore della scrittura* (Milano: Tartaruga, 1983). During the same period, studies on Anglo-American literature concentrated on the recognition of a women's literary tradition. See Showalter *A Literature of their Own* 3-36.

twentieth centuries. I believe that only by evaluating women's production within the context in which it was written can we reconstruct a complete vision of Italian culture and the literary *milieu* of women's writing.

My research proposes to re-evaluate Anna Banti within the panorama of Italian writing and, at the same time, to examine her individual style and her contribution to the rebirth of the Italian novel; my analysis will highlight Anna Banti's stylistic and thematic characteristics in order to better understand her complex work. Banti is, first of all, an innovator of the modern Italian novel because she distances herself from artistic prose and from the neorealist novel, subjectively reformulating the pre-existing narrative structure. She is a promoter of women's identity and independence, in opposition to the order of a chauvinistic culture and society.

This introduction seeks to provide a historical, cultural and social panorama of the Italian *women's question*, with particular attention to the role of women in fascist society. Having analyzed this background and the difficult role of women in Italian society of the *fin de siècle* and 1900's, in the first chapter I discuss Anna Banti's personal experience as an author. I reconstruct her intellectual and personal biography, using her works and the testimonies of her contemporaries as resources; this recognition reveals the motives which drove Anna Banti to write and, most of all, the difficulties she encountered reconciling her life and her literary career. I analyze, besides, the characteristics of Anna Banti's novels and stories which bear witness to the author's different thematic horizon with respect to the neorealist movement and to authors such as Tozzi, Svevo and Kafka. Banti, for example, recounts the stories of married women, such as Amina, Ophelia, and Artemisia and she reflects on their experiences from their point of view, which also serves as a critique of the institution of marriage. In defining this reality, Banti assumes the female dimension as a privileged observer and describes it by way of a new perception, radically "other" than that of men.

In my analysis, moreover, I point out how the author created new subjective narrative structures, rediscovering the historical novel and autobiographical forms. In speaking of the bonds between Banti and the historical novel, I prefer to use the author's own words

> In all my reading, history is documented by contemporaries, by witnesses. My past work, in general, is 'historical interpretation' and not 'historical fiction', from the moment it is documented as based on a true story. But history has black holes, especially, since I prefer the history of the Dark Ages and the High Middle Ages. I have often sought to reweave the supposed gaps in the silent periods of the Dark Ages. 'La camicia bruciata'

> (1973) was written based on authentic documents found about Marguerite d'Orléans, cousin of Louis XIV. Among my readings were the Latin and Greek patrologies of Migne (from the 3d century to Innocent II, 1216), The Thomists, Pastor, the sacred oratories and, again, the histories of Paul Diacono, the chronicles of the Goths, the Franks, the Burgundians and Unni. In 'Je vous écris d'un pays lointain' (1971), I speak of a Roman villa occupied by the barbarians".[48]

The history alluded to by Banti must undergo the author's imaginative manipulation, which realistically fills in the "black holes" in the historical figures: "Allow yourselves to realistically invent" protests Banti with Marguerite Louise, who wishes to emphasise the silent limits which history conceals. Regarding this very thing, Jo Ann Cannon comments: "Banti's exercise in historical – literary symbiosis is part of a larger enterprise- the reconceptualization of Western history from the perspective of marginalized subjects"[49] and Biagini affirms that Banti's historical vocation is neither a cultural reference (the 1600's) nor is it the "contents" of the novel, but seems to be the means to recover a lost reality, the same all encompassing will, always disappointed, of the modern novel.[50] Anna Banti seeks not to remember the past but to interpret it in light of the present, to provide a plausible and complete view of the lives of historic personages who can once again "speak" to her and to her contemporaries, and above all, to victimized or rebellious women: "[Anna Banti] can either consider the "wiping out of women due to oppression" or "perceive in the female historical experience pockets of resistance and of the refusal of imposed roles." [51]

After discussing Banti's historical novel, I approach women's autobiographical writing in order to understand the tradition that prompts Anna Banti to conceal her "I" in her female characters. The "I" of the author is never openly a part of the story, but always resonates in the voices of Paolina, Maria Alessi, Artemisia, Lavinia, Marguerite-Louise and Violante. In this section, I also draw on examples from the autobiographical novel, *Un grido lacerante.*

---

[48] Interview by Sergio Falcone with Anna Banti in 1982, in www.annabanti.splinder.com

[49] Jo Ann, Cannon, "Artemisia and the Life Story of the Exceptional Woman." *Forum Italicum* 28.2 (1994), 326.

[50] Enza Biagini, *Anna Banti*. Milano: Mursia, 1978.

[51] Maria Ornella Marotti, ed. and introd. *Italian Women Writers from the Renaissance to the Present.* University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, 105.

In the second chapter, I examine the way in which Anna Banti rebels against the discrimination against women and, in particular, against female artists. Banti creates narrative examples of intellectually active women who are able to value themselves in a society which reduces women to the role of wife and mother. Here, I analyse the way in which Banti's characters approach marriage and motherhood which, very often, they must renounce in favour of their professional realisation.

I examine, moreover, Banti in relation to the feminist movement in order to understand if she can be defined as a feminist author or if her perspective lies beyond this movement. To find an answer to this, I analyze Anna Banti's critical essays, published in the literary review, *Paragone*, reflecting on *Ermengarda e Geltrude*, *Storia e ragioni del romanzo rosa*, *Responsabilità della donna intellettuale*, *Dedicato alle ragazze*, La *mamma lavora* and *L'emancipation non c'entra*. In the second chapter, I also begin to delineate the possible personal motives which may have prompted Anna Banti to develop her themes on the institution of marriage and motherhood and the way in which her characters deal with them. This is a possible key to the reading of Banti's work which I intend to adopt in the fourth chapter of the thesis.

In the third and fourth chapters, I analyze the historical novel, *La camicia bruciata*, published in 1973, an as yet little known and studied text. My study seeks to demonstrate that the historical novel helps the author give voice to the complex and difficult female reality which, despite the passing of centuries is still subject to social and cultural restrictions. The third chapter includes a structural analysis of the novel and of its principal characters, concluding with a study of the principal themes of the work: marriage and motherhood.

In the fourth chapter, I demonstrate the impossibility, for Banti, of narrating history objectively, because the "raw facts"[52] are used by the author to create what for her was not "a historical novel but a hypothetical interpretation of history."[53] The historical characters are divided between characters in the novel and real people: they are two co-dependent entities but, at the same time, remain distinct and give form to Banti's work. To enable me to develop this argument and to understand how much Banti approaches or retreats from historical fact, I use some of her sources, *The House of Medici* by Christopher Hibbert and *The Last Medici* by Harold Acton. I examine the link between reinterpretation and history in sections

[52] Anna Banti, *Opinioni*, Milano, Il Saggiatore: 1961, 42.
[53] Anna Banti, *Un grido lacerante*, Milano, Rizzoli: 1981, 120.

of the novel which can be compared with "historically verified" facts, in order to reflect on the literary transposition the author makes of them.

To back my interpretive hypothesis, I place the novel, *La camicia bruciata*, within the context of the renaissance of the historical novel in Italy by means of, most of all, authors whose production concentrates on the present and past roles of women, long abandoned in silence. I explain how authors rediscover the historical novel genre, but distance themselves from tradition in favour of an innovative interpretation of the concept of historical truth, in which the interest shifts from general events to individual experience.

Finally, I intend to demonstrate how Banti uses narration to reflect her vision of women, of the institution of marriage and of the choice of motherhood. My objective is to demonstrate how the author provides a personal interpretation of the motives that drive Marguerite-Louise and her other characters to act. In this dynamic are reflected, I believe, aspects of the psychology and beliefs of the author.

CHAPTER ONE

THE POETICS OF ANNA BANTI

Banti was a highly tormented, leading personality in the history of Italian culture of this century. She wrote two masterworks, *Artemisia* (1947) and *La camicia bruciata* (1973), and perhaps the most beautiful narrative of the twentieth century, *Lavinia fuggita* (1950). She was a difficult and little read novelist, a reserved woman, unapproachable, authoritarian; with the ways, attitude and haughtiness of a queen; with great vulnerability hidden within herself, in her moments of solitude.[1]

It is with these words that Cesare Garboli remembers Anna Banti, acknowledging the importance and the complex and contradictory richness of one of the most important authors of the twentieth century. After her death on September 2, 1985, the figure and the artistic production of Anna Banti aroused great interest among scholars, but this success was rarely, if ever, accompanied by public success[2].

Born in Florence on the 27th of June, 1895, Anna Banti enrolled to the registrar, Lucia Lopresti in the Faculty of Letters in Rome and in 1919, got her start in art criticism, collaborating in "Arte" with Adolfo Venturi. Her first article, *Marco Boschini, scrittore d'arte,* based on her thesis, was praised by Croce in an instalment of "Critica."[3] This scientific production continues until 1934, when the author published the narrative, *Cortile,* the first narrative writing in which she used the pseudonym, Anna Banti. In 1937, *l'Itinerario di Paolina* was printed, but her success as an author doesn't arrive until 1940 with *Coraggio delle donne* and in 1947 with *Artemisia,* the novel that made her famous. Along with her narrative production, Banti also dedicates herself to intense critical activity, which

[1] Cesare Garboli, *Paragone,* n. 426.

[2] The meagre public success could be due to the fact that Anna Banti's novels were judged by critics, difficult and because they couldn't be found in bookstoresthe only novel to achieve any success and which could be found in bookstores, is *Artemisia.*

[3] The criticism of Benedetto Croce, born in 1903, was one of the cultural reviews of the early 1900's which, contrary to the other numerous ones merging at this time but which ended after just a few years, continued for 42 years, until 1944.

extended from literature to art and cinema: Banti conducted her critical activity mainly in "Paragone", the review founded in 1950 by her husband, Roberto Longhi, and released in two series, one literary, for which Banti was co-director, and the other artistic. After the death of her husband, Banti directed both sections and presided over the Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte "Roberto Longhi", which she tenaciously sustained and promoted and which was housed in the Florentine villa, "Il Tasso". In 1961, her collection of essays, *Opinioni*, was released containing her contributions in literary and film criticism.

These are the fundamental biographical facts that remain on Anna Banti, in that the author preferred to conduct her life very privately. Those who were unable to or didn't know how to approach her describe her as a cold person, unsociable and proud. But, from the testimonies of her most trusted collaborators and closest friends, it emerges that this behaviour was only a defensive strategy. A mask made of attitude and pride, which she wore to hide that "lump of suffering" that burdened her:

> Anna Banti never revealed herself. [...] I tried many times to get near her [...] inside her landscape of inner truths, crisscrossed by human injuries, of truths lived. No, she offered her writings, perhaps masterpieces, but wouldn't and couldn't sully herself with childish involvements. These would have placed the dimension in which she lived at risk: distance and contemplation.[4]

Generous by nature, Anna Banti, as Alberto Arbasino[5] remembers, was more variegated in manner and behaviour because she came from a class of writers (the likes of Gianna Manzini, Maria Bellonci, Paola Masino and Alba de Cèspedes) who were very wrapped up in their own literary work at a "high" level. Banti kept up this demeanour all her life and, reluctant to speak of herself, she never explained her decision to abandon her artistic studies and dedicate herself to writing. Whenever she was asked the reason for this change, she would only say: "I had many arrows in my quiver. I enjoyed politics, cinema and painting enormously. I became a writer."[6] One could accept this explanation if, in her last novel,[7] *Un grido*

[4] Grazia Livi, *Narrare è un destino*. Milano: La Tartaruga, 2002, 98-99.
[5] Alberto Arbasino, "Ricordo di Anna Banti." *Paragone*, June, 2005: 116.
[6] Sandra Petrignani, *Le signore della scrittura* . Milano: La Tartaruga, 1984, 102.
[7] Bantian criticism is unanimous in recognising the highly autobiographical nature of this novel. Maria Luisa Di Blasi affirms that,although it is a somewhat ambiguous text on an interpretive level, and that it doesn't contain openly autobiographical refernces, the vicissitudes of the protagonist, Agnese Lanzi, can easily be referred to the personal events of Anna Banti: cfr. *L'altro silenzio. To*

lacerante, Banti hadn't revealed another truth. Agnese Lanzi, the author's twin spirit, is unable to forget "her vaguely ambitious nostalgia for the art historian she never was"[8], which, in any case, she couldn't go back to: "sacrificing literature to the illusion of art scholarship displeased her husband who thought very highly of his wife's writing"[9]. One could advance the hypothesis that, for love and the immense admiration she had for her husband, Roberto Longhi, the celebrated art critic, Banti let go of her own aspirations as an art historian. She felt herself to be in the company of an exceptional man and would have done nothing to tarnish the image of the Maestro, to the point that the move to writing was done with great reservation:

> I would like to have used my husband's surname. But he had already made it great and it didn't seem right to me to steal it. I didn't like my real name, Lucia Lopresti. It wasn't musical enough. Anna Banti was a relative of my mother's family. A very elegant noblewoman, very mysterious. Ever since I was a little girl, I was very curious about her. So I became Anna Banti. After all, we make our own name. No one ever said that we must keep our birth name forever.[10]

For the author, Fausta Garavini[11], Banti's former student, *Grido* is, above all, a novel about widowhood. Thus, we needn't believe in the bitter renunciation of the author: this would be nothing more than another legend related about Banti, a story that Banti herself had created and recounted to whoever wanted to hear it. According to Garavini, there were already prominent elements of the writer within the art historian, Anna Banti, yes, attentive to pictorial values, but, above all, keen to understand the sensibilities of the artist; these same elements hadn't escaped Croce, who had been able to see in Longhi's student the novelty of investigation used by a writer of seventeenth-century art: "[…] it would be all the same for her to speak of riding in a gondola through the canals and lagoons of Venice; of a grizzled old man in white and covered in a damask overcoat, accompanied by a bizarre, long-haired man".[12] Moreover, one need only

---

read "Un grido lacerante" by Anna Banti in the light of a women's transcendency. Firenze: Le Lettere, 2001, 23-24.

[8] Anna Banti, *Un grido lacerante.* Milano: Rizzoli, 1981, 66.

[9] Ivi.

[10] Sandra Petrignani, *Le signore della scrittura*. Milano: La Tartaruga, 101.

[11] Fausta Garavini, "Di che lacrime", *Paragone*, June, 2005:71-114.

[12] Anna Banti, "Marco Boschini", *L'Arte*, anno XXII, fasc.1-2, January-April, 1919.

glance at Banti's bibliography[13] to realise that, over the course of her long career, Banti divided herself between literature and art history, and whenever possible, she combined them. It is for this reason that Garavini traces Banti's suffering not so much to her contradictory vocation, but to what has always been regarded by specialists as the inadequacy of the work of female novelist. Within the Italian cultural *establishment*, in fact, Anna Banti never felt appreciated or respected in the same way as other authors; she was never at ease in that patriarchal literary world which she had to move in, but which treated her with condescension as the wife of Roberto Longhi:

> In the reviews they had used the moniker, "signora", instead of her baptismal name. Like Eugenio Montale, speaking of *Allarme sul lago*, in 1955 in the "Corriere della Sera": "To ask mercy for the three poor women carries the art of signora Banti enough..." What critic would have dared to write: signor Gadda, signor Landolfi? That "signora", which appears an act of homage, like removing your hat, was very different from the English, "Mrs". It was, truthfully, the sign of a restrained irony toward one who, coming from the so-called weaker sex, had earned herself, with a kind of arm twisting, the right to be treated on a par.[14]

It is from this that Banti's diffidence toward cultural power arises, as well as the behaviours that serve to protect her from her literary foes. The turning point in the author's life was made possible by the death of Longhi[15], or better yet, by the realisation of that death: Maestro before husband, it was he who "enlivened her, and worked miracles to restore her faith and security"[16], it was him who she measured herself against, compared herself to, "the lesson learned from this was to be herself, that is, distinguish herself until torn away by detachment, until the choice, at the cost of blood and tears, was another road."[17] Now that she was left without the Maestro, she felt truly vulnerable and in pain; now she must defend herself from a much more insidious enemy, old age and loneliness. What sense does it make anymore to remain silent? Left alone, Banti must again take stock of her own existence and all her doubts resurface, the regrets and the feelings of guilt, removed and driven back into the

---

[13] See, a rigarding, the bibliography by Laura Desideri in *Paragone*, December, 1990: 73-120.
[14] Grazia Livi, *Narrare è un destino*, 96.
[15] As Testori observes, "Ritratto di Anna Banti", *Paragone*, December, 1990: 13-21.
[16] Anna Banti, *Un grido lacerante*, 79-80.
[17] Margherita Pieracci Harwell, "Anna Banti tra narrativa e scritti d'arte", *Paragone*, June, 2005: 131.

unconscious. One thing only doesn't seem foolish to her, and it's the cry of pain that proclaims his absence:

> She hated life, she wanted to undo it, but how? She hated the words, pronounced continuously: the body, the coffin, the funeral, she crushed them like flies. They wanted to know her intentions. What intentions? She didn't respond, but began to understand...Now it was up to her to decide, and there were voices in her head. Perhaps now was the time to ask the question she asked as a child: Who am I?[18]

Responding to the question, *Who am I?*, is the governing intent of, if not all of Anna Banti's works, then most of them, from her first novel, *L'Itinerario di Paolina*, until her novel as a developed author, *Un grido lacerante*. To find the answer to this question, the author must disguise her current reality and her life, entering into "the remoteness of history without using the "I". On the contrary, she throws it far away, she transforms it into an artist, an abbess, an engineer, into a princess."[19] Her novels and narratives are like cryptograms because, telling the stories of other women, Banti tells of her own life. Those restrictions and wounds that mark the female reality in time, and also hers. This "chameleon-like"[20] writing will become a distinctive trait in all of Banti's production: it will always be problematic to categorise her in a distinct movement or literary genre because many literary influences merge in her works, from artistic prose to neorealism to the classics (above all Balzac, Manzoni, Defoe and Verga), to authors like Virginia Woolf, as well as suggestions of her favourite painters, Lorenzo Lotto, Fra Angelico, Diego Velasquez, Claude Monet and Giovanni da San Giovanni: It will be useful to pursue Banti's route […] but not without difficulties if the result is a hasty attempt at labelling, "artistic prose", "narration as memory", "feminism", "neorealism", but also in place of a grounded attempt at immediate collocation in the history of the modern novel."[21] In her literary "solitude", however, Banti prefers the autobiographical and historical genres, where the poetry of her cultured style, subtly allusive and elegantly refined, joins with her love of art history and her interest in women's issues.

---

[18] Anna Banti, *Un grido lacerante*, 79-80.
[19] Grazia Livi, *Narrare è un destino*, 98.
[20] The scholar, Ernestina Pellegrini speaks of the chameleon-like nature of women's literature, in "Donne allo specchio. Riflessioni su una collezione di biografie imperfette," *Passaggi: Letterature comparate al femminile*. Ed. Laura Borghi. Urbino: QuattroVenti, 2001,113.
[21] Enza Biagini, *Anna Banti*, Milano: Mursia, 1978, 6.

Autobiographical perspective is a recurrent characteristic in her work, even if the clues appear absolutely camouflaged, hidden in the biographies of historical or imaginary characters which the author brings "to life":

> Autobiography becomes a central issue in Banti's production as a novelist. In large part, Banti's works shun first-person narration, but still employ the genre of autobiographical writing. The two novels that most explicitly belong to this category are the first and the last, like the two ends of a circle enclosing Banti's whole career: *Itinerario di Paolina*, which, in accordance with the author's will, was never republished after 1937, and *Un grido lacerante*, which appeared when she was in her eighties.[22]

Itinerario di Paolina is Anna Banti's narrative point of departure, but also the internal point of departure of her personal story: it is, in fact, easy to recognise the child or adolescent Banti in the solitary and shy Paolina. The polar opposite of the sentimental remembrances that infuse literature from Rousseau to Proust, the author chooses to tell her story through impersonality as this allows her to distance herself from herself: it is told in the third person and in the present, which means the distancing and elimination of childhood memories, of the formulas of evocation that arouse them: "It is precisely through the use of the third person that the unlimited possibilities for separation from the "fact" derives: the person who writes from outside one's self can see and describe even an absolutely interior event, without tarnishing the credibility of the story."[23] Everything becomes functional to the story Paolina is telling: the fragments of memories of the first images, the first games, the failed attempts at communicating with others; the discovery of one's own existence, the trials of the world: school, holidays, the banal and common experiences of a bourgeois girl. According to Biagini, many points of the *Itinerario* apply to the rules of psychoanalytical interpretation. It is as if Paolina's story served to explain Paola's present and to recount to Anna her own self:

> Banti retains narrative distance through the use of a second person narrator, who distances herself from the child she is inventing while creating an alliance with the reader by inviting us to participate in this invention and indeed to reinvent ourselves in the same way. By directly addressing the reader, the narrator invites the reader to observe rather than remember Paolina. The reader witnesses Paolina's strategies of self invention first

[22] Daria Valentini, "Introduction", *Beyond Artemisia: Female Subjectivity, History, and Culture in Anna Banti*, Annali d'Italianistica: Chapel Hill, 2004, 5.
[23] Enza Biagini, *Anna Banti*, 13.