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The 'Pulp' generation between avant-garde and tradition(s): legacies, gender and youth culture in the narrative of Silvia Ballestra, Rossana Campo and Isabella Santacroce

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**THE 'PULP' GENERATION BETWEEN AVANT-GARDE AND
TRADITION(S): LEGACIES, GENDER AND YOUTH
CULTURE IN THE NARRATIVE OF SILVIA BALLESTRA,
ROSSANA CAMPO AND ISABELLA SANTACROCE**

Submitted by CLAUDIA BERNARDI

**for the degree of PhD
of the University of Bath
January 2009**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the work of Silvia Ballestra, Rossana Campo and Isabella Santacroce within the context of the so-called ‘pulp generation’ of writers who emerged in 1990s Italy. My analysis addresses three main concerns of these writers: youth culture, gender, and literary legacies.

The Introduction provides the methodological coordinates of my study, stating my initial aims, tracing the evolution of my interest in the writers and of my approach to their narratives, and outlining the structure of the thesis. Chapter 1 identifies themes and styles common to the ‘pulp generation’, referring to the work of, among others, Niccolò Ammaniti, Silvia Ballestra, Enrico Brizzi, Rossana Campo, Giuseppe Culicchia, Aldo Nove, Isabella Santacroce, Tiziano Scarpa and Simona Vinci. I focus on the critical reception of these writers and the support they received from the members of 1960-70s avant-garde, *Gruppo 63*. In Chapter 2, I map out the links between the 1990s writers and some of the authors who emerged in the 1980s, and particularly Pier Vittorio Tondelli, teasing out similarities and differences between the two generations. The remaining three chapters are devoted to in-depth analyses of my three main writers, who have been selected for having already published a sizeable body of texts, for exhibiting a very distinctive evolution in themes, styles, and genres, and for having already acquired the status of ‘canonical’ writers of their generation. Chapter 3 on Ballestra, Chapter 4 on Campo, and Chapter 5 on Santacroce chart this evolution from their early postmodern fiction, dominated by youth themes and experimental language and structures, to more realist forms and mature themes of their later works, which combine a continued engagement with narrative form with a commitment to communication and with gender-oriented thematics. My investigation brings into relief the different treatment of these thematics and the styles adopted to convey them by the three authors. More importantly, it highlights the intertextual dialogue each one of them conducts with the tradition(s) of women’s writing, something that has been overlooked by critics in Italy and abroad. The Conclusion offers a brief sketch of the evolution of these three writers and of ‘pulp’ narrative in general.

For my mother and my father

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This thesis is about the links that exist between different generations of writers, and especially about the literary mothers and fathers new authors choose for themselves. It seems therefore appropriate that I should dedicate it to my mother and father: they have taught me the value of reading and studying, and have continued to provide me with Italian books all the way to New Zealand. Without the moral and emotional support of my family, of my sister Anna Bernardi and my brother-in-law Juri Zinani, as well as my parents Marisa Bertozzi and Antonio Bernardi, I would have never completed this work.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Nanni Balestrini, Renato Barilli, Ivano Burani and Giuseppe Caliceti edited an anthology of thirty-two texts presented by thirty-three emerging authors at the *Ricerca* conferences held in Reggio Emilia between 1993 and 1999.¹ At the end of that decade and after seven years of promoting a cultural event which had been widely debated in the media, at times in quite controversial terms, its organisers were thus ensuring that the role of *Ricerca* in discovering and nurturing the new literary talents was properly acknowledged. With their selection, they established a tentative canon of those writers who, in their view, had produced the most innovative work during those years. By doing so, they were also responding to those critics who had accused *Ricerca*, with its strong connection with the 1960s-70s *neoavanguardia*, to be a self-serving project for the benefit of the old *Gruppo 63*, whose choices of new authors would prove ephemeral at best. As I detail in the first chapter of this thesis, the history of *Ricerca* and the relationship between the *neoavanguardia* intellectuals and the new generation they promoted is a complex and fascinating one, where it is often difficult to ascertain who was looking for intellectual mentors and who was trying instead to identify their heirs. But the later literary output of the authors featured in the anthology proved that the new writers of the 1990s associated with *Ricerca* had a lasting shelf life, one that went beyond the ‘pulp’ and *cannibale* labels which had been used to describe them in the mid-1990s.

The title of the anthology, *Narrative invaders. Narratori di ‘Ricerca’ 1993-1999*, echoes the subtitle of the single issue of the journal *La bestia*, published in 1997 and intended as the first in a series about the emerging Italian narrative. Comparing the thirty-three authors of the anthology to the twelve

¹ Nanni Balestrini, Renato Barilli, Ivano Burani and Giuseppe Caliceti (eds.), *Narrative invaders. Narratori di ‘Ricerca’ 1993-1999* (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2000). The authors, presented alphabetically, are: Niccolò Ammaniti and Luisa Brancaccio, Silvia Ballestra, Simone Battig, Marco Berisso, Davide Bregola, Enrico Brizzi, Romalo Bugaro, Giuseppe Caliceti, Rossana Campo, Mauro Covacich, Greta Danes, Sandrone Dazieri, Giuseppe Ferrandino, Marco Franzoso, Matteo Galiazzo, Peppe Lanzetta, Stefano Massaron, Gulio Mozzi, Paolo Nelli, Paolo Nori, Aldo Nove, Tommaso Ottonieri, Francesco Piccolo, Antonio Rezza, Livio Romano, Maurizio Salabelle, Isabella Santacroce, Tiziano Scarpa, Vitaliano Trevisan, Simona Vinci, Lello Voce and Dario Voltolini.

included in *La bestia 1. Narrative invaders!*,² by Balestrini and Barilli, it is easy to see how a distance of only three years had already put a different perspective on the narrative of the 1990s and on the framework used for the evaluation of its most significant voices. While all the writers present in *La bestia* appeared also in the anthology, they were now part of a far more inclusive group, one that better reflected the variety of voices produced by *Ricerca*: ‘Veniva [...] manifestata senza alcun dubbio l’intenzione di premiare un carattere di novità, ma, anche qui, senza specificare troppo e in modi univoci che cosa si volesse intendere con questo concetto’.³ The focus was still on those who had distinguished themselves for their experimentalism, but the terms used to define their innovative contribution now included authors who had never been described as ‘pulp’. The disappearance of the exclamation mark from the title of *Narrative invaders. Narratori di ‘Ricerca’ 1993-1999*, as compared to the title of the earlier text, became symbolic of the shift from the early enthusiasm for a small and groundbreaking group of writers whose youth had been hailed as a breath of fresh air in the Italian literary landscape of the 1990s, to a more comprehensive evaluation of the narrative production of those years. This was further confirmed by Barilli’s critical assessment of the poetry and fiction of that period, in his book *È arrivata la terza ondata. Dalla neo-avanguardia alla neo-neo-avanguardia*, where he reframed the concepts of ‘pulp’ and *cannibali* in the context of the more inclusive ‘scrittura nuova-nuova’.⁴

Although ‘pulp’ is now considered merely one of the many different strands of the Italian literary production in the 1990s, its impact should not be underestimated. Critics are still debating the intrinsic quality of trends and individual voices from those years, but there is no doubt that authors such as Niccolò Ammaniti, Silvia Ballestra, Enrico Brizzi, Giuseppe Caliceti, Rossana Campo, Giuseppe Culicchia, Peppe Lanzetta, Aldo Nove, Isabella Santacroce, Tiziano Scarpa and Simona Vinci caused a minor revolution in the language and

² Nanni Balestrini and Renato Barilli (eds.), *La bestia 1. Narrative invaders!* (Rome: Costa & Nolan, 1997). The writers featured in it are: Niccolò Ammaniti, Silvia Ballestra, Enrico Brizzi, Giuseppe Caliceti, Rossana Campo, Giuseppe Culicchia, Matteo Galiano, Giulio Mozzi, Aldo Nove, Francesco Piccolo, Isabella Santacroce and Tiziano Scarpa.

³ Balestrini, Barilli, Burani and Caliceti, ‘Introduzione’, in *Narrative invaders. Narratori di ‘Ricerca’ 1993-1999*, pp. V-XIII (p. VI).

⁴ Renato Barilli, *È arrivata la terza ondata. Dalla neo-avanguardia alla neo-neo-avanguardia* (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2000).

themes of Italian narrative, while creating a new, younger readership. They successfully combined literary fiction, youth culture and a representation of contemporary society in texts that proclaimed themselves to be deliberately experimental. The life of the generation born in the 1960s and raised in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s was at last portrayed by the same writers who experienced it: adolescent angst, the school and university years, first love and first sexual experiences, the conflict with the family, all those moments that characterise the passage from youth to adulthood, became central themes in the fiction of the early 1990s. More importantly, these subject matters were expressed in a language that strived to be as adherent as possible to the Italian really used by that generation at the time.

The new *Bildungsromane* of authors such as Silvia Ballestra, Enrico Brizzi, Rossana Campo or Giuseppe Culicchia were innovative not only because they described what it meant to grow up as young Italians in the 1990s, but also because they did so in a language that mimicked the jargons and cultural references of their generation. Thus, the novels of the early and mid-1990s introduced vocabulary and sentence structures of the real conversations of the period into the literary language. The standard literary Italian of mainstream literature was disrupted by texts that attempted to reproduce spoken conversations. The specialistic languages of international rock and pop music, club culture and drug culture, all paramount to the lives of 1990s youth, became a prominent feature in the Italian used by the new writers, as did the constant use of English, a sign of the globalisation of youth culture and lifestyle in postmodernity. But the generational *Bildungsroman* was not the only element of the new narrative that captured the attention of critics, who highlighted – both in positive and negative terms – the new writers’ ability to describe all aspects of contemporary society: the overwhelming role played by the mass media in our lives, television *in primis*, but also the internet; the obsession with consumerism across all social classes, encouraged by and reflected in the rise of tycoon Silvio Berlusconi to political power; the transformation of culture into a market product, with the subsequent merging of all differences between high and low, between literature and genres and, in narrative terms, between the most diverse linguistic registers. All this contributed to the creation of books which gave voice to the sense of

alienation of the new generation, frustrated by the impossibility to effect any political change in the post-ideological Italy of the 1990s.

The arrival of ‘pulp’ and the so-called *cannibali* writers in the mid-1990s, with their violent and often disturbing descriptions of the contemporary world, was the moment when the new narrative reached its most disruptive and controversial point: Niccolò Ammaniti, Peppe Lanzetta, Aldo Nove, Isabella Santacroce, Tiziano Scarpa and Simona Vinci shocked Italian readers and critics alike with their stories of sexually active children, sons who killed their parents for a shampoo, young men who raped and tortured young women as a punishment for not knowing the lyrics of a song, university students who embarked upon destructive rampages through the Italian capital to beat their pre-exam boredom. As I will explain in my opening chapter, the controversy created, and in part orchestrated by publishers, around the new fiction did not subtract from the almost shocking sense of new it brought about in terms of themes and language. However, the *svecchiamento* of the Italian literary scene attributed to the ‘pulp’ generation was not a complete novelty, as it modelled itself on the 1960s-70s *Gruppo 63* and took up the legacy of the 1980s, Pier Vittorio Tondelli’s work in particular. The ‘pulp’ trend would not be considered as relevant today as I believe it is, had it been based exclusively on its challenge to the literary mainstream and had it turned out to be the one-trick phenomenon that many of its critics predicted. Instead, almost all the names that appeared in the 2000 *Narrative invaders* anthology and, indeed, in the earlier *La bestia I. Narrative invaders!* have endured the test of time, many of them having published a considerable body of work since their early *Ricerca* days.

My research reflects the same development as its subject matter. Initially, I intended to analyse the ‘pulp’ phenomenon as a collective movement imbued with the youth and popular culture typical of the age of its practitioners, which was, incidentally, also my own age. Excited by the prospect of reading books that spoke my language, described my lifestyle and made references to the same books, music, comics, films and television shows that were the common background of those who were born in Italy in the 1960s and had grown up in the 1980s-90s, I felt compelled to respond to what I saw as the limits of the critical discourse on the new writers: namely, the failure on the part of older critics to identify the cultural coordinates of the new fiction. Most of the studies on the

‘pulp’ narrative to date, have concentrated on two main areas of investigation: first, its thematic innovation, introduction of youth themes and linguistic experimentalism, seen as the natural development of the avant-garde of the 1960s-70s and of the generational narrative of the 1980s;⁵ second, the eminently ‘pulp’ aspects of the movement, such as the writers’ portrayal of the postmodern world, their reflections on the loss of identity caused by cultural globalisation, the influence of the mass media and the market on the narrative language, the formal and linguistic fragmentation expressed in the new fiction.⁶ While both approaches take into account the presence of many cultural and literary influences, from the Italian *neoavanguardia* to Tondelli, from Salinger to Stephen King, from Iggy Pop to Quentin Tarantino, the analysis has rarely gone beyond taking note of the obvious references, already explicitly stated by the authors themselves. Therefore, a large part of the rich intertextual discourse entertained by the ‘pulp’ generation with a variety of literary traditions has often been overlooked.

In the course of my research, I realised that the more the work of the ‘pulp’ generation progressed, the clearer became their dialogue with a variety of literary traditions. The idea that the writers of the 1990s were choosing between the lessons of the *neoavanguardia* and the generational writing of the 1980s seemed increasingly reductive. This became particularly true of women writers who, in varying degrees, had been undertaking a parallel exchange with women authors from the past ever since the early 1990s.⁷ I decided therefore to focus on three women writers, Silvia Ballestra, Rossana Campo and Isabella Santacroce, in order to examine in detail the evolution of those I consider to be the most interesting and influential novelists among those who emerged in those years, each with her own distinctive voice. All three were received very positively by critics and readers alike when their first novels were published in the early and

⁵ See, for example, Barilli, *È arrivata la terza ondata*; Filippo La Porta, *La nuova narrativa italiana. Travestimenti e stili di fine secolo* (Milan: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995, revised edition 2003); Elisabetta Mondello (ed.), *La narrativa italiana degli anni novanta* (Rome: Meltemi, 2004).

⁶ See Stefania Lucamante (ed.), *Italian Pulp Fiction: the New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers* (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), and Marino Sinibaldi, *Pulp. La narrativa nell'era della simultaneità* (Rome: Donzelli, 1997).

⁷ The international conference ‘Contemporary European Women Writers: Gender and Generation’, which I attended at the University of Bath in the Spring of 2005, helped me to define the final focus of my research. A selection of papers presented at the conference, including my own, can be found in Adalgisa Giorgio and Julia Waters (eds.), *Women’s Writing in Western Europe: Gender Generation and Legacy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).

mid-1990s: Ballestra was applauded for her books on the adventures of university students from the Italian provinces of Marche and Abruzzi, told in a mixture of tragic and comic registers; Campo was praised for her talent in giving voice to the spoken language and dialogue of young Italian women entering adult life; and Santacrose, perhaps the most controversial and experimental of the three, was acclaimed for her creation of a fragmented, highly individual language suitable to speak about her female characters' search for self-fulfilment, including the darker sides of drug consumption and sexual promiscuity. As well as being representative of the 'pulp' generation, the evolution of Ballestra's, Campo's and Santacrose's writing shows them transforming into sophisticated authors who constantly change their style as they grow, challenging themselves and the expectations of their readers. This growth, as we shall see in the chapters I devote to each of them, is strictly linked to the literary traditions and legacies they choose to engage with, thus encouraging a study of their work that takes into account its web of intertextual references, also those that are not immediately evident on a first reading.

Chapter 1 provides the overall context and critical framework of my thesis, including a discussion of the terms 'pulp', '*cannibale*' and 'generational writing'. I outline the rise of this new group of writers, their favourite subject matters, their work on language, their use of genres and the innovative elements present in their fiction. I describe also the critics' response to the new authors, with a focus on the debate between the members of *Gruppo 63* who promoted them through the *Ricerca* meetings, and those who attacked the emerging writers as a means of rehashing old controversies regarding the *neoavanguardia*. In both cases, the critics' concern with past literary issues, such as the debate about the relative merits of realist narrative versus more experimental forms, sidelined the truly innovative aspects of the 1990s fiction, namely its engagement with contemporary popular culture. Furthermore, while the relationship between the 'pulp' generation and the literary fathers of the *neoavanguardia* is undoubtedly a significant one, an emphasis on such a relationship, whether in positive or negative terms, does not take into due account the equally important influence of Tondelli and other authors of the 1980s. Furthermore, I suggest that even those who acknowledged the dialogue between the younger authors and a variety of cultural sources, from *Gruppo 63* to Tondelli, from American minimalism to genres of mass

consumption, have ignored the role female literary models have played for many women writers of the 1990s.

In Chapter 2, I address the relationship between the ‘pulp’ generation and the legacy of the 1980s. I do so by showing how many of the themes, narrative patterns and linguistic experimentation developed in the novels of the early 1990s are inherited from authors who had become prominent in the previous decade. Similarly, the references to national and international popular culture and cult figures such as Céline, Kerouac or Bret Easton Ellis derive in great part from Tondelli and his generation. The connection between the new novelists of the 1980s and those of the 1990s can be summarised as a shared sense of cultural displacement, a common estrangement from Italian society, which is perceived as conservative and provincial. Tondelli’s fascination with American and Northern European cultures returns in the fiction of the new writers, who feel disconnected from the Italian literary canon. They express their own sense of non-belonging through characters who desire to escape Italy’s geographical confines. However, as I demonstrate by comparing Ballestra’s Antò Lu Purk to Ballestra’s, Campo’s, Santacroce’s and other authors’ female characters, gender often plays a key role in determining the success or failure of the escape journey. Using Rosi Braidotti’s theoretical framework and her distinction between the exile as displaced wanderer and the nomad as traveller by choice,⁸ I argue that the women writers of the 1990s deromanticise the pattern of journey and return established by Tondelli, rewriting it from a female perspective.

Chapter 3 begins with an illustration of how the remarkable presence of women among the most successful authors of the 1990s has often been reduced to a sociological note or a passing comment on the irrelevance of the category of gender in the current production and reception of Italian writers. Contrary to this notion, however, Ballestra, Campo and other women of their generation have become increasingly vocal in their need to establish their narrative voices in gender-specific terms. I trace the development of Ballestra's fiction to show her move from the early experimental production (*Compleanno dell'iguana*, 1991; *La*

⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

guerra degli Antò, 1992; and *Gli orsi*, 1994)⁹, inspired as it was by *Gruppo 63* and Tondelli, to the realist trilogy centred on the autobiographical character of Nina: *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (1998), *Nina* (2001) and *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (2002).¹⁰ This second phase is marked by two important stylistic changes: the adoption of a realist mode based on the tradition of women's writing, with a focus on romantic love and the family, and the use of female narrators and focalisers. The driving force behind this evolution is the encounter with Joyce Lussu, about whom Ballestra wrote a biography in the form of a conversation: *Joyce L. Una vita contro* (1996).¹¹ Lussu became for Ballestra a literary mentor who allowed her to articulate a confident female voice and to reconnect with women's literary traditions she had previously overlooked. Lussu's example of political writing was also important in defining Ballestra's own engagement with contemporary society and history through a kind of writing that gives priority to communication with the readers, rather than focusing exclusively on formal concerns. The negotiation between experimental and realist forms, between autobiographical narrative and committed literature, between male and female narrators, and between a variety of literary traditions, from the *neoavanguardia*, to Tondelli to Lussu – as well as canonical writers of the Western tradition, such as Leopardi and Chekhov – guides the evolution of Ballestra's work and is still evident in her more recent output. In the last two years she has published three very different books where all her narrative interests coexist side by side: the linguistically experimental family saga, *Tutto su mia nonna* (2005); the realist novel *La seconda Dora* (2006), set primarily during the fascist period and the war years; and *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli* (2006), a feminist pamphlet that denounces the misogynistic backlash rampant in contemporary Italian media, society and culture.¹² Ballestra's growth from a cult author of the 'pulp' generation into a mature writer who moves between genres, styles and literary traditions has taken unexpected turns, which could not have

⁹ Silvia Ballestra, *Compleanno dell'iguana* (Ancona: Transeuropa and Milan: Mondadori, 1991); *La guerra degli Antò* (Ancona: Transeuropa and Milan: Mondadori, 1992); *Gli orsi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994).

¹⁰ Silvia Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1998); *Nina* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001); *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002).

¹¹ Silvia Ballestra, *Joyce L. Una vita contro* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1996).

¹² Silvia Ballestra, *Tutto su mia nonna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005); *La seconda Dora* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006); *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2006).

been understood without taking into account her deliberate choice of a symbolic mother figure like Lussu.

In Chapter 4, I address the evolution of Campo's work from a slightly different perspective. Unlike Ballestra, Campo acknowledged the legacy of women's writing and feminist thought from her early works. Therefore, her development does not show an overt distancing from the fathers of the *neoavanguardia*, while she also searched for literary mothers. On the contrary, she negotiated the relationship between a variety of legacies, from the *Gruppo 63*, to historical feminists such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, to the Italian and French feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s, paying homage, albeit in an ironic way, to all of them. Her acceptance of the tradition of women's writing is expressed through her autobiographical writing and her use of the romance genre. The *Bildungsromane* of her younger years become the more complex, introspective and darker novels of the maturity. Drawing on Susan Sniader Lanser's study on narrative voices in women's writing,¹³ I argue that Campo's version of communal voices in her first three novels is based on the experience of feminist group dynamics and dialogues. In *In principio erano le mutande* (1992), *Il pieno di super* (1993) and *Mai sentita così bene* (1995),¹⁴ the dialogue between the many female characters dominates the narrative, reflecting the dialogue existent in the tradition of Western women's writing, often directly quoted in the texts. At the same time, the use of spoken language reflects the *abbassamento linguistico* that was and remains a tenet of *neoavanguardia* authors such as Nanni Balestrini and Edoardo Sanguineti. Campo's later fiction, from *L'attore americano* (1997) to *Più forte di me* (2007),¹⁵ focuses instead on the conflict between the first-person female narrator and her male lovers or father figures, a conflict that is also symbolic of the love/hate relationship between Campo and her literary fathers.

¹³ Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992), *Il pieno di super* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993) and *Mai sentita così bene* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995).

¹⁵ Rossana Campo, *L'attore americano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997); *Mentre la mia bella dorme* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999); *Sono pazza di te* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001); *L'uomo che non ho sposato* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003); *Duro come l'amore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005); *Più forte di me* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007).

In chapter 5, I examine the work of Santacroce, one of the ‘pulp’ writers who has been most resistant to acknowledging her debt to any literary tradition in interviews, yet the one who has made most explicit use of a wide web of intertextual connections in her novels and short stories. Santacroce’s epigraphs, present in all her books, are very important keys to the interpretation of her writing, often allowing different levels of interpretation depending on the reader’s knowledge and understanding of the intertext, whether this is a rock song from her early ‘pulp’ novels, such as *Fluo* (1995), *Destroy* (1996) or *Luminal* (1998), or a paragraph from the Marquis De Sade’s *oeuvre* as in her latest epic of adolescent libertines, *V.M. 18* (2007).¹⁶ This is particularly true in the case of references to women writers and poets, such as Cristina Campo, Sylvia Plath, Amelia Rosselli or Anne Sexton. In a close reading of *Lovers* (2001) and of the short story ‘La tigrecigno’,¹⁷ I analyse the complex use of references to Sexton’s themes of incest and suicide, and to Cristina Campo’s poetry of family loss and poetic inspiration. While failure to grasp the intertextual allusions does not preclude an understanding of Santacroce’s novel, knowing to what extent Santacroce is using or rewriting the original model makes the reading experience complete and multi-layered, in the same way that knowledge of the youth club and drug culture of the early 1990s enhanced the reading of her earlier fiction. Although women’s literary tradition is by no means the only legacy inherited by Santacroce’s fiction, the obsessive investigation of family themes and the imagery borrowed from Sexton and Campo are also present in her subsequent novels (*Revolver*, 2004; *Dark Demonica*, 2005; and *Zoo*, 2006),¹⁸ thus demonstrating that her reading of cult figures from the international tradition of women’s poetry continues to have a lasting impact on her writing, even as she takes up the Western male canon, as she does with her rewriting of Seneca, De Sade and Lewis Carroll in *V.M. 18*.

A research project that had started as an attempt to redirect the critical discourse on the fiction of the 1990s away from its debt to the *neoavanguardia* and towards the impact of youth lifestyle and culture on the new generation of

¹⁶ Isabella Santacroce, *Fluo. Storie di giovani a Riccione* (Rome: Castelvevchi, 1995); *Destroy* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996); *Luminal* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997); *V.M. 18* (Rome: Fazi, 2007).

¹⁷ Isabella Santacroce, *Lovers* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001); ‘La tigrecigno’, in Antonio Franchini and Ferruccio Parazzoli (eds.), *Sandokan* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 249-52.

¹⁸ Isabella Santacroce, *Revolver* (Milan: Mondadori 2004); *Dark Demonica* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005); *Zoo* (Rome: Fazi, 2009).

writers has thus become an investigation of the variety of traditions that generation has chosen to engage with in the course of time. The focus on three women who are representative of the writers who attended the *Ricerca* meetings, but who also developed strong individual voices, has allowed me to explore the area I saw as the most neglected by critics as I began my study, namely, the role played by gender in the new narrative and the impact of women's literary tradition on the work of the women writers of the 1990s as they grew from young and 'pulp' into the complex and mature authors they are now.

CHAPTER 1**THE NEW ITALIAN NARRATIVE OF THE 1990S: THEMES, POETICS AND CRITICAL ASSESSMENT****1.1 Introduction: a new generation of writers**

A highly significant Italian literary event of the 1990s was the emergence of a new group of writers who can be collectively described as the ‘pulp’ generation. At the start of the decade, a number of critics and publishers became aware of a new generation of authors and encouraged the publication of their writings. Niccolò Ammaniti (b. 1966), Silvia Ballestra (b. 1969), Enrico Brizzi (b. 1974), Giuseppe Caliceti (b. 1964), Giuseppe Culicchia (b. 1965), Rossana Campo (b. 1963), Aldo Nove (b. 1967), Isabella Santacroce (b. 1968), Tiziano Scarpa (b. 1963) and Simona Vinci (b. 1970) are among the most successful and influential writers who emerged in those years. They were immediately discussed by critics and media as a group, in light of their perceived similar themes, as well as of their common linguistic and formal concerns. Editorial strategies were devised to maximise the success of these young authors, including the creation of specific *collane* by both established and new publishing houses, aimed at promoting their work. Alternative, smaller and provincial publishers from all over the country, such as Argo, Castelvechi, Ediesse, mimimum fax, pequod, Theoria, Transeuropa and Zelig, effectively rose to national level in the early 1990s thanks to the presence of young writers in their lists. Similarly, more prominent publishers created their own *collane* to exploit the phenomenon, such as Feltrinelli’s ‘I Canguri’ and Einaudi’s ‘Stile Libero’, the latter inaugurated in 1996 with the publication of the controversial anthology *Gioventù cannibale*.¹ At the same time, smaller publishers acted as talent scouts, first of all Transeuropa (Ancona), whose director Massimo Canalini nurtured and launched the careers of, amongst others, Ballestra, Brizzi and Andrea Demarchi (b. 1964), in order to later pass them on to the more powerful Baldini & Castoldi, Rizzoli and Mondadori.²

¹ Daniele Brolli (ed.), *Gioventù cannibale. La prima antologia italiana dell’orrore estremo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996).

² See Marco Romani, ‘Il frastuono della letteratura’, *Liberazione*, 8 May 1996. Silvia Ballestra’s *Compleanno dell’iguana* (1991) and *La guerra degli Antò* (1992), Enrico Brizzi’s *Jack Fruscante è uscito dal gruppo* (1995) and Andrea Demarchi’s *Sandrino e il canto celestiale di Robert Plant*

In this chapter, I outline the main features of the new narrative of the 1990s, focusing in particular on the so-called ‘pulp’ writers, within the context of the critical debate which has surrounded this phenomenon from its inception to the present. Themes, plots, narrative structures, style and language of a number of authors will be identified and discussed. My choice consists of a selection of the writers I consider the most innovative and influential amongst those who have already entered the 1990s narrative canon, as it has been outlined and developed from the mid-1990s to recent years by those who have attempted an assessment of the period. I refer in particular to Marino Sinibaldi (1997), Renato Barilli (2000), Stefania Lucamante (2001), Filippo La Porta (1995, revised edition 2003) and Elisabetta Mondello (2004).³ With important methodological differences and contrasting critical evaluations, their work on the new narrative of the 1990s seems to implicitly accept and endorse, although with variations as to who belongs to which group, the early selection and classification of new authors already proposed in 1997 by Nanni Balestrini and Barilli in *La bestia*.⁴ From a strong *neoavanguardia* standpoint, Barilli and Balestrini focused primarily on the experimental aspects of the new writing. According to them and to the other contributors to *La bestia*, Ammaniti, Ballestra, Brizzi, Caliceti, Campo, Culicchia, Nove, Santacroce and Scarpa represent the more interesting ‘pulp’ voices of the 1990s, while Matteo Galiano (b. 1970), Giulio Mozzi (b. 1960) and Francesco Piccolo (b. 1964) are included as representative of the *linea fredda* of the same generation, stylistically different yet sharing with the first group a common interest in describing the changing reality and languages of contemporary Italy.

Besides discussing the definitions – including ‘pulp’ and *linea fredda* – adopted by critics, this chapter also includes a number of considerations on the evolution and the limits of the early critical views of *Gruppo 63*. I then suggest how alternative critical perspectives that take into account the role played by

(1997), were released almost simultaneously by both Transeuropa (Ancona) and Mondadori (Milan).

³ Renato Barilli, *È arrivata la terza ondata. Dalla neo-avanguardia alla neo-neo-avanguardia* (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2000); Filippo La Porta, *La nuova narrativa italiana. Travestimenti e stili di fine secolo* (Milan: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995, revised edition 2003); Stefania Lucamante (ed.), *Italian Pulp Fiction: the New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers* (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001); Elisabetta Mondello (ed.), *La narrativa italiana degli anni novanta* (Rome: Meltemi, 2004); Marino Sinibaldi, *Pulp. La narrativa nell'era della simultaneità* (Rome: Donzelli, 1997).

⁴ Nanni Balestrini and Renato Barilli (eds.), *La bestia 1. Narrative invaders!* (Milan: Costa & Nolan, 1996).

youth and gender provide more insightful interpretations of those works and authors, without, however, wishing to dismiss the important role played by the *neoavanguardia* itself in gathering media, critical and public attention for the new narrative and in providing useful tools of analysis for those texts. Finally, I examine the current state of the critical discourse on the authors of the 1990s, now that a decade has passed since the controversy around the ‘pulp’ narrative erupted and we can avail ourselves of the self-assessment of some of the writers, such as Ballestra, Brizzi, Campo, Nove and Scarpa, who were at the centre of the controversy and who demonstrated their worth by continuing to write successfully.

1.2 The new narrative of the 1990s and the *neoavanguardia*

A large part of the critical and media success reaped by new writers in the early/mid-1990s was due to the support they received from *Gruppo 63*, the authoritative group of avant-garde intellectuals who had dominated the experimental literary scene in Italy in the 1960s. Critics such as Barilli, Balestrini, Angelo Guglielmi and Edoardo Sanguineti were initially drawn to the new writers by the similarities they saw between the young authors and their own experimental approach thirty years earlier.⁵ The main theatre of this encounter between the emerging writers and the 1960s influential avant-garde intellectuals was a series of annual conferences – held in Reggio Emilia – called ‘Ricerca: laboratorio di nuove scritture’, launched in 1993 and discontinued in 2005, when the event moved to Macerata for one final edition. The choice of Reggio Emilia itself, where one of the historical meetings of *Gruppo 63* was held in 1964, suggests that the link between the *neoavanguardia* and the new writers is to be found precisely in the experimental nature of the young authors’ writings. However, while the first of the *Ricerca* meetings, entitled ‘1963-1993: Trent’anni di ricerca letteraria’,⁶ focused on the new poetry of *Gruppo 93* (Mariano Bajno, Marco Berisso, Alessandra Berardi, Piero Cademartori, Giuseppe Caliceti, Biagio Cepollaro, Lorenzo Durante, Gabriele Frasca, Marcello Frixione, Paolo Gentiluomo, Rosaria Lo Russo, Tommaso Ottonieri and Lello Voce) and on

⁵ *Neoavanguardia* and ‘pulp’ writers are effectively two generations apart, as most of the members of *Gruppo 63* were born in the 1930s.

⁶ Renato Barilli and others, *63/93 Trent’anni di ricerca letteraria. Convegno di dibattito e di proposta (Atti del convegno)* (Reggio Emilia: Elytra, 1993).

the continuity between the different generations of poets,⁷ the 1996 edition, entitled ‘Nuove tendenze’, underlined instead the differences between the two generations of novelists who had followed the *neoavanguardia*, that is to say the writers of the 1980s and the 1990s. The 1996 meeting was a turning point, contributing the most to the perception of the new 1990s writers as a cohesive group, united by common themes, styles, languages and narrative strategies.

In 1996 and in the following years, the Reggio Emilia meetings grabbed the attention of the cultural pages of major newspapers and magazines, opening a heated debate on the nature of experimental writing in Italy and outlining a definition of the general trends of the new narrative. Terms like ‘pulp’ and *cannibale* were introduced for the first time in an attempt to describe the characteristics shared by the individual authors. Critics and journalists asked themselves whether the new fiction had any real literary value, whether it was just a passing fad or would have a lasting impact on Italian narrative. Balestrini, Barilli, Guglielmi, Sanguineti and other critics close to the positions of *Gruppo 63* claimed that the new writers were rejuvenating the national literary landscape – which they perceived as out of touch with contemporary Italian reality and with global cultural developments – through the development of innovative language and themes. Other critics, historically in contrast with the *neoavanguardia*, such as Roberto Carnero, Roberto Cotroneo, Cesare Garboli and La Porta, expressed their reservations on the newest generation by questioning the validity of *Gruppo 63* itself and the importance they placed upon experimentation.

The *neoavanguardia* emphasised not only the difference between the new narrative of the 1980s and that of the 1990s, but also, and more interestingly, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ authors of the 1990s generation. Inevitably, they assessed the new writers in terms of their engagement with linguistic and formal experimentation, one of the main concerns of *Gruppo 63*’s literary project three decades earlier. The terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ were used ironically by the neoavant-garde critics, reflecting the terms adopted by the media in relation to the political debate that was taking place at the same time within the Italian Left. Following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party in 1991, the struggle of the Italian Left to redefine its own identity was

⁷ On *Gruppo 93*, see Barilli, *È arrivata la terza ondata*, pp. 58-79.

portrayed somewhat simplistically by the media as a split between a conciliatory, centrist, moderate position, ideally represented by one of the leaders of the newly-created Democratic Party of the Left, Walter Veltroni, and a more anti-capitalistic, leftist, radical line, embodied by the leader of the Communist Refoundation Party, Fausto Bertinotti. The language used by the mass media to describe this political conflict made liberal use of the adjectives *buona/buonista* with reference to the moderate line, and *cattiva/cattivista* for the more radical faction. The same terminology was appropriated by the literary critics, which was not surprising in a context, such as the Italian one, where political and intellectual discourses have historically always overlapped and influenced each other. The word *buona/buonista* was adopted to designate the introspective and linguistically non-experimental fiction written by some of the most successful authors of the 1980s: according to the *neoavanguardia* critics such authors had influenced the least interesting writers of the 1990s. Some of the most popular *buonisti* authors of the 1980s – Andrea De Carlo (b. 1952), Daniele Del Giudice (b. 1943), Marco Lodoli (b. 1956) and Sandro Veronesi (b. 1959) – were summarily grouped together and associated with writers who emerged in the 1990s, such as Alessandro Baricco (b. 1958), Paola Capriolo (b. 1962) and Susanna Tamaro (b. 1957). In the negative opinion of the critics who identified with the *neoavanguardia*, all these writers were guilty of using mainstream, standard language and style that did nothing to innovate Italian narrative as well as of adopting predictable sentimental, introspective, family-centred plots concerning the interactions of middle-class characters, or of creating escapist, intellectualised fantasies filled with references to the European literary canon, as in the case, for example, of Capriolo. According to this negative evaluation, these authors failed to engage with the reality of contemporary Italy and to represent the social, cultural and linguistic shift the country had undergone in the previous decade and was still undergoing. Balestrini argued that these writers ‘confezionano pagine leziose e artefatte [che] rasserenano il lettore, senza inquietarlo e porgli problemi’; theirs, he insisted, are ‘opere anestetiche, piccole droghe per evadere dalla realtà e non fare i conti con reali contraddizioni’.⁸ He maintained that being experimental equates with being politically engaged, thus echoing Francesco Leonetti’s claim

⁸ Quoted in Mirella Serri, ‘Scrittori buonisti, erbaccia sotto l’Ulivo’, *La Stampa*, 4 May 1996.

that the common, commendable trait of the *neoavanguardia* and the ‘pulp’ generation consisted, on the contrary, of ‘proporsi come opposizione al mondo esistente’.⁹ Moreover, added Severino Cesari, unlike the dialogical new writers of the 1990s, who engaged with the wide variety of linguistic codes provided by different media, the authors of the 1980s (and their 1990s successors) had preferred to follow the ‘versione piccoloborghese’ of the ‘linea monologica’ described by Bachtin: ‘dove il narratore tiene sotto controllo tutto, nulla sfugge e tutto è ricondotto al dispiegarsi di uno sguardo che serenamente, osservando la realtà, la riconferma e ne viene riconfermato’. What was missing, Cesari suggested, was the challenge to that reality that only a narrative deeply immersed in its cultural and linguistic changes is capable of producing.¹⁰

Balestrini, Barilli, Cesari, Gugliemi, Leonetti and their *neoavanguardia* colleagues preferred a growing group of loosely connected authors – labelled variously as *cattivisti*, *maledettisti*, *cannibali* or ‘pulp’ – influenced by the postmodern American culture of citation and parody, thematically and stylistically close to the work of writer and film director Quentin Tarantino (b. 1963) and generally to contemporary American literature and cinema. In this sense, Ammaniti, Ballestra, Brizzi, Caliceti, Campo, Nove, Santacroce, Scarpa and Vinci wrote a type of fiction that could be considered groundbreaking both linguistically and thematically. Their Italian literary models were identified in the experimental production of *Gruppo 63* itself, in particular of Balestrini (b. 1935) and Sanguineti (b. 1930), as well as of Alberto Arbasino (b. 1930) and Gianni Celati (b. 1937), two authors who had strong connections with the *neoavanguardia* at its beginnings, but who later followed independent narrative directions. Furthermore, the work of 1980s author Pier Vittorio Tondelli (b. 1955) was seen as extremely influential for the younger generation. Indeed, Tondelli’s acknowledged influence on the 1990s writers forced the *neoavanguardia* critics to re-evaluate, in more positive terms, the writings of Tondelli himself and a handful of other novelists from his generation, in particular Aldo Busi (b. 1948), Enrico Palandri (b. 1956) and Claudio Piersanti (b. 1954), whom had admittedly been underestimated and overlooked at first by *Gruppo 63*. In his 2000 book on the *terza ondata* of

⁹ Quoted in Marco Romani, ‘La letteratura che c’è e non si vede’, *Liberazione*, 9 April 1993.

¹⁰ Severino Cesari, ‘Narratori dell’eccesso’, in Nanni Balestrini and Renato Barilli (eds.), *La bestia 1. Narrative invaders!* (Milan: Costa & Nolan, 1996), pp. 24-36 (p. 33).

experimental writing – as he calls the 1990s generation, after the historic European 1920-30s avant-garde and the Italian 1960s *neoavanguardia* – Barilli presented a complete reassessment of the writers of the 1980s: while he still accused them of not having been able to form a unified literary and intellectual front with a shared poetics, he also praised them for reviving the narrative desire and pleasure, after the 1970s crisis of fiction, through the sheer strength of their individual narrative voices.¹¹

As I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, the link between the 1980s and 1990s writers is in fact more complex and more significant than *Gruppo 63* were able to see in the mid-1990s, concerned as they were with claiming the new writers as part of their own literary legacy. For Guglielmi, the new fiction of the 1990s marked the successful return of experimental narrative, after the crisis of the very concept of narrative in the 1970s on the one hand, and the disinterest in formal and linguistic experimentation in the 1980s on the other: ‘abbiamo constatato la presenza di giovani scrittori capaci di riprodurre il romanzo a trama, senza rinunciare a quelle finalità estetico-formali che (sole) garantiscono il valore di un’opera letteraria’.¹² The return to what Guglielmi calls ‘romanzo a trama’ coincided with a return to realistic and even hyper-realistic plots, used by the writers of the ‘pulp’ generation to reveal reality’s loss of meaning and to represent the media-induced homologation of contemporary languages and lifestyles. Their stories expressed ironically the apocalyptic loss of meaning of fictional reality, as represented, for example, by Ammaniti’s ‘L’ultimo Capodanno dell’umanità’, a novella included in the collection *Fango* (1996)¹³ which resolves the progressively schizophrenic web of storylines in the explosion of the apartment building where they are set. He saw the young writers of the 1990s as dramatically different from the mainstream narrative of the 1980s generation, precisely for their use of storylines and a language which were meant to disturb the readers and upset their expectations of narrative subject matters. Balestrini summarised this contrast in decisive cultural and political terms when he said that the aim of the Reggio Emilia conferences was ‘la critica degli anni Ottanta: un periodo d’involuzione generale, infame per la cultura, oltre che per la politica:

¹¹ Barilli, *È arrivata la terza ondata*, pp. 25-57.

¹² Angelo Guglielmi, ‘Pulp fiction alla romana’, *L’Espresso*, 30 May 1996, p. 213.

¹³ Niccolò Ammaniti, ‘L’ultimo Capodanno dell’umanità’, in *Fango* (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), pp. 7-122.

restaurazione, riflusso, poca e pessima letteratura'.¹⁴ The 1990s 'pulp' generation marked, in his view, a change of direction towards a narrative that was once again both formally innovative and politically engaged, a narrative that was not afraid to confront the Italian reality of its time, never giving in to escapist temptations, no matter how pessimistic its outlook on that reality was.

The reaction of other critics to *Gruppo 63*'s appraisal and their lists of *buoni* and *cattivi* was equally strong. The ensuing debate on the relationship between experimentation and tradition in Italian literature took the tone of a *resa dei conti* between Italian intellectuals who had supported and those who had antagonised the *neoavanguardia* three decades earlier. The discussion of the new writers became often secondary to the discussion of the *neoavanguardia*'s motivations for supporting them. Garboli dismissed the new wave by discrediting its older supporters: 'Il Gruppo 63 è più noioso di un neonato che non fa che strillare',¹⁵ he claimed, an opinion echoed by Cotroneo: 'Il Gruppo 63, misteriosamente vivo oggi, era già morto nel 62. Niente di ciò che è stato scritto da loro è sopravvissuto. Non c'è sperimentalismo che tenga'.¹⁶ If such statements do not say much about the specific characteristics and literary merits of the 1990s generation, then they reveal how the unresolved conflict between experimentation and tradition that had divided Italian intellectuals in the 1960s was still critically relevant in the final decade of the twentieth century.

As late as 2003, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *Gruppo 63*, the question of the true legacy of the avant-garde and of the debt the 1990s generation owed their self-proclaimed fathers was still open for debate. Barilli insisted on a direct link between the 1960s avant-garde and the most significant 1990s writers who had, in his view, skipped the narrative *terra bruciata* of the 1970s, but who had also been inspired by such exceptional voices of the 1980s as Busi and Tondelli, and to a lesser degree Palandri. Palandri himself rebutted Barilli's position, by maintaining that the writers of the 1980s had been unjustly underestimated by the *neoavanguardia*. Along similar lines, Carnero insisted that not only were the members of *Gruppo 63* still trying to claim for themselves a questionable literary legacy by bypassing an entire generation (the writers who

¹⁴ Quoted in Laura Lilli, 'Blob sessantatré', *La Repubblica*, 1 March 1997.

¹⁵ Marco Ferrari, 'Meglio buoni che vecchi', *L'Unità*, 7 May 1996.

¹⁶ Roberto Cotroneo, 'Un'idea: abolire l'autor giovane', *L'Espresso*, 30 May 1996, p. 215.

emerged in the 1980s), but also that the authors they had championed in the 1990s as their ideal children (whom Carnero circumscribed to the *cannibali* launched by the Einaudi anthology) had proved to be, by and large, fleeting and ultimately uninfluential.¹⁷ While I agree with both Palandri's and Carnero's view that the *neoavanguardia* intellectuals had underestimated the 1980s writers and overestimated their own influence on the experimental writing of the 1990s, I argue in this thesis that the 'pulp' generation was in fact consciously engaging with many literary legacies: *Gruppo 63*, the 1980s writers and many more literary influences besides, such as the tradition of women's writing that supporters as well as detractors of the avant-garde seemed to skim over very quickly both in the 1993 and 2003 celebrations of the *neoavanguardia*. As early as 1996, Nicola Signorile had summarised, ironically but precisely, the gist of the most polemical phases of this controversy: 'Sulla pelle dei trentenni si consuma un'antica vendetta'.¹⁸

1.3 Themes and styles of the new narrative of the 1990s

To their credit, *Gruppo 63* recognised from the start that, along with elements of continuity between their own works and those of the new writers – first of all, as we shall see in the next chapter, *abbassamento linguistico* and the use of oral and other non-literary linguistic codes, as the main stylistic strategy able to narrate such a reality – there was a fundamental difference between the poetics of the two generations. Guglielmi explained: 'Mentre le opere degli anni Sessanta sfidavano il linguaggio, che forzavano nei suoi limiti poveramente comunicativi [...] le opere dei nuovi scrittori raggiungono lo stesso obiettivo lavorando sui contenuti [...] forzando la trama realista'.¹⁹ A degree of self-criticism is evident also in Barilli's admission that the avant-garde of the 1960s produced 'libri illeggibili che rappresentano i nostri scheletri nell'armadio'.²⁰ The *neoavanguardia* praised the new writers for their ability to be experimental and still produce communicative

¹⁷ Barilli's, Carnero's and Palandri's interventions, as well as those by Ballestra, Campo and Mauro Covacich can be found in the transcription of the *tavola rotonda* held at the University of Bologna on Sunday, 11th May 2003, at the conference on *Gruppo 63: 'Il Gruppo 63 e la ricerca narrativa successiva'*, in Francesco Agnello and others, *Il Gruppo 63 quarant'anni dopo. Bologna, 8-11 maggio 2003. Atti del convegno* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2005), pp. 273-301.

¹⁸ Nicola Signorile, 'Ragione o sentimento. Nuovissimi scrittori al bivio', *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 11 May 1996.

¹⁹ Guglielmi, 'Pulp fiction alla romana'.

²⁰ Quoted in Annamaria Guadagni, 'Franti versus Garrone', *L'Unità*, 12 May 1996.

and readable narratives: their originality should not therefore be confused with the deconstructive practices favoured by the 1960s avant-garde. More importantly, the debate on the fiction of the 1990s ignited by the *neoavanguardia* had the effect of sparking the interest of the media and of the general public in the new authors, as well as encouraging the critics to trace a tentative genealogy of contemporary experimental Italian literature. It also brought about a first classification of the main authors, themes and stylistic features that has proved useful to this day.

However, the discussion of the new authors in these terms had serious limits, first and foremost the lack of specific insights into the 1990s youth culture, which was at the core of the new writers' early works. Another problem with the approach adopted by both the *neoavanguardia* and its detractors was the tendency to formulate generalizations and all-inclusive definitions, which did not account for the full spectrum of the 1990s production. It soon became apparent that the division between *buonisti* and *cattivisti*, mainstream and 'pulp', *minimalisti* and *cannibali* – with the implicit negative value the *neoavanguardia* attributed to the first term of each pair – was insufficient to account for the diversity of writing produced by the new generation. Guglielmi and Barilli themselves highlighted the significant differences that existed within the heterogeneous group of the so-called *buonisti*, acknowledging the linguistic complexity of such authors as Galiano, Mozzi and Piccolo, in contrast with, for example, Baricco and Tamaro. In fact, as we have already seen, Mozzi, Piccolo and Galiano were included in *La bestia*, one of the earliest in-depth critical appraisals of the new narrative. Mozzi's participation in the 1995 *Ricerca* meeting had already encouraged critics and writers to rethink the automatic equivalence between experimental writing and the strictly 'pulp'/*cannibale/cattivista* style, with its display of baroque linguistic fireworks, its dialogical references to a multiplicity of media, codes and references, its use of violent and shocking plots embedded in the tradition of contemporary youth culture. Mozzi, claimed Barilli, 'si richiamava a una scrittura "bianca", contro cui, però, non era proprio il caso di scagliare anatemi'.²¹ It was precisely in relation to Mozzi and Piccolo that Guglielmi spoke of 'minimalismo

²¹ Renato Barilli, 'Ricerca e la narrativa nuova-nuova', in Balestrini and Barilli (eds.), *La bestia I. Narrative invaders!*, pp. 8-18 (p. 15).

orgoglioso' and 'minimalismo inquietante',²² to be distinguished from the standard, unchallenging minimalism of Baricco and Tamaro. Similarly, Barilli defined Mozzi's work 'scrittura tutt'altro che umile', but rather 'controllata, fredda'.²³ Both critics claimed that the difference between these authors and mainstream ones was to be found in a kind of linguistic experimentation achieved through a tightly controlled use of everyday Italian vocabulary: their language, streamlined and reduced to its most essential communicative function, was able to describe the horrors of contemporary Italian life with almost surgical precision, thus as effectively as the baroque vocabulary and accumulation of styles and registers typical of the 'pulp' writers. Indeed, both styles, at their most effective, produced a sense of linguistic awareness in the readers that forced them take stock of the reality they were exposed to. Franco Cordelli even suggested a parallel between the 'stile impassibile' of the minimalists and the 'stile fiammeggiante' of the 'pulp' writers: 'Come non vedere nel minimalismo la faccia di una medaglia che dall'altra esibisce il pulp?' Faced with a reality that has lost meaning and where actions appear to be incapable of influencing the political and social realms in any significant way, the best minimalist and 'pulp' authors produce narratives that reflect each other, in order to 'illuminare o violentare la giornata'.²⁴

Together with Mozzi's *Questo è il giardino* (1993), *La felicità terrena* (1996) and *Parole private dette in pubblico* (1997),²⁵ the most successful representative of this *linea fredda* is Vinci, who burst onto the Italian literary scene with her emotionally detached novel of child cruelty and sexual abuse, *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (1997). The horror of the latter is enhanced precisely by the contrast between the simplicity of the standard Italian used by the writer and the violence of the world she describes. Vinci further proved her talent with her evocative, disturbing, at times horrific tales on the nature of inanimate objects and rituals of ordinary life in the collection, *In tutti i sensi come l'amore* (1999).²⁶ The assessment of the *scrittura fredda* as a legitimate form of experimental writing and a powerful way to express the anguish of contemporary reality has led to a re-

²² Angelo Guglielmi, 'Felicità, ti guardo da lontano', *L'Espresso*, 30 May 1996, p. 213.

²³ Serri, 'Scrittori buonisti erbaccia sotto l'Ulivo'.

²⁴ Franco Cordelli, 'I ragazzi del Pulp senza una bussola', *La Stampa*, 26 June 1996.

²⁵ Giulio Mozzi, *Questo è il giardino* (Rome and Naples: Theoria, 1993); *La felicità terrena* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996); *Parole private dette in pubblico* (Rome and Naples: Theoria, 1997).

²⁶ Simona Vinci, *Dei bambini non si sa niente* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997); *In tutti i sensi come l'amore* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999).

evaluation of also some of the works of the more mainstream authors: among them, the chillingly explicit stories of domestic violence and everyday madness that appear in Tamaro's early collection *Per voce sola* (1991), a book that Nove himself admits to love 'tantissimo',²⁷ no matter how apparently distant Tamaro was from the poetics and world of both the *neoavanguardia* and 'pulp' narrative.

During the 1997 edition of *Ricerzare*, some critics referred to this emerging group of *scrittori freddi* – parallel and complementary to the 'pulp' group – as 'scuola veneta', which included, together with Mozzi, such writers as Simone Battig (b. 1974), Marco Franzoso (b. 1965) and Vitaliano Trevisan (b. 1960). Drawing on the work of the latter three, Caliceti suggested that the tension towards cultural globalisation, implicit in many stylistic and linguistic choices of the 'pulp' writers, is counterbalanced by an equally strong desire to retrieve one's regional roots.²⁸ I agree with Caliceti that the new fiction brings together international and local youth culture references by incorporating them in a narrative language that echoes both foreign idioms and regional dialects. Franzoso's first novel for example, entitled *Westwood dee-jay (Il miracolo del nord-est)* (1998), is written entirely in Venetian dialect modified by 1990s youth jargon. Used to narrate the relentless failures and delusions of the novel's protagonist, this language functions as an ironic comment on his personal aspirations and on the political, separatist aspirations of the Northern League, with which he sympathises.²⁹ Similarly, a distinct Southern voice also emerged, one that included linguistically baroque and/or thematically hyper-realistic authors such as the Neapolitans Peppe Lanzetta (b. 1956) and Giuseppe Ferrandino (b. 1958), or the Sicilians Giosuè Calaciura (b. 1960) and Silvana Grasso (b. 1952), but also writers associated with the *linea fredda*, such as Piccolo, from Caserta, who had, as we have already seen, featured in *La bestia*. In my discussion of the three writers whom I consider representative of the main strands of the new 1990s narrative and of its later developments – the *marchigiana/bolognese* Ballestra, now living in Milan; the Neapolitan/Genoese Campo, who has expatriated to Paris; the *romagnola*/Roman Isabella Santacroce, whose early novels are set in London, Amsterdam and Zurich, – I will argue that the theme of regional roots

²⁷ Susanna Tamaro, *Per voce sola* (Venice: Marsilio, 1991).

²⁸ See Rita Rocchetti, 'Scusa, che lingua scrivi?', *La Gazzetta di Reggio*, 14 May 1997.

²⁹ Marco Franzoso, *Westwood dee-jay (Il miracolo del nord-est)* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1998).

and of the linguistic and cultural origins of the characters whose lives are narrated, is of paramount importance. The reality that is the focus of their narratives is often conveyed through their young characters' twofold negotiation of the limits of their local background and the impact of global culture and technology on their lives.

1.4 Youth culture and the 'pulp' generation

In order to fully understand the experimental nature of the new narrative, it is therefore necessary to be able to recognise the cultural framework of Italian youth in the 1990s. Most critics noted early on that the new fiction was characterised by both high and popular culture elements and a vocabulary that draws on youth jargons, pop music, cinema, comic books, television and computer languages. However, nobody attempted an in-depth analysis of the dialogue between the new texts and their models. On the one hand, terms like pulp, trash, splatter and gore were used indiscriminately to talk about the violence and consumer culture that were the main motifs of the new narrative; on the other hand, traditional academic perspectives were still applied to it in order to evaluate its literary worth, with the predictable result that it was easily criticised, even by *neoavanguardia* intellectuals such as Furio Colombo, precisely for being written from the position of youth and, therefore, not adhering to higher cultural models.³⁰ It is my contention that only by identifying all the models and sources of the young narrative can the generational links between the different authors be fully appreciated, and a collective 'pulp' experience emerge from the individual writings.

We have already seen how a more complex reading is needed than the one initially proposed by *Gruppo 63*, which simplistically divided the 1990s fiction into *buonista* and *cattivista*. The *buonista*, minimalist category included, for example, works by Mozzi and Piccolo, whom the *neoavanguardia* critics considered nevertheless linguistically interesting and thematically innovative. Similarly, for authors defined as 'pulp', the term 'pulp' was often used as a fashionable modifier without explanation of its meaning. Indeed, while some of the early works by Ammaniti, Brizzi, Brolli, Caliceti, Nove, Santacroce and other writers included in the anthology *Gioventù cannibale* satisfy the prerequisites of

³⁰ Furio Colombo, 'La lingua mozzata dei giovani scrittori', *La Repubblica*, 4 May 1997.

‘pulp’ as codified in Quentin Tarantino’s films *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994)³¹ – violent, at times spectacularly horrific plots, narrated through a combination of high and low registers, and influenced by a wide variety of media and popular culture – most of the fiction written by Ballestra, Campo and Scarpa features an ironic use of genres but does not necessarily precipitate the plots into violent resolutions or extreme hyper-realism. Other authors, such as Culicchia, Demarchi, the early Brizzi of *Jack Frusciante* and the ones present in the anthology *Coda* (1996),³² quote directly J.B. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), while writing realistic *Bildungsroman* plots that romanticise the experience of youth. Yet, all these writers were and are grouped together by critics under the umbrella term of ‘pulp’ generation.

The definition ‘pulp generation’ is, in my view, flexible enough to describe the group of writers who emerged from the *Ricerca* meetings and who were vocally supported by the *neoavanguardia*. While the term *cannibali* designates a narrower selection of authors and refers strictly to the extreme horror of the plots of the 1996 Einaudi anthology, ‘pulp’ – with its evocation of high and low cultural influences, its mass-market and consumer society connotations, its emphasis on entertainment and therefore the ironic aspects of the new narrative – is wide enough to be applied to a variety of fictional works that do not embrace the gory, violent, hyper-realism of *Gioventù cannibale*, Ammaniti’s *Fango*, Brizzi’s *Bastogne* (1996), Nove’s *Woobinda* (1996), or Santacroce’s *Destroy* (1996) and *Luminal* (1998).³³ Whether minimalist or baroque, the authors belonging to both fronts analysed by Balestrini, Barilli, La Porta, Lucamante, Mondello and Sinibaldi, present similarities that have stood the test of time, both in their early works and in the pattern they established in their later narrative. So much so, that, in Barilli’s words, ‘non è meraviglia che accanto a Ammaniti, che racconta di stupri e di omicidi, nella stessa schiera di scrittori figurino [...] per

³¹ By contrast, Barilli suggested Robert Zemeckis’ film *Forrest Gump* (1994) – with its innocent, simple, well-meaning hero – as the model and equivalent of the *scrittura buonista*. See Barilli, ‘Ricerca e la narrativa nuova-nuova’, p. 15.

³² Silvia Ballestra and Giulio Mozzi (eds.), *Coda. Undici ‘under 25’ nati dopo il 1970* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1996); Enrico Brizzi, *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1994).

³³ Enrico Brizzi, *Bastogne* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1996); Aldo Nove, *Woobinda e altre storie senza lieto fine* (Rome: Castelvechi, 1996), revised and expanded version published as *Superwoobinda* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998); Isabella Santacroce, *Destroy* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996), *Luminal* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998).

esempio Rossana Campo, che racconta di donne e di sesso; il “tenero” Brizzi di Jack Frusciante e, solo un anno dopo, l’atroce Brizzi di *Bastogne*; Caliceti, che irride all’autorità del padre; Tiziano Scarpa, che attua una pratica di autodenigrazione cioè di discesa nella materialità del corpo, o la Ballestra che si dedica ai riti del cannibalismo universitario’.³⁴

The most obvious characteristic shared by the 1990s authors accounting for the similarities critics have seen in such a disparate group of texts and authors – to the extent that they have talked of a real literary movement complete with its own poetics – is the fact that all these writers belong to the same generation. However, it is not age *per se* which distinguishes ‘pulp’ narrative, but its interest in the language and culture of the authors’ generation. Their output, especially from the early and mid-1990s, is unified by a distinctive engagement with youth themes, jargons and subcultures, references to a wide-ranging variety of media – television, cinema, music, the internet, the new languages of technology –, by the use of standard literary Italian incorporating regional and international spoken languages, the use and combination of a multitude of genres and registers, as well as an overarching meditation on what it means to write in the context of the mass literary production/consumption.

Trying to define a ‘young writer’ poses, however, several problems. The division proposed by the *neoavanguardia* between innovative and mainstream writers referred implicitly to a difference between the authors who had emerged in the 1990s and those who had come to prominence in the 1980s, two groups whose age difference was minimal and, therefore, were not divided by a real generation gap, yet who appeared at first sight to be culturally very different. But the age and cultural differences between 1980s young and 1990s younger writers were, as we have seen, less relevant to the critical discourse on the new narrative than the explicit or implicit allegiance of the writers to the poetics of the *neoavanguardia*. The influence of *Gruppo 63* on the development of an Italian experimental tradition was one of the terms of the original critical discussion: while the 1980s young authors demonstrated, with the exception of Tondelli’s admiration for Arbasino, no allegiance to *Gruppo 63*, the 1990s writers did. The re-elaboration by the new authors of the narrative and linguistic innovation which had been the

³⁴ Barilli, ‘Ricerche e la narrativa nuova-nuova’, p. 23.

focus of the *neoavanguardia*'s work became a positive term of evaluation. However, if the critical success (or, conversely, the critical bashing) of the new authors came in the wake of the *neoavanguardia*'s blessing and patronage, the general readers' interest in them, especially the interest of young readers, was determined by the connection they saw between the new fiction and the youth world it represented. The early novels and short stories of the 'pulp' writers can in fact be read as a collective *Bildungsroman*, in the form of multiple formative patterns presented through the perspective and the language of the 1990s generation. These texts gave readers belonging to that generation a representation and commentary of their own experience of youth, while providing older readers with an almost anthropological insight into youth culture. Future generations will, hopefully, find in these texts themes and motifs that resonate with their own experience or, at least, an insight into the culture and lifestyle of their predecessors.

1.5 Language, narrative structures and the use of genres

Linguistically, the new narrative is dominated by youth jargons and by constant reference to the heterogeneous youth culture, consisting of films, comic books, rock music, drug subcultures and computer technology. Sex and violence, often together, figure prominently, for example, in Brizzi's *Bastogne*, a story of a group of male friends devoted to drugs, murder, rape, shooting policemen, and generally to humiliating those who do not share their moral values and linguistic codes. Male bonding, tinted with sexist and racist overtones, characterises also Caliceti's *Fonderia Italghisa* (1996),³⁵ whereas Brolli's *Animanera* (1997) describes the cruelties of two serial killers on the 'costa romagnola'.³⁶ Rape, often gang rape, appears constantly in the 'antologia dell'orrore estremo' *Gioventù cannibale* and in other stories, while Nove focuses on the portrayal of media-induced neurosis and violence. His *Woobinda* opens with words that exemplify the general tone – violent and ironic – of the new narrative: 'Ho ammazzato i miei genitori perchè usavano un bagnoschiuma assurdo, Pure & Vegetal... io uso Vidal e voglio che in casa tutti usino Vidal'.³⁷ Santacroce's novels plunge the reader into the darkest

³⁵ Giuseppe Caliceti, *Fonderia Italghisa* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996).

³⁶ Daniele Brolli, *Animanera e altri quattro racconti plumbei* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1994).

³⁷ Nove, *Woobinda*, p. 11.

underbelly of club and drug culture, in Italy (*Fluo*), London (*Destroy*), Zurich and Hamburg (*Luminal*), and later on into the less glamorous but equally doomed worlds of lower-middle class domestic abuse and violence (*Revolver*, 2004, and *Zoo*, 2005),³⁸ while Francesca Mazzuccato (b. 1965) explores the attraction and the humiliation of sexual obsession (*Hot line. Storia di un'ossessione*, 1996; *Relazioni scandalosamente pure*, 1998).³⁹ Lanzetta's *Figli di un Bronx minore* (1993), *Un Messico napoletano* (1994) and *Incendiami la vita* (1996), and Ferrandino's *Pericle il nero* (1998) detail the lives of characters who hopelessly precipitate into a world of criminality and violence dominated by a brutal and unglamorous mafia.⁴⁰

Not all stories are so dark and pessimistic: Ballestra, for example, uses an ironic but compassionate tone to narrate the adventures of Antò Lu Purk, 'punk pescarese' and 'studente fuorisede' at the University of Bologna, in her *Compleanno dell'iguana* and *La guerra degli Antò*; a similar tone is adopted by Campo's female narrators when they talk about their numerous and mostly joyful sexual experiences (*In principio erano le mutande*, 1992; *Il pieno di super*, 1993; *Mai sentita così bene*, 1995).⁴¹ Even though with a less optimistic outcome, irony also dominates Culicchia's portrayal of Walter, a young man from a working-class background, seen in *Tutti giù per terra* (1994) and *Paso Doble* (1995) as he navigates frustratingly through university, his civil service as *obiettore di coscienza*, work and his first sexual and romantic experiences.⁴² Irony becomes surreal satire in Scarpa's *Occhi sulla graticola* (1996),⁴³ whose young protagonist struggles through the uncharted waters that are supposed to lead him to adulthood: university, friendship, sex and love. Whether dark or ironic, realistic or hyper-realistic, the short stories and novels of the 'pulp' generation describe the life of Italian youth using the languages and cultural references that belong to that

³⁸ Isabella Santacroce, *Fluo. Storie di giovani a Riccione* (Rome: Castelveccchi, 1995); *Revolver* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004); *Zoo* (Rome: Fazi, 2006).

³⁹ Francesca Mazzuccato, *Hot line. Storia di un'ossessione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996); *Relazioni scandalosamente pure* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996).

⁴⁰ Peppe Lanzetta, *Figli di un Bronx minore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993); *Un Messico napoletano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994); *Incendiami la vita* (Milan, Baldini & Castoldi, 1996); Giuseppe Ferrandino, *Pericle il nero* (Milan: Adelphi, 1998).

⁴¹ Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992); *Il pieno di super* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993); *Mai sentita così bene* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995).

⁴² Giuseppe Culicchia, *Tutti giù per terra* (Milan: Teadue, 1994); *Paso Doble* (Milan: Garzanti, 1995).

⁴³ Tiziano Scarpa, *Occhi sulla graticola* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996).

generation. As obvious as this might sound, the representation of youth reality by means of the language of youth is to be considered one of the main achievements of the ‘pulp’ writers. Furthermore, as Sanguineti pointed out, they addressed their writing to ‘un pubblico specifico, coetaneo’.⁴⁴ It is therefore unsurprising that the language of the new narrative might appear ‘criptico, ostico, comunque non letterario’ to readers such as Renzo Paris, who are strangers to both the language and the culture of Italian youth in the 1990s: ‘È l’immaginario, oltre che il linguaggio, che è cambiato’.⁴⁵

Love, sex, friendship, parent-child relationships, lifestyle, drugs, school and university, the ordeal of finding the first job and coming to terms with adulthood are the main themes of the early fiction by the authors of the 1990s. The experience of being young is narrated through the voices of those who live that experience, in contrast with the tradition of the formative novel that presents the events retrospectively from an adult point of view and voice. Youth is told by the young, not through the filter of memory or after the disillusionment of older age. But even while writing their own youthful experiences these young writers are not unaware of, or disengaged from, the literary tradition behind them. On the contrary, in most cases the literary models are stated directly, as we see very clearly in Ballestra’s short story ‘Gli orsi (63-93)’,⁴⁶ an ironic homage to the influence of *Gruppo 63* upon her early work, which I will discuss in detail in the third chapter of this thesis. Language, the main concern of experimental writing in the 1960s and early 1970s, moves beyond the dead-end of *neoavanguardia* deconstruction and attempts to reinvent itself while remaining communicative, by opening to the influences of youth jargon and vocabulary. The *neoavanguardia* and the 1990s ‘pulp’ novelists are therefore linked by a shared experimental approach: language is a site of innovation for both groups of writers. However, whereas the 1960s avant-garde had concentrated on deconstructing traditional narrative structures and exposing the ideological discourse implicit in those structures, the ‘pulp’ authors experiment with vocabulary and syntax, while accepting and reproducing realist (in fact, often hyper-realist) narrative patterns. If

⁴⁴ Marco Berisso’s interview with Sanguineti, ‘Cannibali e no’, in Balestrini and Barilli (eds.), *La bestia 1*, pp. 116-27 (p. 117).

⁴⁵ Renzo Paris, *Romanzi di culto. Sulla nuova tribù dei narratori e sui loro biechi recensori* (Rome: Castelveccchi, 1995), p. 8.

⁴⁶ Silvia Ballestra, ‘Gli orsi (‘63-93)’, in *Gli orsi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), pp. 7-29.

the *neoavanguardia* had been postmodern in its questioning of both realist and modernist narrative modes, the 1990s novelists are postmodern in their reinvention of the language through which those conventional narrative forms have been traditionally expressed. By telling, for example, a *Bildungsroman* through its traditionally codified moments of formation, but in the multi-faceted language of contemporary youth, rather than the standard Italian of the traditional novel, the writers create a sense of displacement between narrative conventions and the stories they narrate that forces the readers to question both the form and its traditional meaning. Narrative form and language thus show their constructed origin, but communication and narration are never interrupted. A story is still told through a recognisable language: the only prerequisite for communication to take place is an understanding of the vocabulary and jargon of youth, as well as of their cultural references, ‘per cui King Ellroy and Philip Dick o Andrea Pazienza o Dylan Dog possono avere la stessa importanza o maggiore che Calvino. E una importanza ancora maggiore possono avere un gruppo rock, un musicista, un ciclo televisivo’.⁴⁷ As we shall see, the reader’s ability to identify and decodify such languages and cultural references, thanks to a shared knowledge of non-traditional literary codes, is essential to understand the narrative of the ‘pulp’ generation.

Although new in terms of vocabulary and cultural references, this narrative was never perceived as elitist and was in fact able to draw a significant readership, something which had eluded all Italian avant-garde movements in the past. This is due to its incorporation of conventions that are familiar to the reader of genre fiction: mystery, romance, horror, adventure and science fiction and their cinematographic counterparts. It is precisely in the use of genres that some critics, such as Anna Comodi, see the most significant and lasting legacy of the ‘pulp’ generations: ‘L’importanza dell’esperienza “cannibale” consiste nell’aver dato piena cittadinanza letteraria alla letteratura di genere in Italia’.⁴⁸ While it is true that the new 1990s authors contributed to disenfranchising genre narrative from the charge of being *para-letteratura*, as it had traditionally been regarded in Italian literary circles, it is my contention that genres were also used with the intent of making the experimental accessible. The new, unconventional language

⁴⁷ Cesari, ‘Narratori dell’eccesso’, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Anna Comodi, *Tratti lessicali e morfosintattici del parlar giovane in “Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo” di Enrico Brizzi* (Perugia: Guerra, 1998), p. 209.

is presented in the context of familiar narrative structures which rely on their predictability to be understood by the readers. Silvia Ballestra's short story 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!',⁴⁹ for example, should be read and understood in the context of the science fiction models it parodies, especially the references, both narrative and political, to the novel and film versions of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.⁵⁰ Taken out of this context, the surreal story of rich tourists who colonise the Marche beach over the summer season and reveal themselves to be dangerous aliens intent on taking over the world, appears little more than an excuse for exposing, by means of the different linguistic registers of its protagonists, the clash between the dialect of the locals and the domineering Milanese and Roman diction of the summer invaders, revealing the social discrepancies between different classes and regional groups. The science fiction context, however, so fully embraced by the short story, transforms this linguistic clash into a metaphor for the 1994 electoral victory of Berlusconi and the Italian Right, as I demonstrate in the chapter devoted to Ballestra's fiction.

The combination of innovative vocabulary with the parodic use of traditional narrative structures becomes therefore a site of the postmodern challenge in the early works of the 'pulp' generation. In this respect, more than the *neoavanguardia*, the most immediate literary model is, as I have already mentioned, Tondelli. In the 1980s, Tondelli had not only been the indefatigable talent-scout and publisher of young writers (among them, Ballestra, Culicchia and Demarchi), but also the author of influential short stories and novels, whose relevance to the development of Italian narrative had somewhat been underestimated by the *neoavanguardia*, as both Carnero and Palandri are keen to remind *Gruppo 63* and as I have already noted earlier on.⁵¹ In Tondelli's work not only do we find the typical themes of youth narrative, but, more importantly, they are expressed through a language that attempts to reproduce the conversation of youth for the first time in Italian narrative. The language of the young writers is experimental mostly in the areas of vocabulary and sentence construction, and

⁴⁹ Silvia Ballestra, 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!', *Gli orsi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), pp. 31-58.

⁵⁰ Jack Finney's original novel *The Body Snatchers*, was published in serialised format in 1954. After the release of the 1956 film directed by Don Siegel, it changed its title to *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Two subsequent film versions of the story were directed by Philip Kaufman in 1978 and by Abel Ferrara in 1994.

⁵¹ Agnello and others, *Il Gruppo 63 quarant'anni dopo*, pp. 279-89.

consequently its models must be found in texts which have explored these specific areas: for example, the long lists of quotations in Arbasino's *Fratelli d'Italia* (1963)⁵² have the same influence on the authors of the 1990s as the list of bibliographical and musical references present in Tondelli's novels, such as the description of Annacarla's book collection in *Altri libertini* or the ideal soundtrack that concludes *Rimini*.⁵³ The latter, reflecting the cultural models of Tondelli's generation, are then ironically reproduced by Ballestra in her description of Fabio di Vasto's flimsy book collection in *La guerra degli Antò*, or parodied in 'Intervistare Bret Ellis (F.P.)', Ballestra's short story that describes a party game of quotations as it degenerates into a meaningless exercise in name dropping.⁵⁴

While in the next chapter I will discuss in detail the impact which the 1980s, writers and other literary models not linked to the *neoavanguardia*, had on the 'pulp' generation, I want to mention here how *Gruppo 63*'s underestimation of the influence of Tondelli's generation originates partly in their inability to fully comprehend the importance youth culture had acquired for both the narrative of the 1980s and the 1990s. This cultural gap, that Carnero qualifies as 'un'incomprensione di tipo generazionale',⁵⁵ is particularly evident, for example, in the frequent references to music that appear in both Tondelli's and some of the 'pulp' writers' works, most notably in the novels of Ballestra, Brizzi, Caliceti, Campo and Santacroce. In particular Anglo-American pop and rock music plays a paramount role in the literary production of the 1990s, as we see in Ballestra's mentions of Iggy Pop in *Compleanno dell'iguana*, Brizzi's references to the Red Hot Chilli Peppers in *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo*, Santacroce's implicit use of the Smashing Pumpkins as the soundtrack of *Destroy*. Interestingly, all these references to popular youth culture are intermingled with references to local and national cultural traditions, resulting in innovative linguistic patterns that reflect the social context in which the novels originated. Not only is the experience of music constantly evoked by the fact that characters find themselves listening to, talking or thinking about pop and rock and in fact using references to pop and

⁵² Alberto Arbasino, *Fratelli d'Italia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1963; two further revised and expanded versions were published in 1967 and 1991).

⁵³ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Altri libertini* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980); *Rimini* (Milan: Bompiani, 1985).

⁵⁴ Silvia Ballestra, 'Intervistare Bret Ellis (F.P.)', *Gli orsi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), pp. 115-23.

⁵⁵ Roberto Carnero, 'Nuova narrativa italiana: 2002-2003', *The Italianist*, no. 23.ii (2003), 276-320 (p. 320).

rock as an emotional short-hand to describe their own mood and ideas, but also sentences and paragraphs reflect the textual and melodic structures of the quoted songs. When he shows the characters of *Fonderia Italghisa* fighting over the music that must be played at the club they have just opened, Caliceti is in fact creating a fitting metaphor for the linguistic challenge of his and his generation's writing: the codes they must navigate are as numerous as the cultural references that are available to them; the result is a negotiation between traditions, media, registers and idioms, whose unresolved conflict constitutes one of the most significant characteristics shared by the 'pulp' generation's early fiction.

The originality of the new writers lies in the appropriation of the language of contemporary youth and society for a literary purpose. The international breadth of the youth discourse present in the early 'pulp' stories is constantly played against the background of the Italian and regional context. The provinciality of many of the characters acts also as a metaphor for their peripheral position in relation to the cosmopolitan centres of Western youth culture, namely America and the great European capitals. The theme of the journey as escape from the province assumes many forms in the new fiction: from national migration from South to North, and then to a mythical Northern Europe in Ballestra's stories – where travelling is often the prelude to the disenchantment of finding only a bigger, if more glamorous, province – to the happy expatriation of Campo's or Santacrocce's young women who leave narrow-minded Italian cities for the apparently more exciting offerings of Paris, London or Zurich. But the journey takes, more often than not, the shape of a dreamed-of flight, as the ties to the country, the region and the birth town are often too tight to be broken, and the flight too threatening, as exemplified by Alex, the male hero of Brizzi's *Jack Fruscante è uscito dal gruppo*, who is stuck in his birth place while his girlfriend Aidi moves on to more exciting and better things in America. Sometimes the journey takes the protagonists to the Northern lands of an imagined sexual freedom, only to reveal itself as a bitter disappointment owing to the inadequacy of the provincial traveller, as is the case with Antò Lu Purk in Ballestra's *Compleanno dell'iguana* and *La guerra degli Antò*, or the protagonist of Culicchia's *Paso Doble* (1995).

The discrepancy between the characters' adolescent dream of becoming part of an international youth culture and their perceived parochialism is again

revealed through the language, alongside the plots. Rejecting the standard Italian of most of their predecessors and many of their contemporaries, the new writers of the 1990s experiment with the linguistic melting pot of youth: foreign vocabulary, especially English, often voluntarily misused, is persistently combined with the local dialects, and both are filtered through the mass-media grinder, a strategy that not only works against the achievement of linguistic uniformity, but further modifies local/national idioms and foreign influences, as we shall see when discussing the speech patterns of Ballestra's characters. The linguistic interplay between different codes requires the writers and their readers to be able to understand and mediate the multiple references, often deployed with ironic and parodic intent. This satirical intent works on several levels: as sympathetic irony when, in Campo's and Culicchia's early books, the characters use the oral language of everyday life; as the parody of the youth jargons and slangs used by Ballestra's and Scarpa's narrative voices, to emphasise their distance from the voices of their characters; or, finally, as the moral and political judgement implicit in Caliceti's and Nove's protagonists' use of the clichéd, banal and empty language of the media. In conclusion, the innovative aspects of the new narrative of the 1990s are apparent in the way the contents of their fiction are combined with the creation of a language and narrative forms that belong to and reflect the subject matter of the stories: youth (or rather, youth to adulthood) experience, expressed through the multiple codes of contemporary youth and with references to the cultural framework of their world, especially in the form of popular genres. A failure to take this important connection into account undermines any attempt to grasp both the avant-garde elements and the themes of the 1990s fiction.

1.6 The 'pulp' generation ten years later

Critics, both those in favour of and those dismissive of the 'pulp' generation, concur that the new 1990s narrative has been responsible for the current unprecedented production and success of genres in Italy which have been met with interest and respect by the literary world. But if the legacy of generic fiction created by the 'pulp' writers is widely acknowledged, the jury is still out on the effective relevance and impact of the 1990s writers. The critical discourse on the narrative of the 'pulp' generation was, as we have seen, initially focused on the identification of the experimental characteristics of their writing, be these the

introduction of new linguistic codes in the literary context – such as youth jargons, mass media languages, popular culture references – or the use of new, often controversial themes to represent contemporary Italian reality: the experience of youth, the pervasiveness of violence and sex, the power of consumerism, the loss of hope in political change, the conflict between regional, national and international forces on the formation of personal identity in our postmodern society. This focus remains to this day the starting point for the analysis of the new narrative of the 1990s. Although not interested in reopening the controversy that surrounded the patronage of the new writers by the *neoavanguardia*, in 2004 Mondello was still trying to qualify to what extent the fiction born out of the *Ricerca* meetings was an avant-garde project or, conversely, a literary effort aware of mass market demands and selling strategies. She concluded that it had been a combination of both, and that its most lasting legacy was that of having created ‘uno sperimentalismo “normalizzato” adatto al consumo di massa’.⁵⁶

But if Mondello, like Barilli and Lucamante before her, argues that the ‘pulp’ narrative of the 1990s has had a lasting impact on the writing and reading of Italian fiction, others, such as La Porta and Carnero, are decisively more dismissive of the whole phenomenon, reducing it to a fashionable but short-lived fad centred around the shock-effect of the *cannibale* narrative. La Porta saves a few individual authors, such as Ammaniti and Nove, who, in his view, have outgrown their youthful production by writing more mature novels, presented in more traditional narrative forms: ‘Si potrebbe concludere che quella lontana esperienza è stata soprattutto utile ad alcuni dei suoi protagonisti (che l’hanno usata come felice laboratorio espressivo)’.⁵⁷ On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the publication of the collection *Gioventù cannibale*, La Porta argues that the programmatic ambitions of the editors of the anthology were matched neither by the mediocre narrative efforts contained in the book, nor by any other subsequent *cannibale* production in the same vein. The critic concludes that ‘La vera avanguardia è quella degli scrittori che attraverso la sperimentazione

⁵⁶ Mondello ‘Introduzione’, in Mondello, *La narrativa italiana degli anni Novanta*, pp. 7-10 (p. 8).

⁵⁷ Filippo La Porta, ‘I cannibali? Un gioco di società ma poco letterario. La boratorio da cui salvare solo Nove e Ammaniti’, *Il Riformista*, 31 May 2006.

linguistica mettono in scena le proprie ossessioni',⁵⁸ warning against the sterility of pre-programmed experimentation. Carnero's objections, voiced throughout the 1990s and reiterated both at the *Ricerzare* meetings and during the later celebrations of *Gruppo 63*, derive from an intellectual resistance to the concept of avant-garde itself: why should the experimental be automatically considered synonymous with innovative and therefore praiseworthy? Is this not precisely the reason why the *neoavanguardia* has so dramatically neglected the importance of the 1980s authors?⁵⁹ He claims not only that the new narrative of the 1990s exhausted itself in the few years of the *cannibale* writing,⁶⁰ but also that there is nothing particularly new in the concept of generational writing that was used to praise the 'pulp' writers of the 1990s, as that concept had been already used extensively to discuss the young authors of the 1970s and 1980s. Carnero concludes that the relationship between avant-garde and tradition has been instrumental to the development of Italian literature since the post-war years, and that 'questa dialettica tra avanguardia e tradizione si è sviluppata secondo ondate cicliche, in cui una delle due tendenze di volta in volta ha avuto la meglio'.⁶¹ Ultimately, he insists, only individual narrative voices are capable of rising above the cyclical nature of literary movements and – as in Tondelli's and Palandri's case – to have a lasting influence on future writers. In other words, even if he acknowledges the impact the 1990s had on such genres as noir, detective novel, horror and romance,⁶² Carnero finds the main limit of the 'pulp' generation in precisely what Barilli and the *neoavanguardia* critics identified as its main strength: its reliance on group poetics and on the existence of a shared literary project, rather than on the force of exceptional individual voices.

Finally, it is appropriate to see how the writers who come from the experience of *Ricerzare* look back on those years, especially in the light of their future narrative development. As we shall see in the discussion of Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce, the 'pulp' experience was by no means the end of the literary production of that generation; in fact, all three authors are among a

⁵⁸ Quoted in Roberto Carnero, 'Nel Bel Paese del romanzo all'antica', *L'Unità*, 2 February 2003.

⁵⁹ Carnero, 'La nuova narrativa italiana: 2002-2003', p. 318.

⁶⁰ Roberto Carnero, 'La nuova narrativa italiana: 2004-2005', *The Italianist*, 25.ii (2005), 307-40 (p. 308).

⁶¹ Carnero, 'Nel Bel Paese del romanzo all'antica'.

⁶² Carnero, 'Nel Bel Paese del romanzo all'antica'.

significant numbers of writers who later developed along very personal and largely successful literary paths. They see the time when they were perceived, and partially perceived themselves, as a group in largely positive, if somewhat contradictory terms. Nove, for example, both reclaims the value of the *cannibali*'s achievement and puts it into perspective. On the one hand, he recalls proudly the common goals he shared with his fellow *cannibali* writers, when he says: 'Quanto ai Cannibali, dico che furono una cosa bellissima, la letteratura che si sposava con l'attualità, io, Scarpa, Ammaniti, Isabella Santacroce eravamo come dei compagni di viaggio e scrivevamo le cose che ci stavano succedendo. Dopo non c'è stato niente di simile, non c'è più stata una tendenza comune, siamo tornati indietro'.⁶³ On the other, he admits that rather than being a literary movement with its own specific theory and poetics – as *Gruppo 63* had been – the 'pulp' generation was in great part the result of editorial strategies, even though supported by strong shared interests among the authors:

Il pulp in Italia è nato come fenomeno editoriale, ma non è stato un esperimento da laboratorio a freddo. In pochi mesi sono emersi nomi di nuovi scrittori, Santacroce, Ammaniti, Caliceti, Scarpa, Nove e altri, che provenivano da esperienze culturali non omogenee ma che raccontavano tutti una quotidianità diversa da quella che si trovava nella letteratura italiana, di cui tutti peraltro eravamo appassionati lettori. Un movimento spontaneo da cui venne fuori la categoria dei pulp.⁶⁴

Scarpa agrees with Nove, when he states that the two of them, together with Ammaniti, Caliceti and others, realised that they had 'fantasie simili' only *after* the publication of their first works, and that none of them felt they belonged to a group. Ironically, however, albeit determined in great part by the 'feticismo dell'avanguardia' displayed by critics and media in the mid-1990s, the experience of being discussed, even in negative terms, as a literary movement had the advantage of allowing the emerging writers to communicate with each other and

⁶³ Ranieri Polese's interview with Nove, 'Aldo Nove, il ritorno del giovin cannibale', *Corriere della sera*, 14 April 2004.

⁶⁴ Paolo Di Stefano's interview with Nove, 'Aldo Nove: basta con i cannibali. La nuova generazione è flessibile', *Corriere della sera*, 16 November 2005.

with literary critics, something the writers of the 2000s, both established and new, are missing out on. According to Scarpa, ‘Quello che oggi noto è la mancanza di comunicazione: lo scrittore scrive, il critico dà voti, ognuno nel suo orticello, senza confronti.’⁶⁵

The one aspect of the *Ricerca* years that most authors agree is now missing is precisely the sense of support they felt from a section of the literary establishment. Many of them are now a little weary of being constantly reminded of the support they received from *Gruppo 63*, although they do not deny their debt to them. Campo describes the relationship of the 1990s generation with *Gruppo 63* as a ‘rapporto di attrazione, di rifiuto, di odio-amore’, informed by typical teacher/pupil dynamics. She adds that the patronage of the *neoavanguardia* felt at times as it had been forced upon her and her fellow writers: ‘ci dà fastidio quando è il maestro che nomina il discepolo, credo che non sia il maestro che deve dire: io sono il tuo maestro, ma il discepolo che riconosce il maestro’.⁶⁶ But she also acknowledges without hesitation not only the influence of the *neoavanguardia* authors, calling them ‘matri simboliche’ (even if they are mostly male writers!),⁶⁷ for having authorised her voice both through their writing and through the practical support of *Ricerca*, their literary advice and reviews – both positive and negative – of her books. Her opinion is echoed by Ballestra, who admits the vital importance of the *Ricerca* meetings in providing the only space where experimental writing could find expression and critical feedback.⁶⁸ The loss of this space and support is what Ballestra misses most of all from the early ‘pulp’ experience, suggesting that this is what distinguishes the authors of the 1990s from the generation of writers that is emerging in the 2000s: ‘Dopo quella stagione, non ho più visto in Italia un lavoro così con gli scrittori. Oggi dove sono gli editor?’, she asks,⁶⁹ recalling the efforts of the small publishing houses, such as Canalini’s Transeuropa, to invest time and energy in new, untested authors. Brizzi endorses her opinion, confirming that ‘allora c’era molta più sinergia tra piccoli e grandi editori [...] c’era una vera e propria caccia al giovane, cosa meritevole che

⁶⁵ Cristina Taglietti’s interview with Sanguineti and Scarpa, ‘Da Sanguineti a Scarpa, l’avanguardia si fa cannibale’, *Corriere della sera*, 22 March 2006.

⁶⁶ Agnello and others, *Il Gruppo 63 quarant’anni dopo*, p. 298.

⁶⁷ Agnello and others, *Il Gruppo 63 quarant’anni dopo*, p. 295.

⁶⁸ Agnello and others, *Il Gruppo 63 quarant’anni dopo*, p. 292.

⁶⁹ Ranieri Polese’s interview with Ballestra, ‘Ballestra contro tutti: editori, giallisti e Dan Brown’, *Il Corriere della sera*, 25 April 2005.

ha aperto molte porte'.⁷⁰ Despite having taken different paths and distanced themselves from their young 'pulp' years, the narrative invaders who emerged in the early 1990s do not regret those times, which, with all the limits associated with being perceived as a group with a strong experimental connotation, they see as fundamental to their later, perhaps more mature production.

1.7 Language, genres and gender

A reading of the most significant 'pulp' authors that takes into account their later development is interesting especially to see if and how they have responded to the early critical evaluations and if those critical assessments succeeded in identifying aspects of the early fiction that became more prominent at a later stage, once the youth focus of the novels was abandoned owing to the growing maturity of the writers. In my view, this is particularly true of women writers. Indeed, several young women writers of the 1990s have spoken of the difficulty of being recognised as distinctive female voices, as one of the main limits of being identified as 'pulp' writers and receiving the patronage of *neoavanguardia* intellectuals. Italian critics and intellectuals have been historically very resistant to taking into account feminist and gender theories in their study and evaluation of literature. In Ballestra's own words, 'L'ambiente della critica letteraria in Italia è molto, molto maschilista e anche misogino e anche tra i critici più di sinistra e più d'avanguardia'.⁷¹ In a reassessment of her position as an Italian woman writer which opens her recent book on the real and cultural violence against women in contemporary Italian society, Ballestra looks back with amusement at her early refusal to be categorised as a woman writer.⁷² After her gradual discovery of how women have been systematically neglected by canonising anthologies, literary histories and 'great' critics, she now admits to having been forced to rethink her literary models and allegiances: 'Ricevo telefonate di invito a conferenze dove risulterò essere l'unica donna prevista (sai che divertimento). Magari accompagnate da "e poi ci manca una donna", considerazione che non irrita tanto

⁷⁰ Cristina Taglietti's interview with Brizzi, 'Jack Frusciante? Gli editori oggi vogliono Melissa', *Il Corriere della sera*, 3 May 2005.

⁷¹ Aurora Caredda's interview with Ballestra, 'Intervista a Silvia Ballestra', in Giuliana Adamo and others, *Narrativa italiana recente/Recent Italian Fiction* (Dublin and Turin: Trauben in Association with Department of Italian, Trinity College Dublin, 2005), pp. 83-93 (p. 85).

⁷² Silvia Ballestra, *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2006), p. 9.

per l'aspetto tappabuchi ma proprio per il desolante paesaggio che si profila all'orizzonte'.⁷³ As we shall see in my chapters on Campo and Santacroce, similar views on the critical blindness or dismissal of the important connection between gender and writing are expressed by other women writers of Ballestra's generation.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, although gender was identified early on in the debate as a potentially useful category for an assessment of the new writers' work, especially with reference to women's fiction, the first systematic readings of these writers to take gender into account were produced quite late and mainly by feminist critics initially and primarily abroad. In 1997, Sinibaldi mentioned that 'pulp' writers' representations of a violent reality were very often realised through stories of violence against the female characters by the male characters, something that, he limited himself to state, was worth reflecting upon.⁷⁴ In the same year, Sanguineti generically praised the new women writers who, unlike previous generations, succeeded in creating 'uno specifico letterario femminile',⁷⁵ managing to both praise the new writers and dismiss the massive body of Italian women's writing that has accumulated since the 1970s, as well as completely ignoring the possibility that women writers of the past might have influenced the younger ones. Others acknowledged off-handedly the significant presence of a female contingent among the 'pulp' generation, hastening to add, as Barilli did, that this took care of any possible 'noiosa accusa di privilegiare una letteratura tutta maschile' for which the *neoavanguardia* intellectuals might be criticised.⁷⁶ Alfredo Giuliani reduces the preponderance of women's themes and voices in Campo's fiction to 'un femminismo sbrigativo (mai nominato)'.⁷⁷ As we shall see in the chapters devoted to Ballestra's, Campo's and Santacroce's works, female poetics and a female literary tradition play a very important role, and the inability of the early Italian critics to see their full impact says more about the generation of older male intellectuals who still dominated the critical discourse in the 1990s than about the texts they analysed.

⁷³ Ballestra, *Contro le donne*, p. 89.

⁷⁴ Sinibaldi, *Pulp*, pp. 71 and 78.

⁷⁵ Berisso, 'Cannibali e no', p. 120.

⁷⁶ Barilli, 'Ricerca e la narrativa nuova-nuova', p. 11.

⁷⁷ Alfredo Giuliani, 'Due letture pescate nel mucchio', in Balestrini and Barilli (eds.), *La bestia 1. Narrative invaders!*, pp. 98-100 (p. 100).

The few critics and scholars who have used the analytical tools of feminist literary theory – mostly French and Anglo-American – in their readings of the 1990s women writers have often addressed the question of whether a ‘specifico letterario femminile’ existed and, if it did, what it entailed. Already in 1996, for example, Paris-based Silvia Contarini offered a reading of Campo’s, Mariateresa Di Lascia’s and Silvana Grasso’s novels in terms of women’s themes.⁷⁸ In 2001, Lucamante, from the USA, provides a first in-depth gendered assessment of the new narrative, and of Santacroce’s novels in particular, with a focus on the relationship between gender and the contemporary culture of mass consumption and commodification.⁷⁹ Nicoletta Di Ciolla McGowan’s discussion of Campo’s female universe, and Aurora Caredda’s study of Ballestra’s narrative development,⁸⁰ provide further gender-inflected critical appreciation of women writers from abroad. We must wait until 2004 for an Italian academic, Monica Cristina Storini, to bring at long last the gender perspective to bear on the narrative of Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce.⁸¹

Even rarer are analyses that address issues of masculinity and femininity in male authors from that generation. Charlotte Ross is among the few who have highlighted the contradiction in texts that pose themselves as linguistically innovative and experimental, such as those of the canonical *cannibale* writer Ammaniti, and at the same time ‘fit easily within a rather too well established tradition of female prostitution and male objectification of women’.⁸² Sanguineti’s early claim that the ‘mescolanza di sesso e violenza è veramente qualche cosa insieme ipnotizzante (perché non c’è dubbio che agisce sopra le pulsioni molto profonde dell’immaginario maschile e femminile [...]) e che suscita angoscia e

⁷⁸ Silvia Contarini, ‘Riflessioni sulla narrativa femminile degli anni ’90’, *Narrativa*, 10 (1996), pp. 139-63.

⁷⁹ Stefania Lucamante ‘Everyday Consumerism and Pornography “above the Pulp Line”’, in Lucamante (ed.), *Italian Pulp Fiction*, pp. 98-134; Stefania Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce* (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2002).

⁸⁰ Nicoletta Di Ciolla McGowan, ‘Mai sentite così bene. L’universo femminile nei romanzi di Rossana Campo’, in Laura Rorato and Simona Storchi (eds.), *Da Calvino agli ipertesti. Prospettive della postmodernità nella letteratura italiana* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2002), pp. 169-76; Aurora Caredda, ‘Silvia Ballestra: l’autobiografia, il gioco, il romanzesco’, in Adamo and others, *Narrativa italiana recente/Recent Italian Fiction*, pp. 75-82.

⁸¹ Monica Cristina Storini, ‘Teorie di genere e nuove forme di scrittura’, in Mondello (ed.), *La narrativa degli anni novanta*, pp. 65-85.

⁸² Charlotte Ross, ‘Creating the Ideal Posthuman Body? Cyborg Sex and Gender in the Work of Buzzati, Vacca and Ammaniti’, *Italica*, vol. 82, no.2 (2005), 222-47 (p. 236).

terrore'⁸³ invites us to read the violent sexual fantasies present in many *cannibali* texts in terms of gender-marked imagination ('immaginario maschile e femminile'). In my thesis, I take up Sanguineti's and Ross' indirect invitation to look more deeply into these authors' treatment of sex and gender. Although it concentrates mainly on the work of three female writers, my investigation of the representation of sex and violence in the latter makes reference to the issues of contemporary Italian masculinity that emerge from the work of both men and women writers of the 1990s.

The most fruitful gendered analysis of the 'pulp' narrative is to consider the connection it makes between gender and sexuality. As I discussed above, the 'pulp' authors adopt genres as a way to negotiate linguistic experimentation and references to the culture of their generation, thus establishing an immediate communication with their ideal readers. As Anne Cranny-Francis has convincingly demonstrated in her books on feminist rewritings of traditional genres in English language literature, generic fiction is framed within conventions that hide coded gender discourses.⁸⁴ Genres such as the detective novel, science fiction and horror, are historically linked to the patriarchal discourses of social order, control of technology and punishment of aberrant (female) sexuality, respectively. Since the 1970s, Cranny-Francis argues, feminist writers have tried to subvert the patriarchal ideology present in these generic texts by subverting the conventions of the genres themselves: by replacing the hero with a heroine, for example, or by rejecting the concept of the alien as enemy in science fiction, or by resisting the restoration of the patriarchal order at the end of detective novels. Genres traditionally associated with women writers and consequently discredited by male critics, such as romance, have been similarly reappropriated by women authors who challenge stereotypical gender roles. While the Italian literary world has been historically less welcoming to generic narrative, Carol Lazzaro-Weis has proved that Italian women writers have been at the forefront of the use and rewriting of conventional genres since the late 1960s, in particular of confessional

⁸³ Berisso in 'Cannibali e no', p. 122.

⁸⁴ Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1990); *Engendered Fiction: Analysing Gender in the Production and Reception of Texts* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992).

writing, romance, *Bildungsroman*, historical novel and detective novel.⁸⁵ Although not many ‘pulp’ authors are aware of (or willing to admit) the impact women writers of the 1970s and 1980s have had on the development of these genres, their own use of genres and their manipulation of gender conventions demonstrate that they have been open to international influences, in particular to Anglo-American culture and its postmodern version of generic fiction. *Noir* and horror – with their graphic descriptions of violence against women – are often deployed by authors like Ammaniti, Brolli, Brizzi, Nove and Santacroce to reveal how the language of contemporary media and consumerism controls our approach to sex and sexual relationships. Similarly, as we shall see in the next chapter, the traditional *Bildungsroman* is revised in narratives of contemporary male and female formation to show young men’s and women’s different sense of self and identity, and to compare their different coping skills in our ever-changing global culture. Finally, as I discuss extensively in relation to Ballestra’s, Campo’s and Santacroce’s novels, the tradition of female romance is used as a powerful tool that enables the writers to create confident female narrative voices.

Before proceeding to a detailed discussion of Ballestra’s, Campo’s and Santacroce’s writing and their development of strong female voices inspired by the legacy of past women writers, it is necessary to see their work in the light of the narrative of the previous generation. In the next chapter, I intend to discuss the link between Tondelli’s use of the *Bildungsroman* and travel and return narratives produced in the 1980s, and how these genres have subsequently been inherited and modified by the 1990s writers. If, as I maintain, the ‘pulp’ writers move so comfortably between international influences, popular genres, media and youth culture and the lesson of the Italian *neoavanguardia*, it is mainly due to the example of Tondelli and a few other writers of the 1980s. And if Tondelli cannot act as a literary mother for aspiring women writers of the 1990s (but we should not forget how strongly he admired and promoted the writings of Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann), he at least offers them a method for searching for the models they need. As Ballestra explains, the inspiration for *Nina* (2001),⁸⁶ her novel about the very female experience of pregnancy and motherhood, came from

⁸⁵ Carol Lazzaro-Weis, *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women’s Writing, 1968-1990* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

⁸⁶ Silvia Ballestra, *Nina* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001).

Tondelli's *Pao Pao* (1992),⁸⁷ a novel on the very male experience of military service: 'Perché in fondo ho pensato: il militare lo fanno tutti. Però nessuno ha scritto sul servizio militare. E ho pensato: va be', quasi tutte le donne, molte donne partoriscono, o almeno è un'esperienza molto comune, però nessuno ha mai scritto, quindi come Tondelli l'ho potuta scrivere'.⁸⁸ Ballestra eventually finds in Joyce Lussu a literary mother figure who allows her to articulate a confident female voice, but she, like other women writers of her age, takes that first, conscious step towards the female literary tradition only after having experienced the *neoavanguardia*'s patronage, together with its limits, and having fully assimilated Tondelli's lesson. Different legacies mark different phases of the 'pulp' writers' literary development, and in the case of women writers it often takes the form of a negotiation between father and mother figures. While in this chapter I have discussed the relationship between the 'pulp' generation and their complex relationship with their self-appointed literary father and critics, in the next I will examine the debt to and gradual distancing from their chosen older brothers of the 1980s, before discussing in detail Ballestra's, Campo's and Santacroce's complex negotiations between mother and father figures and their search for their own individual voices.

⁸⁷ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Pao Pao* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982).

⁸⁸ Caredda, 'Intervista a Silvia Ballestra', p. 91.

CHAPTER 2

THE 'PULP' GENERATION AND THE LEGACY OF THE 1980S

2.1 Introduction: displacement, journey and return in the 'pulp' narrative of the 1990s

A common theme explored by the Italian 'pulp' writers of the 1990s is the condition of displacement experienced by the characters, who feel that they do not belong, or do not fully belong, to their place and culture of origin and to their own times. This feeling of not belonging is expressed through narrative patterns of journey and flight, whether real or simply longed for, that appear in many early works of this generation of writers. The protagonists of Ballestra's, Campo's and Santacroce's early fiction strive to escape the geographic boundaries of their birth places. The four Antò who are the protagonists of Silvia Ballestra's 'La via per Berlino' (1991) and *La guerra degli Antò* (1992),¹ attempt, not always successfully, to leave the Abruzzi province, which they perceive as stifling, and move to Bologna, Berlin or Amsterdam. In *In principio erano le mutande* (1992) and *Il pieno di super* (1993),² Campo shows her main characters as they decide to leave behind the confines of the Northern Italian working class suburbs where they have grown up, or living as expatriates in Paris and travelling around the world, like the first-person narrators of *Mai sentita così bene* (1995) and *L'attore americano* (1997).³ The autobiographical protagonists of Santacroce's fiction move from the claustrophobic *Riccione riviera*, in which *Fluo* (1995) is set, to a variety of Northern European cities in *Destroy* (1996) and in *Luminal* (1998).⁴

In their later works, the same writers transform the escape journeys of their early works into return journeys, bringing back their plots to the Italian and provincial contexts that their early characters had abandoned, or showing their

¹ Silvia Ballestra, 'La via per Berlino', in *Compleanno dell'iguana* (Milan: Mondadori and Ancona: Transeuropa, 1991; my references are to the Mondadori edition), pp. 7-103; *La guerra degli Antò* (Milan: Mondadori and Ancona: Transeuropa, 1992). 'La via per Berlino' and *La guerra degli Antò*, have been published together as *Il disastro degli Antò* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1997).

² Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992); *Il pieno di super* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993).

³ Rossana Campo, *Mai sentita così bene* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995); *L'attore americano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997).

⁴ Isabella Santacroce, *Fluo. Storie di giovani a Riccione* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 1995); *Destroy* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996); *Luminal* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998).

protagonists as they come to terms with the places and the past they had left behind. In *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (1998), *Nina* (2001), *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (2002), *Tutto su mia nonna* (2003) and *La seconda Dora* (2006), Ballestra's narrators confront their youth and learn to perceive their native province in a more positive light.⁵ In Campo's later novels, the characters, while holding on to their condition of Italian expatriates in Paris, must confront the place they have run away from, when it appears on their doorstep in the form of a prodigal father in *Sono pazzo di te* (2001), in that of a long-lost lover in *L'uomo che non ho sposato* (2003), in the unresolved conflict with one's parents in *Mentre la mia bella dorme* (1999) and *Duro come l'amore* (2005).⁶ Campo's radio-play *Il matrimonio di Maria* (1998) dramatises the conflict between the desire to fly and the need to come to terms with one's past and origin, by staging the unwelcome irruption of the Southern Italian family into the life of Maria, who had migrated to Milan in order to escape their pressure and interference.⁷ Santacroce's transition from her early 'pulp' narrative to the more lyrical style of *Lovers* (2001) is accompanied by a return of her plots to an Italian setting, a move that is confirmed also in her later novels *Revolver* (2004) and *Zoo* (2006).⁸

The narrative pattern of journey and return present in the fiction of Ballestra, Campo, Santacroce plays an important role also in the works of Ammaniti, Brizzi, Caliceti, Culicchia and Nove, even though – as we shall see later in this chapter – their male protagonists' desire to escape remains often unfulfilled or is resolved more unsuccessfully than that of most female characters created by both men and women writers. All these writers, however, articulate the condition of non-belonging experienced by their characters through a language that challenges the standard Italian of their national literary tradition. The language developed by many 'pulp' writers, especially in their early fiction, shows a deliberate rejection

⁵ Silvia Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1998); *Nina* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001); *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002); *Tutto su mia nonna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005); *La seconda Dora* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006).

⁶ Rossana Campo, *Mentre la mia bella dorme* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999); *Sono pazzo di te* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001); *L'uomo che non ho sposato* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003); *Duro come l'amore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005).

⁷ Rossana Campo, *Il matrimonio di Maria* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998; first aired on Radio Tre in January 1997).

⁸ Isabella Santacroce, *Lovers* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001); *Revolver* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004); *Zoo* (Rome: Fazi, 2006).

of literary standard Italian vocabulary and syntax, accompanied by an assimilation of slangs, dialecticisms, regionalisms and foreign idioms.⁹ In this sense, these authors contradict the trend towards a homogeneous literary language, which appears instead to be a common trait of the 1980s narrative. Lino Pertile suggests that many writers of the 1980s opted for a standard narrative Italian, in an attempt to reconcile the tension between the high idiom of traditional Italian literature and the language of medium usage, which had become widespread in the mass-educated, media-influenced and socially, economically and geographically more homogeneous post-war Italy.¹⁰ This modern literary language, Pertile explains, 'is supple, precise, clear, and without local or social inflexions'.¹¹ It is the language adopted by most Italian novelists of the 1980s, both emerging and already established, including Gianni Celati, Andrea De Carlo, Daniele Del Giudice, Francesca Duranti, Francesca Sanvitale, Antonio Tabucchi and Sebastiano Vassalli. In contrast with this trend, Pertile argues, Pier Vittorio Tondelli stands out for having forged a different type of narrative language: an idiom by which he 'attempts to reproduce faithfully the "low" language of his characters'.¹² Pertile sees Tondelli's linguistic experiment as one of the few exceptions within the monolingual trend of the Italian narrative in the 1980s, an eccentric stylistic choice that the critic deems 'bound to undergo rapid obsolescence'.¹³ Against Pertile's prediction, it was precisely the experimental language of novels such as Tondelli's *Altri libertini* (1980) and *Pao Pao* (1982),¹⁴ which served as the most immediate literary model for the 'pulp' writers of the 1990s.

⁹ See Anna Comodi, *Tratti lessicali e morfosintattici del parlar giovane in 'Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo' di Enrico Brizzi* (Perugia: Guerra, 1998); Maria Teresa Frattegiani Tinca, 'Silvia Ballestra e il neo-italiano', *Annali dell'Università di Perugia*, vol. 6, no. 25 (1998), 87-93; Marco Berisso, 'Livelli linguistici e soluzioni stilistiche. Sondaggi sulla nuova narrativa italiana: 1991-1998', *Lingua e stile*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2000), 471-504. Berisso's essay has also been published in English as 'Linguistic Levels and Stylistic Solutions in the New Italian Narrative (1991-1998)', in Stefania Lucamante (ed.), *The New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers* (Madison-Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and London: Associated University Press, 2001), pp. 76-97.

¹⁰ Lino Pertile, 'The Italian Novel Today: Politics, Language, Literature', in Lino Pertile and Zygmunt Barański (eds.), *The New Italian Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 1-19 (pp. 13-15).

¹¹ Pertile, 'The Italian Novel Today', p. 14.

¹² Pertile, 'The Italian Novel Today', p. 15. Among the other authors whose language does not conform to the standard literary Italian he describes, Pertile includes Gesualdo Bufalino, Vincenzo Consolo, Aldo Busi and Sebastiano Vassalli's works of the late 1970s-early 1980s.

¹³ Pertile, 'The Italian Novel Today', p. 16.

¹⁴ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Altri libertini* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980); *Pao Pao* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982).

2.2 Tondelli's legacy and the 'pulp' generation

Discussing Tondelli's influence on his contemporaries and on the next generation of writers, Enos Rota explains that *Altri libertini* played the role of 'spartiacque nella letteratura italiana' and was 'il capostipite di un nuovo modello di narrativa'.¹⁵ The most groundbreaking aspect of Tondelli's fiction, Rota suggests, is the introduction of alternative and transgressive themes, such as youth life, drug culture and explicit male homosexuality, into the Italian literary landscape. While I agree that Tondelli's work brought about a thematic shift that was very influential for writers of his own and future generations, even more significant is, in my view, the fact that he developed these new themes through an experimental language that conveyed precisely the novelty of his subject matters: the language spoken by the youth of the 1970s-1980s and their culture. Tondelli himself often stressed how the 'discorso generazionale', which many readers and critics of *Altri libertini* recognised since its first appearance, should not be interpreted as an attempt to write and speak on behalf of his generation and culture, but rather as an effort to represent the youth culture of his time through its own languages.¹⁶

A similar correspondence between subject matter and the language used to represent it is an important characteristic of the 'pulp' fiction of the 1990s, a consequence of the lasting impact of Tondelli's first book on the definition of what constitutes new writing in Italy. Critics such as Enrico Minardi recognised the link between *Altri libertini* and the 'pulp' fiction of the 1990s:

Tondelli, con il suo libro, è all'origine di quel singolare fenomeno dei 'giovani autori' che, con un largo consenso di pubblico e di critica, continua tuttora, pur avendo avuto il suo apice nella seconda metà degli anni ottanta (fautore lo stesso Tondelli) e poi nel decennio successivo con i cosiddetti cannibali.¹⁷

¹⁵ Enos Rota, 'Presentazione', in Rota (ed.), *Caro Pier... I lettori di Tondelli: ritratto di una generazione* (Milan: Selene Edizioni, 2002), pp. 7-8 (p. 8).

¹⁶ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, 'Conversazioni con Pier Vittorio Tondelli', in Fulvio Panzeri and Generoso Picone (eds.), *Pier Vittorio Tondelli. Il mestiere di scrittore. Un libro-intervista*, (Rome-Naples: Theoria, 1997), pp. 39-96 (pp. 59-60).

¹⁷ Enrico Minardi, *Pier Vittorio Tondelli* (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2003), p. 11.

In this, Minardi follows Carnero, who, already in the early 1990s, argued that Tondelli had been a fundamental influence on the writers of the 1980s and that he had gained (and enjoys to this day) the status of a ‘vero e proprio punto di riferimento per tutta una generazione di autori emergenti’.¹⁸ Even those members of the *neoavanguardia*, such as Arbasino, Barilli and Guglielmi, who had not always been very receptive to Tondelli’s narrative efforts during his lifetime, acknowledge now his long-lasting influence.¹⁹ Notwithstanding at this stage the fact that he ignores the body of work produced by women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, which he considers too mainstream to merit his attention, Guglielmi not only acknowledges that Tondelli had succeeded in giving Italian narrative a new lease of life in the 1980s, by pulling it out of the stagnant waters of the self-referential experimentation pursued by the *Gruppo 63* during the 1960s and early 1970s; he also concedes that without *Altri libertini* and *Pao Pao* ‘quel tanto di buona narrativa (in vero poca) che oggi ci capita di leggere (la cosiddetta narrativa dell’eccesso, degli Scarpa, dei Nove, Ammaniti, ecc.) non esisterebbe’.²⁰ He points out that the reason for Tondelli’s lasting influence must be attributed to his desire and ability to sustain a new-found ‘narratività’ – a renewed belief in the relevance of story-telling that the *neoavanguardia* had radically questioned – with the creation of a highly expressive language; this is a language that combines the suggestions of cinema, television, comics, pop and rock music: in other words, the language of youth culture.

Tondelli’s own efforts to foster a new generation of writers confirms that his influence on the ‘pulp’ generation was not accidental. His willingness to dialogue with younger writers is testified by his enthusiastic involvement in the ‘Under 25’ project, that, between 1985 and 1990, led to the publication of three anthologies of short stories written by twenty-five-years-old or younger authors.²¹ Among the

¹⁸ Roberto Carnero, ‘Un classico degli anni Ottanta’, *Panta*, no. 9 (1992), 12-24 (p. 12).

¹⁹ See Alberto Arbasino, ‘Tondelli al telefono’; Renato Barilli, ‘Percorso di Tondelli’; Angelo Guglielmi, ‘Tondelli letto oggi’, *Panta*, no. 20 (2003), 137-139, 41-48 and 49-59, respectively.

²⁰ Guglielmi, ‘Tondelli letto oggi’, p. 55.

²¹ Pier Vittorio Tondelli (ed.), *Giovani blues. Under 25 I* (Ancona: Il Lavoro editoriale, 1986); *Belli e Perversi. Under 25 II* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1987); *Papergang. Under 25 III* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1990). For a detailed history of Tondelli’s involvement in the ‘Under 25’ project, see the endnotes compiled by Fulvio Panzeri, ‘Under 25 (1985-1990)’, in Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Opere. Cronache, saggi, conversazioni*, ed. by Fulvio Panzeri (Milan: Bompiani, 2001), pp. 1076-100. For a critical reflection on the project and a discussion of its long-lasting impact, see Antonio Spadaro, *Laboratorio ‘Under 25’. Tondelli e i nuovi narratori italiani* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2000).

latter, one can find Ballestra, herself destined to become an iconic author for her contemporaries and younger writers,²² who was praised by Tondelli both for her ability to represent her own generation and for updating the linguistic literary map with her ‘anglo-pescarese’ youth jargon.²³ What Ballestra has to say about Tondelli’s role in the new Italian literature sheds further light on the influence that his writings had on the new writers and readers of the 1990s. As Ballestra, explains, discovering Tondelli’s work in her youth, meant, among other things, that it was possible for her to overcome her diffidence towards an Italian literary tradition that appeared completely alien to the youth culture she knew and experienced:

Scoprendo Tondelli, dunque, constatai che anche in Italia vi era qualcuno che sì scriveva ma non se ne restava imbalsamato dietro la scrivania [...] e anche se parlava di una generazione non proprio vicinissima alla mia lo faceva usando una rete di riferimenti abbastanza familiari.²⁴

2.3 Language and youth culture from the new writers of the 1980s to the ‘pulp’ writers of the 1990s

The ‘rete di riferimenti’ that Ballestra recognises in Tondelli’s fiction is shared by the characters who populate her own narrative and the language through which they express themselves. By inextricably linking the language with the themes of his writings, Tondelli acknowledged and identified with a specific readership. Talking of *Altri libertini*, he said: ‘Quando scrivevo i racconti di quel libro

²² See for example, Enrico Brizzi’s acknowledgement of his debt to Ballestra, whom he includes in his list of influential ‘scrittori giovani’, together with David Leavitt, Jay McInerney, Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Andrea De Carlo, Daniele Del Giudice and Enrico Palandri, in Cristina Gaspodini (ed.) *Il mondo secondo Frusciante Jack* (Ancona-Milan: Transeuropa, 1999), pp. 48 and 109. See also Giulio Milani and Roberta Schiavon, two slightly younger writers, who admit to having been inspired by Ballestra’s work in Giulio Mozzi and Silvia Ballestra (eds.), *Coda. Undici ‘under 25’ nati dopo il 1970* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1996), pp. 11-22 (pp. 18 and 20). Ballestra is also mentioned as an inspiration equal to Tondelli by yet another young writer, Stefania Olivieri, quoted in Andrea Demarchi (ed.), *Coda II. Fifth. Volume I* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1997), p. 21.

²³ Tondelli, ‘Ragazze’ and ‘Commento ai testi. Silvia Ballestra’, in *Opere. Cronache, saggi, conversazioni*, pp. 755-59 and 765-66 respectively.

²⁴ Silvia Ballestra, ‘Intrappolato in questo rock’, *Panta*, no. 9 (1992), 329-35 (p. 333).

cercavo un determinato pubblico e avevo un'idea di lettore. Volevo comunicare con altre persone che avessero più o meno la mia età'.²⁵ As Severino Cesari points out, Tondelli's ideal readers belonged to the writer's own generation and culture, exactly as the 1990s 'pulp' writers' ideal readers belong to the same generation and culture as their own.²⁶ Both groups of readers are selected precisely for their ability to understand the narrative languages adopted by the writers, as well as the cultural references suggested by such languages.

In the early 1990s, the emerging 'pulp' generation follows Tondelli's example and forges narrative idioms that echo vocabulary, sentence construction and references belonging to the youth culture of the 1990s, in the same way as the language of *Altri libertini* and *Pao Pao* had given literary form to the spoken language of the Italian youth of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The presence of anglicisms, regional idioms, technological terms and brand names in Ballestra's, Nove's, Santacroce's and Scarpa's novels show how these writers select the cultures in which they embed their narrative, and how they address an ideal readership capable of understanding their language. Cesari speaks from the point of view of a young writer when he describes the process of selecting his own generation as his readership:

L'equazione è semplice: i linguaggi diffusi e universali sono quelli [...] della musica, della cronaca, dei videogiochi, della pubblicità, della TV, del fumetto [...] fino a quelli, non tanto universali per la verità, della letteratura di genere? Io scrittore li assumo (potenzialmente) in blocco come sterminato terreno di caccia, la mia lingua tutti li parlerà e li conetterà tra loro [...] *E dunque, il mio pubblico potenziale è il pubblico naturale di questi linguaggi, chi ne ha la competenza*

²⁵ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, 'Conversazioni con Pier Vittorio Tondelli', p. 57.

²⁶ Severino Cesari, 'Narratori dell'eccesso' in Nanni Balestrini and Renato Barilli (eds.), *La bestia I. Narrative invaders!*, (Milan: Costa & Nolan, 1997), pp. 24-36 (p. 32). On *Altri libertini* and *Pao Pao* as generational novels, see Roberto Carnero, *Lo spazio emozionale. Guida alla lettura di Pier Vittorio Tondelli* (Novara: Interlinea, 1998), pp. 39-42, and Elena Buia, *Verso casa. Viaggio nella narrativa di Pier Vittorio Tondelli* (Ravenna: Fernandel, 1999), pp. 56-60. On the generational aspects of Tondelli's writing within the context of student culture in Bologna in the late 1970s, see Minardi, *Pier Vittorio Tondelli* pp. 18-25. On Tondelli as a writer for his own generation, see Fulvio Panzeri, 'Pianura progressiva', in Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Opere. Romanzi, teatro, racconti*, ed. by Fulvio Panzeri (Milan: Bompiani, 2000), pp. vii-xxxx (pp. xiv-xvi) and Fulvio Panzeri, 'L'unica storia possibile', in Tondelli, *Opere. Cronache, saggi, conversazioni*, pp. vii-xxviii (p. xii).

linguistica: rispetto a questo pubblico prima di tutto eseguirò la mia performance, perché sia da lui comprensibile.²⁷

It is beyond doubt that a specific linguistic and cultural competence is needed by the reader, who otherwise runs the risk of feeling and being excluded from the style and contents of a mode of writing that does not conform to the Italian literary canon. The network of cultural references and the language(s) present in the new narrative require instead that whoever approaches the texts is able to cross-reference it against alternative traditions, such as twentieth century American literature, punk music, drug culture, comics and Japanese manga, advertising, and so on. Talking about Santacroce's *Destroy*, for example, Marino Sinibaldi stresses how intimidating her language might appear to those who are not familiar enough with the world evoked by her vocabulary: 'lo sciorinamento di luoghi, pratiche, marchi sconosciuti e incomprensibili vuole visibilmente raggiungere un effetto assordante e stordente, che sgomenta e quasi impone di sospendere il giudizio per manifesta inferiorità del lettore'.²⁸ Of course, the references that Sinibaldi finds hard to understand might be perfectly transparent to those who are conversant with Santacroce's cultural models. The 'alienating' terms Lovers X, Bubblegum Crisis, Vampire Hunters and other titles of Japanese manga series, adopted by Santacroce as names for the designer drugs consumed by the characters of her second novel *Destroy*, reflect the fact that the drugs used in the American and European club culture have been named after comic book characters since the 1980s. For the reader who is familiar with 1990s youth culture, the effect is not 'assordante e stordente', but rather one of ironic contrast between the colourful and generally optimistic contents of most of these manga stories, aimed at a middle-class, teenage, female readership, and the darkness of the drug culture embraced by the protagonist in *Destroy*. A reader with a more extensive knowledge of 1990s manga, youth and drug cultures than Sinibaldi – and indeed myself – will be better equipped to understand the full extent of Santacroce's linguistic play. A specific cultural competence is needed, one in which the contemporary Italian canon and its standard literary language are bound to play a secondary, if still relevant role. Within this context, both readers and

²⁷ Cesari, 'Narratori dell'eccesso', p. 32 (italics mine).

²⁸ Sinibaldi, *Pulp*, p. 79.

writers are expected to be well prepared in the culture that sustains the new fiction: the audience, explains Cesari, ‘non perdonerà l’errore della citazione sbagliata, cialtrona, approssimativa’.²⁹

Yet, it is not only the use of youth language and cultural reference that attracts the ‘pulp’ generation to the 1980s new writers, but also their adoption of the journey as a distinctive narrative pattern. Plots and characters of the 1990s follow patterns of exile, flight and return inspired by writers of the previous generation, such as De Carlo, Palandri and Tondelli.³⁰ In the 1980s, Tondelli’s characters desire to leave behind the social and cultural constraints of their lives in the Italian province, in order to be able to express their artistic, political and sexual aspirations more freely and in a more congenial environment. Their need to escape the province in the direction of a mythical, if rather generic, Northern Europe, is symbolised, for instance, by the *Autobrennero* motorway in Tondelli’s short story ‘Autobahn’,³¹ or by the big cities found in *Rimini* (1985) and *Camere separate* (1989).³² However, the longing to run away and be elsewhere, a longing that drives the plots of the generational fiction of the 1980s, is almost always counterbalanced by a sense of loss and nostalgia for the place of origin, a desire to return home.³³ The opposing desires to flee and to return to one’s birthplace, which inform the development of Tondelli’s protagonists and are, in fact, the pattern of his entire narrative production, appear also in the fiction of his self-confessed followers in the 1990s, who adopt this model in a deromanticised form and thus expose all its ironic contradictions.

The characters of both the 1980s and 1990s narratives betray a constant feeling of not belonging and the wish to escape their cultural and social boundaries, first and foremost the geographical limitations of their lives. At the

²⁹ Cesari, ‘Narratori dell’eccesso’, p. 33.

³⁰ Andrea De Carlo, *Treno di panna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981); Enrico Palandri, *Boccalone. Storia vera piena di bugie* (Milan: L’erbavoglio, 1979; repr. Milan: Bompiani, 1997).

³¹ In Tondelli, *Altri libertini*, pp. 177-95.

³² Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Rimini* (1985) and *Camere separate* (1989). For these novels, I refer to Tondelli’s complete works, *Opere. Romanzi, teatro, racconti*, pp. 401-623 and 911-1106 respectively.

³³ See, in particular, Leo’s return to his ‘piccolo borgo della bassa padana’ in *Camere separate*, in Tondelli, *Opere, Romanzi, teatro, racconti*, p. 1005. On the theme of journey and return in Tondelli’s fiction, see Carnero, *Lo spazio emozionale*, pp. 38-9; Buia, pp. 73-85; Antonio Spadaro, ‘L’esigenza del ritorno. Le radici di una geografia interiore in P.V. Tondelli’, in Laura Rorato and Simona Storchi (eds.), *Da Calvino agli ipertesti. Prospettive della postmodernità nella letteratura italiana* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2002), pp. 65-77.

same time, their sense of geographical displacement always translates itself into a cultural and literary displacement. The conflict present in the Italian ‘pulp’ fiction of the 1990s between the characters and their native Italian background, is reflected in the tension present in the texts between their Italian cultural context and the foreign cultural influences. The latter mirror the writers’ own empathy with foreign cultural frameworks, or with literary models that do not belong to the Italian canon, neither in terms of contents nor language. Both the new 1990s writers and those of the 1980s adopt and re-elaborate narrative patterns of flight and return found mainly Anglo-American and French. Brizzi’s debt to Louis Ferdinand Céline (1894-1961) and Ballestra’s ironic admiration for Bret Easton Ellis (b. 1964) and the American minimalists of the 1980s, for example, show how Tondelli’s dialogue with those literary models was kept alive a decade later by a younger generation of Italian writers.³⁴ The influence of other authors who were very important for Tondelli, such as Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) and the ‘beat’ generation, might not be always self-evident in the fiction of the 1990s, but it is visible in the ‘pulp’ writers’ desire to follow Tondelli’s directives on the use of spoken language and musical rhythms, a technique which Tondelli himself modelled on his reading of the ‘beat’ narrative.³⁵ In some cases, the allusions to

³⁴ Céline’s influence on Tondelli, Palandri and Claudio Piersanti, by way of Gianni Celati’s lectures at the University of Bologna, is discussed by Minardi, *Pier Vittorio Tondelli*, pp. 22-23. Brizzi admits to having been inspired by Céline’s writings in *Il mondo secondo Frusciante Jack*, p. 153. For Tondelli’s interest in American minimalist writers of the 1980s, see ‘David Leavitt’, ‘Jay McInerney’ and ‘Brett Easton Ellis’, in Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Un weekend postmoderno* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990; repr. 1996), pp. 525-28, 529-30 and 532-33 respectively. On Ballestra’s admiration for American minimalist narrative, see Rosaria Guacci’s interview with Ballestra, ‘Silvia Ballestra: monnezza e peluche’, *Tuttetorie*, no. 3 (March 1995), 14-16 (p. 15). Ballestra talks about the influence of twentieth century American literature in general in Giuseppe Caliceti (ed.), */baò'bab/ Autodizionario*, pp. 11-13 (13). See also Ballestra’s ironic homage to Bret Easton Ellis in her short story ‘Intervistare Bret Ellis (F.P.)’, in *Gli orsi*, pp. 115-23.

³⁵ On Tondelli’s relationship with Jack Kerouac and the ‘beat’ generation, see Generoso Picone, ‘Introduzione’, in Panzeri and Picone (eds.), *Pier Vittorio Tondelli. Il mestiere di scrittore*, pp. 11-26 (p. 17). Kerouac’s influence is discussed by Minardi, *Pier Vittorio Tondelli*, p. 23. Tondelli wrote about Kerouac and the ‘beat’ generation in the essays ‘Jack Kerouac’ and ‘John Fante’, in *Un weekend postmoderno*, pp. 520-24 and 540-54 respectively. In October 1987, Tondelli attended a conference on Kerouac in Québec, Canada, where he presented a paper on the importance of this American author for the Italian writers of the 1980s; the paper was later published in *Il Mattino* (18 July 1989) and can now be read with the title ‘Nei sotterranei della provincia’, in Tondelli, *Opere. Cronache, saggi, conversazioni*, pp. 786-90. In the same volume, see also ‘Oltre il fiume’, Tondelli’s report on his visit to Kerouac’s native place, pp. 1103-08. This experience directly inspired the episode of Leo’s attendance of a Kerouac conference in *Camere separate*, pp. 520-24. Ballestra discusses how influential Tondelli’s reading of James Baldwin, Jack Kerouac and Bret Easton Ellis have been for her in ‘Intrappolato in questo rock’, p. 334, confirming the role played by Tondelli as a mediator of cultural references between his own and the ‘pulp’ generation. Silvia Ballestra has translated Jack Kerouac into Italian, in *Scrivere Bop. Lezioni di scrittura creativa* (Milan Mondadori, 1996).

foreign cultures are specific to the writers of the 1990s, for obvious reasons of chronology or simply for reasons of personal preference: the cyberpunk fiction that Ballestra parodies in *Gli orsi* – a work that I will discuss in the next chapter – was, of course, not available to Tondelli and his generation, together with the 1990s music culture and Japanese manga that are embedded, for example, in Santacroce's narrative. But a shared tension towards specific foreign cultures, whether directly inherited through the new fiction of the 1980s, or authorised by Tondelli's and his generation's openness to a wide variety of cultural examples, both national and international, clearly reveals the link between the 'pulp' writers of the 1990s and the new fiction of the 1980s.

2.4 Challenging the 1980s canon in the 1990s

While the inclusion of non-literary models, such as rock music, television, cinema and popular culture, is one of the elements that differentiates the 1990s narratives from those produced in the 1980s, in a way that should caution us against making sweeping generalisations about similarities between the two generations of writers, it is also true that the 'pulp' writers of the 1990s continue to challenge the national cultural canon as their predecessors had done in the 1980s, from both outside and within the Italian literary confines. Comparable for their affinity with foreign cultural suggestions, the new writers of the 1980s and those of the 1990s are connected also by their preference for literary models that are located at the margins of the Italian canon. Generoso Picone states: 'Nel lungo giro attorno alla casa della letteratura italiana, per accedervi i narratori degli anni ottanta mostrano di preferire le entrate secondarie, quasi di servizio, quelle che sulle mappe catastali ufficiali sono appena indicate'.³⁶ The same can be said of many writers of the 1990s, whose dialogue with potential literary mothers and fathers who occupy the margins of the national literary landscape becomes another strategy for conversing at the same time with their favourite authors of the 1980s. Both Tondelli and Ballestra, for example, privilege the tradition of provincial writing, especially choosing writers who are closely associated with local realities and who are off the chart of the national canon. As we shall see in the next chapter,

³⁶ Generoso Picone, 'Ipotesi critiche per la lettura di un'onda', in Generoso Picone, Fulvio Panzeri, Massimo Raffaelli and Angelo Ferracuti (eds.), *Paesaggi italiani* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1994), pp. 15-65 (p. 51).

Ballestra's interest in Joyce Lussu (1912-1998) should be read not only as a young writer's rediscovery of a woman writer, meant to counterbalance the male models offered by the *neoavanguardia*, but also as a reappropriation of an author whose life and work are deeply rooted in the regional history and culture of the Marche.³⁷ Ballestra's relationship with Lussu mirrors Tondelli's affinity with Reggio Emilia writer Silvio D'Arzo (b.1920): born and raised in the small town of Correggio, in the Reggio Emilia province, Tondelli found an ideal interlocutor in D'Arzo, whose work was equally marked by a love-hate relationship with his place of birth. By choosing Lussu as her literary model, Ballestra replicates Tondelli's adoption of a model that belongs to his own regional background: the Marche is a shared geographical and cultural context for Lussu and Ballestra, as Reggio Emilia was for D'Arzo and Tondelli. Carnero, who was drawn to studying D'Arzo's narrative by Tondelli's interest in it, points out that D'Arzo was very influential for other writers of Tondelli's generation, such as Claudio Piersanti (b. 1954), and that this influence continued in the narrative of the 1990s.³⁸ The return of the protagonist Leo to his childhood home gives the narrator of *Camere separate* an opportunity to explore his bedroom: music, film posters and books that are scattered around the room are reminders of Leo's intellectual education; D'Arzo's books appear side by side with the writings of Antonio Delfini (b. 1908), another author Leo (in this instance, a clear alter ego of Tondelli) feels close to because of their shared connection with provincial life and narrative.³⁹ On Tondelli's map of literary models, D'Arzo and Delfini – like Carlo Coccioli (b. 1920), who had touched a chord in Tondelli's literary sensibility because of their similar independence and anti-conformist approach to religion and spirituality⁴⁰ – play a similar role to Kerouac and Céline: the *emiliani*, like the American and the French writers, offer an alternative to the Italian canon, and, read side by side, conjure up a narrative space where the desire to escape the province and the pull

³⁷ Lussu's interest in the local history of the Marche is testified primarily by her *Storia del Fermano: dalle origini all'Unità d'Italia* (Ancona: Il Lavoro editoriale, 1981) and *Le inglesi in Italia. Una saga anglo-franco-marchigiana* (Ancona: Il Lavoro editoriale, 1981; repr. 1999). Her respect for regional traditions and cultures inspired her fairy tales based on the oral story telling of peasants from the Marche in *Libro perogno* (Ancona: Il Lavoro editoriale, 1982; repr. 1992).

³⁸ Roberto Carnero, *Silvio D'Arzo. Un bilancio critico* (Novara: Interlinea, 2000), pp. 7-14. Carnero agrees with Generoso Picone that the title of Piersanti's first novel *Casa di nessuno* (1981) is a homage to D'Arzo's *Casa d'altri* (1952).

³⁹ Tondelli, *Camere separate*, pp. 1014-15.

⁴⁰ Tondelli, 'Carlo Coccioli', in *Un weekend postmoderno*, pp. 478-90.

to return to it can meet. On the one hand, Tondelli states that Kerouac played a fundamental role for the Italian writers of the 1980s because he taught them ‘il desiderio della fuga’, for having offered them the possibility to leave the province behind, ‘di lasciare Peyton Place’.⁴¹ On the other hand, he turns D’Arzo into the embodiment of a new myth, the myth of the province, complementary to the suggestions offered by the American ‘on the road’ myth: ‘quello stesso mito di Reggio e della provincia emiliana come luoghi privilegiati di un “sogno americano”, d’un percorso che mentalmente scavalca l’oceano per trovarsi là i propri maestri’.⁴²

Tondelli proved to be the most significant literary mentor of the ‘pulp’ generation, partly for his controversial themes – such as drugs, prostitution and homosexuality – and for his elaboration of a literary language indebted to spoken youth jargons. He was not chosen as a model simply because of his interest in voicing the alienation of Italian youth from their national culture, or for his ability to see links between alternative foreign models and the narrative of the province, but rather because of his ability to draw connections between all of these different aspects of his writings, aspects the new writers of the 1990s could identify with. Explaining the principles that governed his ‘scrittura emotiva’ and his use of the ‘sound del linguaggio parlato’, Tondelli mentioned in succession the names of Arbasino, Cèline, Baldwin and Celati, bringing together disparate models, traditions, cultures and generations.⁴³ When asked directly about his literary models, he listed a heterogenous group of foreign and Italian writers, such as Fitzgerald and Kerouac, Gadda, Testori and Arbasino, ‘quegli autori che maggiormente hanno lavorato sulla lingua o che hanno cercato di dare uno spaccato generazionale o sociale del loro tempo e dei loro anni’.⁴⁴ By showing that a writer can move freely between a variety of congenial models, that canons – both literary and non-literary – can be challenged, expanded, created and contaminated, Tondelli provided the successive generation of writers with a point of reference for their journeys through the cultural map, and with a model who would guide them in their further explorations. Furthermore, he offered an

⁴¹ Tondelli, ‘Nei sotterranei della provincia’, pp. 787-88.

⁴² Tondelli, ‘Giro in provincia’, in *Un weekend postmoderno*, pp. 555-93 (p. 593).

⁴³ Pier Vittorio Tondelli, ‘Colpo d’oppio’, in *Opere. Cronache, saggi, conversazioni*, pp. 779-82 (p. 780).

⁴⁴ Tondelli, ‘Conversazioni con Pier Vittorio Tondelli’, pp. 94-96.

example of a young Italian writer who travels through a variety of national and international cultural influences, by creating what Minardi calls the ‘archetipo strutturale’ of Tondelli’s fiction: the external pattern of ‘fuga’ and ‘ritorno’, corresponding to the internal movement of ‘ascesa’ and ‘caduta’ experienced by his characters.⁴⁵

2.5 Journey and return from the 1980s to the 1990s

In Tondelli’s writings, the recurrent theme of journey-flight becomes synonymous with the psychological condition of exile experienced by his young protagonists, a pattern that is echoed also in Palandri’s, De Carlo’s and Lodoli’s early fiction, and which can therefore be considered a generational feature. The geographical and psychological journeys of their characters are stimulated by cultural and literary suggestions. In Tondelli’s own words, ‘è possibile rintracciare, per i giovani, una struttura del viaggio e una sua mitologia che si costruisce, generazione dopo generazione, attraverso la visione di certi film, la lettura di certi romanzi, la diffusione di certe idee’.⁴⁶ Literary or not, these narrative patterns contribute to the creation of what Fulvio Panzeri calls ‘mito della fuga’, which is ultimately a journey with no final destination. Panzeri argues that, as well as being inspired by the texts of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg or Wim Wenders, the writers of Tondelli’s generation adopt narrative patterns of journey and escape in order to represent the sense of exile experienced by 1980s Italian youth from their national and social reality.⁴⁷

Picone suggests that after the failure of the 1970s political struggles, the young Italian writers of the 1980s feel estranged from the world in which they are forced to live.⁴⁸ The most innovative writers of this generation challenged therefore both the engaged political representations produced in the 1970s and the notion of a crisis of all narrative possibilities after the end of the *neoavanguardia*, because both these positions – politically engaged literature and experimental

⁴⁵ Minardi, *Pier Vittorio Tondelli*, pp. 37-40. On the theme of the return as evidence of the influence of Celati’s writings on Tondelli’s fiction, see Mauro Vianello, ‘Memorie dell’opera di Gianni Celati nella prima produzione narrativa tondelliana’, *Panta*, no. 20 (2003), 253-262 (p. 255).

⁴⁶ Tondelli, ‘Sulle strade dei propri miti’, in *Un weekend postmoderno*, pp. 461-3 (p. 461).

⁴⁷ Fulvio Panzeri, ‘Il paesaggio come tentazione’, in Picone, Panzeri, Raffaelli and Ferracuti (eds.) *Paesaggi italiani*, pp. 67-102 (p. 86).

⁴⁸ Picone, ‘Ipotesi critiche per la lettura di un’onda’, pp. 33-36.

writing – had failed to make any permanent impact on either the political or literary context. The authors of the 1980s chose therefore to return to more traditional narrative modes, adopting primarily realist plots, used to represent the distance between their young characters and the environment in which they operate. Journey and flight became the recurrent pattern of their stories and Tondelli's *Altri libertini* became the archetypal text of the 1980s-1990s. The book consists of six short stories which represent the progressive distancing of their protagonists from the alien space of the Northern Italian province, and their movement, first to Italian university towns, then on to the mythical and idealised cities of Northern Europe.⁴⁹ The progression from province to Italian town, to European city, and sometimes to America – but, as Carnero points out with reference to Tondelli's work, the myth of Northern Europe can be as powerful as that of America –⁵⁰ abounds in the fiction of the 1980s and is reproduced with an ironic twist by many writers of the early 1990s. For the estrangement from their original places and from themselves does not end when the place of desire is reached, but shifts its target within the characters' souls and is transformed into the dream of another world, which, according to Panzeri, exists only in the space of the subject's desire.⁵¹

Tondelli's work exemplifies the critics' claim that the Italian fiction of his time shows a generation in a permanent state of exile. However, several critics have also highlighted how he also develops the theme of the return to the province, where the characters end their journeys and the plots reach their conclusion. The last section of *Un weekend postmoderno* is devoted to places and journeys.⁵² The tension between personal desire to escape and the condition of constant displacement that his fiction developed through its patterns of flight and return, is obtained here by means of a fragmented textual structure, in which paragraphs on European metropolis alternate with observations on some provincial town or landscape. This strategy highlights the fact that identity is never fixed to a single place, but is always projected elsewhere. Similarly,

⁴⁹ On the utopian space that the North represents in Tondelli's narrative, see Aldo Tagliaferri, 'Sul motore tirato al massimo', *Panta*, 9 (1992), 12-17 (p.14); Buia, *Verso casa*, pp. 77-78; Minardi, *Pier Vittorio Tondelli*, p. 42.

⁵⁰ Carnero, *Lo spazio emozionale*, p. 22.

⁵¹ Panzeri, 'Il paesaggio come tentazione', p. 86.

⁵² See, in particular, the sections 'Viaggi' and 'Geografia letteraria', in Tondelli, *Un weekend postmoderno*, pp. 372-457 and 459-593 respectively.

Tondelli's essays form a map of desired places which changes with the writer's growing maturity, as in his texts the metaphor of flight is gradually replaced by that of return. This overall pattern, that characterises Tondelli's *oeuvre*, where the autobiographical characters of the fiction overlap with the author-as-character of the essays, comes full circle in *Camere separate*, a novel dominated by a nostalgic mood and sense of loss, symbolised by the death of Leo's lover and expressed through Leo's return to the places of his youth. What is most significant, however, is the fact that both escape and return are invested with a sense of displacement, which causes the characters to feel in exile throughout the different stages of their journeys. Explaining the significance of Leo's return to his small town, Minardi comments on the travel patterns followed by Tondelli's characters in general: 'Come l'abbandono del territorio di origine li porta a una precarietà presto insopportabile, così il ritorno verso quello che sembra essere un porto di sicurezza e contenere quella promessa di stabilità a cui aspirano, ne spegne e inghiottisce a poco a poco le energie, conducendoli verso un esito di azzeramento e catatonìa'.⁵³ The journey, therefore, becomes the only possible condition for the protagonists, who, through their failed attempts to escape and return, must accept that their hopes will remain for ever unfulfilled.

While they inherit Tondelli's narrative patterns of journey and return, Ammaniti, Ballestra, Brizzi, Caliceti, Culicchia, Campo, Nove and Santacrose rewrite Tondelli's plot ironically. They acknowledge that their characters' yearning to escape their national cultural tradition is inspired by a romanticised and nostalgic interpretation of specific literary and cultural models. But, unlike their models of the previous decade, they highlight the danger of this myth. Through an ironic use of the archetypal plot of journey favoured by Tondelli's generation, Ballestra and her contemporaries in the early 1990s distance themselves from those very literary models. Like Tondelli's young protagonists of the 1980s, the fictional characters of the 1990s desire to be elsewhere than Italy, to read books other than Italian ones, to speak and write in languages different from the standard Italian learnt from school textbooks. The myth of Northern metropolitan cities that had guided the journeys of *Altri libertini*, *Un weekend postmoderno* and *Camere separate* still fascinates Ammaniti's, Ballestra's,

⁵³ Minardi, *Pier Vittorio Tondelli*, p. 42.

Brizzi's, Campos's, Caliceti's, Culicchia's, Nove's and Santacroce's young protagonists, but the narrators of their stories reveal it to be a myth from the very beginning. A contrast becomes immediately apparent between the characters who believe in the 'mito della fuga' – including its corollary of longing for the place left behind – and the narrator's detachment from and ironic take on the myth. Moreover, the formative journeys of the 1990s are no longer subject to the nostalgic dimension of memory, which had been such an important element of Tondelli's works. The focus shifts from the strangeness of new places to the extraneity the young characters feel for all places. The inadequacy of the Italian province becomes the inadequacy of those who come from the province to fulfill their international aspirations, precisely because they cannot overcome their provincial origin. This is exemplified by 'Postoristoro 2002', Giuseppe Caliceti's rewriting of and homage to Tondelli's 'Postoristoro'.⁵⁴ The short story that opens Tondelli's *Altri libertini* is a dark and pessimistic, but also tragically romantic, description of the lives of drug addicts, prostitutes and petty criminals who populated the Reggio Emilia train station in the late 1970s. Here the protagonist Giusy pursues the impossible dream of escaping the place that represents his hopeless life condition, a place, however, where he can still be the hero who sacrifices himself, by sleeping with the small mafia boss Salvino, in order to provide his friend Bibo with the drugs he needs to get through the night. Twenty years later, the same station appears in Caliceti's narrative as utterly devoid of a tragic dimension, peopled with characters who are identified by the names of the taxis they drive, rather than the personal nicknames found in Tondelli's fiction, and, most importantly, as a place that none of the characters ever contemplates leaving. In Caliceti's story, the station has become a point of arrival towards which the desires of different groups of characters converge: the prostitutes who arrive by train, the old men who wait for them driving in circles outside the station, and the taxi drivers who see the women as a source of fares. While sharing equally pessimistic views of the Italian province, the two stories exhibit altogether different tones towards their characters: tragic and sympathetic in Tondelli, farcical and ironic in Caliceti. The two narratives also present opposing perspectives on that symbolic place of journey and departure that is the provincial

⁵⁴ Giuseppe Caliceti, 'Postoristoro 2002', in *Suini* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), pp. 93-100; Tondelli, 'Postoristoro', in *Altri libertini*, pp. 9-34.

train station: for Tondelli, although ultimately unattainable, the dream (or the memory) of escaping the *postoristoro* defines and lends tragic depth to its inhabitants; for Caliceti, on the contrary, the station is proof that the destination of one's journey out of one's own provincial background might be simply *another* province, as suggested by the number plates of the cars ('targate Parma, Modena, Bologna, Reggio Emilia')⁵⁵ driven by the old men who come to meet the prostitutes outside the station. In Caliceti's story, the only travellers are the prostitutes, who undertake daily the train journey for work reasons and who have effectively left behind their places of origin (they are described as 'brasiliane, nigeriane, senegalesi, albanesi')⁵⁶ or the transsexuals who have transited between genders.

2.6 Exiles, migrants and nomads: Rosi Braidotti's 'nomadic subjects'

In order to see how the adoption of similar patterns of journey and return are invested with similar, but also different meanings in the new narrative of the 1980s and the fiction of the 1990s, I draw on the postmodern concept of literary exile and on the idea of nomadic subject elaborated by Rosi Braidotti within a postcolonial framework.⁵⁷ Both terms and definitions are useful to understand the many levels of displacement that operate within the Italian 'pulp' fiction of the 1990s. The term 'exile' should be understood in a wider sense than the writers' physical distance from their native country. In his study of exile literature, Martin Tucker explains that such a term refers also to the 'profound state of psychic exile', which informs much contemporary narrative.⁵⁸ Psychic exile is the state of the contemporary subject, and the main psychological consequence of geographic exile is a fragmented and decentred identity. Exile can therefore be considered as a metaphor for the condition of the postmodern subject, in so far as the loss of one's own country, of a geographical point of origin, symbolises the loss/dispersion of identity, which characterises the postmodern condition. Exile narrative is therefore the postmodern narrative *par excellence*, and every narrative

⁵⁵ Caliceti, 'Postoristoro 2002', p. 97.

⁵⁶ Caliceti, 'Postoristoro 2002', p. 98.

⁵⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁵⁸ Martin Tucker, 'Preface', in *Literary Exile in the Twentieth Century: An Analysis and Biographical Dictionary*, ed. by Martin Tucker (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp. vii-xii (p. vii).

that focuses on the state of exile experienced by the contemporary subject can be said to be a narrative of exile. Exile narrative, whether it refers to texts of voluntary escape or forced displacement, is also characterised by the persistent sense of loss of one's place of origin and self-identity, accompanied by a more or less conscious mood of nostalgia.⁵⁹ If exile is considered a useful metaphor to describe the contemporary subject and her/his identity, nostalgia can refer to the individual desire for a coherent and centred identity denied in postmodernity.

In opposition to the nostalgic re-evaluation of the past that Tucker associates with the metaphor of exile as a philosophical representation of the postmodern condition, Braidotti introduces the alternative metaphor of nomadism and of the polyglot as a linguistic nomad.⁶⁰ Braidotti introduces the metaphor of nomadism in order to point out the limits that are intrinsic in the conceptualisation of exile. Speaking from a feminist standpoint, Braidotti underlines how the term exile is traditionally used to define the displacement of an apparently ungendered and undifferentiated subject, which is in fact the subject of male and white Eurocentric thought. Such a subject occupies a privileged position from which he can look back at, miss, feel nostalgic about a place of origin, a moment in time and space when he felt firmly placed. This longing is in itself a privilege, which cannot be enjoyed by those subjects, such as women, whose location on the identity map has always been more insecure and unstable, placed as they are at the margins of male-centred discourse. Braidotti warns against a feminist appropriation of the exile metaphor, as it would invest with negative moral connotations, or, conversely, it would romanticise a condition which is all too real for a multitude of human beings. Her nomadic subject, on the other hand, does not represent a homeless being, nor the condition of forced displacement, but rather a 'subject who has abandoned all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity'.⁶¹ The nomad does not look back upon a fixed place, nor does s/he miss the stable identity provided by a definite position. On the contrary, s/he is always in transit, moving along the borders and through places, perfectly aware of and responsible for her/his transitions and for confronting the many others s/he encounters along the way. This notion of nomadism offers a theoretical framework, which helps to describe

⁵⁹ Tucker, 'Preface', pp. ix-x.

⁶⁰ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, pp. 8-15.

⁶¹ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 22.

contemporary identities by placing the emphasis on the desire that drives the subjects' transitions, rather than on their more or less forced displacements, as in the case of exile. Moving away from the place of origin and from the permanent sense of identity it traditionally helps to secure becomes not so much a necessity as an act of will, performed by the subject in perfect awareness of the impermanence of any chosen position and of the multiple coordinates (age, gender, nationality, language, sexuality, class and others) which contribute to locate identities in any given space and time.

Braidotti does not theorise the erasure of the exile from the cultural and literary discourse, or his/her replacement by the nomad. On the contrary, her definitions of exile and nomadism are intended as complementary and reciprocally alternative metaphors for the condition of permanent mobility, which characterises postmodern identities. But while exile describes the condition of a subject who looks back at an ideal past (whether real or imaginary) in which one's sense of identity was firmly located, the nomad has never experienced such an idealised sense of placedness and belonging: his/her subjectivity, therefore, is not defined by the desire for what is or may be lost. In linguistic and narrative terms, the nomad is a fundamental figure of postcolonial literature, which Braidotti sees in a different light from the literature of exile and that of migration. The difference between the three forms of writing lies in the different relationship the migrant, the exile and the nomad entertain with time and culture. While the migrant and the exile long for the lost time of wholeness in their place of origin, the nomad engages in an ever-shifting present, resisting the temptation to be fixed in a moment and place that might give her/him a stable sense of identity. Moreover, the nomad's resistance to any dominant culture and language means both engagement with that culture and constant tension against assimilation to any fixed identity a culture might stand for. A nomadic writer is, on all accounts, a postcolonial writer, who resists every culture s/he decides to confront in a specific time/space, from a specific position.⁶² Braidotti's observations on the difference between the positions occupied by exile, migrant and nomad, particularly where she insists that the nomadic position is equally one of engagement and resistance,

⁶² Braidotti discusses the difference between exile, migrant and nomad in the introduction to *Nomadic Subjects*, pp. 21-28.

are useful to explain the form which exile takes in the Italian writers of the 1990s, especially in their relation to gender.

2.7 The ‘pulp’ character as exile: Silvia Ballestra’s Antò Lu Purk

Italian 1990s ‘pulp’ narrative is populated with characters who move between the positions of exile and nomadism, between a sense of displacement accompanied by a longing for a stable, idealized point of origin – a position that recalls very closely Tondelli’s protagonists – and a desire to belong to many places and no place at once. The theme of the journey dominates the early fiction of these writers, but, echoing Tondelli’s development, it is gradually replaced in the late 1990s and early 2000s by the motif of the return, suggesting that the authors’ own entry into adulthood establishes a new relationship between the characters and their fictional spaces. Ballestra’s *oeuvre* opens with the narrative of Antò Lu Purk’s exile from native Montesilvano, detailing his and his friends’ unsuccessful attempts at escaping the Abruzzi province in the novella ‘La via per Berlino’ and in *La guerra degli Antò*, by emigrating first to Bologna, the city of an idealised university experience, and later by travelling to the capitals of alternative youth culture in Northern Europe. These escapes from the restrictive cultural models offered by the province end disastrously, due to the male characters’ inability to transform themselves from exiles into nomads (we shall see in the next section that gender is relevant). Renzo Paris explains the pattern of failed flight in Ballestra’s early fiction in the following terms:

Cosa c’è di più provinciale, sembra chiedersi la Ballestra, di una provincia sprovincializzata, di gente che mentalmente va all’estero, vive una vita parallela televisiva; e invece poi gli tocca mangiare la cucina casereccia e trattare con i coatti locali. Ballestra mette in evidenza una specie di alienazione, quella culturale, dai riflessi inediti.⁶³

The definition ‘punk Pescaraese’, which Ballestra applies to her protagonist Antò, is meant ironically to remind the readers of the protagonist’s desire to be part of

⁶³ Renzo Paris, *Romanzi di culto. Sulla tribù dei nuovi narratori e sui loro biechi recensori* (Rome: Castelvechi, 1995), p.15.

an international youth culture and of the limits to his aspirations he must face because of his geographic location. The first chapter of the novella, entitled, in the style of traditional formative fiction, 'Un'adolescenza pescarese', underlines this contradiction: 'Antò Lu Purk è nato a Montesilvano, provincia di Pescara, nel 1969, lo stesso giorno che l'uomo ha conquistato la luna'.⁶⁴ No connection is suggested between the two events if not the disproportion of the comparison. The Italian province where Antò is born cannot be fled simply by virtue of a narrative link between his date of birth and History: the irony of the sentence is directed both at the character's self-aggrandisement and at the power of fiction to overcome geographical limitations.

After having failed his high school exams, Antò embarks upon the prescriptive 'viaggio di formazione in Europa: Berlino-Amsterdam, Londra-Barcellona'.⁶⁵ This first flight from Italy, however, is paid for by Antò's parents and the list of cities visited by him remains what the narrator tells us, the ideal away-from-Italy itinerary. The text, thus, contrives to stress the empty superficiality of his motivations for travelling. Back in Italy, Antò invests his desire to be elsewhere in his hope for a student life in Bologna. His failure to meet the challenges of life in the university city leaves Antò bewildered and persuades him of the inadequacy of the Italian scene to his aspirations. His formative summer journey then acquires in his memory a mythical dimension, which, Ballestra's narrator insists, is simply the result of Antò's frustrations and projections:

decise di tagliare i ponti con il resto delle terre peninsulari, concluse che non meritavano affatto il suo pianto. Dopotutto conservava degli ottimi ricordi del giro in Europa; particolarmente Berlino. All'improvviso fu certo di poter trovare una nuova famiglia a Kreuzberg, il quartiere delle case occupate, dei punk e dei turchi, e questo pensiero bastò a renderlo sereno.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ballestra, 'La via per Berlino', p. 9.

⁶⁵ Ballestra, 'La via per Berlino', p. 38.

⁶⁶ Ballestra, 'La via per Berlino', pp. 45-46.

Going to Kreuzberg becomes Antò's confused dream that is constantly frustrated by his failures at all levels (study, love, work, friendship) while he lives in Bologna. Ballestra captures her protagonist's inadequacies in an episode in which Antò, because of his inability to perceive his own limits, has an accident at work and must have a leg amputated. He still decides to leave for Berlin, his maimed body now a symbol of his greater inability to travel. The choice of Berlin as his ideal destination is certainly founded on the aura of haven of alternative culture that the city had acquired during the 1980s. It is not unrealistic to imagine that Antò, who reads minimalist American writer David Leavitt in order to impress young women at the university library, might have picked up his literary and travel hints from Tondelli's *Un weekend postmoderno*. Lu Purk's expectations of Berlin may be based on Tondelli's description of a city that, even in winter, is 'dolce, facile da vivere, ordinata, piena di umanità'.⁶⁷ What is certain is that Ballestra has read *Un weekend posmoderno* and has assimilated the myth and the language created by Tondelli's writings on London, Berlin and Amsterdam.⁶⁸ In Antò Lu Purk's mouth, however, such enthusiasm for a place that he has never experienced, except through the words of others, seems unjustified and excessive.

Ballestra shows her protagonist on the train that takes him to Kreuzberg, regretting the fact that he has to miss 'un buon film di Craven sul terzo', suggesting that his intellectual desire to escape Italy has more to do with mediatic representation of other cultures than with reality. The story ends sadly, revealing Antò's lack of the linguistic skills he needs in order to move comfortably around the city of his dreams: 'Quando il controllore teutonico entrò nello scompartimento per vidimare il biglietto, Antò Lu Purk capì che la sua meta era prossima, ormai; non resistette alla tentazione di spiegargli, in un pessimo anglo-pescarese, che quel giovane senza una gamba era forse l'ultima vera roccia degli Abruzzi, un punk italiano affascinato dalla Germania'.⁶⁹ Antò's linguistic inadequacy acts as an ironic comment on the idealised plurilinguism of Tondelli's fiction. The train conductor cannot understand what the young man says, because his alleged international outlook is in fact cramped by his regional (not even

⁶⁷ Tondelli, 'Berlino', in *Un weekend postmoderno*, pp. 397-400 (p. 398). On the myth of Kreuzberg, see also Tondelli, 'Anni ottanta', in *Opere. Cronache, saggi, conversazioni*, pp. 840-42 (p. 841).

⁶⁸ Ballestra, 'Intrappolato in questo rock', p. 334.

⁶⁹ Ballestra, *La guerra degli Antò*, in *Il disastro degli Antò*, pp. 100-01.

national!) origins, precisely what he is trying to leave behind. Geography, suggests Ballestra, is not easily overcome by the power of narrative imagination: ‘prima della Storia, della Sociologia, a noi ci inculca la Geografia. L’Antropologia. La Linguistica, toh’.⁷⁰

In *La guerra degli Antò*, which starts where the plot of ‘La via per Berlino’ ends, Ballestra insists on the theme of the limits which are imposed upon her young characters by their culture of origin. Berlin, the mythical place of Antò’s voluntary exile, has already proved a failure (in Antò’s mind places fail him, rather than the other way around). The narrator now comments directly on her character’s shortcomings, addressing him in the second person singular. Having, not surprisingly, been rejected by his ideal family of punks and squatters in Kreuzberg, as he was unable to communicate with them, Antò is rhetorically asked by the narrator: ‘sul serio non immaginavi che già i punk bolognesi ti guardavano con aria di sufficienza e ti consideravano un goffo della Madonna ogni volta che comparivi all’orizzonte?’.⁷¹ Antò’s experiences in Berlin, the city that had been his main goal in the previous story, are significantly left outside the narration, so insignificant and hostile has the place actually proved to be. The young man is now in Amsterdam, alone and rejected by the city, and, most importantly, missing his friends and family.

In Amsterdam, Antò does not find the dreamt-of space of cultural freedom, as it was only a space of his mind, constructed from the suggestions evoked by books, films and songs shared by his generation. He does not find the ‘paradiso terrestre in cui musica, rock, droghe leggere, rapporti sessuali, abitazioni, sussidi di disoccupazione, servizi sociali [sono] veramente alla portata di tutti’, that Tondelli had brought to life in his description of the city.⁷² On the contrary, Antò feels again alone and isolated, the only sexual experience the city offers him being an unsatisfactory visit to a squalid peepshow. The very motivations of the protagonist’s travelling are questioned by the narrator, who wonders why Antò behaves in Amsterdam exactly as he would in his native town. Meanwhile, Antò acquires a mythical aura in the eyes of his Italian friends, for whom he ironically becomes a model of voluntary exile. In order to explain the reasons that lie behind

⁷⁰ Ballestra, *Il disastro degli Antò*, p. 320.

⁷¹ Ballestra, *Il disastro degli Antò*, p. 101.

⁷² Tondelli, ‘Amsterdam’, in *Un weekend postmoderno*, pp. 431-38 (p. 431).

her young characters' desire to escape their reality, the narrator describes in detail the limits of the Italian province. History, for example, proves to be beyond political engagement and control, as in the example of the Gulf war. The only possible activism for the young appears to consist of commenting upon media reports on what is decided elsewhere. Political idealism, in the form of rallies against George Bush and American imperialism, is shown to be as ineffective as Antò's attempts to find an ideal family in Kreuzberg. When one of Antò's friends wrongly believes he has been called up for active military service in the Gulf, he absconds and joins his mythical friend and hero in Amsterdam. The absurdity of his reaction is mirrored by the final failure of the two friends in Amsterdam. In the youth hostel where they are staying the two men decide to cook spaghetti, in order to celebrate their successful retreat and their nostalgia for Italy, but their ineffectiveness is so complete that this simple act ends up causing a fire, which destroys the hostel, and both men are sent home in disgrace.

2.8 Exiles and nomads: male ad female 'pulp' characters

Ballestra's bleak view of young people's desire for exile as a mythical space originates in the limited knowledge young Italians have of their ideal cultures, in her characters' inability to construct themselves as nomadic subjects who move freely about a postmodern and postcolonial world, subjects who, like Braidotti suggests, constantly aspire to be elsewhere, but who must at the same time be strongly situated, aware of the position they occupy as young provincial Italians at home and in the world. Antò's tragedy is precipitated by his denial of the limits imposed upon him by his geographic rootedness combined with his inadequate, second-hand acquaintance with the foreign cultures he has come to idealise.

Like Antò, the male protagonists of Brizzi's *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* (1994), Caliceti's *Fonderia Italghisa* (1996), *Battito animale* (2001) and *Suini* (2003), Culicchia's *Bla bla bla* (1997) and Nove's *Puerto Plata Market* (1997) seem unable to negotiate their desire to escape to the mythical places learnt from their cultural references, and the limits imposed upon them by their provincial roots and their lack of international social skills and linguistic

competence.⁷³ Generally speaking, female characters fare much better, when they are not reduced to victims of the male character's objectification and violence. Examples of nomadic subjects are offered by Ballestra in *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore, Nina, Il compagno di mezzanotte, Tutto su mia nonna* and *La seconda Dora*, by Santacroce in *Destroy* and *Luminal*, by Campo in most of her novels, as well as by some male writers, whose female characters appear to be better equipped than male characters to deal with an uncertain sense of national identity, an identity which is less fixed for them from the start precisely because of their gender. In *Destroy*, for example, Santacroce's character Misty can move at ease in a dark, pornographic London because she is fluent in all the linguistic and cultural codes through which the city communicates, first of all the English language. The Italian young women who, in Campo's novels, decide to live in Paris as voluntary expatriates, do so being fully aware of their origins, with no nostalgia for what they have left behind. By contrast, in Brizzi's *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo*, Alex experiences the condition of exile, while Aidi, his girlfriend, possesses the traits of the potential nomad: he perceives his hometown, Bologna, as foreign and romantically dreams of Salinger and rock bands, but is unable to transcend the boundaries of school yard, family home and neighbourhood; she, on the contrary, is unencumbered by cultural myths and goes to America in order to learn English, leaving him behind.

The young heroines of Rossana Campo's early novels, *In principio erano le mutande* and *Il pieno di super*, are aware from the outset of their condition of exile as young women born into Southern Italian families who have emigrated to Milan. Their desire to move away from their place of origin is a necessary consequence of their multi-faceted cultural background. This background is initially seen as oppressive in its traditional limitations, especially for the constraints the families force upon the young women's sexuality. However, it is precisely their varied origin that facilitates the girls' nomadic movements through geographical spaces and cultures and transforms their flight into an adventure, rather than an escape framed by nostalgic regret. The young women's spirit of adventure, their nomadic desire and their sense of solidarity prevail over their

⁷³ Enrico Brizzi, *Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo* (Ancona: Transeuropa, 1994); Giuseppe Caliceti, *Fonderia Italghisa* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), *Battito animale* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), *Suini* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003); Giuseppe Culicchia, *Bla bla bla* (Milan: Garzanti, 1997); Aldo Nove, *Puerto Plata Market* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997).

fears. The adjustments required by the characters' transitions to other countries and by their encounter with other differences never throw the subjects of Campo's fictions completely out of their flexible balance. In *Mai sentita così bene*, *L'attore americano*, *Mentre la mia bella dorme*, *Sono pazza di te*, *L'uomo che non ho sposato* and *Duro come l'amore*, the female protagonists who are a development of Campo's earlier and younger characters, move with confidence in non-Italian contexts, mainly Paris, but also America and London, and seem to fit into a framework of cultural, racial, sexual, class and personal diversity. The characters' physical wanderings along the many routes allowed by the Parisian map to reach the house where the endless party of *Mai sentita così bene* is taking place, the intercontinental flights undertaken in search of true love which structure the narrative of *L'attore americano*, the movements across Europe that help the protagonist of *Mentre la mia bella dorme* to unravel the mystery of her new lover's murder, all these travels are performed in a spirit of constant dialogue and exchange with the other(s), with a marked preference for interlocutors who are marginal or outcast subjects, but she perceives as nomads, border-crossers and travellers:

Io mi trovavo bene fra quelle persone che sono arrivate al capolinea dell'umanità, che ridono, urlano, scoppiano a piangere per i motivi più insensati [...] mi sono sempre piaciuti i disadattati, gli sfigati, i ciccioni, i fuori dal mondo, quelli che non ce la fanno, quelli che parlano con la Madonna, quelli che passano il tempo a tingere i capelli a una bambola, che sono tagliati fuori dalle conversazioni educate, dalle belle macchine, dai conti in banca, dalle vetrine coi vestiti eleganti [...] Può darsi che ci sia troppa ingenuità in tutto questo, ma per me quegli sbandati si battono in prima linea. Sono i guerrieri dell'umanità.⁷⁴

It is of course Campo's narrator's own nomadic perspective that enables her to reinscribe the marginal and the exile as a nomad. Let's compare, for example, Campo's *In principio erano le mutande* with Culicchia's *Bla bla bla*. Both texts

⁷⁴ Campo, *Sono pazza di te*, p. 21.

present very similar situations, in which the first-person narrators describe their impact with new cities. In *Bla bla bla*, the main character wanders around the streets of a city that, although never named, resembles London very closely. The anonymity of the city underlines its alienating features and the protagonist's difficult transit through it:

Cammino, cammino, cammino: trascorro le mie giornate attraversando silenzioso quartieri sconosciuti, mercati, edifici, rifiuti, alberi e dentro i mercati e intorno agli edifici e sopra i rifiuti e sotto gli alberi vedo volti, mani, capelli, gambe, incredibilmente vicini ma del tutto irraggiungibili, segmenti di vite inesplorate, estranee, distanti, io ignoro tutto di voi, voi ignorate tutto di me [...] ci si sente come una cacca di microbo su un grosso letamaio, rispetto a quell'adolescente bionda che vola via in bicicletta non sono che un pedone da evitare zigzagando.⁷⁵

The character's perception of his physical environment as silent and anonymous ('attraversando silenzioso quartieri sconosciuti') is the prelude to the human silence, the complete absence of communication, which marks his stay in the alien city. The absence of any form of connection between the protagonist and the subjects that cross his path, transforms his route through the city into an aimless wandering, an almost imperceptible interference in other people's travelling ('rispetto a quell'adolescente bionda che vola via in bicicletta non sono che un pedone da evitare zigzagando'). On the contrary, in Campo's novel the arrival in Barcelona coincides with the excitement of exploration, discovery and desire:

Poi comincio a fare quello che faccio sempre in una città sconosciuta, cioè che prendo e mi metto a girare come una forsennata con questa grande furia che devo vedere tutto subito, ambientarmi e sapere andare in giro per le strade *come fosse casa mia*.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Culicchia, *Bla bla bla*, p. 23.

⁷⁶ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 91 (italics mine).

It is especially her desire and ability to communicate that distinguishes Campo's character from Culicchia's protagonist. The first-person narrator of *In principio erano le mutande* walks through Barcelona, familiarising herself with the place, meeting new people and talking to them, in a constant dialogue with their differences. Conversely, Culicchia's exile, who wanders through the streets of the unknown metropolis, is doomed to complete loneliness, to an even more definitive silence: the languages spoken by other people, which he is unable to understand, become for him an annoying background noise, an unbearable *bla bla bla*.

If for Campo's characters the journey is a space of dialogue with the other(s), it is also true that moving away from their place of origin allows them to reassess the reasons of their exile from it. Confronting her father and his 'mondo di troie e di bevute e la sua vita insensata'⁷⁷ helps the protagonist of *Sono pazza di te* overcome a moment of stasis in her nomadic experience. Her father's tales remind the main character and narrator of the reasons that had pushed her away from her birthplace, which her father had come to symbolise. Nevertheless, by finally being able to distinguish her father's 'troie' and 'bevute' from his mad love for her mother, she recognises in his restless personality a desire to escape and to return home similar to her own. Only once she has identified the existence of these conflicting desires and their origin, the young woman is able to resume her nomadic passion. The dangers hidden in a journey that does not take into account the possibility and necessity of a return are exemplified in Campo's radio-play, *Il matrimonio di Maria*. The protagonist is a young Sicilian woman, Maria, happily settled in a lesbian relationship with her Milanese partner Patti. Maria's happy exile from her family is suddenly interrupted when her parents force her to face the weight of Southern Italian traditions. The impact of the parents' pressure to see their daughter married is particularly devastating for the couple, because Maria has never really confronted the place and past she had once escaped from. Escape proves in this case to be insufficient to transform the exile into a nomad: only after a confrontation with her roots, however forced (symbolised here by her parents and relatives moving briefly to Milan), an awkward plot resolution is allowed and Maria's journey through her chosen nomadic identity can continue.

⁷⁷ Campo, *Sono pazza di te*, p. 172.

Maria's marriage of convenience is performed in order to meet her parents' expectations and results in a pregnancy, which causes the break up of the lesbian relationship. Reconciliation between Patti and Maria is only possible once the two young women have acknowledged that this pregnancy is in fact the realisation of their yet unfulfilled desire for maternity, a partial acceptance of the family values which they had tried to escape, but which they had nevertheless internalised.

Campo's radio-play is an overt rewriting of Ang Lee's film *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), where the interracial Chinese/American male gay couple is replaced with a Sicilian/Milanese lesbian couple. In the film the traditional Chinese parents unwittingly force the fake wedding that leads to the unplanned pregnancy of the newly married couple. Interestingly, while the Chinese parents of the film confront individually (but never admit to each other) their son's homosexuality, in Campo's radio-play Maria's Sicilian family disappears from the plot after the wedding banquet, suggesting that their role was limited to that of reminding their daughter of the traditional values they embody. While in Lee's film the Chinese parents are somehow forced to revise their own traditional values in the light of the reality of their son's life, this opportunity is not given to Maria's parents. Campo's determination to resolve the story with a more upbeat ending than the bittersweet conclusion of Lee's film, dissuades her from introducing a confrontation between the young women and Maria's parents. Although it is suggested that such a confrontation will take place after the end of the play, with Maria determined to tell everything to her parents, this discordant element is left outside the plot. Campo's intention of devising a happy ending for all is further emphasised by the fact that while the pretend-wife of *The Wedding Banquet* eventually moves out of the gay couple's home, after deciding to have the baby and raise him/her with only external assistance from the father and his family, the lesbian couple of Campo's play choose to live together with Maria's husband ('in fondo è anche figlia sua'), who will play the traditional wife role ('Cucina benissimo, sa fare tutti i lavori, vedessi com'è scrupoloso a pulire il bagno').⁷⁸ This alternative family unit confirms Campo's tendency to offset the lesbian plots she regularly introduces in her stories, a characteristic that I will discuss in detail in the chapter dedicated to her novels, but it is also an attempt to reconcile the

⁷⁸ Campo, *Il matrimonio di Maria*, p. 90.

nostalgia for the traditional values and stability represented by the *idea* of the family with the desire for individual freedom.

Isabella Santacroce's plots also progressively move away from the Romagna province (*Fluo*), to London (*Destroy*), to different cities in Northern Europe (*Luminal*), and finally return to the Italian province in *Lovers*, *Revolver* and *Zoo*. In Santacroce's case, there is no doubt that her characters' journey away from Italy and between the capital cities of European club culture (London, Zurich, Hamburg) constitutes an escape from cultural and sexual limitations. The nomadic experience of the free and confident characters abroad is interrupted whenever the past pulls them back to their point of departure and to their condition of exile. The unresolved relationship with the family, with the mother in particular, triggers, for example, Starlet's desire to leave her hometown Riccione in *Fluo*, but is also the cause of the interruptions of Demon's journeys in *Luminal*. In *Lovers*, the heroines unleash their sexual desire within the heart of their family, sublimating their need for their own parents in the form of sexual intercourse with the protagonist's best friend's father. As I will argue in detail in the chapter devoted to Santacroce, the family, with the incestuous relationship between its members, becomes also the stage of the unresolved feelings of attraction to and rejection of the symbolic place of origin, which is the point of departure of many Italian narrative journeys and the point of arrival of many returns.

2.9 Exiles, nomads and language

The opposing desires to fly away and to return, which inform many fictional texts of the 1990s, correspond to the characters' movement between the positions of exiles and nomads, that is to say between the perception of their context as strange and unsympathetic, a place to escape from, and an awareness of themselves as subjects willing to exist in a permanent state of transition. This narrative pattern achieves its most interesting results at a linguistic level. The characters' ability to successfully make the transition to nomadic subjects varies from text to text and from author to author. Female characters created by women writers do, however, seem generally better equipped to deal with the conflicting desires to flee and to return, adapting more comfortably to the multiple cultural shifts their identities are required to undergo. In the case of male characters, both men and women writers, on the other hand, tend to focus on the discomfort and limitations that traditional

expectations of Italian masculinity impose on them, also at the level of the language they employ. In Santacroce's *Destroy*, for example, the character Misty can deal with the darkness of a marginal and pornographic London, because she is fluent in the English language, a skill which Culicchia's protagonist of *Bla bla bla* was so tragically lacking. Campo's young protagonists, while aware of their Italian origins, do not dwell on nostalgic feelings for 'home' and for the past. Instead, they move with full linguistic competence between Italy, Paris, London and America feeling equally at home and strangers in all places. The movement between the conditions of exile and nomadism, with its gender implications, must therefore be considered a fundamental component of the relationship between 'pulp' narrative and language.

'Pulp' writers strive to break the confines of the Italian language, especially the language of the mainstream narrative tradition, both in terms of vocabulary and syntax. Their language is heavily influenced by foreign idioms, mostly Anglo-American and Northern European, and by the use of dialects and regional sentence construction. I have already mentioned that Ballestra, for example, creates an idiom, which the narrator of 'La via per Berlino' and *La guerra degli Antò* ironically calls 'anglo-pescarese', and which is used to voice the international linguistic and cultural aspirations and regional limitations of her characters. Rossana Campo inserts colloquial Italian and colloquial French into texts which are structured around free flowing conversations of Italian expatriates in Paris and around the world. English enters Isabella Santacroce's *Fluo*, *Destroy* and *Luminal* completely unmediated by translation and paraphrase, and it is assumed the readers understand it as they understand Italian:

Arriva la police sbruffona come al solito. Lo spaccia un po' si caga ma mantiene la calma cercando di arruffianarsi i men in uniforme atillata. Edie si diverte con le jap isteriche dalla pelle liscia come budino alla vaniglia, saltella con loro canticchiando *Praying Hands* dei Devo. La lady del pusher sempre scalza e tremolante mi si avvicina timidamente chiedendomi una sigaretta. Ha una voce strana, sottile, quasi infantile. Potrebbe doppiare Minnie o qualsiasi altro personaggio fumettoso.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Santacroce, *Fluo*, p. 82.

Not only is one expected to sail through the English terms ‘police’, ‘men’, ‘lady’, ‘pusher’, but also to understand the references to youth and drug jargon implicit in words such as ‘spaccia’ (*spacciatore*, drug-dealer) and ‘jap’ (Japanese women). In order to grasp the full meaning of the paragraph, Santacroce’s ideal readers should also be acquainted with the reference to the song *Praying Hands* and the comic book character Minnie.

It is, however, precisely in the use of *forestierismi* that the works of Campo, Santacroce and Ballestra show a distinctive focus, which differentiates them from their male counterparts and creates links between their otherwise very heterogeneous linguistic and narrative experiments. The issue of linguistic competence, or better, plurilinguistic competence, is addressed directly by these writers, who seem to subscribe to Braidotti’s belief that what distinguishes the condition of the exile from that of the nomad is the subject’s ability to identify her/himself as a polyglot. The polyglot is a linguistic nomad and, differently from the exile, s/he is able to communicate effectively in any given context, moving with ease across linguistic, as well as cultural, boundaries. The exile, on the other hand, longs for her/his linguistic origin, and therefore her/his cultural transitions are impeded by her/his lack of linguistic skills, her/his inability to move beyond the relative stability of the original language. Potentially multilingual by virtue of their gender, which locates them on the borders of patriarchal linguistic and literary codes, Campo’s, Ballestra’s and Santacroce’s female characters meet Braidotti’s definition of the nomadic subject as a polyglot.⁸⁰ Male characters, on the other hand, are often presented in a condition of exile, striving to escape the limits of their national identity, but stuck in the cultural and linguistic limitations of traditional Italian masculinity. *Sono pazza di te* is again a very apt example of how crucial the relationship between gender and language is when trying to define the exile or nomadic condition in the ‘pulp’ narrative.

As in most of Campo’s novels, *Sono pazza di te* is set abroad and features an Italian protagonist narrator who has chosen to live in Paris and who is perfectly fluent in French. Despite the French context, the narrative is carried out almost exclusively in colloquial Italian, since it is filtered through the consciousness of

⁸⁰ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 10.

the Italian protagonist. Her free indirect discourse incorporates the voices and conversations of French characters. French vocabulary flows freely within the Italian, usually in order to underline the informal colloquialism of a specific exchange, or through a slang that signifies a particularly intense emotional moment. Reminders that the narrative context is in fact foreign (French) to that of the main language in which the text is written (Italian) become, however, more frequent once the character of Renato, the protagonist's long-lost father, appears in the plot. Renato perceives himself as a nomad, a free willing agent of his own transitional destiny, who tries to project his self-image to his daughter and her friends. The daughter and narrator, who has throughout her life experienced his flights for freedom and adventure as personal abandonment, exposes him to be an exile, someone who transits neither successfully nor comfortably through the places of his numerous journeys. On the contrary, Renato has remained attached to the myth of Southern virility and to the language that traditionally expresses it (the dialect words 'bufaiotti' and 'poppone' are among his favourite terms when describing women's physical attributes and when talking about women in general). When father and daughter go to lunch in a Chinese restaurant, Renato's displacement in a doubly foreign culture (a Chinese restaurant in Paris) becomes palpable: 'si guarda in giro, cerca di avere l'aria di qualcuno sicuro di sé, tipo boss della camorra'.⁸¹ Although he boasts of having travelled around the world, it soon becomes apparent that he must rely on his daughter's linguistic and cultural competence in order to read the menu and choose his food. In an attempt to make up for the discomfort revealed by his linguistic incompetence, Renato resorts to a verbal display of his virile appreciation of the Chinese waitresses, interspersing his comments with dialect: 'Ma vedi che belle signorine che ci stanno in questo locale, dobbiamo venirci più spesso qua. Uè, e pure per la strada stamattina! ho visto un paio di sventole... mamma mia! Guarda a quella che bel culone che tiene'.⁸²

Renato is an older version of Ballestra's Antò Lu Purk, who is not only tragically unable to establish his identity in the Abruzzi province of his birth, but who also fails to reach a sufficient degree of linguistic and cultural competence, which would enable him to deal with the European punk culture he aspires to

⁸¹ Campo, *Sono pazza di te*, p. 84.

⁸² Campo, *Sono pazza di te*, p. 85.

become part of. During his exile in Berlin and Amsterdam, Antò's English proves to be insufficient for him to join in the youth subcultures, constantly pulled back by the *pescarese* portion of his *anglo-pescarese* idiom:

Hai vagato per Kreuzberg giorno e notte, cercando di farti benevolere, 'taccare bottone con gli squatters più irriducibili e sanguinari, ma quei giovani introversi ti hanno snobbato senza pietà. Del resto, buoni tre quarti delle cose che dicevi erano incomprensibili, per loro. Inutile negarlo, Antò, tu le lingue non le conosci, e quando cerchi di parlare inglese il telaio delle frasi è tutto compromesso e stravolto dalla costruzione pescarese. Facciamo un esempio: "Egli è un mio amico", "He's a friend of mine". Tu invece pensi "Collù è micc'a me" e dici "Ittis e frìnd to mmi".

E chi vuoi capisca cosa, in Germania? Parli quasi creolo ti rendi conto?⁸³

On the contrary, Antò's linguistic competence is never found lacking when he is required to define femininity, which he does by resorting to his vernacular, original, although geographically rejected cultural roots (see for example the phrases 'la prustituta Laura Mei' or 'pocciuta furia', used to refer to women he desires).

Both Renato and Antò display through their language the same limits identified by Lucamante when she talks of the experimental language created by numerous male 'pulp' writers. Italian male *cannibali*, she considers, are themselves 'entrenched in a sphere of the imaginary in which women are still two-dimensional, their existence continues to be narratively defined in a physically determined matter, in an unending reiteration of *tette, culo, cosce*, etc.'⁸⁴ I suspect that this statement would not prove to be applicable all the time once we start to differentiate between the authors' own moral position and the linguistic codes which they deem necessary to represent the 'pulpy' worlds of their characters. Yet, I agree with Lucamante's perception that the works of numerous male *cannibali* are permeated by a sexist and androcentric vocabulary,

⁸³ Ballestra, *Il disastro degli Antò*, pp. 100-01.

⁸⁴ Lucamante, 'Everyday Consumerism', p. 104.

one which does not allow alternative voices to emerge. A notable exception to this consideration is Tiziano Scarpa, who, in the final pages of *Occhi sulla graticola* (1996),⁸⁵ gives a prominent position to the voice of the until then objectified female character Maria Grazia. Her final intervention in the novel is to all effects a rewriting of the first-person narrative by the male protagonist, in which she had been the silent object of his desire. In *Battito animale*, also Caliceti introduces the voice of a female character Silvia, thus creating the only real moment of crisis within the hyper-vitalistic, sexist, racist, homophobic and consumeristic framework of the protagonist's first-person perspective. While the woman-hating vocabulary of much 'pulp' fiction written by men is the most effective tool to represent the commodification of Italian society and of its culture, women authors are more successful in revealing that gender is in fact one of the main components by which narrative expresses its own 'pulpification'. Brizzi's, Caliceti's and Nove's narratives, for example, articulate correctly and effectively the language of an Italy where the homologation produced by the pervasiveness of the market and the media, the 'riduzione del mondo a pura quantità',⁸⁶ is expressed also through the linguistic equation of women to other forms of merchandise. In Nove's short story 'Jasmine', the narrator explains how he has hired a prostitute as a surprise present inside a chocolate egg for his brother's birthday. When the egg is opened and Jasmine is found to be dead, the man's reaction is one of frustration before wasted goods: 'Erano le cinque del pomeriggio, non potevo più prenderne un'altra'. He then recounts how both he and his brother try to make the most out of the dead body, in order not to lose out on a good bargain: 'Jasmine è un maiale, non si butta via niente. Le aprii la bocca e le misi il cazzo dentro'.⁸⁷ While Nove succeeds in reproducing the sexism inscribed in the culture and language of consumerism, he fails to or chooses not to escape the confines of that language in order to introduce those voices (such as Jasmine's), which might counter and defy the one through which the story is narrated and focalised. In Nove's, Brizzi's, Caliceti's novels and short stories, female characters are for the most part deprived of voices and identities, simply being extensions of the male narrators' world. They are defined as 'vagine' and 'uniculi' in the Emilia disco-epos

⁸⁵ Tiziano Scarpa, *Occhi sulla graticola: breve saggio sulla penultima storia d'amore vissuta dalla donna alla quale desidererei unirmi in duraturo vincolo affettivo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996).

⁸⁶ Sinibaldi, *Pulp*, p. 81.

⁸⁷ Aldo Nove, *Woobinda* (Rome: Castelvechi, 1996), p. 116.

conjured up by Caliceti in *Fonderia Italghisa*, or reduced to absolute silence before being raped and murdered in the fictional Nice of Cousin Jerry and his friends narrated by Brizzi in *Bastogne*. While the authors of these texts represent with great talent the sexism inherent in the language of much popular and youth culture, they seem uninterested in narrating alternative voices and subjectivities that, because of their gender, are denied by the aggressively masculine linguistic and cultural codes adopted in their ‘pulp’ narratives.

In contrast, Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce employ narrative patterns of journey and return in order to expose and question the very relationship between language, gender and identity. By doing so they reveal alternative ways by which ‘pulp’ fiction can conduct its linguistic experimentation. In them, parallel to the search for linguistic patterns that mirror the cultural condition of the male and female characters in the contemporary geographical and social contexts, runs a constant search for a narrative voice that can let them speak as female authors in a literary world still dominated by a predominantly male canon and critical discourse. The achievement of a confident female voice comes as the result of a complex negotiation between the ambition to belong to the Italian experimental tradition, embodied by the *neoavanguardia* of the 1960s-early 1970s, their affinity with Tondelli’s 1980s youth and popular culture model, and the more or less explicit need to find points of reference in the tradition of women’s writing. Having already examined in this and in the previous chapter the debt of the ‘pulp’ generation to the legacy of the *neoavanguardia*, I will devote the next three chapters to the study of Ballestra’s, Campo’s and Santacroce’s narrative work in the light of their as yet unexplored relationship with a variety of other literary models, in particular the women writers of previous generations.

CHAPTER 3

FROM THE INFLUENCE OF THE *NEOAVANGUARDIA* TO THE LEGACY OF WOMEN'S TRADITION: SILVIA BALLESTRA

3.1 Introduction: the women of the 'pulp' generation

Silvia Ballestra, Rossana Campo, and Isabella Santacroce are among the most prominent writers of the 'pulp' generation. We have already seen how the same *neoavanguardia* intellectuals who hailed and supported the new 1990s authors were the first to acknowledge the distinctiveness of women's voices, in apparent contrast with the male-dominated avant-garde of the 1960s. Interviewed by Marco Berisso, the *neoavanguardia* writer Edoardo Sanguineti claimed that, unlike the books of the 'insigni ed apprezzabili scrittrici' of the past, in Ballestra's, Campo's and Santacroce's works 'l'ottica femminile si impone e veramente con caratteri specifici propri'.¹ However, he did not explain what these characteristics are in relation to current or past men and women writers. Berisso questioned Sanguineti's statement, wondering whether the emergence of a specifically female narrative voice should not be considered paradoxical in the contemporary, postmodern cultural context:

Sarebbe a questo punto abbastanza paradossale, ma non lo escluderei, che il femminile prendesse voce proprio nel momento in cui si arriva ad una specie di altra indistinzione. La donna ha finalmente preso la parola in quanto donna ma contemporaneamente nasce una cultura in cui la differenza sessuale tende ad essere superata da modalità di comportamento e di linguaggio in cui la differenza stessa non è più così decisiva.²

The exchange between Sanguineti and Berisso suggests a new awareness on the part of Italian critics of the need to approach the new generation of writers from a gender-specific viewpoint. At the same time, it reveals a certain resistance in discussing the appearance of a confident female literary perspective and the

¹ Marco Berisso's interview with Sanguineti, 'Cannibali e no', in Nanni Balestrini and Renato Barilli (eds.), *La bestia I. Narrative invaders!* (Milan: Costa & Nolan, 1996), pp. 116-27 (p. 120).

² Berisso, 'Cannibali e no', p. 123.

temptation to dismiss it as out of time. Neither Sanguineti nor Berisso consider the possibility that the confident new voice of the ‘pulp’ women writers might be founded on the tradition of past women’s writing. In this and in the next two chapters, I intend to conduct a detailed reading of Ballestra’s, Campo’s and Santacroce’s work, demonstrating precisely how their act of speaking and writing confidently as women is the result of a complex negotiation of multiple literary models, which include the male-dominated avant-garde of the 1960s-early 1970s, as well as parallel traditions of women’s writing, both Italian and non-Italian. Before embarking upon the analysis of these three writers, though, I must discuss how the supporters of the ‘pulp’ writers, while prompt in pointing out the influence of the *neoavanguardia* and willing to acknowledge the similarities between the new generation of male writers of the 1980s and the 1990s authors, have been generally less ready to recognise the importance of women’s literary tradition for the ‘pulp’ generation, especially for the women of the group. Indeed, the acknowledgement by some critics of the importance of gender in the new authors’ work betrays their ignorance of the fact that a specifically female narrative voice had emerged in Italy since the 1970s.

In his authoritative assessment of the *neoavanguardia*, Renato Barilli either ignores or downplays the experimental production of women in the 1960s.³ Nanni Balestrini includes only five women in an anthology of *Gruppo 63* which features fifty authors (Alice Ceresa, Giulia Niccolai, Amelia Rosselli, Carla Vasio and Patrizia Vicinelli).⁴ The critical perception of women’s role in the experimental literary production as marginal has led some critics, such as Ann Hallamore Caesar, to trace an alternative post-war tradition of women’s writing, based on the realist narrative model, which runs parallel with, but is distinct from, the avant-garde.⁵ While Hallamore Caesar points out how the development of women’s realist writing contains a number of innovative and experimental elements, other critics argue too mechanically that the apparent absence of women writers from

³ Renato Barilli, *Neoavanguardia. La neoavanguardia italiana. Dalla fine del ‘Verri’ alla nascita di ‘Quindici’* (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 1995). When he talks about the only novel written by a woman mentioned in his book – *L’orizzonte*, by Carla Vasio (1966) – Barilli refers to the female first-person narrator as ‘deliziosa coscienza che ci parla’, where the adjective ‘deliziosa’ frames the narrator’s gender in paternalistic terms.

⁴ Nanni Balestrini (ed.), *Gruppo 63. L’antologia* (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2002).

⁵ Ann Hallamore Caesar, ‘Post-War Italian Narrative: An Alternative Account’, in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, edited by David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 248-260 (p. 249).

the avant-garde canon means that Italian women are traditionally not interested in experimental writing. Silvia Contarini, for example, claims that if the early 1990s work of Rossana Campo, Silvana Grasso and Mariateresa di Lascia is not experimental, this is not because they do not elaborate new narrative languages, but because they are concerned with traditional themes of women's writing, such as emotions, intuition, feelings, romance and family, all expressed through the marginal genres of autobiography, biography, diary letters, and so on:

I temi tradizionali della letteratura femminile rischiano di diventare una 'riserva letteraria', uno spazio cioè in cui le donne possono parlare di sé e della famiglia, esprimere emozioni e intuito, tenerezza, sentimenti, autorelegandosi a generi come l'autobiografia, la biografia di personalità femminili, la corrispondenza, il diario intimo.⁶

By contrast, feminist critics Adalgisa Giorgio and Lucia Re have recently highlighted the significant contribution of women to the Italian experimental production of the 1960s-1970s and their participation in the avant-garde.⁷ In doing so, Giorgio and Re have rectified the critical discourse on the *neoavanguardia*, which has historically marginalised the contribution of women poets, such as Giulia Niccolai, Amelia Rosselli and Patrizia Vicinelli, and of novelists such as Silvia Castelli, Alice Ceresa, and Carla Vasio. In this and in the next two chapters, it is my intention to show how Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce are aware of the existence of a variety of women's literary traditions, both realist and experimental, from both within and without the Italian avant-garde. In fact, I demonstrate that these authors establish an intertextual dialogue with past women writers, even as they openly acknowledge their debt to the fathers of the canonical *neoavanguardia* and the older brothers of the 1980s.

Notwithstanding their differences, the women writers who emerged in the 1990s in the context of the *Ricerca* meetings have become increasingly

⁶ Silvia Contarini, 'Riflessioni sulla narrativa femminile degli anni '90', *Narrativa* 10 (1996): 139-163 (p. 143).

⁷ Adalgisa Giorgio, 'From Little Girls to Bad Girls: Women's Writing and Experimentalism in the 1970s and 1990s', in *Speaking Out and Silencing: Culture, Society and Politics in Italy in the 1990s*, edited by Anna Cento Bull and Adalgisa Giorgio (Leeds: Legenda/MHRA/Italian Perspectives & Maney Publishing, 2006), pp. 95-114; Lucia Re, 'Language, Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde', *MLN*, no. 119 (2004), 135-73.

outspoken in their claims to belong to both the male experimental tradition and that of women's writing. At the conference for the fortieth anniversary of *Gruppo 63*, Campo insisted that the presence of women in the Italian *neoavanguardia* should neither be overlooked nor reduced to a sociological comment. While, for example, she reiterated that *neoavanguardia* authors Nanni Balestrini, Gianni Celati, Luigi Malerba and Edoardo Sanguineti inspired her own writing, she stressed the equally important influence of the modernist American writer Gertrude Stein as translated by Giulia Niccolai.⁸ At the same event, poet Rosaria Lo Russo (b. 1964), one of the first poets to emerge from the *Ricerca* meetings, acknowledged her debt to such literary mothers as Amelia Rosselli, Anne Sexton and Patrizia Vicinelli, as well as to such fathers as Elio Pagliarani.⁹ In a context that celebrated the lasting influence of the *neoavanguardia*, Campo and Lo Russo, whilst identifying with that literary movement, felt compelled to point out the limits of that legacy in terms of gender and geography. With different modalities, a similar need to reclaim the influence of a variety of female writing traditions alongside the experimental canon of the 1960s-70s and the postmodern experience of the 1980s is also evident in the work of Ballestra and Santacroce. In this chapter, I start with analysing the development of Ballestra's work.

3.2 Silvia Ballestra, the *neoavanguardia* and the postmodern: *Compleanno dell'iguana* (1991), *La guerra degli Antò* (1992) and *Gli orsi* (1994)

The coexistence of various literary models in the fiction of these important female 'pulp' authors, with different emphasis at different stages of their work, becomes particularly evident when we consider the issue of narrative voice. With the progress of their work, we see how Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce grow increasingly preoccupied with finding female literary models who can authorise their own writing, and with establishing a more or less explicit dialogue with the literary mothers of the Western tradition. In Ballestra's case, the struggle to acquire a confident female narrative voice marks the development of her fiction from her early *neoavanguardia*-influenced short stories and novels, *Compleanno dell'iguana* (1991) and *La guerra degli Antò* (1992), to the use and critique of

⁸ Francesco Agnello and others, *Il Gruppo 63 quarant'anni dopo. Bologna, 8-11 maggio 2003. Atti del Convegno* (Bologna: Pendragon, 2005), pp. 296-97.

⁹ Agnello and others, *Il Gruppo 63 quarant'anni dopo*, p. 241.

postmodern narrative strategies in the collection *Gli orsi* (1994),¹⁰ to her gradually more overt adoption of a female, autobiographical narrative voice and feminist perspective in her later writing.

Ballestra's early novels and short stories were acclaimed for their innovative, experimental language, which includes hybridisation of spoken and written forms, youth jargons, mass media idioms, dialects and national language. Critics praised her use of postmodern narrative devices, such as the introduction of meta-fictional characters, the contamination of different genres and the use of intertextual references. The adventures of the four Antò, university students and drop-outs who are the protagonists of 'La via per Berlino' and of *La guerra degli Antò*, are conveyed through their own eyes and voices. The third-person narrator strives to hide her gender behind the male focalisers and their extensive use of sexist and regional youth jargons. Since I have already spoken in some detail about these two books in the previous chapters, here I only want to underline that they are both third-person narratives. The final chapters of *La guerra degli Antò*, however, show the first signs of Ballestra's unease with the *neoavanguardia* technique of hiding the social, cultural and gender position of the narrative voice. This unease becomes very apparent when the author irrupts into the novel as a character, called Ballestrera, with the aim of asserting her narrative control. While the character of Ballestrera can be seen as the author's use of a postmodern meta-narrative strategy that highlights both the experimental nature of the text and shows ironically the limits of postmodern fiction, she is also the expression of the author's increasing need to refocalise her fiction through a female perspective. In other words, Ballestrera's appearance introduces a woman's voice in an otherwise male-focalised text. Ballestra thus signals her newly acquired authorial confidence: having already proved in previous works that she is able to produce the apparently gender-neutral (but in reality male-focalised) narrative voice which has granted her the desired experimental credentials, she is now ready to experiment with the female voice.

¹⁰ Silvia Ballestra, *Compleanno dell'iguana* (Ancona: Transeuropa and Milan: Mondadori, 1991; my references are to the Mondadori edition); *La guerra degli Antò* (Milan: Mondadori and Ancona: Transeuropa, 1992); 'La via per Berlino' and *La guerra degli Antò* were published again together as *Il disastro degli Antò* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1997): my references to *La guerra degli Antò* are to this edition); *Gli orsi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994).

Before she can fully elaborate a female narrative voice that speaks from the context of women's literary tradition, Ballestra must, however, deal with the postmodern narrative strategies she has been encouraged to adopt in her early works, influenced both by the example of the *neoavanguardia* and by the Tondellian narrative of the 1980s. The book where she carries out this complex act of homage and implicit repudiation of her past literary models is *Gli orsi*. With this collection of short stories, Ballestra takes to the next level her considerations on the role of the narrative voice, introduced in *La guerra degli Antò* with the character of Ballestrera. A close reading of the first short-story of the collection, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', reveals in fact that Ballestra's relationship with her acknowledged masters has always been fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence. The epigraph which introduces the first story is a quotation from Giacomo Leopardi:

*Se si dovessero seguire i gran principii prudenziali e
marchegiani di mio padre, scriveremmo sempre sopra gli
argomenti del secolo di Aronne.*¹¹

The most immediate effect of this quotation is to invite the readers to see the book as antagonistic to 'i gran principii prudenziali', that is to say, the Italian literary tradition and its standard subject matters. Readers can predict that the stories they are about to read will be in contrast with 'gli argomenti del secolo di Aronne', the tired themes of the national literary past. Leopardi's criticism towards the literary tradition is expressed, in Ballestra's chosen quotation, through negative remarks about his father's beliefs, whose principles are defined not only as 'prudenziali', but also as 'marchegiani', that is to say, provincial and narrow. Ballestra's attack

¹¹ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', in *Gli orsi*, pp. 7-29 (p. 7). The quotation is from Leopardi's letter 'All'avvocato Pietro Brighenti, a Bologna', written from Recanati on 28th April 1820. The poet complains bitterly about his father's interference in his projects. The full paragraph reads: 'Alle ragioni di mio padre contro la mia prima canzone inedita, rispondo con un solo esempio fra i milioni che se ne trovano, e che avrei in mente. Il *Werther* di Goethe versa sopra un fatto ch'era conosciutissimo in Germania, e la Carolina e il marito erano vivi e verdi, quando quell'opera famosa fu pubblicata. Ebbene? Ma se volessimo seguire i gran principii prudenziali e marchegiani di mio padre, il quale, come ho detto, non ha niente di mondo letterario, scriveremmo sempre sopra gli argomenti del secolo d'Aronne, e i nostri scritti reggerebbero anche alla censura della quondam inquisizione di Spagna. Il mio intelletto è stanco delle catene domestiche ed estranee'. Giacomo Leopardi, *Da l'epistolario. A cura di Benvenuto Cestaro* (Turin: Paravia, 1946), pp. 92-93.

by way of Leopardi is directed at the literary fathers of the Italian narrative tradition. One cannot but note, however, the contradiction inherent in quoting one of the most canonical of modern Italian poets in order to suggest a text's opposition to literary tradition. An alternative reading of the quotation opens the possibility that Ballestra is addressing those readers who have previous knowledge and expectations of her work. That this might be the case is confirmed by the direct references in the story to the author's past fiction: 'Io vi giuro che questa è l'ultima cosa che scrivo così. Dei circa gli otto milioni e mezzo ricevuti quale compenso dei libri precedenti restituirò senz'altro le spese processuali, più sei milioni'.¹² Ballestra is thus establishing a dialogue with her ideal readers, who are familiar with her first two books. This sheds new light on the significance of Leopardi's quotation.

In 'La via per Berlino', quotations of and references to such canonical Italian authors as Gabriele D'Annunzio had already been skillfully introduced in order to highlight the distance between contemporary writing and the weight of literary tradition. In the second paragraph of that novella, the father of Italian *Decadentismo* is mentioned four times: first, in the name – the same as his poem *Primo Vere* – of the cake-shop that serves as a meeting place for the young protagonists; second, in the name of *piazza D'Annunzio*, where the *pasticceria* is located; thirdly, in the hospital where one of the characters works as a nurse and which is called *Vittoriale*, after D'Annunzio's famous mansion; and, finally, in the pen-name adopted by the intellectually most ambitious of the four Antò characters, an aspiring journalist who signs his articles as Antonio Possis D'Arno, echoing D'Annunzio's own pen-name.¹³ The fact that D'Annunzio is evoked so extensively emphasises the contrast between the literary pretensions associated with the name and the reality of what it designates: a cake-shop, a hospital, a square, and an aspiring writer who does not share the talent of his model. D'Annunzio is thus shown to be an inadequate model for contemporary Italian narrative and is ironically framed within a context which questions the very idea of literary tradition. At the same time, references to him are meant as a commentary on the contemporary social and cultural context, which is automatically belittled by the comparison with the 'greatness' of the master. In

¹² Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 12

¹³ Ballestra, 'La via per Berlino', in *Compleanno dell' iguana*, pp. 7-103 (p. 9).

light of this and other references to the canon in Ballestra's previous work, Leopardi's quotation in *Gli orsi* is thus to be interpreted as an ironic strategy that highlights the distance between the quoted model and the poverty of the present cultural landscape.

In 'Gli orsi (63-93)', at times this irony becomes cruel parody. The story recounts the events of the first *Ricerca* conference held in Reggio Emilia in March 1993 to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of *Gruppo 63* and of the *neoavanguardia*, as already discussed in the first chapter. The structure of the story is chronological, opening with a phone call that invites the protagonist to take part in the celebration and closing with the protagonist's reading of her work at the event. The overtly autobiographical subject matter of the story is confirmed by the use of a first-person narrator whom we can identify as Ballestra herself. The intervention of the author's voice as the narrator had already featured in the many asides of *La guerra degli Antò*. In one such case, for example, the narrator suggested that the novel should be supported by a video-tape provided by the publisher.¹⁴ References to the author's life were also present, as, for example, when the narrator explained how the writing process of the novel in question took place simultaneously with the publication of its author's first book, *Compleanno dell'iguana*:

Tre giorni fa ho compiuto ventidue anni. In fondo al cassetto del comò ti ho ritrovato una bozza di copertina consegnatami dai tipi dell'editrice nel marzo 1989, quando ero a meno di quindici giorni dal mio ventesimo compleanno.

Notare che lo strillo di copertina diceva proprio: 'Il felice esordio di una scrittrice non ancora ventenne'.

A parte che avevano detto: 'Quando c'è la copertina c'è tutto, il libro è praticamente in tipografia, manca solo la rilegatura', il libro l'avete visto, voialtri?

[...]

¹⁴ Ballestra, *La guerra degli Antò*, in *Il disastro degli Antò*, p. 154

E tutti gli amici mi stanno a portare per il culo e qualcuno addirittura mi guarda male perchè c'è la convinzione che il *Compleanno dell'iguana* non sia mai stato scritto.¹⁵

Most of the narrator-as-author's interventions in *La guerra degli Antò* offer a moral commentary on the vicissitudes of the four main characters of this third-person narrative, a parody of the traditional narrative device of authorial intervention. As I have already mentioned, in chapters 11 and 19 of the novel the author's desire to intervene takes a new turn, in the form of a character called Ballestrera who suddenly enters the narrative. In *Gli orsi*, at last, the narrator-as-author becomes the protagonist of the book without any meta-narrative mediation. The narrating 'io' is established as autobiographical, as confirmed not only by the character's traits (she lives in Bologna, studies at the university, is a writer, etc.), but also by the many references to her previous works. In the very first page of 'Gli orsi (63-93)', for example, the protagonist mentions that she might write an essay on Iggy Pop,¹⁶ the cultural icon to whom the word *iguana* refers in the title of *Compleanno dell'iguana*. Unlike her previous fiction, though, 'Gli orsi (63-93)' is narrated in the first person, transforming the narrator-as-author into a main character and depriving her of the role of external commentator.

The intellectuals who organised and attended the 1993 *Ricerca* conference appear with their real names, with a few exceptions, where the invented names invite easy identification. The first part is structured around the phone calls that invite the narrator to the conference. The style of the conversations makes fun of the organisers' self-importance, as when they refer to each other by their first names, rather than their surnames, presuming that everyone knows who they are. In reply to a question about who is going to attend the meeting, professor Renato Omissis (most likely the *neoavanguardia* critic Renato Barilli) states: 'C'è tutti... C'è tutti e anche di più', *tutti* being the members of *Gruppo 63*:

¹⁵ Ballestra, *Il disastro degli Antò*, pp. 202-03.

¹⁶ Iggy Pop is the stage name of Jame Newell Osterberg, Jr (b. 1947), American punk rock musician, also known as 'the Godfather of Punk'. In the 1960-70s, he was the lead singer of the band The Stooges. His anarchic live performances included consumption of drugs, self-mutilation, self-exposure, and use of obscene language.

Sessantatvé-Novantatvé. Anceschi, Pagliarani. E poi qualcuno dei giovani, io, Guglielmi, Nanni, Remo, Giorgio, Sergio, dei musicologi, Ghezzi, l'Ipertesto... Si stanno muovendo dei continenti, guardi... Lei, signorina, pensi soltanto al (omissis) che ci ha.¹⁷

Omissis throws in that also 'qualcuno dei giovani' will be present, but remains firmly focused on himself and other members of *Gruppo 63*. The list of names risks becoming meaningless to the interlocutor who does not have perfect knowledge of the *neoavanguardia*, underlining Ballestra's irony towards a group of intellectuals she fundamentally admires, but whom she also considers patronising towards the younger generation of writers.

The list of critics and intellectuals who, according to Omissis, will attend the conference is only the first of the many lists that appear in this story and in the rest of the collection. As the list, *l'elenco*, is one of the strategies which, in keeping with the tradition celebrated by the 63-93 conference, unifies experimental writing of the 1960s and the 1990s, its parodic use can be construed as an implicit criticism to the aims of the meeting. Omissis insists that everyone will be present, that continents will come, but the randomness of those who are mentioned, the arbitrariness of the connections created by his lists, make his critical views sound superficial:

E poi Puppi da Parigi, Sollers, l'École du Regard, Trompe-L'Oeil, Escamotage, Surménage e gli Écrits di Lacan... ci sarà Leonetti, la signora Feltrinelli, Bob Dylan, Barbolini e i giovani critici delle pianure... Fanno cose semiotiche di grande interesse. Sulla cabala e i metalli pesanti. Cagliostro lo conoscerà, no? Verranno fatte anche delle rivelazioni su Rohmer e il *Pasto Nudo*, il *Crudo* e il *Cotto*, l'origine delle buone maniere a tavola e le tradizioni degli Sciti. Abbiamo uno sponsor, l'Ipersidis di Reggio'.¹⁸

The joke is at the expense of the postmodern obsession of mixing high and low, culture and market, different genres and systems of cultural production. The ironic

¹⁷ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 10.

¹⁸ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', pp. 10-11.

effect is achieved precisely through the same narrative device which is being parodied. The list of names, titles of books, brands and movements which Omissis mentions together, in an attempt to reproduce the postmodern technique of random accumulation and unexpected proximity of terms, mocks its own premise. One *really* unexpected name, an evocative, but meaningless alliteration, the use of a book's name in place of the writer's, the linguistic pleasure of quotation, all these elements emphasise the limits of this device, the theoretical basis of which is also questioned. 'Puppi da Parigi' triggers a sequence of French references, a compendium of names (Lacan and Sollers), literary movements, and generic French terms. The pretentiousness of the speaker, who expects the listener to know all about the obscure Puppi, is magnified by the fact that a person is mentioned alongside critical ideas, writings and groups, as if *l'école du regard* and Lacan's *écrits* were people. If the proximity of French and Italian intellectuals does not seem completely incongruous, this only highlights the estranging effect of mentioning also Bob Dylan. The list becomes suddenly surreal: Bob Dylan cannot obviously be a guest of the conference and neither can Cagliostro, Cabal, Rohmer, Burroughs, Levi-Strauss and Foucault.

The name of a sponsor, 'l'Ipersidis di Reggio' (a supermarket), acts as a seal at the end of the list of participants, to highlight the interaction between cultural production and the market, one of the main cultural themes of the *neoavanguardia*. Omissis's casual mention of the financial gains that might be had from participating at the conference, is echoed by Giuseppe Caliceti, 'giovane poeta e falso amico', one of the other conference organisers. Caliceti tries to persuade the narrator to attend the conference, by suggesting the obvious benefits she would gain:

In cambio di questi vantaggi potrai pavoneggiarti con i tuoi amici e assumere atteggiamenti da stronza con i poveracci più giovani che scrivono e scrivono ma ancora non hanno pubblicato niente nemmeno nelle Millelire.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 13.

There is in fact a high price which the narrator is asked to pay in order to be granted a place in the family of experimental narrators: the loss of intellectual independence. Caliceti explains the role the protagonist is required to play as that of ‘un ripetitore umano’: ‘Leggerai senza fare commenti, per circa dieci minuti, delle pagine a tua scelta. Da *Altri libertini* leggerai le pagine a tua scelta 23-25 [...]’.²⁰

The insertion of Pier Vittorio Tondelli into the speech at this point is very important, as it comes to signify how misleading the creation of a tradition can be. The choice of text (*Altri libertini*), pages and context are all geared towards the appropriation of Tondelli on the part of the conference organisers. The acknowledged model of Ballestra and many other new authors of her generation is to be presented without comments. The pages the protagonist is asked to read are chosen by the committee and are not up for discussion. It is up to the self-appointed forefathers to decide what of their experimental project has been passed on to the young ones (Ballestra), through the example of the middle generation (Tondelli). Caliceti offers the best definition of this position when he offers his own list of guests, which mirrors and expands, from his own age and cultural perspective, the one previously presented by Omissis:

Ci saranno tutte le Forme Nuove, poi dei graffitisti, l’Ipertesto e alcuni giovani telecomandati dai vecchi, Leonetti, il professor Omissis, Celati passerà ma solo per un saluto, Barbolini e poi gli altri amici della stampa e determinate stelle di prima grandezza, piú dei frosci danzatori di mambo.²¹

‘Ipertesto’, ‘Forme Nuove’ and ‘graffitisti’ replace Omissis’s references, but, like Omissis, Caliceti moves freely between names of persons and of art movements, relishing in the postmodern pleasure of mixing levels and contexts (Celati, Leonetti and Barbolini are presented alongside journalists, unspecified stars and ‘frosci danzatori di mambo’). Like Omissis, Caliceti leaves the final words to financial considerations: ‘Sarai alloggiata in un albergo per ricchi, così potremo

²⁰ Ballestra, ‘Gli orsi (63-93)’, p. 14.

²¹ Ballestra, ‘Gli orsi (63-93)’, p. 14.

conoscerci di persona'.²² The significance of the protagonist's presence at the conference and of her position there as a young writer is summarised in the definition which Caliceti applies to the writers of the generation both he and Ballestra belong to: 'alcuni giovani telecomandati da vecchi'.²³ The character's cynical words go to the core of the young/old writer relationship which is the obvious subtext of the conference. Young authors, suggest the organisers, must accept their subordinate position and, at the same time, must feel honoured by the opportunity they are given to be part of a specific literary establishment, firstly, by declaring themselves descendants of that tradition and, secondly, by accepting a degree of control from the father figures of that tradition. By taking on a filial role the young generation will enjoy the privilege of a place within the Italian avant-garde canon which the conference is precisely attempting to create.

But even as she accepts to participate in the conference, thus acknowledging her debt to the experimental lesson of the 1960s, Ballestra's narrator occupies a marginal position throughout the event. Against Caliceti's promises, she ends up being the only conference guest who is accommodated at the 'albergo dei poveri'.²⁴ In order to represent the narrator's unease, Ballestra creates the character's alter-ego, the teddy bear Gioele. Always referred to in the third person masculine, Gioele is the narrator-as-writer's persona through whom she confronts the critics and the literary establishment. By contrast, in the private moments with her partner, the narrator identifies herself in the first person feminine. Ballestra's contradiction in embracing the *neoavanguardia* legacy, by repressing her gender and assuming a non-adult masculine persona, could not be symbolised more explicitly. The two days of the conference, the first of which is devoted to the legacy of the *neoavanguardia* and of Tondelli's generation and the second to introducing the new authors, correspond to two distinct moments for the protagonist: first failure, then success. Required to read earlier than scheduled the pre-assigned passages from Tondelli's book, the protagonist-as-Gioele reads the wrong passage: 'subito cappella la sequenza e si dirige, riselezionando tutto alle pagine dove Tondelli parla male di Reggio Emilia, le uniche che *mai* avrebbero

²² Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 14.

²³ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 14.

²⁴ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 15.

dovuto essere lette al teatro di Reggio Emilia'.²⁵ This follows the decription of Gioele's panic attack before his reading, but the clause 'riselezionando tutto' suggests that Gioele has perhaps consciously chosen to read a different text from the one imposed by the organisers, a subtle challenge to their script on literary legacy.

The older intellectuals are described in less than flattering terms as self-appointed fathers of the 1990s generation, in their moment of self-incensement. We are shown Walter Pedullà 'in secca fra i resti del buffet, stordito, appesantito dalle adenoidi', while Gianfranco Cordelli 'si fa pregare, e non vuole prendere parte al dibattito perchè il riconoscimento da parte del gruppo 63 nei confronti del gruppo Cordelli è stato *troppo* tardivo'.²⁶ The *neoavanguardia* critics are portrayed as they reminisce and congratulate each other on their past: 'tutta una rievocazione storica dedicata ai meriti del gruppo 63, le medaglie, gli attestati, i buffetti reciproci sulle guance e i "Ti ricordi, Nello?" tutti fra di loro'.²⁷ In such a context, Gioele can only express his discomfort by choosing what to read, a passage from Tondelli's *Altri libertini* that describes Reggio Emilia in less than glowing terms, a critique of the city that is hosting the conference and that *Gruppo 63* claims as one of their historical places.

Whereas most of the protagonists of the debate are sketched in a few, ironic words, a long paragraph is dedicated to Alberto Arbasino's participation on video conference. The sarcasm which had characterised the narrator's description of the other members of the *neoavanguardia* and of their generational allies and enemies is replaced here by amused admiration:

Una pelle da far invidia a un ventenne, luminosissima, con dei capelli un po' alla Mercury ma più vaporosi e vorrei dire folti ma privo degli incantevoli baffi che pure l'accompagnavano in certe foto degli anni settanta, con, dietro alle spalle, libri dappertutto e uno schienale di divano a fantasia, il re dei re riassume [...] i meriti culturali

²⁵ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 26.

²⁶ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 22.

²⁷ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 23.

dell'armée 63. Gli 'r' sono tutti, come sempre, incantevolmente arrotondati e finissimi, ma tutt'altro che fastidiosi.²⁸

The success of Arbasino's performance constitutes the only moment when the participants overcome their self-centredness and divisions, as his reading 'scuote, fa vibrare d'incanto, all'unisono, la platea'. Furthermore, his words find consensus among the young, 'la pattuglia dei più giovani e giovanissimi'.²⁹ Arbasino's speech prompts the narrator to explain the real legacy of *Gruppo 63* for the younger generation. His monologue is, predictably, in the form of a long list of authors and movements which Arbasino considers the cultural basis of the Italian avant-garde:

La bibliografia e i meriti sono sterminati, l'importazione di idee, effetti, dispositivi, più che grandiosa; in pochissimi anni sprovvincializzando a colpi di revolverate entusiastiche e lacanismi e psicologismi e genettismi il Pecorame Muto che aveva caratterizzato la cultura italiana prima, durante e dopo il Ventennio.³⁰

In her comments, the narrator admits that the *neoavanguardia* has effectively contributed to the modernisation of the Italian cultural landscape, moving it beyond the 'principi prudenziali e marchegiani' despised by Leopardi. Arbasino and the other intellectuals of his generation must certainly be praised for this achievement.

If the first day of the conference investigates the tradition of Italian experimental writing and allows the narrator to explain in what terms the authors of the 1990s relate to it, the second day is all about the young writers. The narrator's presentation of her own fiction is described in little over one page:

L'orso Gioele, supportato da una calma glaciale e determinato a ben figurare almeno in quella seconda e ultima occasione, legge una decina di cartelle tratte dal suo ultimo insuccesso. Pagine che se da un

²⁸ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 24.

²⁹ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 25.

³⁰ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 24.

lato non guardano affatto alla grande Kultur del Novecento, dall'altra si rifanno, ma consideriamo che è un orso a riferirne, alla quotidianità più parlata, meno costruita e immediata che ci si possa immaginare.³¹

The narrator, wearing Gioele's mask while presenting her own work, does not let false modesty ('ultimo insuccesso') undermine her confidence in her talent. The strength of Gioele's writing does not rely on the acrobatic talent Arbasino had shown in linking the disparate threads of great European culture, but on the ability to narrate everyday, contemporary life and the spoken language of youth. While the other young authors are invited to read their texts in alphabetical order – all of them causing a 'Scud effect' (an ironic reference to the American missile used during the first war against Iraq) on the audience of older critics – and a ferocious 'tutti contro tutti' takes over the conference, Gioele retires to the bathroom to admire himself in the mirror. 'Da orso a pavone il passo è brevissimo',³² warns the narrator. The irony until then directed at the literary establishment does not leave Gioele unscathed. The autobiographical narrator's alter-ego is already showing signs of assimilation to the canon. The rebellion of the first day gives way to the pride of being accepted among the progeny of the experimental establishment.

'Gli orsi (63-93)' describes the complex relationship between the 'pulp' generation and the *neoavanguardia*. The other six short stories continue to explore the collection's main theme: the weight of the literary tradition on contemporary narrative and the role of the writer in the postmodern context. 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!', 'Cari ci siete o no?', 'Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)', 'Intervistare Bret Ellis (F.P.)' and '1974' are in the first instance postmodern elaborations of established genres and styles, adopting cultural references that transcend the parameters of the *neoavanguardia*. As already mentioned in the first chapter, 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!' uses the standard plot and narrative structure of science fiction; 'Cari, ci siete o no?' employs ironically the language of cyberpunk; 'Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)' is inspired by horror and fantasy themes; 'Intervistare Bret Ellis (F.P.)' comments on the influence of 1980s American minimalism on Italian literature; and '1974' is a variation on childhood

³¹ Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 28.

³² Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', p. 29.

memory motifs. Ballestra adopts genres which belong to the popular culture of her generation (science fiction, cyberpunk, horror and fantasy, minimalism and childhood autobiography), in order to parody and critique them. In the closing short story, 'La fidanzata di Hendrix da piccolo', she eventually suggests a return to realist narrative modes as a more effective strategy to say something significant on contemporary Italian society and as the next necessary step in her development as a writer.

Many intertextual references appear in the stories, linking them to each other and to Ballestra's previous work. There are also numerous historical references to early 1990s Italy, especially the end of the first Italian Republic and the rise to power of Silvio Berlusconi and of the Italian Right. In 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!', the supporters of the Italian Right are depicted as aliens from another planet. The middle class Northern Italians and Romans who, each summer, invade the Marche coast are variously referred to as 'mostri', 'alieni', 'zombie inimmaginabili', 'cozze millenarie', 'cozze dell'ultraspazio' and their behaviour is compared to that of the invaders in Hollywood science fiction movies from the 1950s: 'Ricordate le tecniche di occupazione messe in atto dagli invasori dell'ultraspazio ne *Il dominio dei mondi*? Più o meno per i bagnini di Cupramarina era andata così: psicologie terrestri rivoltate come guanti, annullamento di tutte le facoltà dell'autodeterminazione'.³³ The language of science fiction is used as an ironic metaphor to describe Italian mores in the Second Republic. The plot develops through a constant comparison between the danger of an alien attack and a social takeover by this emerging class. The private family territory is about to be invaded by the body snatchers on the occasion of a dinner party organised by the protagonist's mother. Following the conventions of the genre, the time which precedes the invasion is filled with ominous signs, including the narrator's fear that the infiltration of alien ideas might have already affected the rebels: 'Hanno preso anche te, non è vero, mamma? Sei una di loro, ormai, non è così? Ti ricordi, quando, la settimana scorsa, volevi permanentarti i capelli? Dicevi "Come starei secondo voi con i capelli permanentati?"'³⁴

³³ Ballestra, 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!', in *Gli orsi*, pp. 31-58 (p. 33).

³⁴ Ballestra, 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!', p. 38.

In keeping with the science fiction canon, the narrator, Laura, is the first one who becomes superficially aware of the real danger looming behind the presence of the tourists, and finds a reluctant ally in her sister Maddalena to carry out an act of resistance and subversion. Dressed up in ‘roba degli anni settanta’, Laura and Maddalena try to take revenge against the ‘cozze’ who have contaminated their beaches, by forcing one of them into a pool of ‘letame’. At first, their attack appears to be successful: the young son of one of the party guests does not recognise Laura in her 1970s clothes and mistakes her for the ‘Satana dei Pomodori’. Dragged to the tub of ‘letame’, the boy succumbs to Laura’s revenge. Suddenly, however, the SF language and metaphor become a reality. The designated victim starts to glow and to show unexpected strength and resistance, while the party guests intone an ominous litany and capture one by one all of Laura’s family members. Having most eagerly adopted the alien metaphor to warn her relatives against the social and political danger represented by the new Italians, Laura is now the one who has most difficulties in coming to terms with the ‘cozze marroni’ turning out to be ‘real’ body snatchers. As her designated victim explains to her, the narrator is the real impostor: not only for pretending to be the ‘Satana dei Pomodori’, but also for not believing that the SF metaphor could hide a much darker truth.

The last section of the story shows the family in exile on planet Altair IV. Two years have gone by since the unexpected climax to the party. The life conditions on the planet are apocalyptic and the family group is the only human presence on it. They are surviving the punishing treatment reserved for them by the aliens and some resistance plan is already forming in the narrator’s mind: with some luck and the help from the Altair IV twisters, she hopes they will return to Earth eventually:

Ho una speranza di riuscire a schiodare via di qui prima del prossimo compleanno dell’Iguana, quando a Civitanova Marche, in un rifugio anticozze chiamato ‘Oceanic’, la popolazione giovanile locale celebra la nascita di Iggy Pop, l’immarcescibile.³⁵

³⁵ Ballestra, ‘Cozze marroni, non fatelo!’, p. 57.

The reference to Iggy Pop's birthday is a direct quotation from Ballestra's first book. In 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!', however, this celebration of Iggy Pop's birthday acquires a political connotation, since the club 'Oceanic' is presented as a place of youth resistance to the alien invasion.

'Cari, ci siete o no?' deploys elements of cyberpunk narrative in an unlikely context, the story of a grandmother's birthday.³⁶ Whereas in 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!' SF conventions are introduced first as a political metaphor and then as truth hidden behind the metaphor, in 'Cari, ci siete o no?' cyberpunk has the function of frustrating the reader's desire for completion of the apparently realist narrative centred on the grandmother. The story relies heavily on the readers' knowledge and expectations, in order to manipulate their response. It opens as the likely narrative of Nonna F's eightieth birthday beginning with a description of her eccentric behaviour. One of her eccentricities, the ritual associated with losing her house keys, soon becomes the dominant theme. Within a list of likely scenarios that might develop from these circumstances, more digressions slow down the plot even further. When the text finally appears to have reached a point where it cannot forestall the description of Nonna F's birthday anymore, the narrative is taken over by Nonna F's confused account of the soap operas she watches constantly on television. Like her viewing, the grandmother's narrative is fragmented and digressive, exactly as the short story in which it appears:

Nonna F. che come certi eroi del cyberspazio crede di poter fruire di più realtà contemporaneamente, livelli di comunicazione e coscienza paralleli, bit database, simstim, e chi più ne ha, come sempre, Mio Dio, più ne metta, essendo tutt'altro che un computer ma soltanto e fortunatamente una nonna, subito si perde.³⁷

Cyberheroes, the narrator reminds us, are able to deal with multiple realities and linguistic levels at the same time – the real world in which they live and the virtual spaces they navigate in cyberspace – but often, like Nonna F. they become confused by the different worlds they inhabit. Just as she needs her family's help

³⁶ A comic book version of the same story appears in Silvia Ballestra, *Senza gli orsi* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003), pp. 149-55. The artwork that illustrates the story is by Alberto Rebori.

³⁷ Ballestra, 'Cari, ci siete o no?', in *Gli orsi*, pp. 59-72 (p. 67).

to find the house keys she frequently misplaces, Nonna F. requires the narrator's direct intervention, in order to be freed from the mediatic chaos that threatens to engulf her life. The danger is real, especially in the light of the previous short story, 'Cozze marroni, non fatelo!', where the alien metaphor had turned out to be reality: 'gli americani si stanno prendendo pure nonna vostra; loro riescono a interfacciarla e voi no [...] scrollatela. Fatela distrarre. Non è un cowboy della consolle, è vostra nonna'.³⁸ The only way to fight the sensory overload that threatens Nonna F. is by forcing her to focus on her eightieth birthday, on the family who wants to celebrate it, and by moving the conversation from fiction back to reality, from talk of soap operas to discussion of family members. In the course of the story, readers are skilfully invited to reflect on their reading practices: by way of frustrated expectations, they, like the narrator, learn that the pleasure of storytelling is anchored in its human themes, rather than formal preoccupations. Cyberpunk references enable the narrator to reflect on questions concerning the relationship between plot, language and content, with a final indication of preference for more realistic strategies.

'Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)' is the longest and most complex story of the collection, based on horror and adventure models which go back to Edgar Allan Poe and H. T. Lovecraft and to contemporary authors of horror fiction (Clive Barker, Stephen King and Anne Rice), all mentioned directly or indirectly alluded to in the text. It is divided into six parts, each covering a classic narrative function of horror fiction: the first part introduces the first-person narrator, Polonio, as she meets for the first time her new, mysterious friend and alter-ego, Silvana Libertini; the second part focuses on Polonio's life as a writer, presented as unsatisfactory, leaving her to crave for something exciting to happen; the third section narrates the event which change the narrator's life, her reading of Silvana's story, which interrupts the realist narrative and introduces the horror and fantasy elements; Polonio's reaction to Silvana's text occupies the fourth part of the narrative, whereas the fifth shows the uncanny results of Silvana's fiction, with their alienating effects on Polonio's real life; finally, the sixth and final part presents Polonio as she learns to relate to the real world again, only to find out that it is more horrific than her friend's narrative: Berlusconi has won the general

³⁸ Ballestra, 'Cari, ci siete o no?', pp. 68-69.

elections and Silvana's tale turns out to be a prophecy of real events: ‘“verrà un Pelàto,” diceva la cinquantunesima Profezia. “Un Pelàto in diretta sulle pelose ali della notte nera”’.³⁹

Silvana Libertini's prophetic skills are announced at the very beginning, when, while attending the football match which opens ‘Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)’, she correctly predicts that the player Giunco will miss the penalty he is about to shoot. The football match itself is an explanation and prefiguration of the political aspects of Silvana's predictions. The game between the young members of the Pds and the ‘creativi’ Rotunderos degenerates into a fight, which echoes the internal weakness and divisions of the Italian Left. The narrator underlines how the Rotunderos themselves are not a compact alternative to the institutional Left: ‘Noi altri creativi eravamo una quindicina, disuniti da ripicche, gelosie, invidie scellerate’.⁴⁰ Polonio's encounter with Silvana precipitates the narrator's crisis as a writer. Polonio tries to explain the Rotunderos' football ethics to Silvana, by comparing the team to a steam engine and then to a huge blind bull who runs loose around the football pitch. Silvana is perplexed by this comparison and asks if the image of the blind bull should be intended literally or as metaphor. Polonio replies:

‘Beh, alla lettera [...] è chiaro.’ Trovavo insopportabile aggiungere spiegazioni a un'immagine tanto netta.

In quel periodo della mia vita mi sentivo come un pittore d'altri tempi, un paesaggista naturalista, uno che con due tre pennellate, zac zac, ti tirava fuori migliaia di verità profondissime sul reale.⁴¹

Silvana's doubts are an implicit critique of Polonio's poetics, as they question the latter's assumption that the link between literal and metaphorical is self-evident. But even before the arrival of Silvana's text, Polonio is presented in a state of

³⁹ Ballestra, ‘Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)’, in *Gli orsi*, pp. 71-113 (p. 113).

⁴⁰ Ballestra, ‘Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)’, p. 76.

⁴¹ Ballestra, ‘Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)’, pp. 79-80.

depression and authorial anxiety, as she doubts her own narrative skills, comparing herself negatively to Leopardi:

Io con gli amici scambiavo giornoletti splatter tutti popolati da bei teschi e tibie e metri cubi di sangue rappreso, e intanto il recanatese alla mia stessa età aveva già tradotto *La Batracomiomachia*, e il *Primo Libro dell'Odissea* e il *Secondo Libro dell'Eneide*, la *Titanomachia* e *La Torta* [...] mentre la sottoscritta – nata anche lei nelle Marche e questo avrà voluto pur dire qualcosa, no? – ebbene, facevo finta di suonare la *chitarra*, per fare bella figura con il disc-jockey Percey [...] Io ero schiacciata da quell'abisso incolmabile.⁴²

Her limits relate not only to literary ambition and competence, but are also cultural: 'io della storia del mondo non ricordavo nulla', bemoans the narrator, her cultural baggage reduced to confused 'toponomastiche' of youth culture, the representatives of which are almost undistinguished entities: 'Johnny Lydon, Johnny Bono, Johnny Bowie'.⁴³

Silvana's story reaches Polonio by fax at a moment of great self-doubt as a writer. Before the reader is given a glimpse of Silvana's text, the narrator offers her critical perspective. First of all, she states that the 'trama' is the aspect of Silvana's story which attracts her most; second, this plot contains a message: 'Un messaggio, desidero anticiparlo con nettezza, questo, in cui nessun essere umano – né umano né vivente – usciva vivo da lì'.⁴⁴ Moreover, the narrator compares positively Silvana's text with Leopardi's *La Torta*, stressing the innovative quality of her friend's fiction; finally, Silvana's writing rings true to Polonio, who finds in it an echo of reality and a mirror of her own narrative concerns, as, for example, her interest in first-person narrative. Set in Paraguay in 1939, Silvana's story follows the structure of the horror genre, with a first-person narrator fighting against an evil man able to transform and assume various identities, until he finally loses his human form and all his body parts and is reduced to his dying eyes. Silvana's intention to write a contemporary political metaphor is expressed

⁴² Ballestra, 'Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)', pp. 84-85.

⁴³ Ballestra, 'Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)', p. 84.

⁴⁴ Ballestra, 'Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)', p. 89.

directly in the text, when, in *Asunción* in 1939, one of the characters is seen reading an old issue of the magazine *Masters of Rock* containing a 1970s photograph of the British band Jethro Tull. The protagonist and her enemy also mention the punk band Sex Pistols, while the narrator refers to Clive Barker, Cornell Woolrich and Eric Rohmer. During the final confrontation between the protagonist and the mutant creature, the historical metaphor is forgotten and direct mention is made of ‘il centro-destra’, ‘Miglio’, ‘la massoneria incappucciata’, ‘i ladri della prima repubblica’ and the prophecy of Berlusconi’s victory.

Polonio becomes obsessed with Silvana’s text: she wants to adapt it for a movie, a musical comedy, or a commercial franchise. She is so focused on it that all her relations with the external world are interrupted. With her friend Giunco, she undergoes a process of physical transformation that recalls the mutant character of Silvana’s fiction. When, at last, Silvana sends her the new pages, the language has become difficult to decode, so much so that the narrator compares it to ‘materiali sperimentali alla Sanguineti’.⁴⁵ The new text carries a promising title, *Tutti i numeri della peste nera*, which makes Polonio hope for something in the same style as Silvana’s previous horror story, *Noi incontaminati, alziamoci!* The text, however, is soon revealed to be made up of numbers, rather than words: ‘Non erano materiali di narrativa e neanche cose aforistiche o mitologiche,’ Polonio explains to Giunco, ‘Qui é tutta matematica pura’.⁴⁶ Finally, the narrator realises that, during her isolation and separation from the world, the Italian general elections have taken place and the numeric tables sent by Silvana are nothing more than the election results, won on 20th March 1994 by the Berlusconi-led alliance of the Centre-Right. Having wasted all her energies on Silvana’s fiction, Polonio reacts with horror to the news, but is unable to gather enough strength to even imagine an act of rebellion.

With the next short story, ‘Intervistare Bret Ellis (F.P.)’, Ballestra spells out her weariness with an idea of fiction that is more concerned with its own form and language than with contents. The title of the story refers to Bret Easton Ellis (b. 1964), author of influential novels about the lifestyle and obsessions of the educated, wealthy and morally vacuous American youth of the 1980s, such as *Less Than Zero* (1985), *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) and *American Psycho*

⁴⁵ Ballestra, ‘Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)’, p. 112.

⁴⁶ Ballestra, ‘Lettere a Polonio (Paraguay)’, p. 113.

(1991). The reference is, however, only the first of many misleading cues used by the narrator, in order to comment ironically on contemporary writers' fascination with narrative fragmentation, irresolution and interpretative openness, some of the traits the *neoavanguardia* critics had identified and praised in Ballestra's first books. The promised interview of the American writer never materialises in the story, which immediately digresses into a long description of the ostentatious apartment where the narrator is invited to meet him, and of the games her guests start to play:

una diavola malata di nervi aveva buttato là a gran voce l'idea del gioco delle iniziali. Non so se lo conoscete. Bisognava dividersi in due squadre, sostanzialmente. Poi, individuate due iniziali, per esempio le iniziali F.P., ci si dava battaglia su chi trovava piú nomi e cognomi universalmente noti di gente che a quel punto poteva chiamarsi.⁴⁷

The list of names starting with F. P. occupies almost a third of the story's length. This list is the extreme version of the lists of names which functioned as an ironic comment on the *neoavanguardia* magma of cultural references in 'Gli orsi (63-93)'. Not only is this list guided merely by initials, but the names which appear in it have arbitrary initials, belonging to unknown people, institutions, places and shops. The game therefore becomes a meaningless wordplay. When the narrator is finally expelled from the game and from the house, the story ends abruptly without resolution and without any suggestion as to whether Bret Ellis will eventually attend the party. The story parodies many strategies of postmodern narrative, such as the use of digressions, arbitrary cultural links and manipulation of readers' response, thus showing them to be futile exercises in style.

In the final two stories of the book, after the critique of her past cultural and literary models developed in the previous ones, Ballestra adopts more realist modes in an attempt to move forward. '1974' is an autobiographical childhood memory and a reflection on the Italian political context of the 1970s. By telling the collective story of her generation's younger years through a tale of school failure and success that reflects the turmoil of the social and political tension of

⁴⁷ Ballestra, 'Intervistare Bret Ellis (F.P.)', in *Gli orsi*, pp. 115-23 (pp. 120-21).

the *anni di piombo*, Ballestra anticipates the theme of childhood that is also at the centre of the last short story, 'La fidanzata di Hendrix da piccolo'. In the latter, she turns fully to realism, adopting a coherent female point of view. Meta-narrative elements are however still present. The autobiographical narrator is followed as she undertakes a train journey and as she relates to people, both adults and children, she meets along the way. This becomes for her an opportunity to reflect in earnest on her role as a writer, and to move away from a focus on form, represented by her obsession with beginnings and endings of stories that never go anywhere, to concentrate instead on content, as symbolised by her increasing engagement with her fellow travellers of different ages, genders and nationalities.

3.3 A literary mother: *Joyce L. Una vita contro* (1996)

A coherent female narrative voice, however, becomes a consistent feature of Ballestra's fiction only *after* having tested the limits of the apparently gender-neutral narrator of her previous work, as the result of her negotiation with a variety of narrative conventions. The adoption of a female voice by a woman author is, in Susan Sniader Lanser's words, 'a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices'.⁴⁸ Women writers are especially aware that a set of western literary traditions and critical practices makes their choice of a female narrator a very serious matter, especially when it comes to the degree of authority they expect their texts to carry. Traditionally, Lanser argues, 'women's writing has carried fuller public authority when its voice has not been marked as female'.⁴⁹ While Lanser's analysis shows that between the 18th and the 20th century women novelists have contributed to changing rhetorical and narrative practices, she claims that still at the end of the 20th century the choice of a female narrative voice by women authors is made with full awareness that their work might be considered less authoritative than if written from an unspecified gender perspective. This is particularly true of first-person narratives: 'Given the precarious position of women in patriarchal societies, women novelists may have avoided personal voice when they feared their work would be taken for

⁴⁸ Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 6.

⁴⁹ Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*, p. 18.

autobiography'.⁵⁰ In Ballestra's fiction, the progressive assertion of a female narrative voice is accompanied by a greater use of autobiographical forms and sentimental plots, what Tommaso Ottonieri, referring specifically to Ballestra's work, calls 'la tipicità "femminile" della dimensione autobiografica'.⁵¹

Her deliberate move away from a position of canonical authority supported by the gender-neutral/male perspective of her early fiction to one that is firmly located within the tradition of women's narrative is only achieved and maintained thanks to her identification of an original model, a new mother figure that can support the young writer and provide her with the confidence she needs in order to write as a woman. We have seen that the fathers of the Italian avant-garde had already approved and authorised Ballestra's early works, even when their attitude might have betrayed some ill-disguised paternalism, as exemplified by the *neoavanguardia* critic Omissis who both compliments and bullies the narrator of 'Gli orsi (63-93)'. Nevertheless, the fathers' approval is insufficient to support the author's desire to develop a narrative voice that is able to express her personal experience and to affirm its political value. The young writer undertakes therefore the search for a literary mother and does so by writing the biography of an older woman writer from the Marche region, Joyce Lussu (1912-1998).

Jennifer Burns points out that the focus on girlhood memories that characterises many of the short stories of *Gli orsi* and the numerous ironic references to feminist theory to be found in them already 'impart a feminine "tone" to the narrative [...] in a way which entertains the idea of a gender-specific relationship with writing without ever making it axiomatic'.⁵² This collection of short stories is, as I have already shown, a reflection on the nature and limitations of a postmodern literature conceived exclusively in terms of opposition to (or ironic deconstruction of) realist literary practices. In the last short story, 'La fidanzata di Hendrix da piccolo', Ballestra suggests that a less self-referential and more engaged blueprint for contemporary fiction might be found in narratives that belong to the autobiographical and realist traditions. Indeed, Burns argues that Ballestra associates the character of the Nonna F. with the act of storytelling, a

⁵⁰ Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*, p. 20.

⁵¹ Tommaso Ottonieri, *La plastica della lingua. Stili in fuga in una età postrema*, (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000), p. 52.

⁵² Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001), p. 152.

‘matriarchal source’ that allows the narrator to re-elaborate existing literary conventions.⁵³ This interpretation is confirmed later with the publication of *Tutto su mia nonna* (2005), a family saga told by a female narrator who traces the origin of her narrative passion back to the storytelling skills of her own mother and grandmother.⁵⁴ But Ballestra’s transition from the position of authority granted by the male perspective of her early fiction, to one that is firmly located within the realm of women’s narrative, is gradual. It is important to recognise the turning point of this transition, namely Ballestra’s deliberate search for a congenial literary mother. She accomplishes this in *Joyce L. Una vita contro* (1996).⁵⁵ This is the biography of Lussu, an older writer who, thanks to her participation in the anti-fascist Resistance, her life-long ethical and political commitment, her social awareness, her feminist ideals, her confident woman’s perspective on the world and on writing, can displace the male literary models followed by the young writer in her early fiction. The book is also, in its biographical/autobiographical/dialogic form, a statement of female poetics that Ballestra will apply to her later fiction.

Joyce L. is presented as a faithful transcription of Lussu’s answers to Ballestra’s prompting remarks, aimed at triggering the subject’s memory of her life. Ballestra’s interventions carefully direct the reader to those elements of Lussu’s life and work that make her an ideal human and literary model. The emphasis is on Lussu’s belief in a literature that is accessible and socially committed, rather than one that merely reflects on itself. Ballestra’s intention to write a type of fiction that is at the same time committed and personal is thus legitimised by the authority of Lussu’s example. When she comments on Lussu’s book on the Italian Resistance, for example, she praises it for ‘la sua completa assenza di retorica’, the ‘tono quotidiano’, ‘la profonda umiltà dei personaggi’.⁵⁶ The older writer’s statements of poetics become Ballestra’s own and authorise the change of direction of her later writing. Lussu says, with words that echo Ballestra’s own questioning of the avant-garde and postmodern models:

⁵³ Burns, *Fragments of Impegno*, p. 152.

⁵⁴ Silvia Ballestra, *Tutto su mia nonna* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005).

⁵⁵ Silvia Ballestra, *Joyce L. Una vita contro* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1996).

⁵⁶ Ballestra, *Joyce L. Una vita contro*, p. 6.

Io mi sono posta il problema dell'interlocutore. Con chi vuoi parlare? Mi sono detta [...] Un raccontare e un argomentare capaci di rinunciare alle parole difficili o a un linguaggio formalizzato, ossia a ciò che per certa gente costituisce invece un gran gusto, allorchè gli sembra che escogitare una parola difficile conferisca importanza al discorso.⁵⁷

Lussu confirms also the legacy of a female narrative tradition, something she herself had tried to establish through her narrative work, in particular with *Sherlock Holmes sul Cornero. Anarchici e siluri* (1982).⁵⁸ In this novel, Lussu combines her love for local history, her socialist political ideals and her practice of a committed literature. The character created by Arthur Conan Doyle is sent to the Marche by the British secret services, on a mission that puts him in touch with the local peasants and anarchists; by the end of the story Holmes is shown to sympathise with the anti-imperialistic ideals of his new anarchist friends. In her insightful reading of this book, Claudia Capancioni argues convincingly that Lussu inscribes her work in the tradition of women's writing, connecting her writing with that of her grandmother Margaret Collier, a British expatriate in the Marche. In the novel, Virginia Woolf makes an appearance as a character who reads Collier's published recollections about her experience in Italy. Thus, Lussu establishes a further link with one of the symbolic mothers of Western women's literary tradition. As Capancioni explains, Lussu 'reclaims her grandmother as a woman writer and as a literary ancestor who foresees her descendant's literary talent, thus inscribing herself into a tradition of women's writing'.⁵⁹ When asked by Ballestra to define women's literature, Lussu refers to her own book *Fronti e frontiere* and her husband's *Diplomazia clandestina*. Both narratives deal with the same subject matter, the couple's experience of exile and anti-fascist Resistance, often touching upon the same personal and political events. However, Lussu insists, the two books could not be more different, precisely because of the

⁵⁷ Ballestra, Joyce L. *Una vita contro*, p. 54.

⁵⁸ Joyce Lussu, *Sherlock Holmes sul Cornero. Anarchici e siluri* (Ancona: Il Lavoro editoriale, 1982; repr. 2000).

⁵⁹ Claudia Capancioni, 'Transmitting Difference: An Anglo-Italian Female tradition in Joyce Salvadori Lussu's Literary Investigation', in Adalgisa Giorgio and Julia Waters (eds.), *Women's Writing in Western Europe: Gender, Generation and Legacy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 277-93.

different gender perspectives offered in each of them.⁶⁰ Thus, Lussu becomes the literary model that authorises Ballestra to move towards realist narrative forms, sentimental genres and autobiographical themes that are traditionally associated with women's writing. These are the forms and themes that she adopts in her work from 1998 onwards and that will find their most accomplished expression in *La seconda Dora* (2006),⁶¹ a poignant family romance concerning the personal implications of public events and the need for social commitment, told from the perspective of a young Jewish woman.

3.4 Nina's trilogy: *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (1998), *Nina* (2001), *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (2003)

Ballestra's works after Lussu's biography, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (1998), *Nina* (2001) and *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (2003), are autobiographical novels featuring the same protagonist, Nina.⁶² The themes of first love in the first book and motherhood in the second link *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.* and *Nina* to the tradition of women's writing, but neither is narrated in the first person. Many clues indicate that the protagonists of these two books are the same character, starting from the fact that they share the same name. Both are said to have spent their youth hopelessly in love with Monsieur Tenebra, the dashing male love interest of the protagonist of *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.*, who is also a past lover in *Nina*:

Allora, Nina scoprì di essere un po' spaventata e dispiaciuta, di trovarsi tanto vicina alla possibilità di chiudere per sempre con monsieur Tenebra, un giovane cantante francese mezzo professionista mezzo girovago – chiudere, per *sempre*, pensò con orrore, quella frustrante storia d'amore che la ossessionava da anni.⁶³

In these novels, the third-person narrative is focalised through a female character. *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* is a sentimental novel

⁶⁰ Ballestra, *Joyce L. Una vita contro*, p. 136.

⁶¹ Silvia Ballestra, *La seconda Dora* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006).

⁶² Silvia Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1998); *Nina* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001); *Il compagno di mezzanotte* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002).

⁶³ Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, p. 21.

about the protagonist's memory of her first love and the heartbreak it caused her. The first part of the title is a direct reference to Anton Chekhov's 'The Tale of Lady NN' (1887),⁶⁴ a short story about a woman whose youthful dreams and hopes of love remain unfulfilled. Unlike Chekhov's protagonist, Ballestra's N.N. moves on beyond that first disappointment, using the memory of that experience to find love and fulfilment in her present, adult life. Ballestra does so by openly adopting narrative modes and genres normally associated with women's writing, as exemplified by the second part of the title, *Una storia d'amore*. The male protagonist is introduced as a 'giovane gentiluomo',⁶⁵ his presence projects an 'aura [...] fiabesca, resa esotica dal poetico viaggiare',⁶⁶ N.N. herself is repeatedly referred to as 'beniamina protagonista', or 'nostra beniamina'.⁶⁷ All these expressions echo the vocabulary of traditional romance, used here with slightly ironic connotations. The first encounter between the two characters is framed in terms of an exceptional event, where the environment also contributes to the romantic atmosphere of love at first sight: 'le luci strobo del locale sciabolavano sui suoi diciassette anni, e tutto intorno, il sabato notte, brillando delle piccole felicità che ci sono disponibili in vita, brillava'.⁶⁸ The memory of first love is presented in the form of the protagonist's return to the places of her youth, where that love first blossomed. The narrator describes N.N.'s return to Grottaville, a fictional town of the Marche, likened in the text to the real Grottamare. Expressions like 'rondine ancora in volo', or 'la cupola cilestrina nell'estremo tramonto'⁶⁹ are used to describe the arrival of spring; Nora Dardone, the protagonist's best friend, is compared to a flower, her elegant head held up by the stem which is her body.⁷⁰

When N.N. meets a group of children survivors of Chernobyl who have come to spend the summer in Grottaville, the narrator links the protagonist's ability to feel compassion for the kids to her new ideas about committed writing:

⁶⁴ In Anton Chekhov, *Stories of Women*, trans. by Paula Ross (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), pp. 176-80.

⁶⁵ Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, p. 38.

⁶⁷ Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, pp. 18, 22 and 25.

⁶⁸ Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, p. 40.

⁶⁹ Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, p. 51.

⁷⁰ Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, p. 62.

Con ogni evidenza, la signorina N.N. aveva in mente – le sue letture di allora, in certo modo ve la costringevano – aveva in mente, dicevo, un'idea di letteratura non troppo incendiaria, e neanche tanto rivoluzionaria. La sua era un'idea di letteratura, per così dire, servizievole.⁷¹

Following Lussu's example, Ballestra knows that, in order to be 'servizievole', literature needs to be expressed in realist language and forms. Experimental preoccupations are secondary to the ability to communicate with one's readers. The narrator eventually sums up the protagonist's sentimental and literary experience, her looking back at the past and acceptance of the present, by stating that the novel 'è, per prima cosa, un fragoroso addio a tutte le puttante dell'estrema giovinezza, ma non un *funerale*, cavoli, bensì una festa di liberazione!'.⁷² While this statement disengages Ballestra's new fiction from her early work, it does so by showing her protagonist as putting the memory of her first love behind her, ready to move on with the new man in her life: the meta-narrative discourse is formulated in terms of romance.

Unlike *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.*, *Nina* does not include meta-narrative asides. The autobiographical voice, again in the third person, directly proceeds to spin a realistic narrative about the protagonist's experience of pregnancy and motherhood. The plot opens where *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.* had ended, that is to say, after the 'addio a tutte la puttante dell'estrema giovinezza', the conclusion of the failed romance with Monsieur Tenebra and the full acceptance of the new relationship between the main character and her new man. Again, the language is lyrical and constant references are made to the tradition of romance. But there is also a sense that the characters are fulfilling their destiny, that their having a child together is almost fated. When Nina and Bruno meet for the first time, she sees how their 'destini uscivano dal corpo e s'inveravano'.⁷³ When the couple's relationships hits a moment of crisis, the narrator insists that Nina is going to stay with Bruno in order to fulfil their destiny, 'una cosa che non s'erano forse mai detti sul serio ma a cui erano

⁷¹ Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, p. 91.

⁷² Ballestra, *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, p. 130.

⁷³ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 19.

chiamati dall'inizio, da quella prima volta in cui s'erano parlati all'interno del negozio musicale Nannucci'.⁷⁴

More openly than in *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.*, the landscape and the environment are used in *Nina* to emphasise the character's emotions, through a poetic language devoid of ironic intentions. When the now pregnant Nina witnesses the arrival of spring in Milan, the new life in the city becomes a reflection of the new life in her womb. The narrator mentions the 'canto delle allodole' and the 'battito delle foglie', and direct references to Leopardi are made explicit when Nina's attention is said to be attracted by the 'alti cespugli di ginestra [...] come il saluto d'una resistenza di fiori e foglie che a dispetto del mondo costruito sussurrava il proprio canto'.⁷⁵ In her pre-labour slumber, Nina sees her youth pass before her eyes, like a dream and a memory, 'una cosa purpurea, un abbraccio d'occhi notturni e cadenti stelle. Un soave d'infanzia'.⁷⁶ She remembers the hovel of an animal, which 'traboccava di vita, di stille',⁷⁷ 'il biancospino odoroso [...], cresciuto spontaneamente', a majestic oak tree, filled with 'suoni minuscoli e straordinaria e invisibile vita'.⁷⁸ Nina is attuned with natural life in all its forms and the narrator expresses this newly found affinity with the natural world through the vocabulary of romantic poetry and sentimental narrative.

After the detailed narrative of the birth of the baby, the narrator attempts to describe Nina's and the baby's inner perception of what it means to give life and to be born. The language becomes suddenly more fragmented, the imagery focused on the woman's body:

Nessun'altra sera sarebbe stata più dolce di quella sera in cui un piccolino e sua madre, rassegnati all'obbedienza che separando nutre, compivano il loro salto dal mondo oscuro e silenzioso, dal liquido e dal morbido.

⁷⁴ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 63.

⁷⁵ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 76.

⁷⁶ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 118.

⁷⁷ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 118.

⁷⁸ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 121.

Caldo. Oscuro. Silenzioso. Liquido. Morbido. Avvolgente.
 Fiore tremante e notturna tempia. Neve che lieve discenda da una
 nuvola purpurea.⁷⁹

The bond between mother and baby is voiced through their shared experience. Warmth, liquidity, darkness, silence and softness are the terms used to express the condition before birth for *both* the mother and the baby.

The realistic and sentimental language, which has served very well in narrating a woman's journey through love and maternity, is suddenly interrupted by a different type of linguistic structure. This new language is anti-narrative, poetical, fragmented, outside the temporal consequentiality of realist modes. It marks the need to verbalise experience outside the chronological causality of realist storytelling. Soon, however, the focus moves from the mother/child dyad to subjects that share a similar experience first and, gradually, to the rest of the world. Nina establishes a connection with the other women who have just given birth in the same hospital. Together, and in virtue of their shared experience, these women find a common form of communication which is historically inscribed in their similar experiences as women and mothers, 'come fra donne che in un mondo antico discutano dentro la casa calma'.⁸⁰ The hospital ward itself is just a step away from the disturbing reality of the outside world, such as the war raging in Yugoslavia. As the reference to the lasting consequences of the Chernobyl disaster and the victory of the Left in the Italian general elections had framed N.N.'s personal experience, so Nina's new perception of the world as a mother makes her particularly sensitive to the public implications of her personal choices. The moral choice of bringing a baby into the world becomes invested with a highly political dimension: 'Trentamila missioni. Ventiquattromila bombe', the protagonist reflects, 'E io guardo e interrogo il mio esserino che non parla'.⁸¹ She watches on television the news of the NATO bombings in Serbia and her horror is particularly heightened when she hears the mayor of a small Serb town asking for humanitarian help:

⁷⁹ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 166.

⁸⁰ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 122.

⁸¹ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 213.

‘Qui abbiamo bisogno di molte cose, ma soprattutto di Pampers! Come dite voi? Pampers è giusto, si capisce?’ Parlava nel suo strano italiano concitato, il buon sindaco del villaggio serbo [...] Chiedeva pannolini. Taglia new born, ma anche midi.⁸²

The personal experience is presented in terms of collective responsibility and human compassion at the end of the novel, when, about to leave the hospital, Nina learns to identify with other characters, including the male gynaecologist she has despised throughout her time at the hospital. She overhears him tell another patient his personal tale of loneliness and lost love. The bond with the other new mothers extends beyond the ward to include mothers in the rest of the world, fathers, Serbian town mayors and people who live in the precarious reality which lies both inside and outside the hospital and the maternal womb. It is not by chance therefore that the maternity clinic Nina has chosen for her pre-natal classes has a connection to the literary world: ‘Il consultorio si trovava in via Vitruvio e occupava le stanze che fino a pochi anni prima erano state la sede di una grande casa editrice’.⁸³ Rooms which have seen magazines, journals and books come to life are now witnessing the presence of women and men who want to learn how to bring new living beings into the world. The narrator mentions that Nina, herself a writer, reflects briefly on this coincidence while waiting for her turn to see the doctor, but her attention is immediately diverted by something much more important and much more real to her: the doctor calls her in to talk about the baby. Nina embraces real life over literature.

The ongoing negotiation between Ballestra’s need to articulate a female narrative voice and the demands of her other literary influences becomes particularly evident in *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, where the narrative role is shared between three characters: Nina, Antò and a nameless narrator. Nina’s narrative of adolescent friendship and betrayal is embedded in the first-person narrative of Nina’s anonymous female interlocutor, most likely an older and wiser version of Nina herself. The story is presented through Nina’s direct speech, as the reader is constantly reminded thanks to the sustained presence of quotation marks and by interventions of both the original, anonymous narrator and Antò Lu

⁸² Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 213.

⁸³ Ballestra, *Nina*, p. 69.

Purk. For a reader familiar with Ballestra's novels, the presence of Antò is an inter-textual reference to her previous work. Antò enters the story as Nina's interlocutor and, implicitly, of the interlocutor of the first narrator, the one who frames both Antò's and Nina's words. Without much encouragement from his friends, he immediately takes control of the dialogue and entertains the others with tales of his and the other Antòs' misadventures, his plans for future travels through Europe, and his dream of studying at Bologna University. The reader, who soon recognises the intertextual references, becomes immediately aware of the unreliability of Antò's narrative, pre-empted by the knowledge of all his future failures as they are featured in 'La via per Berlino' and *La guerra degli Antò*. Antò boasts: 'noi non ce ponémo limiti. Dalle Marche alla Puglia, da Pescara a Roma, ogni volta che serve prendiamo la macchina e andiamo fino a Rimini, che è una bella tirata, ma nun c'importa, perché dove c'è qualcosa da fa' noi ce dovémo esse'.⁸⁴ But no matter how confident his delivery appears to be, the ideal reader knows that his words will be contradicted by the reality of his future demise.

Ballestra's ideal readers are already acquainted with Nina, too, from *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.* and *Nina*. They know that the young woman who is now talking to her friends on a hot summer evening between the *maturità* and university will in fact be the one who will reach the sexual maturity, emotional fulfillment, creative and poetic achievements that Antò wishes for himself. Her narrative is, therefore, more reliable. Rather than embarking upon a narrative of her own future dreams, Nina chooses instead to talk about her recent past and about the heartbreak of betrayed friendship. Nina's friendship with Nora Dardone and Sonia Pallavicini, their experiences at school, their first loves, Sonia's betrayal, Nina's disappointment and her subsequent attempts at writing, are presented as a sentimental plot in the tradition of the female *Bildungsroman*. Antò becomes completely enraptured in Nina's narrative. While Nina's response to Antò's narrative of improbable sexual adventures and literary pretensions is polite but ironic, Antò is almost brought to tears by Nina's story: such is the emotional authority of Nina's ironic, but sentimental narrative.

What is, then, the role of the third friend? Who is this first narrator, the quiet listener of Antò's and Nina's speeches, the character whose voice frames both

⁸⁴ Ballestra, *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, p. 20.

Antò's and Nina's speeches? Ballestra does not provide any obvious clue to help the readers identify this mysterious character: she sits at the table of the outdoor caffè with Nina, but she is neither Sonia nor Nora, Nina's schoolfriends and protagonists of her narrative. However, she seems to know Nina quite well, in fact better than any 'compagna di banco' – as at some stage she identifies herself⁸⁵– possibly could. The first person narrator suggests that she and Nina might be one and the same person, sharing the same set of experiences. She also hints that all three of them, Nina, Antò and herself, are linked by similar biographical traits:

L'amica Nina proseguiva a parlare e io, ascoltandola, non potevo fare a meno di ripercorrere, in parte, la mia stessa vita, che era giovane quanto la sua e quanto quella del ragazzo un po' ilare e un po' avventuroso che, dentro la vicinanza leggera d'un sogno non cattivo, stava tenendoci compagnia.⁸⁶

Nina and Antò are thus talking to each other in the presence of an unidentified silent listener who later mediates their first person narratives, who lets Antò's voice fade away in favour of Nina's, and who then embeds both Antò's and Nina's speeches within the distancing frame of her own voice. Such a narrator has the confidence to be sentimental without the protective layers of postmodern irony used by other characters. While, for example, Antò offers a poor imitation of experimental poetry,⁸⁷ and while Nina adapts ironically Leopardi's words about her dreadful experience of provincial life,⁸⁸ the third narrator embraces Leopardi's romantic style in order to describe the place, the night and the moon that oversees their encounter: 'un celeste regno in cui il profilo della luna, ancora pallida nel contrasto, bianca e tardiva, non appieno si lasciava distinguere [...] in tanta quiete

⁸⁵ Ballestra, *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, p. 14.

⁸⁶ Ballestra, *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, p. 54.

⁸⁷ He recites: 'se intitola *Sniffando colla* e dice così: Non la tua mediocrità davanti a un fiotto / de sangue. / Lasciame morire ora / perché nun so se fra dieci anni / te ricorderai la mia voce. / Oblio assalimi, baciami Dioniso! / Oblio assalimi, baciami Dioniso! / T'ucciderò col rasoio nella vasca da bagno. / Nella vasca. / Da bagno.' Ballestra, *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, p. 19.

⁸⁸ '“Non veniteci, qui!” ammoniva Nina i suoi pochi conoscenti di fuori, “che un posto del genere fa fuggire i migliori, gambe in spalla, a furia di scoregge!” E questa identica considerazione, l'aveva declamata tale e quale anche uno sfortunato poeta del luogo duecento anni prima'. Ballestra, *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, p. 13.

era come se ogni litigio di voce umana avesse chinato docile il capo'.⁸⁹ Thus, the three characters – Nina, Antò and the silent anonymous narrator – sitting at the caffè on a hot summer night can be read as one and the same voice, each representing a different stage in Ballestra's development: the confident, but ultimately fruitless avant-garde posturing of Antò's perspective, which can be associated with *Compleanno dell'iguana* and *La guerra degli Antò*; the ironic, postmodern detachment adopted by Nina in order to demystify Antò's voice, a transition that we have seen take place in *Gli orsi*; and, finally, the more mature perspective of the third interlocutor, who has embraced the sentimental and realistic modes associated with women's literary tradition. The references to Leopardi must be interpreted in this light, as both a homage to the symbol of the national and regional poetic tradition Ballestra embraces after her earlier experimental work, an acknowledgement of the male canon that has contributed to her formation as a writer, but also a mediation of that legacy from a female perspective. As with Chekhov in relation to *La giovinezza della signorina N.N. Una storia d'amore*, the pessimism and melancholy of the Leopardian model is rewritten as a more positive outlook on the possibilities offered by adulthood, and female adulthood in particular, through the experiences of writing, work, mature love, realistic friendship, motherhood and rediscovery of the family. The three narrators of *Il compagno di mezzanotte* dramatise this development in their different perspectives during their night-long dialogue.

In the final pages of the novel, the narrator briefly summarises what Nina is yet unable to narrate through her tale, because she has not yet experienced the lasting consequences of her friend Sonia's betrayal. A result of the permanent rift between Sonia and Nina, explains the narrator, is the 'tenue silenzio' or 'silenzio convalescente' that interrupts the communication between Nina and her other friend Nora. The rift between Nina and Nora will eventually be mended, as confirmed both by the narrator of *Il compagno di mezzanotte* and by the plot of *La giovinezza della signorina N.N.*, that chronicles precisely the renewal of that friendship. In the meantime, however, Nina is shown promising herself that 'fossero pure trascorsi secoli, anni-luce ed ere geologiche, di lì in avanti [...] sarebbe stata enormemente attenta a non avere, fra le sue amiche, delle

⁸⁹ Ballestra, *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, p. 9.

coetanee'.⁹⁰ This sentence explains Nina's rejection of the 'discorsi fra donne' that she had otherwise enjoyed throughout her adolescence, but it also functions as a meta-narrative comment on the distance that Nina, as Ballestra's alter-ego, has put between her early fiction and the voices and themes of women's narrative tradition. However, by placing this statement in the context of *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, the narrator reminds the reader that Nina will in fact grow out of her determination not to have women friends for the rest of her life. Similarly, Ballestra has not only been able to develop a narrative voice that incorporates the male models of the *neoavanguardia* and of postmodern fiction, as well as the older exemplary woman Joyce Lussu, but she has also managed to articulate a woman's voice that speaks to and about the women of her generation.

3.5 Tradition, avant-garde and political writing in a woman's voice: *Tutto su mia nonna* (2005), *La seconda Dora* (2006) and *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli* (2006)

The three voices embodied by the different characters of *Il compagno di mezzanotte* are eventually integrated in *Tutto su mia nonna*, where the first-person narrator never tries to disguise her female identity and her personal relationship with the other female characters. In this novel, the autobiographical material is expressed explicitly by the narrator who gives voice to both her mother and her grandmother and who invites her readers to see female storytelling as intrinsically experimental. The innovative language and form that the *neoavanguardia* critics had praised in Ballestra's early works – fragmentation, digressions, meta-narrative comments, open-endedness, dialogism, multi-linguism and use of jargons – are finally revealed to be language and forms of the maternal oral narratives passed on from generation to generation.

Nonna Fernanda's story begins as a series of family tales, recollected after the matriarch's death, where the male characters, among whom the narrator's father, appear in secondary roles. This story of a grandmother starts in a realist style, with a scene where the narrator and her sister go through the family album and try to put together the memories of their grandmother's life. However, this tale becomes interconnected with that of three generations of women. Chronology

⁹⁰ Ballestra, *Il compagno di mezzanotte*, p. 171.

is soon abandoned in favour of a fragmented narrative, dominated by Fernanda's and her female descendants' dialogues, the narrator's references to her own work as a writer, the return of characters who appeared in her previous novels, random childhood memories, thoughts on the current political situation in Italy and international events from the recent past, such as the environmental disaster of Chernobyl, followed immediately by a chapter on Fernanda's experiences during fascism and World War II, or the transcription of surreal phone calls between the narrator and her mother. The fragmented style, the meta-narrative comments, the intertextual references, the variety of registers, the use of the Marche dialect, all echo the experimentalism of Ballestra's early works, but frame it within the memory of family life, women's experiences and, most importantly, women's language: 'Nonna ha sempre inventato parole, e mamma pure e io pure. Nonna ha inventato soprannomi e, ribattezzandole, ha nobilitato ai miei occhi determinate persone rendendole personaggi [...] E sono parole per noi preziose'.⁹¹ The experimental elements of the book are therefore closely connected to women's own storytelling, suggesting that the origin of Ballestra's more avant-garde production finds its origin as much in this family tradition as in the literary models of *Gruppo 63*.

Parallel to the need to recuperate her family's voices, Ballestra continues to follow Lussu's teachings about a politically engaged literature. Dedicated to Lussu and to Ballestra's schoolteacher, *La seconda Dora* is a historical novel set between the rise of fascism and the present day. The protagonist is Dora Levi, a young Jewish woman who is forced to convert to Catholicism and abandon the religion of her father in order to survive the anti-Jewish persecution, but who later finds the sense of identity she had lost during her youth by becoming a dedicated school teacher. While the events of the war years mark her profoundly, including the death of her father in a road accident caused by the American troops, her determination to live, have a family and follow her path as an educator, transforms that experience into the basis for a quiet moral growth.

Narrated in the third person, the novel is told in a simple, realist style that Angelo Guglielmi describes as 'una sorta di resistenza linguistica contro la volgarità viriloide e l'aggressività roboante che ha marcato lo scorrere di tanta

⁹¹ Ballestra, *Tutto su mia nonna*, p. 192.

parte del secolo scorso'.⁹² Guglielmi's words underline a key element of a novel that takes on a widely narrated historical period, from the perspective of a woman who experiences that history from the margins: as a female and a Jew, but also as a convert to Catholicism who does not experience direct persecution; as the daughter of a Jewish father who loses his job and wealth as a consequence of the racial laws, but who continues to sympathise with the fascist government; and, finally, as a survivor of war who lost her beloved father at the hands of the liberators. Significantly, in a gesture symbolic of her negotiation of multiple identities, while embracing her new religion, the devout Catholic Dora ('la seconda Dora' of the title) will continue to remember her father with a Jewish prayer:

Aveva il culto, Dora, della sua memoria, e in casa teneva un ritratto del suo genitore, e accanto a quel ritratto sistemava sempre dei fiori freschi insieme a una stella di Davide incisa su legno. Disponeva i fiori accanto alla stella e qualche volta pregava. Non proprio una preghiera, ma una frase che il prete aveva detto in chiesa, negli ultimi anni. Era una frase che ripeteva dentro di sé: 'Shemà Israel, Shemà Israel'. 'Ascolta. Ascolta, Israele'.⁹³

The language and narrative structure could not be more different from the anarchic experimentalism of *Tutto su mia nonna*. Nevertheless, they reflect the previous novel's interest in portraying an ordinary woman's life within a clearly identifiable political and historical framework. It seems that by having chosen women's experiences and language as the common denominator and focal point of her writing, Ballestra has also achieved the confidence to move between different styles and traditions, between avant-garde and more mainstream forms: 'vorrei continuare a esplorare nuove strade e a mantenere quella cosa più ludica, più sperimentale se vogliamo, che gioca più con le strutture, coi personaggi, però fare qualcosa di diverso, confrontarmi col romanzo più ortodosso'.⁹⁴

⁹² Angelo Guglielmi, 'Le due vite di Dora ebrea, poi cattolica per sfuggire al nazismo', *L'Unità*, 8 August 2006.

⁹³ Ballestra, *La seconda Dora*, p. 114.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Aurora Caredda, 'Intervista a Silvia Ballestra', in Giuliana Adamo and others (eds.), *Narrativa italiana recente/Recent Italian Fiction*, edited by Giuliana Adamo and others (Dublin

Her focus on women's experience and writing tradition is also at the basis of *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli*, a feminist pamphlet where Ballestra addresses the misogynistic backlash in contemporary society and in the media. As discussed earlier on, Ballestra's awareness of a women's tradition is something she resisted at the beginning of her career, when she did not want to be identified as a female author, and before the Italian critics' lack of interest in women's writing became apparent to her. In the new pamphlet, she claims that the prejudice of the Italian literary world ('mi scoprivo a contare le donne invitate ai convegni, presenti nelle antologie, nell'Olimpo della critica, e non le trovavo'),⁹⁵ however, made her aware of the misogyny of the world at large and of women's own complicity in letting this happen ('neanche le scrittrici e le attrici più giovani e underground riescono a sottrarsi a questo palloso teatrino').⁹⁶ The violence against women in all its forms – the media's objectification of the female body, the conservative undermining of reproduction rights and women's control over their own bodies, physical abuse and rape, the economic exploitation of immigrants as underpaid, unprotected, often illegal domestic workers – all these attacks against women are the object of Ballestra's discussion. Most importantly, she argues, classic texts of Italian feminism, such as Carla Ravaioli's *La donna contro se stessa* and Carla Lonzi's *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale*, are still very relevant today and need to be rediscovered and published again, in an urgently needed dialogue between generations of women, which is also a dialogue between generations of women writers. In the final pages of the book, Ballestra encourages her readers to become more alert to the signs of the backlash and gives an example: 'Esco e vado alla Feltrinelli: c'è una parete occupata dalle novità più vendute [...] tanto per fare un giochetto mi metto a contare e su cinquanta libri solo quattro risultano scritti da donne. Forse è un periodo così, un caso. O forse no'.⁹⁷ Rediscovering past women writers and engaging with their texts is a first step towards balancing the books.

and Turin: Trauben in association with Department of Italian, Trinity College Dublin, 2005), pp. 83-93 (p. 93).

⁹⁵ Ballestra, *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Ballestra, *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli*, p. 17.

⁹⁷ Ballestra, *Contro le donne nei secoli dei secoli*, p. 91.

CHAPTER 4

ROSSANA CAMPO: PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE VOICES BETWEEN
NEOAVANGUARDIA AND FEMINISM

4.1 Introduction: Rossana Campo's female narrators

We have seen how, in her ongoing negotiations between the experimental model of the *neoavanguardia*, the example proposed by Tondelli and the 1980s generation with their exploration of youth language and themes, and the search for a tradition that would authorise the use of a female narrative voice, Silvia Ballestra moves from the postmodern engagement with genres of her early 'pulp' production to the more realist forms and themes traditionally associated with women's writing in her later fiction. She achieves her goal by searching for and finding a literary mother in the writer Joyce Lussu, whose poetics pursue a politically committed, socially useful and formally accessible type of writing. This is precisely the model that she embraces in the late 1990s and early 2000s, albeit never abandoning her interest in formal and linguistic experimentation. The symbolic significance of her encounter with Lussu is confirmed explicitly by Ballestra herself when she states: 'C'è stato lo spartiacque con l'incontro con Joyce Lussu. C'è un prima e un dopo. Non poteva essere altrimenti e poi non potevo continuare a scrivere libri come prima'.¹

In Rossana Campo's case, the relationship with the legacy of women's writing takes the form of affectionate but ironic references to the mothers of Western feminism. Through such references, Campo acknowledges that the tradition of women's literature enables her to articulate a confident and unapologetic female narrative voice, one that does not show any sign of authorial anxiety. All of Campo's novels and short stories are told by female narrators. Preferential female readers are also implied by the dialogic structure of most of her fiction, through conversations that involve the narrators and other women characters. When male characters appear as interlocutors, their conversations with the female protagonists are very often marked by tension and confrontation, as in

¹ Aurora Caredda's interview with Ballestra, 'Silvia Ballestra: l'autobiografia, il gioco, il romanzesco', in Giuliana Adamo (et al.), *Narrativa italiana recente / Recent Italian Fiction*. (Dublin: Trauben in Association with Department of Italian, Trinity College Dublin, 2005), pp. 75-93 (p. 89).

the dialogues between the narrator and her unreliable, alcoholic lover Steve in *L'attore americano* (1997), between the narrator and her father Renato in *Sono pazza di te* (2001), the narrator and her abusive lover in *Duro come l'amore* (2005), or the narrator and her husband, who leaves her for another woman, in *Più forte di me* (2007).² The dialogic form of Campo's first three novels³ is achieved in her later books through the use of confident narrators, whose voices convey a multiplicity of female perspectives.

Following Susan Sniader Lanser's classification of narrative voices in women's literature, we can state that Campo structures her books around 'communal voices', that is to say, she establishes 'a practice in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community'.⁴ In Campo's books, the narrators speak for themselves and as representatives of the larger community of young women they belong to. Read in chronological order, Campo's early novels reveal the development of specific strategies that create a correspondence between the autobiographical first-person narrator of each book and the group of female characters she speaks for. All these characters take turns as narrators, a privilege that the original narrator seems glad to share with a variety of other women's voices. Whether they speak in the first person, or whether they are gradually replaced by other voices, the female narrators of Campo's early fiction in particular authorise each other to speak on behalf of specific communities of young women.

4.2 Rossana Campo and the legacy of the *neoavanguardia*

Campo's attitude towards women's writing is symptomatic of her relationship with literary models in general. Her narrative deals in fact with the same questions faced by Ballestra in her attempt to identify existing and potential literary figures

² Rossana Campo, *L'attore americano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997); *Sono pazza di te* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001); *Duro come l'amore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005); *Più forte di me* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007).

³ Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992; my references are to the Universale Economica Edition, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994); *Il pieno di super* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 1993); *Mai sentita così bene* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995).

⁴ Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 21.

of reference. However, while Ballestra's work shows that, once acknowledged, the influence of the avant-garde needs to be questioned and integrated with an alternative tradition, so that a young writer may articulate her narrative in a woman's voice, Campo indicates that she is perfectly aware that such a tradition already exists and that it can be treated ironically. Furthermore, Campo's perspective on feminism, with its trademark mixture of homage and distance, is the same one that she applies to the male experimental tradition.⁵ Silvia Contarini argues that in her first novel Campo's low, comic register and her transcription of the oral language of her characters are modelled on Gianni Celati's fiction. Interestingly, in his introduction to Campo's first short story, Celati himself had highlighted the links between Campo's and Edoardo Sanguineti's style, by stressing a comparable interest in colloquial registers and vocabulary.⁶ But her acknowledgement and reassessment of the *neoavanguardia* are not only expressed through the use of references to some of the protagonists of *Gruppo 63*; rather, it is represented mainly through the love/hate relationship between the first person narrator and a number of male characters, in particular the 'pittore futurista' of *In principio erano le mutande*.⁷

Campo's first novel follows the protagonist's sentimental journey, intercutting it with her friend Giovanna's stories and with the narrator's own childhood memories. Her most significant heterosexual relationship is the one the narrator entertains with an artist, 'un tipo sulla cinquantina molto grosso grande pancia capello lungo mezzo brizzolato insomma quasi più bello di Pavarotti'.⁸ The

⁵ Silvia Contarini, 'L'eredità della Neoavanguardia nei romanzi di Silvia Ballestra, Rossana Campo, Carmen Covito', *Narrativa*, no. 8 (1995), 77-99.

⁶ Gianni Celati, 'Rossana Campo', in Celati (ed.), *Narratori delle Riserve* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992), p. 66. Campo's short story, 'La storia della Gabri' (pp. 67-72), in this collection, is an early version of chapters 7 and 8 of *In principio erano le mutande*. The influence of the *neoavanguardia* and Campo's version of the 'abbassamento linguistico' are discussed briefly also by Nicoletta Di Ciolla McGowan, 'Giovani pulp crescono. Il percorso della narrativa italiana degli anni Novanta nell'opera di Rossana Campo', *Narrativa*, no. 14 (1999), 167-81 (pp. 171-72), while Massimo Arcangeli presents a detailed linguistic analysis of her use of spoken language in *Giovani scrittori, scritture giovani. Ribelli, sognatori, cannibali, bad girls* (Rome, Carocci, 2007), pp. 103-22.

⁷ Interestingly, the film adaptation of the novel alters completely the nature of the relationship between the protagonist and the 'pittore futurista', transforming the latter into a minor, annoying character. The protagonist of the movie falls in love instead with a fireman, who plays a minor role in the novel, and who is intellectually less problematic. The film, directed by Anna Negri, was released in 2000. The screenplay is credited to Rossana Campo, Ivan Cotroneo, Davide Ferrario, Doriana Leoneff and Anna Negri.

⁸ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 55.

man's art is described as 'tele rivoluzionarie futuriste d'avanguardia',⁹ a definition that can be interpreted as a reference to avant-garde culture in general. Considering the age of this character and the fact that most of his conversations with the narrator are centred on literature, rather than art, I suggest that 'il pittore futurista' belongs to the same generation and is a symbol of the *neoavanguardia* writers who have been so influential for Campo. This influence, however, is ironically downplayed in the representation of the relationship that ensues between them. As a pretext to approach him, the young protagonist tells him that she likes his paintings, proclaiming: 'Viva l'avanguardia!'.¹⁰ Afterwards, she must confess her ignorance of his art, but it soon becomes evident that part of her admiration for the man is based on the fact that he is an avant-garde intellectual. At the same time, the man's artistic credentials are also the source of amusement for the narrator, who claims: 'Questo futurista mi sembra simpatico, battuta pronta, a tratti anche un'aria un po' rincoglionita devo dire, però molto brillante e ironico da vero futurista'.¹¹

While the avant-garde credentials of the artist are both fascinating and amusing to the narrator, she acknowledges him as her potential soulmate only after he admits his love for Emily Brönte's *Wuthering Heights*. The young woman is a fan of the novel, too, primarily for its romantic and passionate love story. She believes that if the artist can appreciate Brönte's romantic masterpiece, this must mean 'che anche lui nel suo cuore deve essere un appassionato, e non un infame'.¹² The fact that the narrator starts falling in love with 'il pittore futurista' after he has stated his admiration for Brönte's archetypal romance is Campo's most symbolic attempt to reconcile her two main literary models: the male experimental tradition represented by *Gruppo 63* and the avant-garde artist, and the tradition of women's writing embodied by Emily Brönte. The meta-narrative function of this marriage between two apparently distant cultural legacies is made explicit at the end of the novel. After having been deserted by her older lover, the narrator discovers that she is pregnant by him. She becomes resigned to having the child and bringing her up on her own. Unexpectedly, however, the novel is given an optimistic twist in the final chapter, with the sudden and unexplained

⁹ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 56.

¹⁰ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 56.

¹¹ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 56.

¹² Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 57.

return of ‘il pittore futurista’ and his reconciliation with the protagonist. The narrator asks the older man if he intends to stay by her side, explaining: ‘devo sapere se lui resta e ci amiamo da esagerati o se parte e mi molla qui che così la storia della letteratura ci ha un altro romanzo bello triste col disincanto eccetera’.¹³ The man’s positive answer (‘dice che a lui i romanzi che gli piacciono sono quelli che vanno a finire bene’)¹⁴ allows Campo to close the novel with a happy ending. This ending is determined more by an act of narrative desire than by any consistent development of character or plot, a reality acknowledged by the narrator when – in a fashion that reminds us of Charlotte Brönte’s direct address to her readership in the final chapter of *Jane Eyre* (‘Reader, I married him’) – she states: ‘Insomma signori miei qui siamo arrivati alla fine del romanzo e io lo finisco così con questo qui tutto esaltato che giù che mi bacia e mi stringe’.¹⁵ The unlikely reconciliation between the feminist narrator and her avant-garde lover, each of them being the embodiment of two seemingly irreconcilable literary traditions, suggests the possibility of a fruitful and symbolically child-bearing exchange between different poetics. The happy ending also allows the author to articulate a distinctive woman’s voice without running the risk of seeing the experimental characteristics of her writing go unnoticed by critics, who include many *neoavanguardia* intellectuals. Framing her text in a way that reflects many of *Gruppo 63*’s linguistic and formal preoccupations – namely, use of oral expressions, *abbassamento linguistico*, meta-narrative self-consciousness, intertextual references – Campo’s love story becomes an avant-garde romance of the 1990s, one that acknowledges its multiple cultural sources, while ironising about them.

Like in Ballestra’s case, however, Campo’s later fiction becomes less preoccupied with showing her experimental credentials, or at least with showing those credentials according to the theoretical framework established by the *neoavanguardia*. Significantly, the character of the older male intellectual becomes gradually less relevant in her subsequent novels, and when he appears he is portrayed in markedly negative terms, as the tormented American actor the narrator falls in love with in *L’attore americano*, the father of the murder victim,

¹³ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 144.

¹⁴ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 145.

¹⁵ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 145.

who is revealed to be also her killer in *Mentre la mia bella dorme* (1999),¹⁶ or the protagonist's ex-lover whose betrayal causes her clinical depression in *Sono pazza di te*. Even more explicit is the rewriting of the avant-garde artist himself in *Duro come l'amore*. Similarly to what had happened in *In principio erano le mutande*, the protagonist of this later novel, now more mature and more disillusioned with life, embarks on a passionate affair with an older artist, while her own marriage is falling apart. However, the new relationship soon becomes controlling and abusive on the man's part, prompting the narrator to escape from it. The optimistic ending of the first novel, that reconciled male and female characters, avant-garde art and women's writing, intellectual and working-class backgrounds, becomes increasingly problematic in Campo's later fiction. The failure of the sentimental relationships between the narrators and their male counterparts alert the readers to a shift in narrative focus. Campo's women's complex negotiation between their flexible female identities (but also between the parameters upon which their identities are constructed, such as the obsession with perfect heterosexual love) and the constraints of the male world that tries to define them, becomes a favourite theme of her narrative. This theme is also a metaphor for Campo's desire to escape the narrow definitions of experimental writing that have influenced her literary efforts, in favour of the models of passionate and sentimental fiction represented by the tradition of women's writing about love and family.

4.3 Dialogic voices: *In principio erano le mutande* (1992) and *Il pieno di super* (1993)

Narrated in the first person, focalised through the perspective of the young narrators and their experiences through childhood and youth, Campo's early novels already show the signs of becoming the collective narratives of the 1990s young women who share the protagonist's experiences. In *In principio erano le mutande*, for example, the twenty-something female narrator describes her comical and picaresque misadventures in love, work and everyday life in the working-class *periferia* of Genoa, alternating her narrative with recollections of her childhood as the daughter of Neapolitans who had migrated to the North in the 1960s. The

¹⁶ Rossana Campo, *Mentre la mia bella dorme* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999).

protagonist's experiences are constantly intercut with the parallel and interconnected stories of her best friend Giovanna. Giovanna's own storytelling is, in fact, embedded in the protagonist's first-person narrative, but it is not introduced by the direct speech marks that traditionally signal the presence of an embedded narrator, a strategy used, for example, by Ballestra to introduce Nina's voice into the framing narrative by the anonymous narrator in *Il compagno di mezzanotte*. In Campo's novel, the original narrator simply gives up her first-person privilege in order to let Giovanna – 'grande raccontatrice'¹⁷ – speak in her own voice, without establishing a hierarchy of narrators. Also when the protagonist summarises Giovanna's stories, Giovanna's own vocabulary and expressions are adopted in the third-person narrative without mediation, in an effort to reproduce the immediacy of the dialogue between the two friends. When Giovanna's description of her sexual encounter with the jazz musician Davis is recounted by the main narrator, for example, the conflict between the reported speech (the narrator reporting Giovanna's story) and Giovanna's original dialogue with the narrator becomes apparent:

Lui è passato e si sono guardati e lei ha pensato una di quelle cose che pensa ogni tanto cioè: Ora o mai più. Pensa che ora lo ferma e qualcosa gli spara, mentre che pensa allo sparo lui già fermato davanti a lei dicendo che si sono già visti, lei pensa gesù si ricorda della figura di merda a Roccella.

Lui dice così: Dopo il concerto andiamo a mangiare, ci vieni con noi?

Lei dice, Sì oh sì che ci vengo, e mi racconta che però ha dovuto sorbirsi tutti e quattro i jazzisti e anche un altro che non ha capito chi era e lei un po' s'annoiava [...] Conclude dicendo: Ero bagnatissima.¹⁸

The original dialogue between the two friends enters directly into the narrator's retelling through Giovanna's direct and free direct speech ('Ora o mai più', 'gesù si ricorda della figura di merda di Roccella', 'Ero bagnatissima'). Moreover, also

¹⁷ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 14.

¹⁸ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 14.

the dialogue between Davis and Giovanna, reported by Giovanna to her friend, is presented by the narrator in immediate dialogic form. Given the absence of inverted commas, the twice reported dialogue cannot be considered a fully fledged direct speech, but rather, it is introduced by markers ('Lui dice così', 'Lei dice', the use of the colon) that underline the directness of the original oral conversation.

This narrative technique, where the use of generally unmarked direct speech and free indirect speech prevails, is characteristic of Campo's narrative in general and it signals the importance of oral conversation and dialogue in her texts.¹⁹ Appearing in all of Campo's books when reporting conversations between female characters and between female and male characters, this strategy finds its most convincing articulation in the all-female context of *Mai sentita così bene*, a truly collective dialogic novel. In *In principio erano le mutande*, the dialogues – whether direct or reported – still contend for narrative space with the first person's voice and her dominant focalisation. Although in this book the dialogic form often takes over the first-person narrative, dialogues appear mostly as conversations between the narrator and just one other character: the narrator and her best friend Giovanna, the narrator and her mother or father, the narrator and a variety of more casual friends, the narrator and one of her many lovers, and other combinations. Only in the chapters devoted to the memory of her childhood, the dialogues extend beyond the conversation between the narrator and one interlocutor, becoming a free interplay between multiple female voices. In the second chapter of the novel, for example, entitled 'Questo è un capitolo che torna indietro nei ricordi infantili',²⁰ the adult narrator introduces her childhood friends and then disappears, the narrative space taken over by the conversation between her younger self and her childhood friends Simona and Nicoletta. The three voices dialogue with each other, none of them dominating the others, while the first-person narrator as a child becomes a fourth interlocutor on equal footing with the others:

Simona lei il progetto che ci ha per quando diventa grande è di comprarsi le Calze da Donna, come ce le ha per esempio Silvia

¹⁹ Campo's only book where direct speeches are introduced by traditional markers is *La gemella buona e la gemella cattiva* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2000). This is a children's book a non-traditional modes of discourse would have been inappropriate.

²⁰ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, pp. 17-22.

Coscina. *Nicoletta dice* che di sicuro Silvia Coscina sarà Una Di Quelle.

Io dico, Certo! Non lo sapevate? E affermo: Anche le Gemelle Chesler!

Nicoletta dice: Anche Raffaella Carrà!

Simona dice: Raffaella Carrà è la donna più bella del mondo!

Io dico che non capisce niente e che la donna più bella del mondo a parte noi tre è Liz Teilor.

Nicoletta e Simona dicono: E chi è?

Io dico: Non sapete niente voi.²¹

As we can see in this extract, the narrator's tendency to control the conversation by recollecting it in indirect or free indirect speech (the first paragraph) is immediately derailed by the force of the other female voices, which function as stimulus and support for each other in the direct conversation.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that *Il pieno di super*, Campo's second novel, should expand even further the use of this collective dialogue, which had only sporadically appeared in *In principio erano le mutande*. *Il pieno di super* focuses exclusively on the childhood adventures of the protagonist and her groups of female friends, in what seems to be a rewriting of *In principio erano le mutande*, but excluding the protagonist's adult adventures. As in Campo's earlier book, the narrative is again in the first person and in the present tense. The young female narrator and the other characters bear different names, but recall very closely the protagonists of Campo's debut novel. The setting is again the Genoa *periferia* of the late 1960s-1970s, a period evoked by means of numerous references to the popular culture of the time, such as television programmes (*Pippi Calzelunghe* and *Attenti a quei due*, the dubbed versions of the series *Pippi Longstockings* and *The Persuaders*) or Italian pop music (the singers Johnny Dorelli, Gianni Morandi, Fred Buscaglione, among others). The characters belong again to working class families, including many immigrant families from the South. The relationships between the characters are very similar to those of Campo's other novels. For example, the volatile relationship between the

²¹ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 20 (italics mine).

protagonist's parents becomes an intertextual *leitmotif* that suggests the autobiographical nature of Campo's work and that encourages her readers to see all of her narrative as closely interconnected. In her later novels, her characters will start bearing identical names and features as in the earlier ones: Renato, for example, is the name of the narrator's father in *In principio erano le mutande*, *Sono pazza di te* and *Più forte di me*; in *L'uomo che non ho sposato*, the protagonist is not only recovering from severe clinical depression, the same illness suffered by the narrator of *Sono pazza di te*, but she is also called Rosi, the abbreviation of the author's name Rossana and a confirmation of the autobiographical, as well as the intertextual aspects of Campo's fiction. Similarly, the meta-narrative comments of the protagonist of Campo's latest novel, *Più forte di me*, validates the autobiographical nature of her writing. The first-person narrator is, yet again, an Italian expatriate novelist who lives in Paris and struggles to recognise and deal with her own alcoholism. At the end of a book presentation, a member of the audience asks her if her fiction is autobiographical, throwing the writer into a fit of annoyed panic:

Cosa vorrebbe dire? ho detto io anche se lo so bene cosa cazzo vuol dire.

Se è la sua vita quella che racconta, ha fatto la nasona.

Io non sono riuscita a rispondere, la trovo così triste questa domanda, così umiliante.²²

Even though she attaches negative connotations to it, the author-as-narrator confirms the autobiographical origin of her body of work, itself strictly interconnected by means of a series of intertextual links.

In the case of *In principio erano le mutande* and *Il pieno di super*, the intertextual connections include not only similarities between characters, plots and style, but also the adoption of headings that summarise the contents of each chapter. This strategy marks also a significant narrative shift between the two books. In *In principio erano le mutande*, most of the chapter titles include verbs conjugated in the first person singular and, less frequently, some form of direct

²² Campo, *Più forte di me*, p. 77.

address to the readers, thus establishing a dialogue between the narrator and her readership, confirmed by the occasional use of the first person plural.²³ While a plural dialogic form is mentioned directly in a few chapter titles,²⁴ it is only in her second book that the first-person singular narrator gradually fades away from the chapter headings, in a way that mirrors the integration between her voice and those of other characters. In *Il pieno di super*, the titles of the different sections are dominated by the use of the first person plural, reflecting the multiple narrators of the story.²⁵ Although the first-person singular narrator does not disappear entirely from the titles – as she does not disappear from the novel – the narrative act itself is qualified in terms that are quite different from the first-person focalisation of the previous book. The verb ‘racconto’ is frequently replaced by the impersonal substantives ‘descrizione’ or ‘presentazione’.²⁶ Moreover, even when she speaks in the first person, the narrator adopts other verbs in order to refer to her narrative act, such as ‘parlare’, which emphasise her act of oral storytelling and place equal emphasis on herself and the other storytellers of the novel.²⁷

The strategy of recollecting childhood through the conversations between the narrator and her young female friends, which Campo had already adopted in

²³ Here are some examples of chapter titles: chapter 1: ‘Il primo capitolo dove *introduco* la mia vita di grandi miserie e *presento* anche l’amica Giovanna’; chapter 3: ‘Terzo capitolo e *torniamo* nel presente [...]’; chapter 4: ‘*Torniamo* indietro e *vi racconto* la mia nascita’; chapter 5: ‘[...] *vi racconto* i discorsi bellissimi sul sesso delle cugine porche’; chapter 7: ‘*Torniamo* più vicino e *vi racconto* [...]’; chapter 8: ‘Dato che il primo infame non *mi* bastava ne *conosco* un secondo’; chapter 9: ‘Dove *vi racconto* i famosi primi amori’; chapter 10: ‘[...] dove *presento* l’infame numero tre e *vi racconto* [...]’; chapter 11 ‘[...] *vado* a trovare Ivano’; chapter 12: ‘Dove *racconto* [...] e *faccio* conoscenza [...]’; chapter 15: ‘*Vado* ancora a salutare mio padre’; chapter 19: ‘*Racconto* che ritorno a casa e poi *vado* dalla famiglia’; chapter 22: ‘*Rivedo* Lella [...]’; chapter 23: ‘Dove *descrivo* una bella gita ai laghi e ci *metto* considerazioni [...]’. The italics are mine and highlight the use of first-person verbal forms or direct address to the readers. Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, pp. 147-49 (italics mine).

²⁴ See, for example, chapter 6: ‘Adesso si va indietro di nuovo e *vi racconto* i discorsi bellissimi sul sesso delle cugine porche’; chapter 17: ‘*Dialoghi* con Miguel’; chapter 23: ‘Dove *descrivo* una bella gita ai laghi e ci *metto* considerazioni sulla vita e sull’amore *sotto forma di dialoghi*’. Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, pp. 147-49 (italics mine).

²⁵ Here are some examples: chapter 1: ‘Perché *andiamo* sempre a casa della Silvia Padella’; ‘*Racconto* dei giochi della nostra compagnia [...]’; chapter 15: ‘Le favole che *ci raccontano* a scuola’; chapter 18: ‘Anche *per noi* c’è la scoperta dell’amore’; chapter 19: ‘*Facciamo* progetti di matrimonio’; chapter 21: ‘*Conosciamo* il dottor Granatella pezzo grosso democristiano’; ‘E così *finiamo tutt’e tre* dai carabinieri’. Campo, *Il pieno di super*, pp. 139-41 (italics mine).

²⁶ See, for example, chapter 2: ‘La *descrizione* dei dialoghi che si svolgono in casa della Silvia Padella’; chapter 4: ‘*Descrizione* di quelli con cui vivo io’; chapter 7: ‘*Presentazione* della scuola e di tutte le sue ingiustizie’. Campo, *Il pieno di super*, pp. 139-41 (italics mine).

²⁷ See, for example, chapter 11: ‘Parlerò adesso di suor Primina e di suor Pescecane’, and chapter 14: ‘Vi parlo di confidenze, intimità e Grand Hotel’. Campo, *Il pieno di super*, pp. 139-41.

In principio erano le mutande, becomes prevalent in *Il pieno di super*. The reader is immediately thrown into such a collective conversation in the first chapter of the book. The group includes six young girls, whose turn-taking in the conversation cannot be easily controlled by the original first-person narrator. On the contrary, she prefers to disappear from the dialogue, becoming a listener and letting the other voices emerge and interact. The conversations and the narratives embedded in the dialogues move the plot forward. Events that take place outside the conversations, such as the young friends' first day at primary school, the Northern teachers' racism and class discrimination towards the Southern children and the poorer pupils, the kids' conflicts with their families, their acts of rebellion and their adolescent sexual discoveries, until their final, dramatic escape by train, appear either as the content or as the result of the conversations that develop between the characters, the young girls in particular.

In light of this prevailing narrative strategy, the ending of Campo's second novel, where, one after the other, the girls jump on a moving train for their 'grande fuga', away from the constraints of their social background, their controlling families, and the limits to their freedom imposed upon them by the social conventions of gender, should be read as a theatrical conclusion and an extension of the characters' conversations. The escape, with its open ending and its cinematographic quality,²⁸ as suggested also by the title of the final chapter ('Riuscirà la grande fuga?'), is exemplary of the whole novel, structured as it is almost entirely through the girls' conversation. The fast pace of the chapter, meant to reflect the increasing pace of their escape, is achieved through a series of exchanges between the characters that become shorter and shorter as the paragraphs progress. While the chapter opens with a paragraph where the narrator establishes the setting of the scene in the first person singular, the gradual arrival of other characters transforms the narrative into a collective effort:

La Gabri dice: Io ho fame

La Michi dice: Andiamo a comprarci dei gelati, ve li pago io.

E dove hai trovato i soldi?

²⁸ For a general discussion of cinematographic references in Campo's fiction, focused in particular on *L'attore americano*, see Julia A. Viazmenski, 'Cinema as Negotiation in Rossana Campo's *L'attore americano*', *Italica*, vol. 78, no. 1 (2001), 203-17.

Li ho fregati nel negozio dei miei genitori.

Miiii-inchiaaaa, sei troppo forte Michi.

Sì troppo forte

La Silvia fa: Hai fatto una cazzata, non si deve rubare ai genitori.²⁹

The dialogic nature of the narrative is foregrounded in this passage, not only by the fact that each paragraph consists of a single exchange of the girls' conversation, but also by the interventions of the main narrator, who – when she intervenes at all – simply indicates who is talking ('La Gabri dice', 'La Michi dice', 'La Silvia fa'). Moreover, readers are reminded of the oral nature of the dialogue by a spelling that underlines the girls' rising intonation ('Miiii-inchiaaaa'). But the most interesting indicator of the inclusion of the narrator's voice in the multivocality of the dialogue is the fact that some of the exchanges cannot be clearly attributed to any of the characters. While Gabri is clearly the one who opens the conversation, and while Michi's responses are indicated either by the narrator or by the contents of her replies, three exchanges ('E dove hai trovato i soldi?', 'Miiii-inchiaaaa, sei troppo forte Michi', 'Sì troppo forte') can be attributed to any of the other five girls present at the scene, with the possible exception of Silvia (who later voices her criticism of Michi's actions).

Such a strategy reinforces the link between the narrator's voice and the voices of all the other characters, suggesting that her intention has always been that of speaking for the group, unless otherwise stated. In the final part of the chapter, the collective narrator struggles to convince the only dissenting voice to join the dialogue as a 'noi' rather than an 'io'. While all the other girls – the original narrator, Natascia, Dani, Gabri and Silvia – jump on the train one after the other, overcoming in different ways their own personal fears, Michi is still resistant:

Ora giù c'è solo la Michi, dice: Io resto qui.

Ou, sei scema? Diciamo tutte. Il treno comincia a muoversi.

No, non vengo, poi se mi becca mia madre me lo apre.

Che stro-onzaaaaa!! facciamo tutte.

²⁹ Campo, *Il pieno di super*, p. 134.

La Gabri dice: Dài, non fare la merda.

La Silvia dice: Che merda che sei.

La Dani dice: Be', ciao Michi, però sei una merda.

Ciao, mandatemi una cartolina dall'Inghilterra,

Sì, ciao,

Quando tornate?

Bo', diciamo noi, forse mai più.

La Michi ci ha guardato ancora, ha fatto una faccia come di chi sta per cominciare a piangere, Ciao neh, ha detto ancora.

Ciau, abbiamo detto noi.

Poi finalmente ha fatto un balzo e è salita anche lei.³⁰

By finally jumping on the train that should take them on an unlikely trip to England, Michi not only joins her friends physically, she also becomes part of their dialogue, one of the 'noi' and 'tutte' the narrator has tried to give voice to. Significantly, when the persuasive force of the collective voice is most needed, the individual sentences echo one another, such as Dani's, Silvia's, and Gabri's expressions 'non fare la merda', 'che merda che sei', 'però sei proprio una merda'. When first voicing her doubts and her decision not to leave, Michi's statements appear quite confident and are firmly closed by full stops; equally firm are the negative responses of her friends and their encouragements to join them. However, underneath their different positions, their voices betray the girls' desire not to interrupt their dialogue and not to be separated. The commas that replace the full stops at the end of the next exchanges ('Ciao, mandatemi una cartolina dall'Inghilterra,' and 'Sì, ciao,') suggest that the sentences pronounced by Michi and the other girls are becoming less conclusive: they are formulated in a manner that invites the interlocutors to continue the dialogue. The conversation that has taken place since the start of the novel is running the risk of being interrupted by the loss of one of the voices that contribute to the collective narrative. But by choosing to follow the rest of the group, Michi allows their dialogue to continue. The ending of the novel corresponds therefore to the moment in which the girls'

³⁰ Campo, *Il pieno di super*, pp. 136-37.

collective narrative voice has reached its most convincing expression, by undergoing a moment of crisis and ultimately overcoming it.

4.4 Collective voices: *Mai sentita così bene* (1995)

It is with *Mai sentita così bene*, however, that Campo's collective narrative voice finds its most mature expression. Massimo Arcangeli argues that, unlike her first novel, 'il parlato riprodotto appare eccessivamente "pulito", in particolare sotto il profilo sintattico-testuale'.³¹ While Arcangeli's correct linguistic analysis stresses Campo's failure to inject the same innovation and inventiveness of her earlier work into her new novel, I believe that the apparent fluidity and formality of the dialogue present in *Mai sentita così bene* are meant to reveal its theatrical nature and its literary sources. Campo's third novel can be read as self-referential and intertextual, precisely in so far as it names, albeit ironically, models and inspiration for the creation of its own dialogic form. Specifically, Campo makes direct references to the feminist tradition of collective discussion and writing developed in Italy (as in most Western countries) during the 1970s and 1980s. Nicoletta Di Ciolla McGowan confirms that Campo is perfectly aware of the Italian feminist debate and that her fiction is informed by the main themes of that debate, as, for example, the use of personal experience as a starting point for her writing which recalls the Diotima group's concept of 'partire da sè'.³² Through a careful reading of *Mai sentita così bene*, we can glimpse not only at how feminist theories and practices have influenced the development of Campo's narrative strategies, but we also perceive how the feminist tradition can be used ironically and self-ironically by a woman writer of the 1990s. In other words, Campo seems to suggest that, once the concerns that have traditionally been explored in women's writing – such as the search for an authoritative female narrator, the inscription of one's own work into the tradition of women's writing about women's lives and the identification of a preferential female readership – have become standard narrative practices among women writers, the need to

³¹ Arcangeli, *Giovani scrittori, scritture giovani*, p. 108.

³² Nicoletta Di Ciolla McGowan, 'Mai sentita così bene. L'universo femminile nei romanzi di Rossana Campo', in Laura Rorato and Simona Storchi (eds.), *Da Calvino agli ipertesti. Prospettive della postmodernità nella letteratura italiana* (Florence: Franco Cesati, 2002), pp. 169-76 (pp. 171 and 174).

acknowledge our debt to our literary mothers should be framed in the same ironic terms as the recognition of the *neoavanguardia* fathers' influence.

Mai sentita così bene has a classical structure: it takes place in the course of a day (unity of time), in Paris, mostly inside the apartment of one of the female characters (unity of space), and it consists of their dialogues about their sentimental and sexual experiences (unity of action). Only through the conversation that develops among the young women, a group of Italian expatriates living in Paris and a few of their friends or acquaintances, the twenty-four hour timeframe allows for movements back in time, in sequences that follow the associations suggested by the dialogue. Both plot and story are carried forward by the conversation, as the characters encourage each other to talk. We hear them push forward the narrative through the use of imperatives such as 'racconta', 'continua', 'lasciala continuare', 'Dai, finisci di raccontare', 'Dai continua', or through phrases such as 'descrivi per filo e per segno', 'voglio sapere tutto', all pointing at the importance of oral storytelling for the structure of this narrative. Questions are asked and attentive listeners become in turn narrators. By contrast, male characters are allowed into the novel only through women's conversations.³³ The fact that we are in the presence of a fiction that is consciously posing itself as an exploration of women's experiences and relationships is stated at the start of the novel, where two epigraphs set the overall tone: on the one hand, are Aristophane's misogynistic words: 'Non c'è cosa più indomabile della donna, neanche il fuoco; non c'è belva altrettanto sfrontata'; on the other, we have the Italian musician and songwriter Gianna Nannini's positive definition of the spirit that drives the women of her generation: 'le donne come me / han messo il body a fiori / perché i tempi sian migliori' (p. 7). As we read the novel, it emerges that Aristophane's statement should be interpreted in the light of Nannini's lyrics, and

³³ Elsewhere, I have suggested a link between Campo's third novel and Pedro Almodovar's film *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) (see my own, 'Exiles/Nomads: Journeys through Language and Gender in Italian Women's Pulp Fiction of the 1990s', *Studi d'italianistica nell'Africa Australe / Italian Studies in Southern Africa. Special issue: Journey and Return / Il Viaggio e il Ritorno*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2003), 41-64). I still maintain that there are generic similarities between the two plots: in each, a number of strong women, obsessed by their quest for love and sexual fulfilment, converge towards the same apartment and develop a sense of friendship based on shared experiences. However, I would like to add that the complete absence of men from the framing narrative of *Mai sentita così bene* recalls also George Cukor's film *The Women* (1939; based on the 1936 play by the same title, by Clare Booth Luce) with its all-female cast, where the men are carefully kept out of the camera frame but are the constant object of the women's conversation and desire.

that the Greek playwright's definition of woman as 'indomabile' and 'belva sfrontata' is given a positive feminist twist in Campo's novel.

Campo's women are, yes, indomitable, restless and determined to experience life, love and sexuality to the full, but even more indomitable seems to be their desire to narrate to other women the events that happened in their lives, to compare notes, to listen to each other's stories, to engage in long, endless conversations, in order to make sense of their experiences. The novel is effectively a transcription of the constant chatter of its numerous characters. The role of the first-person narrator appears to be often limited to bringing the different voices together and to organising them in chapters, after having witnessed their conversations. Sometimes she might contribute to such conversations, or else she might be involved in them simply as a listener and then as an implied transcriber of other first-person narratives. Embedded narratives need fewer and fewer narratorial introductions and read increasingly as the lines of a theatre or radio play, while the role of the original narrator is often reduced to attributing the lines to this or that speaker. It comes therefore as no surprise that Campo's next work should be a radio play, *Il matrimonio di Maria* (1998).³⁴ A meta-narrative reference to the theatrical elements of the novel is further suggested by one of the characters who, when yet another woman arrives at the apartment, observes: 'Ehi, non è che siamo finite in una commedia di Faydeau'.³⁵

The exchanges that are not clearly attributed, as already seen in *Il pieno di super*, become more numerous here, attesting to the author's intention to narrate through a collective voice. This voice consists of separate female individuals, who converge towards a common expression, mirroring their geographical convergence towards a single place in Paris. This strategy is not devoid of dangers, first of all that of erasing the individual differences between the women characters, including the social and cultural differences that define their identities. In this regard, the character of Valeria is revealing, because she appears as a relatively new member of the group, who is said to fit in immediately. However, her narrative is presented as separate from those of the other women, almost as an aside. While the introduction of the various characters gradually increases the number of women who participate in the collective conversation and widens the

³⁴ Rossana Campo, *Il matrimonio di Maria* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998).

³⁵ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, p. 210.

audience that listens and contributes to each woman's narrative, Valeria's story is told solely to the original narrator, while the two of them are buying supplies for dinner. In order to speak, Valeria must leave the apartment. This episode is at odds with the carefully constructed narrative frame of the novel, but it is consistent with the fact that, while all the other women's narratives are mainly centred on their pursuit of men, Valeria is a lesbian. She tells the narrator about her sentimental and sexual experiences. The narrator reacts positively but, once back to the apartment and for the rest of the novel, there is no other mention of Valeria's sexuality, or of lesbian identity in general. Valeria responds now and then to the other women's discussion about their men, but never contributes an alternative perspective. On the contrary, while the individual voices become increasingly attuned and merge into a collective voice, Valeria's interventions become gradually more infrequent until she disappears from the text, although she is still present in the apartment. Evidently, when all the other women in the group talk excitedly about their heterosexual experiences, Valeria's voice must withdraw from the collective narrative and, rather than introducing a discordant or critical note, Campo prefers to leave her out of the conversation altogether.

The avoidance of the discordant note that Valeria might have represented is symptomatic of Campo's ambiguity in dealing with lesbian characters. While many of her female protagonists declare to be equally open to both heterosexual and lesbian relationships, the space that lesbians or lesbian interactions occupy in her texts is always subordinate to the heterosexual narrative. In fact, lesbian characters and storylines are often introduced and given potentially prominent roles, only to be abruptly minimised or even erased from the text later on, thus betraying the author's uncertainty on how to deal with their extensive presence. When the protagonist of *In principio erano le mutande* tells about her lesbian relationship with Lella, she describes it in positive terms, but clearly as a subordinate relationship, possibly dictated by the temporary unavailability of men: 'Cosa succede poi, succede la sera dell'incontro con l'infame futurista e chi ci pensa più a questa Lella'.³⁶ Even more revealing is the case of *Mentre la mia bella dorme*, a detective story in which the first-person narrator, a young pregnant woman with a long string of failed heterosexual relationships behind her, spends

³⁶ Campo, *In principio erano le mutande*, p. 124.

one night of passion with a female neighbour, Fruit. Fruit becomes the first lesbian lover of the narrator, who openly admits to having found the experience sexually and emotionally more satisfying than her past relationships. Her new lover is then suddenly murdered and the narrator investigates the case, but without any suggestion that her lesbian sexuality might be developed any further. In fact, a male love interest is soon introduced. In effect, Fruit's death coincides with the disappearance of the lesbian plot from the text. The only text by Campo where the lesbian plot is sustained throughout is the radio play *Il matrimonio di Maria*. However, in light of the fact that the play is a rewriting of Ang Lee's film *The Wedding Banquet* (1994), it is interesting to note how, unlike her source – which showed no real reconciliation between the Chinese/white American gay couple and the heterosexual expectations of the Chinese man's family – Campo resolves her plot by having a male character, the father of the child conceived by one of the two lesbian protagonists, move in with them, thus introducing a heterosexual element in the new family group and reducing the transgressiveness of the lesbian family.

Mai sentita così bene is interested in defining the common aspects of women's experiences, but these are mainly heterosexual, young, white, Italian, intellectual women abroad. While they talk about their men, Campo's women are in fact talking about each other, supporting each other's words, giving authority to each other's voices. The model of their dialogue is the 1970s feminist practice of *autocoscienza*, which Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp describe as 'small groups of women, meeting to discuss issues of all kinds on the basis of personal experience'.³⁷ In Di Ciolla McGowan's words, with this novel 'Campo sembra farsi promotrice di una liberazione/emancipazione sessuale stile anni '70, da collettivo femminista e gruppi di autocoscienza'.³⁸ Unlike the original 'consciousness raising' groups, however, Campo's girls do not meet with the specific purpose to develop a feminist analysis of their own personal, social, cultural and political condition as women. Revolving around their sexual and sentimental experiences, the dialogues of *Mai sentita così bene* take place in a

³⁷ Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, 'Introduction: Coming from the South', in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 1-29 (p. 9).

³⁸ Di Ciolla McGowan, '*Mai sentite così bene*. L'universo femminile nei romanzi di Rossana Campo', p. 173.

world that takes for granted the achievements of the feminist movement. A recurrent topic discussed by Ale, Nadia, Monica and their friends is the question of how to deal with the personal and sexual freedom available to young women in the 1990s, rather than exploring the roots of their oppression as women. Nevertheless, their apparently random conversations reach moments of political and cultural insight and even of rudimentary theorising on their status as young women, which echo themes and patterns of feminist discussions from the previous decades. Interestingly, whenever such a moment is achieved, one or more of the characters make a direct, ironic reference to their feminist predecessors. Thanks to this strategy, Campo pays homage to the feminist generation and to specific mothers of feminism who have inspired both the contents and the style of her writing, while also keeping at bay any temptation for her characters' to take their feminist theorising too seriously.

In the course of her storytelling, for example, Betty expresses her concern for putting on weight and becoming consequently less attractive to men. The other women immediately voice their disapproval of the fact that she judges her own attractiveness according to patriarchal ideology. The first-person narrator intervenes with a generic feminist statement: 'Sì, vabbè, ma stai calma. Non fissiamoci con la bilancia! Sempre fissate con la bilancia noi donne, faccio io con un tono da Mary Woolstonecraft [sic] degli anni ruggenti'.³⁹ Later on, while Nadia describes one of her past sexual experiences, her friends ask her if she was protected during intercourse. A short discussion ensues on the necessity that women remember to have protected sex, when experiencing their sexual freedom to the full. Nadia replies: 'Senti un po', Biancaneve, io senza il palloncino non mi faccio nemmeno accarezzare una mano, occhei? Sono sempre stata libera e consapevole, io (dice consapevole con un tono da anni settanta)'.⁴⁰ Later on, Monica reminds the other young women how they should be more focused on their own lives, rather than on their relationships with men; the narrator praises her wisdom, a comment reinforced ironically by Ale: 'Guarda, Simone de Beauvoir non era nessuno al tuo confronto'.⁴¹ Virginia Woolf is then mentioned as a rare example of a woman who has achieved self-fulfillment thanks to her

³⁹ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, p. 54.

⁴⁰ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, p. 89.

⁴¹ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, p. 104.

work, rather than her willingness to please men, but also through ironic allusions to her modernist literary practices: ‘flusso d’incoscienza’ is the way Nadia describes her own thoughts and doubts about whether she should sleep with a man on a first date, an ironic take on Woolf’s stream of consciousness technique;⁴² Lucia’s passionate analysis of how she was derailed from her promising youth as a rebel and a feminist, and pushed into accepting her family’s expectations to become a good wife and mother is called ‘monologo esteriore’, an ironic variation on the ‘interior monologue’ associated with modernist writing.⁴³ Feminist literary criticism of the 1970s and 1980s is constantly evoked, with the characters comparing their failed romantic relationships with those of the classic adulteresses of the male literary tradition, such as Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, Effi Briest, Hesther Prynne.⁴⁴ Campo refers not only to the ‘lost’ women of the male literary canon, but also to the rereadings of those characters by feminist critics, whom Campo’s characters quote in their conversations. When Lucia asks: ‘Ma perchè tutte le storie con le donne adulare finiscono sempre di merda?’, Monica replies: ‘Semplice tesoro, perché sono gli uomini che le raccontano’.⁴⁵ In her stories, Campo rewrites the destinies of these adulteresses fully aware that she can do so thanks to Wollstonecraft, Woolf, Beauvoir, the feminist movement of the 1970s and the feminist literary critics of the 1980s. However ironic, the references to the mother figures of feminist culture are also an implicit homage to their legacy. In one of the most autobiographical and meta-narrative asides of her first person narrator, Campo acknowledges that this influence extends to the most recent developments in feminist thought: ‘dopotutto mi sono anche letta la ponderosa opera Backlash della Susan Faludi, la metà del mattone di Camille Paglia *Sexual Personae* e perfino l’intera *Mistica della femminilità* della leggendaria Betty Friedan’,⁴⁶ thus naming one of the most influential figures of the feminist movement of the 1970s, Betty Friedan, in the same sentence as more contemporary international feminist theorists, such as Faludi and Paglia.

⁴² Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, pp. 87-88.

⁴³ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, p. 104.

⁴⁴ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, pp. 94, 102 and 107.

⁴⁵ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, p. 127.

⁴⁶ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, p. 90.

In *Mai sentita così bene* there are no direct references to Italian women writers. Nor any mention is made of Luce Irigaray and other French feminists, who have been so influential for the development of Italian feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. This detail becomes particularly interesting in light of the fact that the novel is set entirely in Paris, as are most of Campo's novels, because it confirms that Campo's choice of feminist references is not casual. Her preference for historical 1960-70s feminism and her elaboration of a writing style that recalls the experience of *autocoscienza*, based as it was on the 'spontaneous exchange of experience', mirrors her mistrust of the 'more sophisticated analytical tools', as Bono and Kemp call them, of later Italian feminism.⁴⁷ Campo's seeming rejection of the sophisticated French and Italian feminism of the 1980s and 1990s, much of it concerned with psychoanalysis, is mentioned directly in *Mai sentita così bene* when the first-person narrator analyses her own relationship with one of the other characters, Nadia. After describing their early friendship as very intense, she explains their later distancing in the following terms:

Con la Nadia dovete sapere che siamo state molto amiche per un periodo, genere ci vediamo tutti i giorni trenta ore al giorno e appena arrivate a casa ci telefoniamo. Poi ci siamo scazzate non ci siamo più viste per un pezzo. Dopo un po' abbiamo ricominciato a vederci ma non è più stata la stessa cosa, credo che potrete capire cosa voglio dire. Ci accusavamo l'un l'altra di egoismo e di voler rifare un rapporto simbiotico, stile madre-figlia. Così si esprimeva lei. Io cercavo di rendere lo stesso concetto con altre parole, un po' più volgari.⁴⁸

The description of the relationship as a 'rapporto simbiotico, stile madre-figlia' is an ironic simplification of the language adopted by some Italian feminists to theorise the mother-daughter relationship as an alternative socio-symbolic system to the patriarchal models of western philosophy and social organisation.⁴⁹ If

⁴⁷ Bono and Kemp, 'Introduction: Coming from the South', p. 11.

⁴⁸ Campo, *Mai sentita così bene*, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁹ For an overview of the many different theoretical positions of Italian feminist thought, including the varying relevance of psychoanalysis, see Adalgisa Giorgio, 'Mothers and Daughters in Italian Feminism: an Overview', in Anna Bull, Hanna Diamond, Rosalind Marsh (eds.), *Feminisms and*

Campo's narrator trivialises the feminist and psychoanalytical discourses she hints at, she also distances herself from its vocabulary, explaining how she is only repeating Nadia's expressions: on her part, she would rather use 'altre parole, un po' più volgari'. This statement is in line with Campo's own assertions in favour of a narrative and a language that are as distant as possible from the sophistication and 'falseness' of academic writing: a narrative that strives to achieve the immediacy of life and experience by means of a language that is close to the 'vulgarity' of the spoken word. In reply to a question about the distance between the spoken and the written word that is encouraged in the Italian school system, for example, she said:

Credo che la cosa importante sia lasciare scrivere i ragazzi come vogliono, anche se sono cose sgrammaticate, che non sta bene dire [...] io sono contraria al fatto che i ragazzi abbiano un loro linguaggio, un loro lessico per comunicare le emozioni, i dubbi, tutto quello che vivono, e poi, quando scrivono, no. Sono contraria ad abituarli a questa menzogna, a questa bugia [...] perché poi queste finzioni continuano e allora si ha l'idea che la letteratura è il posto dell' 'essere fasulli'.⁵⁰

In the light of her general approach to writing, it is therefore not surprising that Campo prefers to entertain an ironic conversation with the feminist and literary mothers of the past, such as Wollstonecraft, Woolf, Beauvoir, the women's movement of the 1970s, rather than with the abstractions of more recent feminist theory. Moreover, the references to the feminist tradition that appear in *Mai sentita così bene* are always presented ironically as slightly at odds with their context: 'Mary Woolstonecraf [sic] degli anni ruggenti', for instance – an expression charged with comic undertones – sounds excessive when used to describe the narrator's rejection of women's dieting; Woolf's writing style is mentioned through parodies of standard critical definitions ('flusso

Women's Movements in Contemporary Europe (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), pp. 180-93.

⁵⁰ Giuseppe Caliceti's interview with Campo (1999): <<http://www.comune.re.it/manifestazioni/baobab/letteratura2000/campo.htm>> [accessed 8 June 2008].

d'incoscienza', 'monologo esteriore'); finally, the narrator's boasting of having read Faludi and Paglia is qualified by references to the inaccessibility of their research ('la ponderosa opera', 'la metà del mattone'). In other words, all the homages Campo pays to women's thought and writing function as reminders of the feminist tradition that lies behind her narrative effort, but, thanks to her ironic stance, the same tradition does not carry the burden of excessive authority.

4.5 Between dialogue and monologue: individual female identity from *L'attore americano* (1997) to *Più forte di me* (2007)

In the second chapter of this thesis, I discussed some of Campo's later fiction in the context of the geographical displacement that characterises so much of the 'pulp' fiction of the 1990s. I argued that the desire to escape from the familial, social and cultural limitations that Campo's young protagonists experience in her early works, realised by means of their becoming Italian expatriates in Paris or travelling around the world, is counterbalanced by an increasing need to face the origins of their dissatisfaction in the later novels: this is the context of the main character's confrontation with her family history and her uneasy reunion with her father in *Sono pazza di te*, and of the protagonist's re-encounter with her first love in *L'uomo che non ho sposato*. In the final part of this chapter, I want to look instead at Campo's later novels in relation to her use of narrative voices, in particular the interaction between female narrators and male characters. In the novels that follow *Mai sentita così bene*, Campo moves away from a collective female narrator and becomes increasingly concerned with the personal experiences of her first-person protagonists. Linked to each other by the presence of recurring characters and the Parisian setting, Campo's books coalesce into the *Bildungsroman* of one individual, where each new volume corresponds to a new chapter in the narrator's life. The protagonist's sentimental and sexual experiences remain the focus of each narrative, but, with only a few exceptions, these experiences are now presented in a darker light. The optimism resulting from the dialogic and collective female voices of the first three novels is replaced with a more self-analytical, self-centred and mature perspective.

Steve Rothman is the aging American movie star with whom the protagonist of *L'attore americano* falls in love. She follows him to New York for a brief, but intense affair, which she ultimately chooses to break off when she realises she

cannot save either him or herself from the actor's alcoholism and self-destructiveness. He is the first of a series of older lovers who experience personal or professional failure and who become the object of the narrators' romantic interest in Campo's later fiction. Even before meeting him in person, the protagonist of *L'attore americano* knows Steve from his films, which have led her to idealise him by identifying him with the sensitive male characters he plays. Her gradual disillusionment with Steve comes not only with her realisation that his weakness is not the same as the emotional openness of his characters, but also with a wider understanding of the myths created by films and literature. They meet for the first time after the Paris screening of an independent film Steve stars in, which has been written and directed by a French woman, Sylvie Limonchick. The narrator is instantly attracted to Gary, the protagonist of the film, for the combination of vulnerability and unwavering masculinity which he embodies. Being aware that this is 'il contrario esatto della maggior parte dei maschi che ci sono in circolazione',⁵¹ she hopes that the actor behind the character might possess the same kind of sensibility. During a key moment in their relationship, the actor himself becomes aware of the narrator's confusion between Steve and Gary, when she calls him by his character's name:

Ecco... lì fai una faccia Gary...

Steve.

Eh?

Mi chiamo Steve, *lui* si chiama Gary, il mio personaggio. Io mi chiamo Steve.

Pff... che idiota... be', stavo dicendo Steve, oh lì fai una faccia che qualunque donna vorrebbe vedere sulla persona che ama, almeno una volta nella vita.

[...]

Capisco quello che vuoi dire, Sylvie voleva esattamente questo tipo di emozione, me lo diceva continuamente, dovevo tirare fuori proprio quella cosa lì. Si vede che è una fissa che voi donne c'avete eh

⁵¹ Campo, *L'attore americano*, p. 13.

(tentativo di sorriso). Mi spiace deluderti baby, io l'ho rifatta dodici volte quella scena, non mi veniva.

Non ci posso credere.

È così honey.⁵²

Steve believes that his lover's confusion is typically female and reflects women's need to project their emotions onto ideal male characters: 'Si vede che è una fissa che voi donne c'avete', he says. Through her own experience in New York, however, the narrator not only comes to terms with the fact that Steve cannot live up to the expectations created by films like Sylvie's, but she also accepts that films, which are one of her main cultural references, and reality belong in different realms: '[c]ome dice Godard, la vita spesso assomiglia a un film girato male'.⁵³

The bulk of the novel is about the protagonist's encounter with Steve in Paris, followed by her pursuit of him and their doomed love story in New York. The description of their meetings and their long, often confrontational, conversations take over the narrative space that, in Campo's previous novels, was occupied by the young women's collective dialogues. Nevertheless, both in Paris and in New York, the protagonist is portrayed as surrounded by a variety of other people, especially women, who discuss and dissect with her the phases of her affair with the actor. In Paris, she is helped by her friends Marcella, Angelo and Alice, all of whom contribute to make her trip to New York possible. In New York, she engages with less reliable connections, but she still finds a support group that allows her to navigate through this difficult city after the final break-up. While the protagonist's personal experience with Steve is the narrative focus of this novel, her conversations with Alice, Sandra and other female characters about that experience help her to make sense of it and to see the error of her excessive romanticism.

The traditional romance plot functions therefore as a critique of women's idealisation of romantic love. It is framed in pessimistic terms that become even more explicit in *Mentre la mia bella dorme*. If *L'attore americano* only hints at the emotional and physical abuse that often hide behind love and marriage (as in

⁵² Campo, *L'attore americano*, p. 142.

⁵³ Campo, *L'attore americano*, p. 149.

the secondary storyline of Kamla, the narrator's neighbour, who is frequently beaten up by her husband), the brutal murder of the young musician Fruit imparts a particularly sinister tone to *Mentre la mia bella dorme*. The limits of the traditional heterosexual romance are immediately indicated by the fact that the protagonist is pregnant but without a partner. Moreover, she has no illusion of ever finding a man with whom she can form a lasting relationship, in stark contrast with the optimistic reconciliation between the pregnant narrator and her older lover that we have seen at the end of *In principio erano le mutande*. In *Mentre la mia bella dorme*, the possibility of a lesbian romance between the narrator and Fruit, promising as it seems, is cut short by the murder of the latter. While this event leads to the renewal of the sexual relationship between the protagonist and the male police investigator Krasicki, such a relationship is framed within the terms of romance narrative and therefore, in the narrator's disenchanted perception, it is doomed to fail. She describes the man as 'un po' il tipo di poliziotto irrealista da film, intelligente e sensibile',⁵⁴ qualities which are undermined by his fatalism and ineffectiveness in resolving the case. As we saw in the second chapter, the narrator herself eventually finds Fruit's murderer: Fruit's own natural father, an *ex-sessantottino*, who had experienced free love in a commune during the flower power years and who had never officially acknowledged the child he had conceived with his partner's daughter. Now a wealthy and respected member of the French establishment, he kills his own daughter to avoid facing a public revelation of the truth. The pessimism of the novel is unrelenting, including its dramatic resolution: Pauline, Fruit's mother, avenges her daughter's death and, implicitly, the loss of her own past innocence at the hands of the older man. It is only after Pauline has made partial amends for the web of lies and deception that have caused her daughter's death, that a real dialogue can finally take place between her and the narrator. But the book remains fundamentally monological, as the narrator's attempts at engaging with other characters are constantly frustrated by their resistance to reveal the truth. Furthermore, she ultimately becomes more and more preoccupied with the impending birth of her own daughter.

⁵⁴ Campo, *Mentre la mia bella dorme*, p. 35.

The father-daughter bond, that Fruit had sought and that her father had refused her in *Mentre la mia bella dorme*, is reversed in *Sono pazza di te*, when Campo's autobiographical narrator is forced to accept her father, Renato, back into her life, following her nervous breakdown caused by having been abandoned by her partner Pascal. The unexpected return of her unreliable parent reopens the wounds caused by his sudden departure fifteen years earlier. While she is determined not to forgive him and not to let him disrupt again the precarious balance she has reached after a period of therapy in a mental clinic, the protagonist gradually accepts her father's love along with his flaws, while becoming aware that his abandonment is at the origin of her difficult relationships with men. Thanks to the encouragement of her flatmate Goli, who is fascinated by the free-spirited man, Renato becomes a narrator in his own right, telling the girls stories that reveal his damaged childhood during the war years, his relentless courtship of Concettina, the protagonist's mother, and his love for his daughter and for the family he has left behind. Although Renato's narrative is constantly framed, interpreted and demystified by his daughter's commentary, his voice is allowed to tell his own tale in sympathetic terms that elicit compassion, if not understanding, on the part of both his listeners and the readers of the novel. Unsurprisingly, in a fiction that deals with the protagonist's psychological problems and with the weight of her past on her present life, the female narrator's perspective remains the dominant one. However, this is contrasted with a strong, articulate, adult male voice that tells his own story. While the two voices never establish a real dialogue, each asserting, instead, their personal versions of the truth, their co-existence in the text allows the reader to balance the individual perspectives, even if the characters are unable to do so.

The dialogue between male and female voices, which fails completely in *L'attore americano* and rests only on a precarious balancing act between contrasting monologues in *Sono pazza di te*, is partially and temporarily achieved in *L'uomo che non ho sposato*. Unlike all other Campo's novels, the adult narrator of this book alternates between first and third person: she first tells, in the present perfect and in the first person, the story of her re-encounter with her first lover in Paris, in a twenty-four hour time-frame. By contrast, the story of that love, which unfolded in Italy in the 1970s, is told in the third person and in the present tense, as the chapters of a novel that the adult narrator is writing about Rosi's

adolescence. By using the third person, the narrator puts some distance between herself and Rosi's story, but the adoption of the present tense highlights the fact that those childhood events are very relevant to her development into an adult. This novel within the novel covers some of the events and includes several characters that Campo's readers have met in her previous works, including the narrator's childhood friend Giusi and her father Renato. Salvatore La Rosa is the name of Rosi's first lover, as well as the name of the man the adult narrator meets again in Paris for one day and one night of memories and passion. The narrator herself authorises us to interpret Rosi as her autobiographical alter ego, when she discusses her novel with the adult Salvatore:

E di che parla questo libro che non hai finito?

Parla di una ragazzina, parla del suo primo amore, del sesso. La ragazzina si chiama Rosi, si chiama come me.⁵⁵

The reconstruction of Rosi's first love and her first heart-break is not conveyed through a negotiation between the narrative voices of the two adult characters, as was the case with the memory of the family past in *Sono pazza di te*. On the contrary, the two parallel stories, Parisian present and Italian past, echo and reflect each other, but remain firmly distinct and separate. As in the previous novel, the roots of the narrator's complex relationship with men lie in the disappointment and sense of abandonment experienced during her youth, but the third-person narrative which looks back at that time enables her to remember with the detachment granted by adulthood. Thus the first-person narrator who rekindles that first love for one night can finally accept the old sense of loss without regrets. Salvatore's voice is given a lot of space in the first-person, primary narrative and the narrator lends an attentive ear to his life story, one that is revealed to be a mixture of success and failure. However, while Salvatore insists that they should start the relationship anew and promises, unrealistically, that he will leave his wife and children so that they can run away together, the narrator knows that this is unlikely to happen: past disappointments and mistakes cannot be resolved in the

⁵⁵ Campo, *L'uomo che non ho sposato*, p. 48.

present, but learning to accept them helps the protagonist to complete the autobiographical novel she had let languish for a long time.

As in *Sono pazza di te*, listening to and giving narrative space to an important male voice from the past becomes for the narrator of *L'uomo che non ho sposato* a necessary step in order to define her own female voice. But although Salvatore appears more attentive to adult Rosi's words and more willing to engage in a real conversation with her than the narrator's father was in the previous novel, the reconciliation between male and female voices remains temporary and precarious. The inability to mediate between male and female perspectives reaches its breaking point in *Duro come l'amore*. The narrator-protagonist of this novel is unhappily married to Serge, a psychiatrist. She starts an affair with Felix, an aging photographer whose artistic, political and personal dreams have all been disappointed. They meet at the supermarket, where she immediately compares his aged, unkempt appearance to memories of her father: 'È l'odore che aveva mio padre, mi sono ricordata all'istante di quando veniva ad aspettarmi all'uscita di scuola [...] e di colpo venivo inondata dal suo odore, che era di sigarette e di benzina e del suo giaccone in pelle'.⁵⁶ The leather jacket, we are told, is a 1970s original, not an imitation, a reminder not only of a time that coincides with the narrator's childhood, but also with the most hopeful period in Felix's life. He remembers how, as a young photographer, he supported and chronicled the pioneering work of the revolutionary Italian psychiatrist Antonio Basaglia, the champion of mental care reform and closure of mental institutions. Felix idealises the political, social and artistic commitment of the 1970s, but is unable to move forward and find fulfillment in the present: 'Perché uno come me si sentirà sempre in esilio, si sentirà sempre un tagliato fuori, estraneo a tutto. Me l'hanno detto anche degli psichiatri, delle persone che ho visto, a me è andata male'.⁵⁷

In contrast with Felix's sense of exile and non-belonging, the narrator's husband Serge is in control of his life and tidily diagnoses people's failures and neuroses from the safe detachment of a psychoanalytical perspective. Not only is he able to identify background and psychological motivations of a serial killer who is murdering women in Paris and whose profile, to the narrator's horror, mirrors very closely Felix's, but he also applies his analytical skills to the writers

⁵⁶ Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 160.

the protagonist likes to read. She resents this approach to literature as much as she dislikes Serge's inclination to neatly diagnose life and its impulses. After Serge has explained away Kafka's diaries as a manifestation of the writer's neurosis, the main character, herself an author, expresses her distaste:

Sa un sacco di cose su Franz, ma non mi piace per niente come ne parla. Sembra uno psichiatra che tiene una conferenza su un paziente davvero schizzato, e questo cosa c'entra con K. Io se volete saperlo penso che la letteratura deve starsene lontana dagli strizzacervelli, perché questi invece di rilassarsi e godersi la poesia che alcuni scoppiati hanno saputo spremere fuori dalla vita cosa fanno, cercano di prendere uno scrittore, allungarlo sul loro lettino e ficcargli in culo qualche complesso edipico. Così hanno risolto tutto.⁵⁸

Serge takes the opportunity to analyse and implicitly criticise his wife's motivations through the writers she feels affinity for, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, whom he defines 'queste tue poetesse suicide'. When she replies that 'a me piacciono queste ragazze, le poetesse schizofreniche come le chiami tu, sono persone che capisco, capisco quello che sentono', he insists that 'sono solo delle schizoidi, paranoiche, è gente malata, che vive fuori dal mondo!'.⁵⁹ But it is precisely the marginality and the ability of these 'scoppiati' to squeeze poetry out of the complexities of life that the narrator seeks in literature, as well as in life through her affair with Felix.

The narrator resists the idea that literature is something which can be psychoanalysed and categorised through a psychoanalytical perspective, in the same way that she resists an academic, reverent approach to reading and writing, 'come se la letteratura fosse qualcosa di immacolato, qualcosa di non contaminato dalla vita, di incredibilmente puro'.⁶⁰ In fact, her favourite authors offer her and her friends the models and the self-awareness that Serge's trust in and Felix's fearful respect for psychoanalysis fail to provide. While she refuses the formal therapy sessions that her husbands recommends she should have, the protagonist

⁵⁸ Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 90.

⁵⁹ Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 180.

⁶⁰ Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 107.

of the novel follows her own personal path of self-analysis through her conversations with Tina, Nathalie, Claire, Francine and Annette and the emotional support she finds in books. She rejects Serge's suggestions in strong terms:

Dico, stiamo parlando di un sacco di soldi per cinquanta minuti di parole, sai quante ore io posso passare a parlare con Claire, o con Nathalie, sai quante ore di confidenze gratis ci facciamo anche con la Tina, per dire, pagare per andare a sparare cazzate su di me e su mia madre e sulla mia infanzia perturbata! Io non ci credo.⁶¹

Although limited to a few chapters, the conversations between the narrator and her mainly female friends provide the novel with its most optimistic moments, reminiscent of the collective voices characteristic of Campo's earlier works. During these dialogues, with the insights they bring into the origins and motivations of the group of friends' neuroses, they often find comfort in those women writers who have become their ideal mothers and whose works help them to better understand their complex relationships with their real mothers. Bemoaning her mother's indifference to her own work and her insistence that she writes 'una bella storia, senza parolacce, senza volgarità, una bella storia d'amore',⁶² the protagonist tells Tina: 'Sai, mi dice la Tina, il rapporto con la madre è fondamentale, io credo che dal rapporto con lei discendono poi tutti gli altri rapporti che avrai nella tua vita, dopo.' She replies to this, by asking: 'Ti leggo un pezzo di Gertrude Stein?'.⁶³ The conversation with Tina not only helps the main character to address her difficult relationship with her mother, something that psychoanalysis might also have done, but it also provides her with a literary example, Gertrude Stein, that helps her to make better sense of that complex relationship. Reading and writing, as well as art and music, become for the narrator a mirror to her own experience, through which 'si cerca di costruire delle regole contro altre regole, quelle che non ci stanno bene e che non capiamo'.⁶⁴

Felix, on the other hand, who is a keen reader of Freud, appears to be stuck on the definitions of analysts and psychiatrists when he tries to explain his failure

⁶¹ Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 98.

⁶² Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 136.

⁶³ Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Campo, *Duro come l'amore*, p. 108.

and sense of non-belonging, turning them into justifications not to move forward, and thus pushing the narrator to break up what she sees as a discouraging and self-destructive relationship. She tells him ‘che non è importante solo quello che ti è capitato, non contano solo i dolori e le sfighe ed i traumi, conta parecchio quello che decidi di fare con tutto questo, da adulto’.⁶⁵ At the end of the novel, although the serial killer that terrorises Parisian women turns out to be someone else, Felix has proved unable to grow up and to accept the break up as an adult would, resorting to physical violence to force the narrator to continue the relationship. Shocked and lost, aware that her marriage with Serge has also reached a dead end, she turns to her friend Tina for help. Again, Tina offers her not only friendship and a place to stay, but also more literary examples, more models from the tradition of women’s writing who might give her some comfort:

Senti, pensa a Colette,
 Cazzo c’entra Colette?
 [...]

 Potresti prenderla come esempio,
 Come esempio, Colette?
 Perché no, c’è bisogno di simboli, no?
 Sì, è un gran personaggio, ma come scrittrice non mi piace neanche
 tanto,
 [...]

 Va bene, allora senti, prendi la Simone de Beauvoir, che mi dici di
 lei?⁶⁶

The mistrust in psychiatry and psychoanalysis as tools for understanding the narrator’s abandonment issues are partially resolved in *Più forte di me*, where the protagonist finally acknowledges and chooses to fight depression and alcoholism. While her problems pre-date her marriage, the narrator’s addiction spirals out of control after her husband Mathieu, a doctor, leaves her for another woman. Unable to continue writing the planned biography of a Swiss artist who had spent her life in a mental institution and who had died in the 1960s, she seeks comfort in

⁶⁵ Campo, *Duro come l’amore*, p. 160.

⁶⁶ Campo, *Duro come l’amore*, pp. 217-18.

bars and casual sex. Only after she has reached rock bottom and thanks to the intervention of her gay friend Fred, she agrees to check herself into a clinic for alcoholics and substance abusers. While the first part of the novel is focused entirely on the first-person narrator's descent into hell and is told through a self-centred monological voice, the second part details her experience at the clinic, where she becomes progressively more open to listening to other perspectives and to let other voices take up narrative space.

To start with, the protagonist has a very difficult relationship with Alain, who is both her analyst and the coordinator of the therapy groups. However, after she learns to appreciate and contribute to the group sessions, she allows herself to be analysed by Alain, predictably identifying the origin of her malaise in her difficult relationship with her parents. The group therapy sessions allow her to make a transition from the destructive self-centredness of her depressive condition to the self-understanding of individual analysis: only by seeing her experience in relation to those of her fellow patients, by listening to their voices and by allowing herself to participate in the collective conversations, she can obtain a healthier view of herself and her own problems. The group dialogues typical of Campo's early fiction, which had made rare and often unsuccessful appearances in the more pessimistic later novels, return in *Più forte di me* as therapeutic conversations: first as enforced interactions between the individual voices of the different patients, but later as a free choice, when the narrator and her fellow patients meet again at her home after they have all been discharged.

Unlike the collective voice of *Mai sentita così bene*, however, the multiple perspectives that come across in the final part of *Più forte di me* include both male and female voices, belonging to people of different generations, all coming together through their various experiences of marginality: 'Siamo le pecore nere, siamo gli asini della classe, quelli che riempiono i loro quaderni di macchie e di errori'.⁶⁷ Thanks to the support of the fellow 'asini della classe', who, guided by Alain's enlightened approach to psychoanalysis, have learnt how to help one another, she can eventually break free from a final destructive relationship with fellow alcoholic Igor and, at last, put her failed marriage with Mathieu behind her. At the end of the novel, the readers are left with a sense of hope that the narrator

⁶⁷ Campo, *Più forte di me*, p. 173.

will in fact be able to resume the writing of her book and to share her real life problems with her new friends. The closing paragraphs of the novel show the main character and recovering fellow alcoholic Yolande discussing life, art and writing together, in a scene reminiscent of Campo's younger narrators and their friends in her early fiction, with their 'chiacchiere un po' ossessive e le analisi dei nostri umori e delle nostre pensate'.⁶⁸ Although the youthful optimism of the early novels is now dimmed by the weight of life experience, friendship, especially (but less exclusively than before) female friendship, and literature by past women writers/artists, continue to sustain the narrator's writing and self-understanding: 'Qualunque tipo di sfiga ti sia arrivata addosso, qualunque sia la delusione e la sofferenza e la pazzia che ti porti dentro, se la racconti cambia un po'. È anche la base della mia poetica, in fondo'.⁶⁹ And this is, by proxy, also what underpins and sustains Campo's own poetics.

⁶⁸ Campo, *Più forte di me*, p. 276.

⁶⁹ Campo, *Più forte di me*, p. 222.

CHAPTER 5

CONFLICTING LEGACIES: PERSONAL VOICE, GENDER AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN
ISABELLA SANTACROCE**5.1 Introduction: individual voice and eccentric literary models in Santacroce's fiction**

Unlike Silvia Ballestra but similarly to Rossana Campo, Isabella Santacroce defines her narrators in gender-specific terms from her very first novel. Some male critics have ignored or downplayed the free sexuality of her female narrators and focalisers, by interpreting their sexual fetishism as an obsessive genderless consumerism, or by writing off their bisexuality and lesbianism as androgyny. Marco Berisso, for example, defines *Destroy* 'un romanzo fondamentale androgino, in cui il protagonista non ha una collocazione sessuale ben definita, neppure lesbica'.¹ Contrary to Berisso's statement, while the sexuality of Misty, the protagonist of *Destroy*, is uncertain, her gender is explicitly female. Berisso's confusion between gender and sexuality reveals the difficulty experienced by many Italian critics in dealing with a character whose sexual conduct defies gender-specific models of literary behaviour. There is no doubt that Santacroce's narrators are women. As such, through their voices the author is attempting not to establish herself as a woman, but rather to engage with themes that are traditionally taboo for Italian women writers: fascination with suicide, incestuous desire, sadomasochism, narcissism and lesbianism. Stefania Lucamante argues that Santacroce exemplifies the *cannibali* women writers who 'are taking stock of themselves against both conventional feminist narratives and a more literary pace, determined by pre-eminently male authors and critics'.² As I will show in this chapter, it is therefore not surprising that Santacroce's literary models must be sought outside the boundaries of both the Italian avant-garde (no matter how supportive *Gruppo 63* was of her innovative and provocative early works) and the

¹ Marco Berisso, 'Cannibali e no. Intervista a Edoardo Sanguineti', in Nanni Balestrini and Renato Barilli (eds.), *La Bestia 1. Narrative invaders!* (Rome: Costa & Nolan, 1997), pp. 116-27 (p. 124).

² Stefania Lucamante, 'Everyday Consumerism and Pornography "Above the Pulp Line"', in Stefania Lucamante (trans. and ed.), *Italian Pulp Fiction: the New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers* (Madison, Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), pp. 99-134 (pp. 101-02).

Italian realist tradition, and instead in the realms of pop culture, women's poetry and a variety of Italian and international models from different historical periods. Lucamante convincingly discusses the influence of popular culture and consumerism in Santacroce's writing.³ Here, I want to explore instead Santacroce's more literary intertextual references, with a focus on the legacy of women's poetry, an aspect as yet relatively unexplored by critics. I will also discuss how this writer's constant dialogue with a variety of other cultural references, both Italian and international, with female and male writers from different periods, is always marked by a gender perspective, even when it is not directly influenced by feminist writing and thought.

As previously mentioned, in her first two novels, *Fluo. Storie di giovani a Riccione* (1995) and *Destroy* (1996),⁴ Santacroce strives to articulate a language whose vocabulary and sentence construction are influenced by television, advertising, pop and rock music, in order to represent the life of contemporary youth and reflect the language of their own culture. In her later works, however, she becomes increasingly preoccupied with the creation of a narrative voice modelled on women's poetry. The long dedication list at the beginning of her third novel, *Luminal* (1998), includes not only names from popular culture such as famous musicians (Dalidà, Nick Drake, Kurt Cobain), film directors (Rainer Werner Fassbinder) and actors (Marilyn Monroe), but also names of classical and contemporary philosophers (Seneca, Gilles Deleuze), historical figures (Cleopatra, Ian Potocki), mythical characters (Fedra), and writers and poets (Vladimir Majakovskij, Yukio Mishima, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Amelia Rosselli, Marina Cvataeva). All these figures are connected by the fact that they committed suicide. While the list testifies to the eclecticism of Santacroce's cultural references, the fact that it is headed by Anne Sexton (1928-1974) and that it includes so many women novelists and poets consecrated by the feminist canon alerts us to an interesting web of intertextual connections. Santacroce's indirect recognition of potential literary mothers becomes even more interesting if analysed in the light of her growing preoccupation with finding the origins of her female characters' destiny in their families, and in particular in their relationship

³ Stefania Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce* (Florence: Cadmo, 2002).

⁴ Isabella Santacroce, *Fluo. Storie di giovani a Riccione* (Rome: Castelveccchi, 1995); *Destroy* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996).

with their mothers. This motif is present in all of Santacroce's writings, but becomes dominant from *Luminal* (1998) onwards.⁵ Her fourth novel, *Lovers* (2001),⁶ is even more explicitly indebted to Sexton's poetry, which is quoted both in the book's dedication and by the characters in the fiction. Santacroce's direct references to Sexton in this book, as well as her more indirect quotation of the poetry of Cristina Campo (1923-1977) in the short story 'La tigrecigno' (2002), indicate her desire to establish a personal resonance between her own voice and the voices of other women authors.

When asked directly by Lucamante about her familiarity with the poetry of Sexton, Plath and Rosselli, Santacroce tried immediately to deflect any suggestion that she might feel a special affinity with women writers and literary traditions in general: 'Non frequento molto nessuno a parte me stessa. Amo la loro scrittura ma ancora più le loro morti. *Luminal* è dedicato a trentadue suicidi celebri. Tra questi anche quelli della Sexton, Plath e Rosselli'.⁷ On the one hand, the young author rejected the interviewer's attempt at finding connections between herself and the other women's writings, by stressing her uniqueness and isolation ('Non frequento molto nessuno a parte me stessa'); on the other hand, she admitted to loving Sexton's, Plath's and Rosselli's poetry, while at the same time shifting the emphasis from their writing to their lives/deaths ('Amo la loro scrittura, ma ancora di più le loro morti'), implying that their exemplarity must be found in their suicides, and thus putting their acts on the same level as that of the other 29 names present in the dedication that opens *Luminal*. However, she concluded by specifying that it was the presence of suicide in their poetry that attracted her to Sexton, Plath and Rosselli, ultimately reconnecting the writers' lives to their writings ('Leggendo le loro poesie ho sempre sentito il loro suicidio').⁸ Santacroce's narrative elaboration of the suicide theme must therefore be read as an attempt to link her work to the writings of other women who have experienced and, most importantly, who have written about their fascination with suicide; women writers whom, in other words, we can safely consider Santacroce's poetic models.

⁵ Isabella Santacroce, *Luminal* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998).

⁶ Isabella Santacroce, *Lovers* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001).

⁷ Quoted in Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce*, p. 142.

⁸ Quoted in Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce*, p. 142.

It is not my intention to discount the influence, for example, of Kurt Cobain's, Nick Drake's or Michael Hutchence's lyrics and music on the language of suicide elaborated by Santacroce in *Luminal*. The names of Cleopatra, Dalidà, Fedra and Monroe suggest the existence of a mystique of (predominantly female) suicide that extends beyond a specific literary tradition, a mystique inherited from sources as varied as history, popular culture and media narratives, all feeding into Santacroce's literary imagination. For example, Santacroce herself explained the title of her third book thus: 'Si pensa che Marilyn Monroe si sia uccisa così, eccedendo in milligrammi di *Luminal*, in milligrammi da diva'.⁹ This statement frames the suicide by the drug Luminal eventually committed by the novel's young protagonists, Demon and Davi, within the context of the decadent world they inhabit (they are erotic dancers and prostitutes), as symbolised by the movie star Monroe. The presence of Sexton, Plath and Rosselli in the list alongside Cleopatra, Cobain or Monroe is justified by the fact that all these figures evoke the myth of suicide, which is such a significant element of their writing. Santacroce herself encourages this interpretation by including poets who have elaborated genealogies and links between their own writings and those of other women poets, precisely through the *motif* of suicide. The most obvious example is the case of Sexton and Plath, both of whom openly admitted to being influenced by each other's poetry *and* by their shared love affair with suicide. Sexton explained the link between suicide and poetry, and commented on her own experience as a suicidal poet in relation to Plath's writings (as well as to her life) in the poem 'Sylvia's Death':

[...]

Thief!-

How did you crawl into,

crawl down alone

into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,

the death we said we both outgrew,

⁹ Quoted in Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce*, p. 142.

the one we wore on our skinny breast,
[...]

And I say only
with my arms stretched out into that stone place,
what is your death
but an old belonging,
a mole that fell out
of one of your poems?
[...]

O tiny mother,
you too!
O funny duchess!
O blonde thing!¹⁰

After describing their shared desire for suicide, a desire rooted in their common experience as women ('the one we wore on our skinny breasts'), and presented in written form in Plath's poems ('a mole that fell out / of one of your poems'), Sexton mourns her friend by addressing her as 'tiny mother', a definition that accounts for the younger age of the dead poet (as well as her physical appearance and her real experience of motherhood) and her status as a literary model for the poet Sexton.¹¹

As we shall see, Santacroce follows Sexton in creating for herself a legacy of suicide poetry that can inspire and give authority to her own narrative. By addressing Sexton directly in her works and especially in *Lovers*, the Italian writer embraces also Sexton's relation with Plath's example. Similarly, by referring to Cristina Campo's 'La Tigre Assenza', Santacroce accepts also the legacy of

¹⁰ Anne Sexton, 'Sylvia's Death', in *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 126.

¹¹ Diane Wood Middlebrook argues that Sexton was aware of how Plath's suicide had shifted the balance between the two poets. While Sexton had been Plath's example in the early days of their friendship and poetic influence, this had changed with Plath's death: 'By this singular move Plath had once and for all reversed their position as senior and junior in the ranks of poetry'. *Anne Sexton. A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 201. On the relationship between Sexton and Plath, see pp. 103-08 and 198-201.

women's writing (but also the oral tradition) inspired by the loss of one's parents, that Campo had identified as her own literary lineage. However, Santacroce appropriates both themes and traditions in very personal terms, combining them with her interest in the extreme language and imagination of her early 'pulp' works, thus pushing them into the taboo territory of incest. Like suicide, incest – to be intended in a very broad sense – is a recurrent theme in Santacroce's fiction and finds its most explicit expression in *Zoo* (2006),¹² where the love-hate relationship between mother and daughter is brought to its dramatic conclusion by the rape and killing of the mother by the daughter-narrator. Incest is also present in the doomed obsession the female protagonist of *Revolver* develops for the adolescent son of her neighbour, while yearning for her own parents who have abandoned her.¹³ These two interconnected themes return in the horror fantasy tale *Dark Demonia* (2005), a short story published in a volume illustrated with drawings of deformed and hybrid human bodies by the graphic artist Talexi. This is the story of a woman who, born with a swan wing instead of an arm, is hidden away in shame by her parents and locked in a prison for monstrous creatures, where she craves for death both as annihilation of her painful, loveless life and as the ultimate fulfillment of her desire to return to the womb of the mother who has rejected her at birth.¹⁴ In Santacroce's latest novel, *V.M. 18* (2007), a narrative explicitly inspired by the Marquis De Sade's writings, the amoral narrator Desdemona embarks upon an escalation of sexual transgressions that culminate in a massacre in the private boarding school she attends, most of which can be seen as an act of resistance to her own parents, who simultaneously attract and repel her.¹⁵ It is, however, in the short story 'La tigrecigno' (2002) that Santacroce establishes most clearly the connection between frustrated incestuous desire and poetic inspiration.¹⁶ In this story, Santacroce unites Campo's and Sexton's models, thus making a very explicit declaration of poetics and affinity with specific women writers. Although, as I have mentioned before, all of Santacroce's works are dotted with numerous intertextual references, my focus on how these

¹² Isabella Santacroce, *Zoo* (Rome: Fazi editore, 2006).

¹³ Isabella Santacroce, *Revolver* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004).

¹⁴ Isabella Santacroce and Talexi, *Dark Demonia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005).

¹⁵ Isabella Santacroce, *V.M. 18* (Rome: Fazi, 2007).

¹⁶ Isabella Santacroce, 'La tigrecigno', in Antonio Franchini and Ferruccio Parazzoli (eds.), *Sandokan* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 249-52.

references are negotiated in only two of them, *Lovers* and ‘La tigrecigno’, is intended to exemplify how she succeeds in conjugating her acknowledgement of existing literary legacies and her need to affirm her own uniqueness and individuality, resisting critical attempts to link her work to a specific tradition.

5.2 Intertextual references to Anne Sexton’s poetry: suicide and incest in *Lovers* (2001)

Although not as explicitly as Sexton in her poem on Plath, Isabella Santacroce openly acknowledges Sexton’s influence in her fourth novel, *Lovers*, where the references to popular and youth culture that had characterised her previous fiction all but disappear. Sexton is introduced through direct quotation of her verses or indirect reference to her poems in crucial moments of the book, most notably in the dedication, then in the context of the first failed attempt by one of the two protagonists to declare her love for the other, and finally in the text of the suicide note that concludes the plot and ends the novel. This novel revolves around the friendship between Elena and Virginia, two adolescent girls who meet by chance and bond over a shared loneliness within their families. Elena falls in love with Virginia, while Virginia starts an affair with Elena’s father Alessandro. When Elena finds out about the affair, she feels so shocked and rejected that she commits suicide, leaving behind a note with her declaration of love for Virginia. This story is narrated in a simple, poetic language that led some critics to speak of a ‘normalisation’ of Santacroce’s writing, a distancing of her new narrative from ‘pulp’ and *cannibale* style of her previous fiction.¹⁷ While the use of narrative verses and the chronological structure adopted in this book mark a decisive change of direction from her previous writings, the novel does present themes and motifs which also had appeared in her previous fiction and that will reappear again in her later, more transgressive works: the characters’ obsession with suicide, the protagonist’s longing for her mother and father, lesbian desire as a symbol of women’s split identity, the origin of poetic inspiration are central themes in all of Santacroce’s novels.

¹⁷ See, for example, Ermanno Paccagnini, ‘La Santacroce riscopre i sentimenti, ma resta succube di Baricco’, *Il Corriere della sera*, 26 August 2001; Lello Voce, ‘Due donne, l’amor sacro e l’amor profano’, *L’Unità*, 16 June 2001; Paola Zanuttini, ‘Accidenti, sto diventando normale’, *Il Venerdì di Repubblica*, 15 June 2001.

Similar themes are also at the core of Sexton's poetry. *Lovers* is introduced by the dedication: 'Alla mia famiglia / con amore', and is followed by the Italian translation of three verses from Sexton: 'E noi, l'una dell'altro / I colli reclinati attorcigliammo / Come due cigni solitari'.¹⁸ The Italian translation quoted by Santacroce is by Rosaria Lo Russo,¹⁹ a poet, translator, playwright and performer who, like Santacroce, has achieved critical recognition thanks in part to her participation in the 1997 edition of the *Ricerca* conferences and the patronage of *Gruppo 63*. As we saw in the chapter on Ballestra, Lo Russo both acknowledges *Gruppo 63* as an important influence on herself and criticises it for its dismissal of women's literary legacy. As well as three volumes of Sexton's poems, Lo Russo has translated (among others) Sylvia Plath and Erica Jong. She has also written a variety of essays and delivered conference papers on Sexton, Plath and Rosselli, to mention only the women poets present in Santacroce's list of thirty-two suicides. All this confirms not only that a dialogue exists between the authors of the 'pulp' generation, but also that Plath, Sexton and other poets belonging to the feminist literary canon and included in *Luminal's* dedication list, have been influential among many of the writers who emerged in the 1990s. This influence is not limited to women writers, as indicated by the fact that Antonello Satta Centanin (Aldo Nove) and Edoardo Zuccato also contributed to the 1997 Italian edition of Sexton's poems edited by Lo Russo.

The verses quoted by Santacroce in *Lovers* are taken from 'How We Danced', Sexton's second poem in the sequence 'The Death of the Fathers', published in *The Book of Folly* (1972), and thus they link up with Santacroce's dedication of the book to her family. This dedication raises a number of questions, especially in the light of a narrative in which the two protagonists deal with the indifference of their respective parents. The ambiguous message of the dedication becomes even more disturbing in the light of the epigraph from Sexton's poem. The lyricism of the novel, a stylistic choice that surprised many critics when the book was published, should be considered as the logical consequence of framing the entire narrative with Sexton's poetry. While Santacroce herself explained how she had strived to achieve a new poetic style, she also defended the essentially narrative quality of her novel. Comparing *Lovers* to her previous fiction, she

¹⁸ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 5.

¹⁹ Rosaria Lo Russo (ed. and trans.), *L'estrosa abbondanza* (Milan: Crocetti, 1997).

stated that it was ‘molto poetico. Più che un romanzo, è un poema, una lunga poesia’,²⁰ but according to Voce the novel remains nevertheless quintessentially narrative: ‘C’è chi ha detto che *Lovers* è una soap opera in forma di poesia. Ma non è vero. Al massimo riscopre la poesia (e dunque la sostanza di pensiero e dolore) che c’è alle radici di ogni trama. [...] In *Lovers* la prosodia versicolare la alleggerisce del romanzesco e ne fa una sorta di epica portatile, personale, quasi lirica’.²¹ The ninety-four short chapters are structured in verses where repetitions, interruptions, enjambements and other poetical devices remind the reader of Sexton’s own collection of narrative, confessional poems. The epigraph from Sexton functions therefore not only as a generic reference to a kind of poetry that explores the same themes as Santacroce’s fiction, but also as a model for her narrative structure and style. By quoting Sexton, Santacroce declares her source of inspiration as she does in all her novels: Lewis Carroll and Tama Janowitz in the *Bildungsroman* *Fluo*; Ian Curtis, Billy Corgan and Friederich Nietzsche in the nihilistic punk fiction *Destroy*; Novalis and the Sex Pistols, as well as the thirty-two suicides that I have already discussed, in the narrative of generational angst *Luminal*. She does it again in her post-*Lovers* novels, by quoting the character of John Merrick from the play/film *The Elephant Man* in the story of social and psychological alienation *Revolver*; verses from the young, family-hating Giacomo Leopardi’s ‘Amore e morte’ in the novel of a mother-daughter destructive relationship *Zoo*; Lewis Carroll, the Marquis De Sade, Aleister Crowley and Seneca in her epic about cruel and amoral adolescents, *V.M. 18*. In all these books, the epigraphs not only hint at the contents, but are also an invitation to read the quoted texts as the inspiration, literary models and traditions Santacroce chooses to follow both thematically and stylistically. Finally, they provide critics with a key to the interpretation of her writing.

In *Lovers*, the intertextual references focus on a woman poet and the style of the book pays direct homage to that model. While it is possible to read and make sense of *Lovers* without referring to Sexton’s poem, Sexton’s verses from ‘How We Danced’ reveal that Santacroce’s novel is double coded, adding an even darker edge to an already pessimistic narrative of love and family relationships. According to Umberto Eco, while the presence of double coding does not prevent

²⁰ Sabrina Ciocca, ‘Isabella la dolce’, *Carnet*, May 2001.

²¹ Voce, ‘Due donne, l’amor sacro e l’amor profano’.

a text from being read and enjoyed without fully comprehending its intertextual references, it is meant to encourage readers to identify them: ‘Che sarebbe una delle forme o forse la forma tipica dell’ironia postmoderna, e l’effetto naturale della sua intertestualità e del suo dialogismo’.²² Moreover, the mechanism of identification of references, activated in the reader by the intertextual connections offered by any given text, escapes the control of the author: ‘Quando [...] un testo scatena la meccanica del *double coding*, deve attendersi che esso non sarà soltanto duplice, ma multiplo, visto che la possibilità di avere una doppia lettura dipende dall’ampiezza dell’enciclopedia testuale del lettore, e questa ampiezza può variare secondo i casi’.²³ In the case of *Lovers*, the fact that the verses quoted in the epigraph are also repeated several times in the text suggests an extra effort on Santacroce’s part to indicate that Sexton and her poem are essential to the understanding of the novel. In other words, Santacroce could not have been more explicit in inviting her readers to explore the intertext, the literary model, in order to fully comprehend her narrative.

Virginia and Elena are brought together by the loneliness they experience in their respective families. The third-person narrative is focalised entirely through Virginia, who seems constantly preoccupied with the mystery of her parents’ relationship. The apparent peace within her family masks the truth that the characters are unable to communicate with one another: ‘La sua era una famiglia dalla tranquillità simile all’assenza / di suono e questo da sempre la inquietava’.²⁴ It is not quite the scathing assessment that Starlet, the protagonist of *Fluo*, makes of her own family, when she says that it is ‘un mix molto kitsch di Adams Family italianizzata e di una versione Kramer contro Kramer un po’ meno tragica’.²⁵ However, Virginia’s yearning for her emotionally absent parents is as strong as Starlet’s disappointment and longing. If Starlet remembers with regret her father, who had left her mother ‘per una lolita puttana’,²⁶ in *Lovers* Virginia ‘Si chiese se realmente suo padre esisteva. Se non / era un personaggio inventato dalla

²² Umberto Eco, ‘Livelli di lettura’, in Alberto Casadei (ed.), *Spazi e confini del romanzo. Narrativa tra Novecento e Duemila*, (Bologna: Pendragon, 2002), pp. 27-41 (p. 28).

²³ Eco, ‘Livelli di lettura’, p. 36.

²⁴ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 10.

²⁵ Santacroce, *Fluo*, p. 13.

²⁶ Santacroce, *Fluo*, p. 17.

situazione',²⁷ in order to make sense of his emotional distance. In *Luminal*, Santacroce's third novel, Demon's desire for her absent mother feeds her masturbation fantasies ('immaginai il suo collo bagnato di me passeggiare baciato da amanti e immaginai i suoi seni masturbandomi'),²⁸ and her unresolved feelings of love and hate: 'Allontana le labbra dalla madre quel tanto che basta per sputarle in faccia' (p. 56). Although more restrained in her expressions of love and hate towards her parents, the protagonist of *Lovers* feels equally rejected by her mother, who is unwilling to open up emotionally to her, even when pretending to confide in her: 'Diventava una madre sdoppiata. Quello che era. Osservava / Quel doppio raccontare niente. Cercare una scusa. Rimanere / Mistero. Girare attorno a un vero discorso da fare.'²⁹ Mother and daughter remain estranged also when they share the experience of being in love (Virginia with her friend Elena's father, Virginia's mother with a secret lover): 'Da dietro potevano sembrare due estranee. / Da davanti una figlia e una madre'.³⁰

Through her friendship with Elena, Virginia breaks her isolation: 'Diventarono indivisibili vite. / Dal niente al tutto con un battito d'ali. / Nemmeno un istante respirare lontane. / Sincronizzando il pulsare del cuore'.³¹ However, she is also fascinated by Elena's father, whose constant presence she contrasts with the emotional distance of her own father. She is attracted to Alessandro in his paternal role, and Elena becomes for her a means of accessing this idealised family presence: 'Le bastava entrare in quella famiglia di cui adottò subito / il padre'.³² Virginia's feelings for Elena's family and for Elena's father are thus incestuous, in the sense that they represent a transfer of her own desire for her parents connotated by sexual tension, as confirmed by the fact that her first sexual fantasies about Alessandro include also his wife: 'Si chiese se stesse dormendo abbracciato / a quella splendida donna. / Se stessero facendo l'amore'.³³ Sexton's verses are crucial to this interpretation of Virginia's desire as incestuous. At first, the verses in the epigraph, later spoken aloud by Elena when she tries to make Virginia understand her own love for her, and finally written by Elena in her

²⁷ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 47.

²⁸ Santacroce, *Luminal*, p. 15.

²⁹ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 104.

³⁰ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 105.

³¹ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 15.

³² Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 20.

³³ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 19.

suicide note after Virginia's rejection, seem to refer exclusively to the love between the two girls. In this interpretation, the two lonely swans bent together, which Elena draws on her notebook while studying with Virginia, would simply reflect Elena's vision of her relationship with the other girl. However, it is important to note that Lo Russo's Italian translation of the original lines does not entirely warrant such a lesbian reading, because it indicates clearly that the two swans are of different genders ('l'una dell'altro'), thus making immediately explicit what in the English original ('and we bent together / like two lonely swans')³⁴ becomes evident by reading the poem. Due to the absence of gender markers, the original is, in theory, more ambiguous, but once Sexton's verses are read in context, it becomes evident that they refer to a father and a daughter locked in an embrace connotated by incestuous overtones. At the ball for a cousin's birthday, father and daughter dance together:

I was nineteen
 And we danced, Father, we orbited
 [...]
 We moved like two birds on fire.
 [...]
 Mother was a belle and danced with twenty men.
 You danced with me never saying a word.
Instead the serpent spoke as you held me close.
The serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me
 like a great god and we bent together
 like two lonely swans.³⁵

As I have already mentioned, 'How We Danced' is the second in a narrative sequence of six autobiographical poems, entitled 'The Death of the Fathers', which describe the unreliable presence of real and ideal father figures in Sexton's life, as well as the relationship between fathers and mothers, a realm which appears inaccessible and couched in mystery to their daughters. 'The Death of the Fathers' is representative of the poetic discourse developed by Sexton throughout

³⁴ Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, p. 324.

³⁵ Sexton, 'How We Danced', pp. 323-24 (italics mine).

her confessional production about the emotional and sexual implications of the relationships between parents and children.³⁶

In the light of this reading of those verses as a text about repressed incestuous feelings, the meaning of the dedication at the beginning of Santacroce's book ('Alla mia famiglia / con amore') is underscored by the ambiguity and fragility of the family love described in Sexton's poem, a notion that is at the centre of the protagonist's turmoil in Santacroce's novel. When Elena appears to be declaring her love to Virginia by reading her a poem 'Della sua poetessa preferita',³⁷ while drawing two swans on a lake, the reader has been given enough intertextual clues to feel authorised to think that Elena is quoting the verses of the epigraph. The fact that Virginia does not understand Elena's declaration of love can be simply attributed to her obliviousness to Elena's feelings. However, to the reader who is aware of the incestuous subtext in Sexton's poem, this suggests also Virginia's inability or unwillingness to understand the full significance of what her friend is trying to convey: namely, her subconscious awareness of and identification with Virginia's feelings towards Alessandro. Such an interpretation is further supported by the fact that Virginia and Elena are portrayed throughout the novel as two embodiments of the same character: 'Differenti gemelle dall'inquietudine affine'.³⁸

Discussing the presence of lesbian characters in her novels, Santacroce made a very significant connection between this recurrent element of her fiction and the theme of the double:

Con *Luminal* sono nate Demon e Davi. Demon sono io. Davi è il mio riflesso.

Starlet nasce in *Fluo*, Misty in *Destroy*, sono mancanti del loro doppio. Tutti possediamo la nostra parte riflessa. Io mi penso accessorio del mio riflesso, vivo per farlo restare, per farlo esistere

³⁶ For a very basic overview of Anne Sexton's confessional poetry, see Caroline King Barnard Hall, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) and J.D.M. McClatchey (ed.) *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978).

³⁷ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 41.

³⁸ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 21.

[...] Demon è accessorio di Davi. In Davi, Demon riesce a fare esistere se stessa.³⁹

The critic Lello Voce took Santacroce's own ideas on board when he stated that Elena and Virginia are 'due identità femminili che sono lo stesso personaggio' or even 'siamesi separate'.⁴⁰ As a reflection of Virginia, Elena can therefore be seen as using Sexton's words in order to by-pass the need to confront her own (as well as Virginia's) incestuous desire for her father, by transforming it into a declaration of love for Virginia. If Virginia cannot understand Elena's words (Elena's love for Virginia), it is equally true that Elena is deaf and blind to the incestuous subtext of Sexton's poem. The novel seems to become a meta-narrative warning against the consequences of being unable to read the intertextual references Santacroce has planted in it. Both young women appear shocked when their secret loves are finally revealed – Elena's for Virginia and Virginia's for Elena's father – as if the signs had not been there for them to pick up throughout the story. On the other hand, those signs have been apparent to the reader, who will therefore question the very foundation of the friendship between Elena and Virginia, and their ability to communicate with each other. Elena's rejected attempt to kiss Virginia and Virginia's confession of her affair with Alessandro abruptly interrupt the communication between the two young women ('Interruppe la conversazione / lasciò cadere la cornetta'),⁴¹ which is only re-established after Elena's suicide, through the suicide note that Elena leaves for her friend: 'A Virginia con infinito amore: / "E noi, l'una dell'altro / i colli reclinati attorcigliammo / come due cigni solitari"'.⁴² Sexton's verses, which conclude the novel, cause Virginia's scream of horror and ultimate realisation: Virginia can finally comprehend, through Elena's references to their favourite poet, the intricate web of feelings linking them with each other and each of them with their parents.

³⁹ Quoted in Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce*, p. 143.

⁴⁰ Voce, 'Due donne, l'amor sacro e l'amor profano'.

⁴¹ Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 112.

⁴² Santacroce, *Lovers*, p. 118.

5.3 Intertextual references to Cristina Campo: poetic inspiration and family loss in 'La tigrecigno' (2002)

We have seen that in *Lovers* the swans appear as a symbol of a possible father/daughter desire, with strong suggestions of their shared yearning for the wife/mother. The verses from Sexton's 'How We Danced' emphasise this point, since in the poem the sexual tension between father and daughter is framed as a response to their longing for the beauty and sexuality of the mother, who is described as 'a belle' and who 'danced with twenty men'. In Santacroce's short story 'La tigrecigno', the swan evolves into a symbol of the connection between the narrator's narrative desire and her yearning for the voice and body of her mother. This is a very short narrative of a mother-daughter relationship, in which a mother tells her young daughter bed-time stories. When the mother starts dating men and stops visiting the daughter at bed-time, the protagonist experiences an irreplaceable void that she learns to fill by imagining her own tales. While confirming Santacroce's recurrent theme of incestuous desire as experienced by her young protagonists, this story evokes also Cristina Campo's poem 'La Tigre Assenza'. At the heart of both Campo's poem and Santacroce's story lies the notion of loss – and in particular the loss of one's parents – as a source of poetic/narrative inspiration. By creating the new symbol of the tiger-swan, Santacroce brings together two literary models who have been most influential to this stage of her narrative production, Sexton and Campo, and makes herself part of a tradition of women's writing concerned with these themes. Her relationship with her models, from whom she takes and freely adapts the symbols of the swan and the tiger, is personal and selective, focused on those elements of their writing that best resonate within her own work, but also discarding other important motifs of their poetry, such as Sexton's exploration of mental illness, or Campo's fascination with asceticism. Campo's presence among Santacroce's literary models is particularly significant in this sense, because it further highlights the personal and unique approach Santacroce establishes with existing canons, including the tradition of Italian women writers. Asked by Stefania Lucamante 'Che cosa t'interessa delle scrittrici italiane del '900, di queste madri e matrigne?', Santacroce replied: 'C'è una grande Madre e si chiama Cristina Campo. Lei è perfezione e bellezza. Come ha scritto Simone Weil che Cristina tanto amava "che ogni parola abbia un sapore massimo". Lei quel sapore massimo lo ha

raggiunto'.⁴³ This statement might surprise critics who focus exclusively on Santacroce's early, 'pulp' narratives, which do not carry any direct or indirect reference to Campo's writings. Moreover, it contradicts her resistance to being associated with specific literary models. Should Santacroce's acknowledgement of Campo's influence be considered simply a generic expression of empathy for the poet's aesthetics of perfection and beauty? A unique figure in the Italian post-war literary scene, Campo was a true scholar, expert in European fables, mysticism and religions, as well as a sophisticated poet and essayist, but never a fiction writer in the traditional sense. By contrast, Santacroce emerged on the Italian literary scene as a representative of the 'pulp' phenomenon of the early 1990s and a member of the *cannibale* generation reluctant to be circumscribed by such labels. Her acknowledgement of Campo as a literary mother is therefore unexpected, but in keeping with her general resistance to being defined by way of association with specific traditions, such as *Gruppo 63* that was effectively promoting her, and a generic notion of 'Italian women writers'. If she admitted to a female influence, this influence is a relatively marginal, non-canonical Italian writer, one who does not fit easily into any of the post-war Italian literary movements as defined by critics. Campo was neither mainstream, nor avant-garde, nor did she identify with the feminist poetic canon. In the words of Monica Farnetti, the Italian expert on Campo, 'Vittoria Guerrini, in arte Cristina Campo, è la scrittrice italiana di singolare raffinatezza destinata a ottenere, se mai l'otterrà, una celebrità paradossale [...] lavorò sempre appartata e schiva, amante della concentrazione, del tutto indifferente al mercato delle lettere', thus producing '[u]na scrittura concepita infatti come rifiuto del superfluo e omissione dell'ovvio, come adesione perfetta del senso alla forma e specularità senza resto tra lo stile e l'idea'.⁴⁴ Santacroce's choice of such a cult figure as a model speaks about her own sophistication and literary ideals.

The connection between Santacroce and Campo lies in their shared perception of the origin of poetic vocation. Santacroce's 'La tigrecigno' expresses this notion with clarity. The title is a direct allusion to Campo's most famous poem 'La Tigre Assenza'. Introduced by the dedication 'pro patre et matre', Campo's poem is a masterpiece of linguistic concentration, where each word

⁴³ Quoted in Lucamante, *Isabella Santacroce*, pp. 146-47.

⁴⁴ Monica Farnetti, *Cristina Campo* (Ferrara: Luciana Tufani Editrice, 1996), p. 9.

strives to achieve the Weilian ‘sapore massimo’ for which Santacroce admires her:

Ahi che la Tigre,
 la Tigre Assenza,
 o amati, ha tutto divorato
 di questo volto rivolto
 a voi! La bocca sola
 pura
 prega ancora
 voi: di pregare ancora
 perché la Tigre,
 la Tigre Assenza,
 o amati,
 non divorì la bocca
 e la preghiera...⁴⁵

Written in 1964-65 in memory of her beloved parents, who had died within one year of each other,⁴⁶ ‘La Tigre Assenza’ is a poem Farnetti convincingly places within the tradition of the *planctus*, that is to say poetry rooted in the popular Mediterranean, Catholic tradition of women crying over the dead: ‘È un’intera tradizione del pianto dunque, antica e femminile, quella che la Campo rievoca, e in cui non manca di riecheggiare quel pianto tra tutti esemplare consumato – *Stabat Mater* – ai piedi di una croce’.⁴⁷ ‘La Tigre Assenza’ is the poet’s lamentation for the loss of her parents, where the tiger represents at the same time the death that devours everything/everyone and generates the absence, the mourning caused by the loss of who/what is absent, and the poetry (in the form of *planctus* and prayer) created in reaction to this loss: ‘L’Assenza è ciò che genera la poesia e nuovi sensi zampillano, inesauribili, dalla morte’.⁴⁸ Although rendered

⁴⁵ Cristina Campo, ‘La Tigre Assenza’, in *La Tigre Assenza* (Milan: Adelphi, 1991), p. 44.

⁴⁶ For a biography of Cristina Campo, see Cristina De Stefano, *Belinda e il mostro. Vita segreta di Cristina Campo* (Milan: Adelphi, 2002).

⁴⁷ Farnetti, *Cristina Campo*, p. 16.

⁴⁸ Farnetti, *Cristina Campo*, p. 45. For a detailed study of the relationship between ‘La Tigre Assenza’ and the *planctus*, see in particular pp. 35-53.

as a very personal elaboration of the loss of her parents, 'La Tigre Assenza' indicated that Campo's alleged insularity from specific poetic traditions, and especially from the tradition of women's poetry, might be more a strategic stance than a reality, one which was cultivated by the author's literary persona and accepted by her contemporaries who were unable to identify her literary sources outside the male-centric canon, but a stance that was contradicted by both her critical and creative work. One of Campo's most fascinating unfinished projects was, in fact, *Libro delle ottanta poetesse*, an anthology that aimed to become, in Campo's own words, 'Una raccolta mai tentata finora delle più pure pagine vergate da mano femminile attraverso i tempi [...], dalla Scuola di Saffo alla Cina classica, dal Giappone dei Fujiwara al deserto pre-maomettano, da Bisanzio al medioevo, dal Rinascimento al secolo XVIII, dal grande Romanticismo ai giorni nostri'.⁴⁹ It is therefore safe to assume that with 'La Tigre Assenza', Campo was aware of her own work belonging to a female poetic genealogy and perhaps a genealogy of *planctus*, a tradition further developed by other Italian women poets, both contemporary to and younger than Campo, such as Alda Merini, Antonia Pozzi, Maria Luisa Spaziani and Patrizia Valduga, all of whom have described poetically the loss of their parents as a source of inspiration.⁵⁰

In Santacroce's short story the absence of the narrator's mother is not due to death, but the story similarly implies that the parent's absence is at the origin of the narrator's creative process. The text appears in a collection of very diverse short stories dedicated to the memory of the adventure fiction writer Emilio Salgari (1862-1911). A number of writers, including, amongst others, Silvia Ballestra, Enrico Brizzi and Aldo Nove, feature in this collection with stories inspired by Salgari's works. In Santacroce's text, Salgari is evoked by the fables of Mompracem, the mythical Malaysian island where most of Salgari's stories are set, stories that the narrator's mother tells her child. The narrator remembers her mother at her bedside, narrating tales 'di mari in tempesta e dei loro pirati'.⁵¹ The mother is identified with both her narrative acts and the stories she tells: 'Proiettava ombre la presenza di una madre narrante [...] La seguivo comporre

⁴⁹ Farnetti, *Cristina Campo*, pp. 14-15.

⁵⁰ Farnetti, *Cristina Campo*, pp. 50-53.

⁵¹ Santacroce, 'La tigrecigno', p. 249.

frasi. Costruire quei viaggi'.⁵² In the child's imagination, the description of far away places, that come out of the mother's mouth, are associated with the mother's body: 'Mompracem [...] Sussurrava quel nome di una terra caduta sul mare che io trasformavo in un lago, che io trasformavo in un ventre'.⁵³ The mother's tale of the tiger is articulated in terms of physical creation, the mother giving narrative birth to the animal through her words: 'Partoriva la tigre che l'affascinava'.⁵⁴ The mother then leaves her child, without telling her the nightly story she has come to expect, in order to meet her new lover. In her absence, the child recalls the image of the mother, who becomes the face of a tiger on the body of a swan, one that lives in the depth of a sea/lake/womb. This imaginative act re-establishes the presence of her absent mother in the child's room: 'Nel mio immaginario lei non se ne andava. Diventava cigno dal muso felino. Abitava in un lago che potevo trovare'.⁵⁵ The mother's absence thus forces the daughter to create her own narrative of the tiger-swan. The daughter in turn forces herself to fall asleep and search for her mother in her dreams.

The arrival of her mother's lover in the household is perceived as an intrusion by the daughter, who resents both his physical attention for the woman, and his interference in her narrative performance ('Si appartava con lui nel nascondiglio subito dopo la fiaba che mi concedeva').⁵⁶ The daughter's jealousy, with its curiosity and obsessiveness over the mother's sexual life, presents yet again incestuous overtones that remind us of Santacroce's treatment of the mother/daughter relationship in her other works. Gradually, after the man's departure, the mother's storytelling becomes more distant and detached ('Credo mi incolpasse dell'abbandono'), and finally unnecessary, as the daughter learns to fall asleep by creating her own narratives without a need for her mother's presence. By losing her role as a storyteller, the mother loses also her 'ruolo di attrice materna'.⁵⁷

The lamentation for the mother's absence recalled by the reference to Campo's *planctus* and to the women's poetry that lies behind it, is combined in

⁵² Santacroce, 'La tigrecigno', p. 249.

⁵³ Santacroce, 'La tigrecigno', p. 249.

⁵⁴ Santacroce, 'La tigrecigno', p. 249.

⁵⁵ Santacroce, 'La tigrecigno', p. 250.

⁵⁶ Santacroce, 'La tigrecigno', p. 251.

⁵⁷ Santacroce, 'La tigrecigno', p. 252.

Santacroce's story with the theme of family estrangement typical of all her fiction. While the previous novels from *Fluo* to *Lovers* had explored the issues relating to this estrangement, including the incestuous desire to close the gap between children and parents (symbolised by Sexton's two swans 'bent together'), 'La tigrecigno' deals with the origins of the first separation, the first absence. Campo's figure of the tiger – in her case a symbol of death and of the grief associated with death – is modified and adapted to Santacroce's own perception of this absence. The monstrous image of the mother as a tiger-swan suggests that the duality of presence/absence is destined to remain unresolved, but that it is essential to the process of creative imagination and of narrative. The daughter learns to create her own stories in order to complete the mother's interrupted storytelling, as well as to reconstruct the original closeness between them. The disturbing conclusion suggests that such closeness can be sought in dreams, but is only achieved by reaching the safety of the sea/lake/womb. Santacroce explains: 'In tutti i miei libri c'è quest'odio per la madre. Per la nascita. Per la vita',⁵⁸ a notion that the critic Lello Voce develops further when he proposes that Santacroce's characters 'annegano nel sangue che schizza dalla ferita di una cesura immedicabile, di una schizofrenia fondatrice, nata dal linciaggio osceno della nascita'.⁵⁹ As a return to the womb and to the wholeness of the pre-natal state is impossible, the original gap Santacroce's characters struggle against through their desires and creative acts can only be bridged by their death, as proved by Elena's suicide at the end of *Lovers*, or by sublimating the sense of loss by creative story-telling as in 'La tigrecigno'.

5.4 Desire and rejection of the family: *Revolver* (2004), *Dark Demonia* (2005) and *Zoo* (2006)

Revolver, the novel that followed *Lovers*, presents again a story of family conflict and personal desperation. The protagonist, Angelica, tries to escape the misery and entrapment she experiences by living with her paralytic aunt, who took care of her after her parents abandoned her, but who now expects to be taken care of:

⁵⁸ Lello Voce, 'Isabella Santacroce. Flesh and blood', *Kult*, June 2001.

⁵⁹ Voce, 'Due donne, l'amor sacro e l'amor profano'.

Quegli estranei da avere in ricordo. Mio padre. Mia madre da giovane. Mancava del marmo a tenerli. Non erano morti. Non c'erano e basta. Mi mancavano a volte. Mi mancavano spesso. Non volevo parlarne. Era tabù da ficcare in memoria. Là dentro. Là in fondo. Abbassare il coperchio.⁶⁰

Although she attempts to repress the memory of their presence, she remains acutely aware of the gaping hole left by their departure, often fantasising about their physical presence in terms that suggest sexual, as well as emotional desire: '[...] mi veniva in mente la dolcezza di quando mi tenevano con loro nella camera da letto. O stavo nel mezzo. Li avevo tutti e due al fianco. Il calore di quei corpi. Era bellissimo'.⁶¹ Her love-hate for her absent parents is transformed into resentment towards her aunt, whose illness traps Angelica into the role of carer. She abandons her aunt, hoping that she can finally achieve the sense of security that has always eluded her, by reconstructing a normal, traditional family with her middle-class husband Gianmaria and her mother-in-law: 'Fuori dai margini. Una vita plausibile. Dignità per la folla. La quiete senza tempesta. Le serate in salotto. La cena sul tavolo. Le gite in campagna. I baci della buona notte. Un uomo a difenderle'.⁶² But the banality of her life with her new family soon reveals itself to be as much of a prison as the apartment she used to share with her paralytic relative. Like her aunt, Angelica's mother-in-law can never take the place of the ideal mother Angelica dreams about, despite Gianmaria's encouragement to do so. In fact, the conflict between Angelica and her mother-in-law forces her to question the very essence of mother-daughter relationships, whether real or ideal:

Ma poi le figlie per le madri cosa sono. Un attaccapanni su cui appendere le proprie menzogne. Un prolungamento della propria carne. Delle alunne a cui insegnare come genuflettersi davanti alla catastrofe dell'essere donne. Una creatura che le assomiglia. Una copia su cui proiettare i bei tempi mai avuti. Un duplicato su cui proiettare le proprie sconfitte. Uno scoiattolo. Un bastone per le

⁶⁰ Santacroce, *Revolver*, p. 14.

⁶¹ Santacroce, *Revolver*, p. 129.

⁶² Santacroce, *Revolver*, p. 29.

disgrazie. La tappa per sentirsi feconde. Un passatempo simile al cruciverba. Qualcosa che deve essere fatto per sentire d'avere una famiglia. Un ostacolo per spassarsela nella giovinezza. Una medaglia d'appuntarsi al petto. Il contenitore in cui mettere i sogni. I sensi di colpa. Un bersaglio da colpire col sentimento. Ogni volta un pugno allo stomaco. Tutto questo col punto di domanda a concludere.⁶³

The claustrophobia of the middle-class family life Angelica has chosen for herself is eloquently summarised by a trip to the zoo with her husband, where they take a tour of the lake on a small row boat, like all the other families. Handling the oars clumsily, Gianmaria keeps hitting the swans that swim on the lake. The swans who had been the symbol of emotional and sexual desire, as well as poetical inspiration, in *Lovers* and 'La tigrecigno', become here the victims of a mediocre family outing:

Ce n'era uno senza piume sulla testa. Un altro con l'ala aperta fatta a pezzi. Erano spelacchiati come orsetti maltrattati dagli infanti. Mentre stavamo seduti come idioti su quell'acqua il setter di qualcuno s'è buttato da una barca. Uno spettacolo terribile. Ha azzannato un collo bianco con i denti. Lo sbatteva fino a ucciderlo. Quelle grida. Lo scompiglio. Cigni che impazzivano scappando. Mi sono coperta gli occhi con le braccia.⁶⁴

Horrified by a life that thwarts her individuality and sexual desire, Angelica contemplates suicide as the ultimate escape. She starts to imagine all the possible ways to end her own life, until she meets Matteo, a 13-year old boy whose family lives in the same building and for whom she develops an immediate obsession. Lucidly, she realises that her attraction and desire for the boy mirrors her yearning for the parents who have left her behind and for the life they have deprived her of by doing so: 'Un bambino con addosso ciò che mi è stato sottratto. La mia infanzia e l'adolescenza [...] Rimanere bambini per sempre. Io che non lo ero mai

⁶³ Santacroce, *Revolver*, p. 64.

⁶⁴ Santacroce, *Revolver*, p. 50.

stata avrei voluto esserlo almeno una volta. Lui per me è stato questo da subito. [...] Io avrei voluto essere lui. Prendergli il posto'.⁶⁵ Unable to control her desire for Matteo, she becomes more and more sexually promiscuous, until, unfulfilled and emotionally out of control, she attacks the boy and kisses him in a desperate gesture that seals the end of her family life. Eventually, Angelica leaves her husband, rejecting once and for all the safety and normality she had sought with him, and giving up hope of the happiness she had longed for all her life.

In *Zoo* the prison of the family and of its double-edged love reaches the darkest and most disturbing tones. Based, as we are told in the sleeve jacket of the book, on a true story, namely a real-life confession that Santacroce has transformed into a fiction, *Zoo* tells the story of a young woman's life with her beloved father and her loved/hated mother: a triangle of need and rejection where father and daughter provide for each other the love the wife and mother seems unwilling to give them. The situation reminds us vividly of the *tableau* painted in Sexton's poem 'How We Danced' which is quoted, as we have seen, in *Lovers*, then recalled indirectly in 'La tigrecigno', in *Revolver* and, later on, in *Dark Demonica*, through the symbolic imagery of the swan. The cover of the original edition of *Zoo* suggests very explicitly a key to understanding the book, by showing a photograph of a toddler sitting in a cot inside a small cage. The theme of parental love as a prison recurs throughout the narrative. Love between children and parents and between spouses is inevitably trapping in the narrow, enclosed family world Santacroce portrays in this novel, either for not being sufficient or for becoming excessive and all-encompassing. Father and daughter, feeling both equally unloved by the beautiful wife/mother, rely on each other in ways that become gradually more exclusive and suffocating: 'In quell'istante, vedo l'amore di mio padre trasformarsi in una gabbia, che nessuno può raggiungere'.⁶⁶ After the failure of a few attempts to socialise with young people of her own age, the narrator accepts that her father is 'l'uomo della mia vita',⁶⁷ a statement of fact more than a choice. Although father and daughter never take their relationship to a sexual level, the protagonist openly acknowledges that her connection to both her parents has strong sexual connotations, as, for example, when she says that her

⁶⁵ Santacroce, *Revolver*, p. 122-23.

⁶⁶ Santacroce, *Zoo*, p. 11.

⁶⁷ Santacroce, *Zoo*, p. 14.

lips will never kiss anyone else: ‘Baceranno i miei genitori, loro sì, nessun altro’;⁶⁸ or when she remembers her first orgasm, reached by masturbating while listening to her parents making love, in a way that reminds us of the scene in *Luminal* where the narrator remembers hiding under her mother’s bed while the latter was having sex with her lovers.⁶⁹

But the love between children and parents is a trap also when it is absent or perceived as insufficient, for the desire it produces to fill the void. While watching her mother handling the clothes in the shop where she works as an assistant, the narrator feels acutely jealous of the objects touched by her mother: ‘Soffro mentre la guardo, provo invidia per quei pezzi di stoffa che sta maneggiando con tanto amore. Vorrei essere uno di loro, essere toccata così, con quella dolcezza che non conosco, che a me non ha dato mai’.⁷⁰ We are told that the mother enjoys keeping her family on their toes, withdrawing affection according to her whims and not granting husband and daughter a sense of peace and security in her love for them. Most of all, according to the narrator, she relishes in making them feel inadequate and undeserving of her love.

The protagonist wishes her mother was different, ‘che mi facesse sentire che era felice d’avermi’,⁷¹ but since she cannot have this, the daughter forces her mother to become the person she desires after an accident leaves her paralysed. After the death of the father, the daughter proceeds to entrap her mother in a cage of her own making, manipulating her emotionally and exploiting her guilt: ‘Voglio commuoverla, spezzarle il cuore, voglio le sue lacrime, le voglio tutte’.⁷² When the mother attempts one final break for freedom by trying to establish a relationship with a new man, the daughter loses all inhibitions, forces the man away, rapes her mother and finally kills her, in a gesture that is not only the extreme expression of her love and hate for her parent, but also an act of liberation, not so much for herself as for the older woman: ‘lei è lì, senza più vita, senza più sbarre, libera’.⁷³ Death is thus confirmed in Santacroce’s narrative universe as the only possible liberation from the entrapment of family

⁶⁸ Santacroce, *Zoo*, p. 19.

⁶⁹ Santacroce, *Luminal*, p. 91.

⁷⁰ Santacroce, *Zoo*, p. 12.

⁷¹ Santacroce, *Zoo*, p. 23.

⁷² Santacroce, *Zoo*, p. 77.

⁷³ Santacroce, *Zoo*, p. 125.

relationships and life itself, from the cage that encloses us the very moment we are born and of which a mother is implicitly responsible: ‘per colpa di quell’abbandono che è il parto in cui esci dalla sua carne, ti espelle. Forse questo strappo che non hai chiesto ti mancherà sempre’.⁷⁴

The ideas of birth as the primary rejection and of unrequited love for one’s parents are present also in *Dark Demonica*. Unlike the realistic language of *Revolver* and *Zoo*, characterised by short sentences, colloquial Italian and recognisable low middle-class Italian setting, *Dark Demonica* is a fantasy-horror tale, told in a poetic and evocative language, with a surreal setting where abnormal events take place. The protagonist, born with a swan wing rather than an arm, that marks her as a freak, but that is not sufficient to enable her to fly, is sent by her parents to an octagonal castle in the woods, where other monsters, marked either by physical deformity or unnatural desires, are locked away in their respective rooms and fed raw pieces of meat by a guardian. Here, the narrator is imprisoned together with a pair of incestuous brother and sister, a man made of cloth who masturbates endlessly, a woman whose legs are replaced by rusty wheels and two immortal children who try eternally to kill each other but cannot die, until, on an apocalyptic night, the guardian becomes crazy, burns the castle and kills all its inhabitants, effectively freeing them.

Throughout her 20-year stay in this horrific prison, the narrator yearns for her mother, to be reunited with her in spite of her rejection, to know the name she was given at birth by her, and to return, effectively, to her womb. Only through death is reunification possible: ‘Perché la nascita è morte. Perché nulla inizia ma finisce soltanto. Perché l’esistenza è continua mancanza. E ancora mi manco’.⁷⁵ At the end, when she leaves her room and, torched by the fire that is burning the castle, she moves her one wing, the simultaneous experiences of dying, attempting to fly and returning to the mother coalesce into the only possible liberation the protagonist is granted.

5.5 Literary fathers in a new woman’s voice: V.M. 18 (2007)

We have seen how Santacroce’s use of intertextual references is very personal and original, whether it is expressed in the form of quotations from contemporary

⁷⁴ Santacroce, *Zoo*, p. 39.

⁷⁵ Santacroce, *Dark Demonica* (no page number; the entire book is unnumbered).

popular culture, such as music, film, comic books, club and drug subcultures, that appear frequently in her early novels, or whether taken from key figures of the international female literary canon, such as Plath, Sexton and Campo, who are so influential, as we have seen, for *Lovers* and 'La tigrecigno'. An intertextual approach to Santacroce's fiction not only points out that a variety of different traditions have contributed to her narrative development, it also provides important clues to an understanding of the complex meanings of her works. Furthermore, by integrating multiple cultural references into her writing, the author constantly challenges herself stylistically, striving to echo languages and narrative structures of her chosen sources with each new text.

As discussed earlier, Sexton's influence in *Lovers* is evident not only in the direct quotation of 'How We Danced' and in the themes shared by the quoted poem and Santacroce's novel, but also in the Italian writer's choice to structure her story in narrative verses. At the same time, she adopts a standard literary Italian vocabulary that denotes a significant change of direction from her previous use of youth jargons, specialistic idioms (such as those of the club and drug scene), fragmented and media-influenced syntax. In fact, her stylistic evolution in *Lovers*, combined with a plot that departs from the themes and contents of youth culture found in her earlier works, has been interpreted by some as a softening of Santacroce's poetics, a marked change of direction away from her original 'pulp' phase. I would like to suggest that *Lovers* is only the first overt example of Santacroce's constant quest for new styles and languages, by means of which she endeavours to express themes that recur time and again throughout her work: the struggle to assert a strong female sexual identity; the negotiation of this identity with family expectations and with contrasting feelings of attraction and repulsion for the father and mother figures; the struggle between female individuality and social expectations; the existential yearning for self-annulment and death, and thus the fascination with suicide.

Santacroce's narrative style changes again dramatically in *V.M. 18*,⁷⁶ in an attempt to echo the four literary models that are cited in the epigraphs:

⁷⁶ Santacroce explains the origin of the title thus: 'Il titolo deriva da un pensiero nato mentre scrivevo il romanzo, ho pensato che ciò che stavo narrando solitamente viene considerato vietato ai minori. Le tre protagoniste quattordicenni sono dunque "minorenni vietate ai minori" '. Elisabetta Corsini's interview with Isabella Santacroce, 'V.M. 18: intervista a Isabella Santacroce',

*Per tutto l'aureo pomeriggio
galleggiamo beati
avendo incauti entrambi i remi
alle bimbe affidati,
le cui manine ora pretendono
guidare i nostri fati.*

LEWIS CARROLL

Alice nel paese delle meraviglie

*Se la natura disapprovasse le nostre inclinazioni
Non ce le ispirerebbe.*

DONATIEN ALPHONSE FRANÇOIS, MARQUIS DE SADE

*La pia finzion secondo la quale il male non esiste
Lo rende soltanto vago, enorme e minaccioso.*

ALEISTER CROWLEY

Un dio vi getta, povere cose umane, in un turbine rapinoso.

TULLIO ANNEO SENECA

*Thyestes*⁷⁷

Thyestes by Seneca (4 BC-65 AD) is echoed in the novel's violent, gory, and incestuous plot; the Marquis De Sade (1740-1814) in the libertine protagonist and her escalating sexual, sadistic experimentation; Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) in the youthful adventurousness of its characters, the surreal imagery and the linguistic creativity; and Aleister Crowley (1875-1947)⁷⁸ in the creation of an independent, mystical, sexually charged religious system. The longest of Santacroce's fictions (almost 500 pages), *V.M. 18* has an epic breadth that recalls a great number of classical texts of the Western literary tradition, especially in its use of titles that

Girodivite. Segnali dalle città invisibili, 18 July 2007 < <http://www.girodivite.it/V-M-18-intervista-a-Isabella.html> > [accessed 15 June 2008].

⁷⁷ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Crowley was a British occultist, poet, founder of the mystical cosmology of Thelema and author of *The Book of Law*. Following one's Will and Love are the basic precepts of the Law. Consumption of drugs and sex magic, both heterosexual and homosexual, are part of its rituals.

summarise the contents of each chapter, the adoption of an aulic language, with unusual, archaic vocabulary, the Latin sentence constructions (for example double adjectives, both before and after the noun, as in ‘l’emaciato mio procreatore paterno’)⁷⁹, the ambitiousness of the project, consisting of twelve chapters, one for each month of the year, and three sections, following the ‘Preludio’ – ‘Paradiso’, ‘Purgatorio’ and ‘Inferno’ – an ironic reversal of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, arguably the central text of the Italian canon. The story is set in a vague past, not linked to any specific period: the characters travel by horse carriages rather than cars and communicate by letter, as advanced technology is absent. The characters have classical names: Desdemona, Andromaca, Cassandra, Animone, Creonte, Minosse, Polissena, Pelopa, Clitennestra, Giocasta, Eufrosina, Tecmessa, Telefassa, Diomede, Laodamia, Caronide, Bellerofonte, Alastor. While the links between them and their classical counterparts remain vague and uncertain, they have the effect of evoking the Western canon and its mythology, thus making explicit Santacroce’s engagement with it.

Santacroce’s allusions to a number of canonical texts written by male authors should be considered not only a homage to writers who have dared to portray both male and female characters outside the moral and sexual norm, such as De Sade’s libertine Juliette or Carroll’s adventurous and intelligent adolescent Alice, but also an appropriation of that tradition from a specifically female perspective. Although she refers specifically to *Zoo*, Lucamante offers an insight into the transgressiveness of Santacroce’s fiction that I believe can be applied also to *V.M. 18*:

I suoi romanzi si informano spesso al concetto di degradazione della natura umana [...] L’effetto creato nei romanzi non si deve all’uso facile della pornografia, né all’acquisizione di tecniche narrative pertinenti al rfigurare finziomene scene di violenza, sesso contro natura e quant’altro si possa ascrivere al campo dell’abiezione. Gli stessi atti di violenza contro le donne non perseguono come scopo quello di volerle presentare come soggette al volere maschile, e sono

⁷⁹ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 16.

anzi spesso condotti da altre donne in un processo di revisione della mitologia sessuale.⁸⁰

The rewriting of sexual mythology includes appropriating key texts that have defined women's relationship with the family, sexuality and morality. In this sense, it is significant to note how the protagonist Desdemona – inevitably we think of the Shakespearean character, the helpless victim of male sexual jealousy, and a symbol of female virtue – is transformed into an adolescent who challenges the accepted rules of family, school and society. While the woman as innocent victim is completely rewritten, free and anarchic female characters such as De Sade's Juliette and Carroll's Alice merge to give voice to young women who are in full control of their own destiny and sexuality. At the same time, male characters such as Minosse and Creonte – who participate in the orgies of the 'spietate ninfette' – are described as simple accessories to the women's entertainment: 'erano creature dal maschile sesso, ovvero esseri stupidi, mancanti d'ingegno, somiglianti alle scimmie, nulla potevo pretendere, d'ammirevole possedevano solo la verga'.⁸¹

Language, narrative structure and references to classical authors reflect the 'atmosfera decadente e barocca'⁸² of the novel and of its setting, a college for adolescent girls where the protagonist Desdemona and her two best friends, 'spietate ninfette',⁸³ embark upon a quest for sexual gratification and moral corruption that causes the downfall of most of their fellow students and teachers, by means of seduction, coercion, violence or murder. Moral qualms never interfere with their enterprise, which can be read as a female reinterpretation of the libertine anti-hero, where the heroine's search for absolute sexual freedom and her challenge to the accepted moral and religious codes are rewarded rather than punished in the end. Desdemona is, once again, the first-person narrator of the first story where the protagonist, who repeatedly refers to herself as 'un satanico Dio, un celestiale demonio',⁸⁴ eventually triumphs by achieving the status of alternative Messiah, in perfect union with God and Satan, both of whom she

⁸⁰ Stefania Lucamante, 'Amore non Amore', *Leggendaria*, no. 57 (2006), 46-47 (p. 46).

⁸¹ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 119.

⁸² Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 29.

⁸³ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 125.

⁸⁴ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 108.

perceives as above the moral codes taught her by her parents and teachers. The endless repetition of imagery and sentences as *leitmotifs*, including the narrator's description of ritualistic acts of humiliation and cruelty towards her victims, but also her beauty regimen, her drug taking, the characters' individual idiosyncrasies, as well as her amoral, anti-religious, anti-authoritarian beliefs, impart a hypnotic quality to the narrator's voice, a quality that remains constant throughout her development as a character. The downfall of the fellow students, their families and the teachers goes exactly as planned and no hints of remorse or doubt are ever attributed to Desdemona and her friends. As in the case of Sade's Juliette, vice and evil are ultimately rewarded, the point of view unflinchingly fixed on Desdemona's scorn for all social, moral and religious conventions. In a reversal of Dante's contemplation and union with God at the end of his *Comedy*, *V. M. 18* ends with Desdemona's complete identification with the essence of Evil, something she is convinced will earn her a place between Satan and God:

io vidi me stessa divenir infinita riempiendo dell'aria lo spazio, e assumere una crocifissa postura, che Gesù Cristo Sofferto con orgoglio osservava, ripetendo con lirico suono dal divino esaltato le parole seguenti: 'Tu sei un satanico Dio, un celestiale demonio, tu sei la somma di due sacralità contrapposte e identiche, tu sei ora per sempre nei secoli dei secoli l'Eroina dell'Estasi'.⁸⁵

The main representatives of normative hypocrisy are Desdemona's parents, whom she claims to hate but to whom she also feels sexually attracted (it should be noted, however, that Desdemona's sexual cravings extends to almost all the characters in the novel, including her dog Alastor): 'Non di rado capitava giungessi all'orgasmo distesa tra i corpi dei miei procreatori assopiti [...] M'eccitava toccarmi poggiando contemporaneamente la lingua sul dorso irsuto della mano paterna, oppure carezzando di mia madre la pelle del collo, per poi sbavarle leggermente sopra la spalla'.⁸⁶ However, her incestuous fantasies are soon reframed as an act of rebellion against the adult moral code, against her

⁸⁵ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 491.

⁸⁶ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 14.

parents' mediocrity, rather than being the expression of real desire: 'Codesta voglia nasceva in verità come surrogato all'aspirazione che avevo di traviare l'irreprensibile moralità dell'emaciato capostipite, provocando tra noi un reato d'incesto'.⁸⁷ To Desdemona, her father's morality is little more than a civilised façade for his own repressed pedophile instincts, which he sublimates by reading Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, encouraging his daughter to do the same.

Alice's adventures intersect with Desdemona's own dreams and drug-induced hallucinations: the popular culture-influenced names of the drugs used in *Fluo*, *Destroy* and *Luminal* – such as Bubblegum Crisis or Luminal – are replaced here with the more dramatic and indeed sinister Cocktail Reietto or Acido Viperino Liquido, and the outcome of the use of drugs is not a realistic descent into the hell of urban subcultures, but rather an imaginary journey down the 'trombe di S. Eustachio', or the sense of falling 'all'interno di un bollente ventre materno [...] dentro una bolla colma di caldo liquido amniotico'.⁸⁸ Unlike the female narrators of her previous novels, the protagonist of *V.M. 18* contemplates the impulse to return to the womb and to commit suicide only as an aesthetic possibility, which she soon discards in favour of her project to fulfil each and every pleasure impulse, instinct and fantasy she nurtures, including inducing others to commit 'l'agognato suicidio'.⁸⁹ In this sense, for presenting a heroine who fully embraces her alternative morality and forces the world to adapt to her own rules, rather than fighting to keep it at bay, Santacroce has created an entirely new character. Unlike Angelica, Desdemona does not assimilate to the hypocritical norm in order to be like everybody else, only to then be defeated by her own nature and desires; rather, she lives her life and rules others by her own code, embracing her monstrosity at no matter what cost.

Desdemona's father's literary preference for Carroll reflects his relationship with language: 'Era naturalmente portato a utilizzare del cervello l'emisfero sinistro, e aveva un innato talento nell'elaborare contorti discorsi, permeati da ossimori (gli interessava accostare le antitesi di due termini forti, creando così

⁸⁷ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 135.

⁸⁸ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 145.

⁸⁹ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 215.

originali contrasti dal sorprendente effetto fonetico)⁹⁰ This, in turn, influences Desdemona's own linguistic development. In a meta-narrative passage, she describes her own relationship with language in terms that reflect the style of the novel itself and of much of Santacroce's work, including her early 'pulp' fiction:

Sempre esprimevo tali disquisizioni compiendo complesse deliquescenze di linguaggio, stravolgendo la grammatica, divertendomi a creare una nuova sintassi, eccedendo in aggettivi qualificativi, sciorinando astrusi concetti, cerebrali soliloqui pungenti ricolmi d'intraducibili ossimori, di paurosi squilibri.⁹¹

While rebelling against her father's moral code, which she perceives as fake and fatally flawed, Desdemona nonetheless gains from him and his cultural references the necessary language to express her own creativity. However, while for her father this experimentation remains exclusively on paper, for Desdemona it becomes a way of life. One cannot help reading in these statements a veiled assessment of the legacy of Santacroce's own literary fathers, especially *Gruppo 63* that promoted her early fiction: an acknowledgement of their lesson, but also an indication of the limits of their self-reflexive avant-garde production. In Santacroce's fiction, these limits are overcome by a combination of multiple, disparate literary legacies: Seneca, for the appropriation of themes such as cannibalism and incest, De Sade for the extreme sexuality of the characters and the amorality of the plot, Carroll for the linguistic play, Crowley for the unconventional take on religion. All these traditions are conflated in a novel that presents again the extreme, violent plots of Santacroce's early 'pulp' production, but that this time refers to canonical literary models, rather than those of youth and popular culture. Almost a rebuttal of those critics who had hinted at a 'normalisation' of Santacroce's voice and themes in *Lovers, V.M. 18* reminds us that, like many of the themes she continues to explore, her writing aims to remain desecrating, alternative, challenging and relentlessly experimental, whatever traditions, male or female, she decides to engage with.

⁹⁰ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 23.

⁹¹ Santacroce, *V.M. 18*, p. 227.

CONCLUSION

In my analysis of Silvia Ballestra's, Rossana Campo's and Isabella Santacroce's novels and short stories, I have outlined the development of their narrative work from their early fiction, centred around youth lifestyle and culture, to the more mature efforts of their later years. This can hardly be considered a convenient transition from fashionable transgression to acquiescence to mainstream literary taste. On the contrary, Ballestra's growing feminist concerns, Campo's increasingly pessimistic view of romantic love, and Santacroce's constant revision of many literary models for her dark explorations of family dynamics show a sustained challenge to the status quo of Italian society and the Italian literary world. Although it is not my intention to discuss it here, a similar development can be traced for other writers, both men and women, who emerged from the *Ricerzare* meetings, such as Nicolò Ammaniti, Enrico Brizzi and Aldo Nove, all of whom have progressed from their early generational and 'pulp' output, to works that engage with a wider variety of narrative forms and themes. Each in their own way, the authors of the 'pulp' generation still display the same interest in language and in the possibility of representing reality as they did throughout the 1990s, only now with more experience in the practice of writing.

In light of my study of Ballestra's, Campo's and Santacroce's writings, it seems clear that their relationship with the canon, whether Italian or international, was and still is for them a homage, but also a challenge to their literary mothers and fathers, as well as a form of resistance to being associated with a single specific tradition. As we have seen, all three writers have accepted to be associated with the *neoavanguardia* and the lesson of *Gruppo 63* to varying degrees, if only by appearing at the *Ricerzare* meetings. Indeed, in 1999, Ballestra became a member of the organising committee of the event, and one of the few women directly involved in the selection of the authors invited to the public readings. Her ambivalence towards *Gruppo 63* and their tutelage of the new generation of writers, is dramatised in her short story 'Gli orsi (63-93)',¹ which I have discussed in Chapter 3, but also in the meta-narrative discourse that runs

¹ Silvia Ballestra, 'Gli orsi (63-93)', in *Gli orsi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994), pp. 7-29.

throughout her fiction. A similar dramatisation of the love-hate relationship with the 1960s-70s avant-garde is also present in Campo's work, symbolised by the controversial relationships between her young female protagonists and the older artists and intellectuals they tend to fall in love with, as for example, in *In principio erano le mutande* and *Duro come l'amore*.² In both cases, the attraction to the avant-garde and the desire for the approval of these father figures exist alongside the need to distance themselves from their overbearing presence. While both Ballestra and Campo have acknowledged many times their debt to Alberto Arbasino, Nanni Balestrini and Eduardo Sanguineti, they have also pointed out, both in interviews and in their narrative work, how the *neoavanguardia* is by no means the only tradition their generation takes as a model, especially since it is a tradition that does not accommodate easily women writers' voices.

Critics readily acknowledged the influence of Pier Vittorio Tondelli and of the 1980s generational narrative on the authors of the 1990s, noting in particular that they had learnt from Tondelli how to be experimental and at the same time to communicate with their readers. The narrative of the *neoavanguardia*, based on a deconstruction of traditional forms that would reflect the linguistic multiplicity and fragmentation of contemporary society and postmodern identity, had proved to be a dead end for storytelling. Fortunately, Tondelli and other writers of his age group had proved that it was possible to use low registers, jargons, youth culture references, specialistic languages, non-linear storytelling and contamination of genres, while still writing readable and compelling stories. This is a lesson many writers of the 1990s made their own. They also borrowed the journey/return plot from Tondelli, elaborating it in ways that reflected the historical changes that occurred between the 1980s and the 1990s. But while the relationship with the new narrative of the 1980s is certainly one that, as I detailed in Chapter 2, had an enormous impact on the fiction of the 1990s, it still did not account for the complex web of intertextual references present in Ballestra's, Campo's and Santacroce's works.

Most of the books of these three writers contain direct and indirect acknowledgements of authors and texts that have inspired them. Through direct references and quotations made by the characters, the use of epigraphs, the

² Rossana Campo, *In principio erano le mutande* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992); *Duro come l'amore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005).

imitations and rewriting of their own literary models, Ballestra, Campo and Santacroce give hints and clues to their chosen legacies and traditions, encouraging their critics to investigate them. As I hope to have demonstrated with this thesis, exploring this intertextual dialogue opens these authors' fiction to new and deeper meanings. In my research, I have chosen to focus on the influence of women's literary traditions for a number of reasons, the most important being that this type of intertextuality has been largely neglected by critics. It is a general assumption that younger women writers do not have a special relationship with the female writing tradition, because they see gender, and therefore legacies that run along gender lines, as a limiting label. As we have seen in the case of Santacroce, and as Ballestra herself has admitted with regards to her early career, this is partly because the writers themselves tend to dismiss questions that ask them to identify their influences, especially if requested to do so in gender-specific terms. The texts, however, tell us a different story, one where women's literary traditions play a very important role.

We have seen how Ballestra's growth as a writer was determined by her encounter with Joyce Lussu's work, an encounter that has enabled her to articulate her own female narrative voice and to embrace forms traditionally dismissed by avant-garde critics for being associated with women's writing, such as autobiography and romance. Since then, she has proved to herself and to her readers that she can write both in realist and in experimental forms, as well as being able to combine them. In Campo's case, we have seen that her interest in the Western feminist canon, both literary and theoretical, makes an appearance in her characters' conversations, but also that it informs the dialogic structure of her novels, showing, as in Ballestra, that innovative writing and women's literary legacy do not necessarily contradict each other. As for Santacroce, my analysis of her intertextual references to national and international women's poetry, especially to Anne Sexton and Cristina Campo, has revealed a new and fascinating interpretation of her work, one which gives greater depth to her recurrent themes of family conflict, incestuous desire and suicide, by showing them as very individual variations in a long tradition of women's writing. In all cases, it is interesting to note how the themes typical of women's fiction – namely, family, parent/children relationships, motherhood and romantic love – are

central to both the Italian women writers of the 1990s and their chosen literary models, in a strong link between gender, genre and literary tradition.

Even though my study has been limited to only three prominent authors of the ‘pulp’ generation, I believe it is safe to conclude that the writers of the 1990s do indeed entertain a dialogue with a number of narrative canons. In the case of women writers, there is also a strong connection with a variety of female legacies, seemingly selected by each author according to her own preference and according to the need to invest her own themes and voice with the authority of past models: in other words, different mother figures for different authors. We must, however, resist the temptation to ascribe the complex web of intertextual references present in Ballestra’s, Campo’s and Santacroce’s works entirely to the influence of a single dominant tradition for each author. The influence of past women writers on the authors of the 1990s is an important one, but, as I have mentioned many times throughout my thesis, it runs parallel with the dialogue these writers establish with an equally diverse male canon. This canon includes, for example, Leopardi and Chekhov for Ballestra, Freud and Kafka for Campo, Seneca, De Sade and Carroll for Santacroce, all intertextual connections that deserve further exploration and perhaps a thesis of their own.

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