

GOLDSMITHS Research Online

Article

Boldrini, Lucia

Anna Banti and Virginia Woolf: A Grammar of Responsibility

Originally published in Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies

You may cite this version as: Boldrini, Lucia, 2009. Anna Banti and Virginia Woolf: A Grammar of Responsibility. Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies , 10 . pp. 135-149. ISSN 1560-2168 [Article]: Goldsmiths Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/3923/>

This document is the author's final manuscript version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during peer review. Some differences between this version and the publisher's version remain. **You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.**

Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners.

Anna Banti and Virginia Woolf: A Grammar of Responsibility

Lucia Boldrini

This paper considers the dialogue that Anna Banti establishes with two female artists, two of her elders and models: the writer Virginia Woolf, and the Renaissance painter Artemisia Gentileschi. But first, let me set the scene – two scenes in fact, striking in their contrast, haunting in their combination.

The first is the beginning of Banti's *Artemisia* (1947): it is 1944 and the narrator – a projection of Banti herself – is sitting in her nightgown on the ground in the Giardino de' Boboli, in Florence, where she has taken refuge having escaped the destruction of her home; she hears a voice: 'non piangere,' 'don't cry.' The Allied troops were entering Florence, the German army were leaving, blowing up bridges before abandoning the town, and the narrator's home, her possessions, her nearly completed manuscript of Artemisia Gentileschi were lost under the rubble. The voice that chides and comforts her is Artemisia's, a painter from three centuries earlier who was raped as a young woman, denounced her rapist in a trial, had to undergo torture to prove that she was telling the truth, was subjected to the humiliation of a gynaecological examination in the court to prove that she had lost her virginity to the rapist, and who went on to become a famous painter, controversial and defiant in her life, sought after by patrons and pupils.

“Non piangere.” Nel silenzio che divide l'uno dall'altro i miei singhiozzi, questa voce figura una ragazzetta che abbia corso in salita e voglia scaricarsi subito di un'imbasciata pressante. Non alzo la testa. “Non piangere”: la rapidità dello sdrucchiolo rimbalza ora come un chicco di grandine, messaggio, nell'ardore estivo, di alti freddi cieli. Non alzo la testa, nessuno mi è vicino.’

“Don't cry.” In the silence that separates each of my sobs this voice conjures up the image of a young girl who has been running uphill and who wishes to deliver an urgent message as quickly as possible. I do not raise my head. “Don't cry”: the suddenness of these two syllables bounces back now like a

hailstone, a harbinger, in the heat of summer, of high, cold skies.
I do not raise my head; there is no one beside me.’¹

Although this ‘hailstone,’ ‘harbinger [...] of high, cold skies’ describes the shock of hearing young Artemisia’s words, unexpectedly generated by the writer’s imagination, they also evoke what is perhaps one of the most often quoted passages on the twentieth century’s sense of crisis and the effects of war on literature’s (in)ability to communicate experience:

‘Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? [...] A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.’²

Banti, a fragile body shaking with sobs, forced by the violence of destructive explosions from what is familiar, from her home, her work by the irruption of history into the present of her life, hears a voice, like a hailstone out of an open cold sky, that comforts her: ‘don’t cry.’

The second image is that of a woman writing at her table, in a nicely furnished room. I see her illuminated by a lamp, surrounded by books in a comfortable study: an image, you will have recognised, inspired by the famous claim by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) that in order to be a writer, a woman needs a room of her own and a substantial income: ‘it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry.’³

These two scenes could not be more different: on the one hand, a woman with nothing left, whose efforts at writing have just been destroyed, reduced to sleeping in the open space of a public garden, let alone able to find refuge in a room of her own to pursue her literary interests; on the other, someone who advocates the necessity of economic and physical comfort for the possibility of becoming a writer and an intellectual. It

1 Anna Banti, *Artemisia* [1947] (Milan. Bompiani, 1989), 9. English edition: Banti, *Artemisia* trans. Shirley D’Ardia Caracciolo (London. Serpent’s Tail, 2004), 23.

2 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’ [1936], in *Illuminations* Hanna Arendt (ed.), trans. Harry Zorn (London. Pimlico, 1999), 83-107: 84.

3 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* [1929] (London. Penguin, 1945), 103.

is a stark contrast that nevertheless seals a literary relationship across time, bridging different but in some ways comparable moments: one writing in the aftermath of the Great War and as universal suffrage was being extended in Britain to all women in 1928, the other during and then immediately after the Second World War, when voting rights were finally extended to women in Italy; yet both recognising the struggle that women still had to face to have equal rights as writers, as intellectuals, and as members of society.

So on the one hand, rubble; on the other, five hundred pounds a year and a room of one's own. Let me add a third image: it is that of another woman, Marguerite Duras, who recalls, at the opening of the diary that she kept during the liberation of Paris, the episode when, working for the Bureau Central de Renseignement et d'Action, she sat at a small table at the Gare d'Orsay in Paris, interviewing refugees and gathering information to pass on to the families, and three officers came up to her and told her that she and her colleagues could work, if they wanted, standing up, but they cannot have the table.⁴

Introducing this incident with words that recall Benjamin's inability to narrate experience for those who return from the war ('War leaves no time for memories. Rather than having stories to tell, we are left with the impossibility of telling stories'), Denis Hollier reads this episode as an allegory of the way war removes the support structures, the foundations on which writing relies, when writers, at times of destruction, of catastrophe, have nothing to fall back on, nothing stable on which to write.⁵ This, however, is precisely what generates literature: 'literature turns toward war [...] because it sees war as what threatens – or promises – to take away its conditions of possibility,' writes Hollier,⁶ this time echoing Maurice Blanchot's assertion that 'literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question,' when its very possibility of existence, its right to exist, is in doubt; when the negation of the 'thing itself' inherent in the

4 Marguerite Duras, *The War: A Memoir* trans. Barbara Bray (New York. The New Press, 1986), 10-13.

5 Denis Hollier, *Absent Without Leave: French Literature under the Threat of War* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass., and London. Harvard University Press, 1997), 4.

6 *Ibid.*, 4.

symbolic nature of language shows how literature ‘gain[s] from death the possibility of speaking the truth of speech.’⁷

What greater impossibility for literature, what more exact description of war’s removal of the condition for writing, than a woman sobbing in her nightgown in a public garden, whose home, whose table, ink, and even the manuscript have been destroyed by the bombs, but who nevertheless finds in literature – in *her* Artemisia – the possibility and the necessity of writing? But this is in many ways what Woolf writes of, too, even if it may at first sight seem like an appeal for comfort and privilege. Women who write must do so to create themselves out of a void of traditions, of language, of the structures that can support their efforts, that can give them the confidence to write but also the right to be read (‘they had no tradition behind them [...] there was no common sentence ready for her use’).⁸ Thus, Woolf concludes, women must write to *support* themselves – to create their tables as it were, their own traditions, a language to rest on comfortably, not just materially but in order to expand the possibilities of their imagination, for themselves and for others who will follow. This writing is all the more urgent and all the more valuable precisely because women currently lack such support: they write out of nothing.

Anna Banti, who wrote repeatedly about Virginia Woolf and translated *Jacob’s Room* into Italian,⁹ in particular recognised the force of Woolf’s views on the opportunities for women to be writers, and on the responsibility of the woman intellectual (‘La responsabilità della donna intellettuale’ is the title of one of the essays where she cites Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*) to open a path for others – not just other women but other disenfranchised members of society.¹⁰

7 Maurice Blanchot, ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ [1949] in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays* George Quasha (ed.), trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lamberton (New York. Station Hill, 1999), 359-399: 359, 378.

8 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 76.

9 See e.g. Banti’s essays ‘Umanità della Woolf,’ *Paragone* 28 (1952), 45-53, republished in *Opinioni* (Milan. Il Saggiatore, 1961), 66-74; ‘Il testamento di Virginia Woolf,’ *Paragone* 168 (1963), 100-104; and her translation of Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* as *La camera di Giacobbe* (Milan. Mondadori, 1950), republished in 1980 as *La camera di Jacob*.

10 Anna Banti, ‘La responsabilità della donna intellettuale,’ in *Le donne e la cultura* Ada Marchesini Gobetti et al (eds.), introduction by Sibilla Aleramo (Rome. Edizioni Noi Donne, 1953), 89-93.

When we speak of the role of the intellectual in society, especially in the immediate post-war period, it is inevitable that one thinks of Jean-Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?* (1948), probably the most important intervention on the subject of *littérature engagée*, committed literature.¹¹ Banti's sense of commitment as a writer is very strong. There is, for example, the commitment to unflinching honesty in demythologising the rhetoric of Italian unification in the novel *Noi Credevamo*, a bitter reflection on the unification of Italy in the Risorgimento that, narrated through the voice of one of its disillusioned 'heroes' (based on a relative of Banti herself, in the typical mixture of fictional and biographical / historical material that we find in much of her work), exposes the political power games, hypocrisy and betrayal masked under the enthusiasm for the liberation and unification of the country and its official triumphal accounts.¹² There is the commitment to analysing her own writing, to exploring of her own preoccupations and motivations as a woman and as a writer (in *Artemisia*, and especially in the largely autobiographical *Un grido lacerante*).¹³ There is a commitment to confronting the ethical implications of the method that has been chosen to give voice to historical women (in the case of *Artemisia*, as I shall argue below, but also, to a good extent, in the case of Marguerite d'Orléans and Violante in *La camicia bruciata*, another novel in which the narrator writes about a historical female character and engages in a dialogue with her).¹⁴ While it would be difficult to find in Banti's precious, carefully constructed prose, any confirmation of Sartre's dislike for 'poetic prose,'¹⁵ her sense of the responsibility of the artist towards the preservation of the clarity of the language also championed by Sartre is expressed in the preface 'Al lettore' ('To the Reader') of *Artemisia*, which Banti describes as 'il tentativo d'immettere nella palude bastarda dell'italiano letterario in corso

11 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* [1948] trans. Bernard Frechtman (London and New York. Routledge, 2001). Maurice Blanchot's 'Literature and the Right to Death,' quoted above, as well as other important essays such as Theodor W. Adorno's 'Commitment' [1962] in *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 2 (New York. Columbia University Press, 1992), 76-94 were more or less direct responses to Sartre's intervention.

12 Banti, *Noi Credevamo* (Milan. Mondadori, 1967).

13 Banti, *Un grido lacerante* (Milan. Rizzoli, 1981).

14 Banti, *La camicia bruciata* (Milan. Mondadori, 1973).

15 Sartre deploringly describes this as 'using words for the obscure harmonics which resound about them and which are made up of vague meanings which are in contradiction with the clear meaning,' *What is Literature?* 219.

vecchie e potabilissime fonti dell'uso popolare nostrano' ('an attempt at infusing into the polluted [bastard] swamp of contemporary literature the pure spring waters of our [popular] language as it once was').¹⁶ These words, while echoing Manzoni's famous declaration that in his revisions of *I promessi sposi* he had rinsed his language in the waters of the Arno,¹⁷ also chime in with Sartre's contemporaneous enjoining the writer/intellectual to call a spade a spade, to express clear messages, to restore to the language the precision that had been lost under the hypocrisy of the propaganda of war and of fascist occupation: 'If words are sick,' he writes in 'The Situation of the Writer in 1947,' 'it is up to us to cure them.'¹⁸ It is, indeed, Banti's literary and theoretical engagement with realism and with Manzoni's practice of and reflections on the historical novel that sustain her literary and social commitment.¹⁹

This emphasis on clear, exact, realist use of language appears to lead into the opposite direction from the one taken by Woolf, whose stylistic experimentalism rejected what she called the materialism of realist writers who, she claimed, believed in the ability of conventional language and forms (calling a spade a spade, to use Sartre's expression) to convey reality accurately; while for Woolf reality is, famously, the luminous halo, not the series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged of which she writes in 'Modern Fiction' (1925).²⁰ And indeed for some critics herein lies a major difference between Banti and Woolf.

The use of the meandering style, the weaving in and out of different consciousnesses, is closely related for Woolf to this intellectual, literary, and even political purpose. When, in their ongoing diatribe, Arnold Bennett accused Woolf, in his review of *A Room of One's Own*, of being unable to resist 'the floral enticement' and straying off the path of straightforward realist narrative ('whereas a woman cannot walk through a meadow in

16 Banti, *Artemisia*, 7; *Artemisia* trans. S. d'Ardia Caracciolo, 21 (the emendations in square brackets are mine).

17 See Alessandro Manzoni, *Lettere* Cesare Arieti (ed.), 3 vols. (Milan. Mondadori, 1970), I, 438.

18 Sartre, 218-19.

19 On this, see also Paola Carù, "'Uno sguardo acuto dalla storia': Anna Banti's Historical Writings," in *Gendering Italian Fiction: Feminist Revisions of Italian History* Maria Ornella Marotti and Gabriella Brooke (eds.) (Madison. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London. Associated University Presses, 1999), 87-101.

20 Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' [1925], in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life: Selected Essays, Volume Two*, Rachel Bowlby (ed.) (London. Penguin, 1993), 5-12.

June without wandering all over the place to pick attractive blossoms, a man can. Virginia Woolf cannot resist the floral enticement'),²¹ one must wonder whether he was at all aware that, for Woolf, straying off the gravel path onto the lawn was a transparent allegory of her intentional pursuit of a narrative technique that departed from the straight, realist, beaten path of her (male) Victorian and Edwardian predecessors and which was, precisely, part of the rebellion against patriarchy and against the gender inequality that also prevented her from entering the library and acquiring an equal education.

Banti frequently indicates Woolf as one of her models and emphasises the importance that the earlier writer had for her thought and for her work (despite her rejection of the label of 'feminism') and critics have also identified direct influences and intertextual relationships in the works of the two writers (for example, between *Artemisia* and *Orlando*).²² Others, however, have emphasised how Banti – by comparison with Virginia Woolf's greater formal and stylistic experimentalism, which, as I have just argued, is directly related to her greater freedom from, or rebellion against, a patriarchal literary tradition – is still too tied to the realism of the Italian, mainly male, tradition of the historical novel, in the wake of Alessandro Manzoni (a debt that indeed Banti quite freely acknowledges in her several essays on Manzoni and the *romanzo storico*); and, stylistically, to the elitist (also mainly male) tradition of the *prosa d'arte*. From this perspective, her open admiration for Woolf is deemed by some to be contradicted by her practice. Nicoletta Careddu, for example, in an insightful essay on Banti's translation of *Jacob's Room*, finds that while the Italian writer admires her predecessor's engagement with social and political issues and her polemical reflections on the exclusion of

21 Arnold Bennett, 'Queen of the High-Brows,' *The Evening Standard*, 28 November 1929, in *The Evening Standard Years: Books and Persons 1926-1931*, Andrew Mylett (ed.) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), 326-328: 327. In this article Bennett denies the "feud" between them, and praises Woolf for writing well, then proceeds to criticise her quite fiercely.

22 See the essays by Banti on Woolf cited in previous footnotes; and the essays collected in Daria Valentini and Paola Carù (eds.), *Beyond Artemisia: Female Subjectivity, History, and Culture in Anna Banti* (Chapel Hill, NC: Annali d'Italianistica, 2003), many of which discuss Banti's interest in and similarities with Woolf; see in particular Daria Valentini, 'Female Bonding in Banti's Fiction,' 49-62; Sharon Wood, 'Deconstructing Historical Narrative: The "tragedia coniugale" of Banti's *La Camicia Bruciata*,' 89-108; and Paola Carù, 'The "Unaware" Feminist Intellectual: Anna Banti and Feminism,' 111-132.

women from history, she nevertheless fails to grasp the similar import of Woolf's high modernist, adventurously experimentalist style, attempting instead to domesticate it into a much more traditional realist writing, thus demonstrating an inconsistency between her theory and her practice in translating Woolf.²³

It is not my intention to dispute these views – in fact I find them acute and persuasive. However, one may also argue that the terms to consider when we look at Woolf and Banti should not be just realism (seen as adherence to the stylistic conventions of a male tradition) vs. modernism (seen as innovative practices that write against that tradition). It may be useful also to compare what Woolf writes in her essay 'The New Biography' about the impossible but necessary reconciliation of the 'granite' of fact and the 'rainbow' of personality in biography, and what Banti argues, in her essay on 'Romanzo e romanzo storico,' about the role of fact and its representation in the novel, drawing a tripartite distinction between the 'historical' or 'actual fact' ('fatto avvenuto'), the 'invented fact' ('fatto inventato') and the 'supposed' or 'presumed fact' ('fatto supposto') that, thanks to the intervention of memory, elevates the 'raw' 'historical fact' above the order of the chronicle, allowing for an effective understanding of and engagement with the actual historical conditions portrayed.²⁴ It is through the necessary negotiations of the 'supposed fact' that an acknowledgement emerges (an acknowledgement of the necessity of responsibility and commitment *as a literary writer*) that the experience of real, historical loss and destruction cannot be evaded. And it is in this acknowledgement that the 'granite,' the stoniness of rubble, in its intractable materiality, *generates* the 'rainbow' of imagined, presumed reality, enabling an effective reflection on individual historical experience and on the historical connection between different individuals (like Banti and Artemisia), but also, as I shall go on to argue, leading to the recognition of what is ultimately the irreducible singularity of individual experience.

23 Nicoletta Careddu, 'Modernism Misunderstood: Anna Banti Translates Virginia Woolf,' *Comparative Literature* 56.1 (2004) 57-76.

24 Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography' [1927], in *Granite and Rainbow* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988), 149-155; Anna Banti, 'Romanzo e romanzo storico' (originally published in *Paragone* 20 (1951), 3-7), in *Opinioni* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961), 38-43: 40, 42. On this see Wood, 94; Paola Giuli, 'Anna Banti's *Artemisia*: Reinscribing the Female Gaze in Italian Literature,' *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 48, (2001-2002), 71-83; and Paola Carù, "Uno sguardo acuto dalla storia."

The rubble and the loss point to the fragility of the material, its lack of solidity, of stability, of safety. A room and five hundred pounds a year do not save the house from the bombs, the manuscript from destruction. But precisely because they cannot save us materially, they also point to the necessity of the imagination – the rainbow – in order for the individual to survive as an individual, a writer and a subject, and a human being among other human beings, full of compassion for their plight. Thus if Banti's renovation of literary form may appear less adventurous than Woolf's, it is in fact also sustained by a constant critical engagement that involves her much more directly in her subject matter, more personally – literally in the first person as a woman with a particular duty towards language, reality, history and female subjects – and which also leads her to question the stability of the experiential, historical subject. I would claim that her stylistic choices too support this engagement, undermining at the same time the stability of the realist subject.²⁵

To illustrate this, I would like to focus on one particular aspect, Banti's use of the grammatical first person in *Artemisia* – a first person that sometimes represents herself as narrator of *Artemisia*, other times is taken over by *Artemisia*; others yet it starts as *Artemisia* but slips back into the narrator (a narrator that always remains very close to Banti herself), or vice versa, and which constantly alternates with a grammatical third person that however is also never stable, at times slipping into the first, sometimes developing into an explicit dialogue between the two women, between the narrator-Banti and her imagined reconstruction of the doubly lost *Artemisia* (the *Artemisia* here presented is as much a reconstruction of the previous lost construction as it is of the historical woman painter). As I shall argue below, this dialogue between the narrator-Banti and *Artemisia*, often pleading, sometimes defiant, at times a quarrel, also raises a crucial ethical question about the very technique of giving voice to another individual – a technique that we find in such (at times controversial) novels as Robert Graves's *The Story of Mary*

25 Susanna Scarparo reads the rewriting of female history in the novel as a collaborative enterprise by *Artemisia* and Banti, and as a metafictional challenge to the truth of official (male) history. While I do not at all dispute this reading, I am more interested in this essay to analyse the linguistic form that this challenge takes, and its implications for the subject and its participation in history. See Susanna Scarparo, 'Artemisia: The Invention of a "Real" Woman,' *Italica* 79.3 (2002), 363-378.

Powell, Wife to Mr Milton (1943),²⁶ William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967),²⁷ or Peter Carey's more recent *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000),²⁸ and which Woolf never adopts in *Orlando*²⁹ or *Flush*,³⁰ both subtitled 'A Biography' and both written in the third person.

Banti's prose does not present itself as the frontal or ironic attack on patriarchal literary forms that Woolf privileges in her 'biographies' (one may also think of the 'biography' of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*), but it does respond, *personally*, to the character-as-person, the historical, once flesh-and-blood living being that she represents in her work – we may take the word 'represent' both in the literary-artistic sense, and in the legal sense of speaking for someone in front of the 'jury of readers' and of 'history' (a context that is especially appropriate for Artemisia, both the accuser and the victim of a court case and of an unjust humiliating system). For there is a double responsibility involved in this: while this practice follows the ethical impulse to give voice to someone whose story may have been silenced, misinterpreted, or forgotten,³¹ at the same time it raises the ethical question of the right to appropriate someone else's voice, identity, subjectivity (the controversy over Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is a case in point), in order to reinterpret it from our own point of view, and maybe for our own ends or needs – as Banti does in calling Artemisia to her aid when her world has literally collapsed around her and all seems lost.

Let us then return to the dialogism intrinsic in the use and the oscillations of the grammatical person in *Artemisia*, a dialogism that is neither quite Socratic, though it is maieutic in giving birth to a new subjectivity, nor quite Bakhtinian, though it points to the intrinsic polyphony of the genre of the fictional auto/biography. This dialogism is especially prominent in the first half of the novel, where the text abounds with questions that the two women ask each other, injunctions, requests,

26 Robert Graves, *The Story of Mary Powell, Wife to Mr Milton* (London. Cassell, 1943).

27 William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York. Random House, 1967).

28 Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang* [2000] (London. Faber, 2001).

29 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* [1928] (London. The Hogarth Press, 1978).

30 Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (London. The Hogarth Press, 1933).

31 And in so doing follows a similar impulse to that which also sustains works as diverse as the rewritings of literary classics such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London. Deutsch, 1966) or J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (London. Secker & Warburg, 1986) or the fictional autobiographies listed above.

answers, encouragements, sometimes bickering. The reconstruction – of *Artemisia* the manuscript, of *Artemisia* the historical figure and wronged exceptional woman, and of the narrator-Banti herself after the trauma and destruction of war – thus takes place through this reciprocal, relational, dialogic nature of the narrative representation, the weaving in and out of the first and third person, often also addressing each other in the second, as if the unsettling, traumatic experience that each had undergone (war, rape) had destabilised the subject and broken it into myriad fragments to be reconstructed. Out of loss, the need to continue writing, the reciprocal questionings that give birth to the new individual, rising again from the rubble, from the destruction, the descent into the hell of war and violence.

But then, exactly half-way through the novel, when some time has passed since the destruction of the bombs of 1944, when the narrator finds herself to be stronger, when the house and the room and the table to write on have been rebuilt – when women get the vote in Italy at last, and at least formally, they acquire the freedom and the rights that they had not had before, and while continuing to fight for equality also must recognise their greater privilege over those who preceded them – then, there comes the moment of letting go, of recognition and respect for the integrity, unknowability, separateness of the other woman:

‘Son scadute le franchigie della guerra [...] solo oggi m’accorgo di averle mancato di rispetto e che il suo vagheggiato consenso è, da lungo tempo, un’assenza. [...] Provo ancora una volta a commuoverla. [...] Artemisia non risponde, la sua lontananza è senza misura, stellare. [...] Mi ravvedo; e dopo un anno che le rovine son rovine, né mostrano di poter essere di più o di meno di tante altre antiche, mi restringo alla mia memoria corta per condannare l’arbitrio presuntuoso di dividere con una morta di tre secoli i terrori del mio tempo. Piove sulle rovine che ho pianto [...] Le due tombe di Artemisia, quella vera e quella fittizia, sono adesso eguali, polvere respirata. Sappiamo, una volta di più, di esser poveri [...]. Per questa ragione, non più esaltata, ma in segreta espiazione, la storia di Artemisia continua.’

‘The immunities granted by war [...] have ended [...] only today do I realize that I lacked respect in her regard and that what I longingly took to be her consent has been, for a long time now, her absence. [...] I try once more to move her. [...]

There is no reply from Artemisia; she is immeasurably distant, light years away. [...] I acknowledge my mistakes; and now that the ruins have been ruins for a year and show no sign of being in any way different from so many other, ancient ones, I limit myself to the short span of my own memory, condemning my presumptuous idea of trying to share the terrors of my own epoch with a woman who has been dead for three centuries. It is raining on the ruins over which I wept [...] Artemisia's two graves, the real and the fictitious, are now the same, breathed-in dust. We have found out once again that we are poor, and the poor must learn to persevere. For this reason, and not for any more exalted one, but in secret expiation, I will continue the story of Artemisia [the story of Artemisia continues].³²

And thus in the second half of the novel the story continues, in the third person, as a novelised biography and no longer as dialogue or exchange³³ – except one final, brief moment, when Artemisia, having completed a self-portrait as an allegory of *The Art of Painting* and, in Banti's interpretation, having given herself the features of the young Neapolitan painter Annella de Rosa, who had been killed by her husband, acknowledges Banti's courage as a woman artist:

'Ma la mano di Artemisia è forte e Annella non se ne libera. Ritratto o no, una donna che dipinge nel milleseicentoquaranta è un atto di coraggio, vale per Annella e per alter cento almeno, fino ad oggi. "Vale anche per te" conclude, al lume di candela, nella stanza che la guerra ha reso fosca, un suono brusco e secco. Un libro si è chiuso, di scatto.'

32 Banti, *Artemisia*, 101-105; *Artemisia* trans. S. d'Ardia Caracciolo, 135-139 (the emendation in square brackets is mine).

33 Of course, I do not mean to say that the narrator does not recognise the other's integrity and autonomy until she has returned to normality, the rubble has been cleared out, and she has a room of her own again – until, that is, she no longer needs Artemisia to help her through her own trauma. The recognition of our debts, as modern women, to those that have come before us and have fought for recognition of their dignity as women is there all along, together with the acknowledgement of the historical conditions and conditioning of the individual's existence. See, for example, 'La nostra povera libertà si lega all'umile libertà di una vergine che nel milleseicentoundici non ha se non quella del proprio corpo integro e non può capacitarsi in eterno di averla perduta.' (Banti, *Artemisia*, 22); ('Our paltry freedom is linked to the humble freedom of a virgin who, in the year sixteen hundred and eleven, has only the freedom of her own intact body, the eternal loss of which she cannot ever come to terms with.' *Artemisia* trans. S. d'Ardia Caracciolo, 39).

‘But Artemisia’s hand is strong and Annella cannot free herself. Whether it is a self-portrait or not, a woman who paints in sixteen hundred and forty is very courageous, and this counts for Annella and for at least a hundred others, right up to the present. “It counts for you too,” she concludes, by the light of a candle, in this room rendered gloomy by war, a short, sharp sound. A book has been closed, suddenly.’³⁴

The dead painter addresses the writer one last time. It is a moment that mirrors that initial ‘non piangere,’ now uttered however from the perspective of experience and of mutual recognition: no longer the young girl comforting a woman sobbing, with nothing left, but the acknowledgment of Banti’s courage in having rebuilt herself into a writer, of Artemisia’s strength in having persevered to make herself into an artist. These words re-state the connection between them across the centuries and with all the women artists (including Woolf, surely) who have had to struggle, who continue to reclaim such recognition, in a ‘dilatarsi della personalità,’ an ‘expansion of personality’ similar to that which Banti finds in Woolf’s identification in *A Room of One’s Own* with Lady Winchelsea, Aphra Benn, Jane Austen and so on, including the poor and hypothetical Judith Shakespeare.³⁵ Whose room is it, illuminated by a candle, made gloomy by war? Which war, indeed, the Second World War, which is now past, or the Thirty Years’ War, which was draining the resources of the English court, where Artemisia had a room, and a candle by which to work? The former has so far been the normal referent of the expression ‘the war,’ but it is probably the latter that is being referenced now. In effect, however, this is a room for all women: poorer, gloomier than those of the men, with just a candle to work by; the war that threatens the artist with the risk of ‘having nothing to fall back on,’³⁶ is for women a perpetual one.

Apart from this further, crucial, and final moment of dialogic exchange between the two women (and that as we have just seen extends the chain to Annella, and to all other women artists and writers, and which marks its finality by the sharp sudden shutting of the book), the second half of the book is essentially a third-person account, following that clear moment of recognition of the essential independence of each

34 Banti, *Artemisia*, 182; *Artemisia* trans. S. d’Ardia Caracciolo, 232.

35 Banti, ‘Il Testamento di Virginia Woolf,’ 102.

36 Hollier, 4.

individual, of the autonomous right not to be *represented* by another, appropriated for another's own ends; of the essential separateness of each human being – which is not individualistic solipsism but an ethical acknowledgement of the other's integrity and the only position from which the trans-historical and inter-personal relationship can be one of awareness and respectful responsiveness – which, I would argue, is precisely the point of having Artemisia address the narrator one final time towards the end of the novel.

Banti thus returns to the biography of the other, of Artemisia, in the third person, interrupting the dialogue and the impersonation and allowing the other to be presented more objectively, at some distance, *because* she now has a room of her own again, her house, her table to rest on, the comfortable income that allow her to *choose* to write – just like Woolf, who never lacked a room of her own and a comfortable income and who had chosen the third person to represent her characters in the novels that she had called 'biographies' in order to attack the patriarchal genre of biography, with its delusions of the objective (male) biographer that reveals the truth about another, and its notion of the worthy subject of biography (that is, again, male, upper class, and a public figure). So Woolf uses the third person throughout in her fictional biographies, Banti *returns* to the third person in her fictional auto/biography – and allows her narrator and her character a final exchange in order to reiterate this courageous achievement of the possession of a room, however gloomily lit, however precarious.

Yet, neither Banti's nor Woolf's is ever quite a comfortable third person, objective, mastering the subject as the traditional male narrators that Woolf mocks in her 'biographies.' During one of Orlando's escapades in the eighteenth century, after he has become a woman but feels equally comfortable donning male clothes and visiting Nell and the other prostitutes at night, we are informed that

'[...] many were the fine tales told and many amusing observations they made, for it cannot be denied that when women get together – but hist – they are always careful to see that the doors are shut and that not a word of it gets into print. All they desire is – but hist again – is that not a man's step on the stair? All they desire, we were about to say when the gentleman took the very words out of our mouths.'³⁷

37 Woolf, *Orlando*, 198.

These words, significantly, quoted by Banti in one of her essays,³⁸ show an interesting sliding from the third person plural that describes the women (such as ‘they made,’ ‘they are careful,’ ‘they desire’) to a first person plural in a sort of ‘royal we’ that should signify authority and mastery (‘we were about to say’), to end up finally with a very odd ‘our mouths’ that gives up any pretence of being the authoritative *pluralis maiestatis* and suddenly indicates instead a complicity of the narrator with the women of the group who fall silent at the approach of ‘the gentleman.’ The exclusivity of the room and the possibility for women to speak is always under the threat of the arrival of a man (that this is a man who is coming to avail himself of the services of a prostitute is telling).

So, in *Orlando* the third person’s pretence to objectivity crumbles, and in *Artemisia*, the return to the third person constantly remains under the shadow of that earlier dialogue, that dialogic ‘I’ which dominates the first half of the text and renounces any pretence to mastery in an *expiation* for and an acknowledgement of the narrator’s own vulnerability, and which re-emerges as the sign of a reciprocal acknowledgement and a respect for the integrity, courage and vulnerability of the other. In neither Woolf nor Banti is the grammatical third person thus a mark of objectivity; it signals, rather, a grammar of responsibility that tries to capture the rainbow-like refractions of subjectivity, while recognising both the granite-like inescapable singularity of individual experience, and the strength to be drawn from the mutual recognition of individual courage.

Goldsmiths University of London

38 See Banti, ‘Umanità della Woolf,’ 51.