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Abstract:

Based on the analysis of an excerpt from the last chapter of *L'uovo di Gertrudina* (2003), this article investigates the forms, themes, and functions of self-reflection in Laura Pariani's fiction. It looks at its meta-fictional features (illusion-breaking devices highlighting the constructed nature of fiction as an artifice: deconstructed frames, non-linear narrations, juxtaposition and intertwining of several stories, multiple focalisations, narrative embeddings, multilingualism, and intertextuality), its self-reflexive traits (reflection of the authorial self in the text, in a character with deliberate autobiographical resonances), and the meta-narrative aspects (the female narrator's pondering on the act of narrating, its processes, its aims). It shows how Pariani uses textual and narrative strategies such as those included under the umbrella-term of self-reflection (typical of postmodern literature, although not exclusive to it), and how, at the same time, her literary project is marked by a strong ethical stance: a moral agenda in postmodern disguise. Irony is discarded, in favour of a renewed trust in the ethical dimension of the act of writing, in the role of the storyteller, and in an empathic narrative pact with the reader. Finally, Pariani's ethics of self-reflection is discussed as an example of the common ground existing between postmodernism and feminisms, allied in the rejection of hegemonic master narratives and in the choice of plural, partial, and minor narratives.

**Gigliola Sulis (University of Leeds)**

***'Forse succede sempre così quando si scrive':***

**Self-Reflection between Postmodernism and Feminism in Laura Pariani's writing**

Mi perdo nel passato; smarrisco anni, secoli. Mi ritrovo con Assunta quindicenne che, nell'età in cui ci si prefigura la vita futura e la propria morte, legge su un vecchio libro di devozioni come la Beata Mariana de Predes si rinchiuse volontariamente per tutta la vita nella sua stanza dove, tra due candele accese, aveva posto un catafalco con uno scheletro di legno, davanti al quale passava il tempo meditando sulla morte. Succede proprio mentre, dalla sua cornice di ardesia, la foto scattata in piazza Duomo nel mio quarto compleanno mi rimanda il viso della bambina che sento di essere ancora qualche volta, quando avverto i mondi di tutte le possibili storie girarmi intorno: con le vergini combattive delle favole di mia nonna, il segreto della Missione salesiana nell'isola Dawson, le mani che si aggrappano a un soggolo che toglie il respiro ne *La monaca forzata* di Mosè Bianchi, il Seicento manzoniano in cui qualcuno spasima sul serio e non per le solite schermaglie amorose di *Filli*... E allora nel cuore i nomi mi si mescolano, i tempi s'incrociano: *apriti sesamo, chiuditi sesamo*... Ché mi pare che tutti i personaggi siano racchiusi nella stessa storia, la mia, e che, senza che davvero me ne rendessi conto, episodi intimi da conservare sigillosamente nel chiuso delle mie fantasie o dei miei rimorsi siano passati sulla bocca di tutti, diventando interpretazioni di altri, pagine di libri.

Forse succede sempre così quando si scrive: una monaca che apre la ferrata di un convento di Monza può diventare di volta in volta una sventurata che risponde, o una Salesiana appassionata che riflette sulla vanità delle parole, o una mezzadonna che, nel buio di una foresta che si sta mangiando il mondo, prega il Santissimo Arcangelo di liberarla dalla sua carne. Forse succede sempre così anche quando si legge: ché da qualche altra parte, in un altro tempo, qualcuno racconterà una storia che ha a che fare intimamente con noi, qualcosa che riguarda la polvere che siamo, il nostro niente che reclama amore; qualcosa che teniamo chiuso nella memoria e mai daremo in pasto agli altri. Ma il meccanismo del vivere, per cui una parte di noi trascorre in altre vite, come le case in cui abbiamo vissuto e che ora occupano altri, finestre in cui ci siamo affacciati e dalle quali adesso uno sconosciuto guarda lo stesso paesaggio, frasi che abbiamo pensato amato scritto e che diventano pensieri di chi li leggerà; l'è tua, l'è mia, l'è morta l'umbria ... Uno nessuno e centomila siamo per gli altri qualcuno non meno inventato di un personaggio secondario di un libro sconosciuto, una comparsa nel film della vita altrui. Ojalá te abras, ojalá te cierres. Con ritmi stravolti, con gesti deformati, nel multiverso che si agita intorno a me, Candelaria può tramutarsi in rondine fuggendo di là dal mare; nel quadro di Francesco Guardi, Il parlatorio delle monache, Antonia si dà agli spassi davanti a un teatrino di gioppini, io mi metto a giocare nel giardino di palazzo Marliani con la mia levriera; e Gertrudina tiene in bilico tra le mani l'uovo primordiale, origine di tutte le galline.

Ché davvero ogni storia questa sera sembra avvenire nello stesso istante: Antonia dalla finestra di palazzo Pusterla sta ascoltando il canto di un canarino che parla di rose in giardini fioriti quando il vento di primavera soffia dolcemente; Virginia Galilei, perduta nel profumo ardente del gelsomino, monta a cavallo di un unicorno; Gertrude chiude in una cassetta di legno le tristi bambole-monache della sua infanzia, mentre con cuore intenerito pensa allo sguardo del giovane paggio, e non è ancora venuto il tempo che converse mormorino e che a una di loro scappi detta una frase di troppo e finisca sotterrata in un pozzo. E nel contempo io, dall'altra parte del mare, di ritorno dal Fin del Mundo cammino in una calda notte cilena, triste di non aver ancora raccontato a nessuno la storia di suor Assunta: sotto la luce di un fiume di stelle a illuminare, a un passo dal palazzo della Moneda, il barrio Brasil abbandonato, facendo risaltare le facciate liberty rovinate, le tegole stinte, i colori delle vetrate sfondate, le tristi erbacce del selciato. Ma, all'imprevista, un uccellino si mette a cantare sfiorando con estrema tenerezza una fontana vuota d'acqua, al centro di una piazzetta circolare, raccontando di altri tempi, de antes, quando queste case erano ancora vive ...<sup>1</sup>

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The definition of metafictional novels that Patricia Waugh proposed in a seminal study is well suited to Laura Pariani's works: 'Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on a principle of fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion.'<sup>2</sup> Constructed at every level on principles of fragmentation, plurality and marginality, and therefore characterised by

non-naturalistic strategies, Pariani's writings insist on the thematisation of writing processes and on the detailed representation of the contexts in which stories are created and transmitted. In a growing progression over time, the obsessive recurrence of a nucleus of metanarrative reflections can be perceived in her work. From *La Signora dei porci* (1999) onwards, these reflections, variously scattered in her texts, are often united around a figure vaguely presented as Pariani's alter ego. The reflection of the writer in a textual person is not marked by a mechanical autobiographism, but rather brings to mind the game of broken mirrors. It is an anonymous 'Scrittrice' (authorial upper-case letter) in *La Signora dei porci*, where the narrative voice is rather associated with the 'Mietitore' (death), or the interviewer 'sciura Laura', a Lombard writer who is interested 'alle tradizioni, le leggende della montagna, le storie di una volta', in *La valle delle donne lupo* (2011).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, with an overturning of gender, in *Questo viaggio chiamavamo amore* (2015) it is the doctor Carlo Pariani who transcribes the story of the patient Dino Campana.<sup>4</sup> The authorial alter ego can appear as a character distinct from the narrator (as in *La Signora* or in *Quando Dio ballava il tango*, 2002), or embodying the narrating voice, as in *L'uovo di Gertrudina* (2003), which will be analysed here, or in *La traduzione* (2004).

Novels and short stories tend to draw upon some facts about the author, like her age (born in 1951) and some life experiences to which fundamental value is ascribed.<sup>5</sup> Her trips to Argentina (and especially one in 1966 with her mother, looking for her grandfather who had emigrated in the twenties and never returned) testify to the rhizomatic rootedness of her personal and family history, in its oscillation between Northern Italy and South America. Childhood places such as Busto Arsizio and Magnago (north of Milan) alternate with the village of Orta San Giulio and the province of modern-day Novara, where she is now based, as well as with Buenos Aires and the region of Patagonia. On a structural level, the authorial double first interrupts the plots, and then connects their fragments with her presence; thematically, she reflects on the mechanisms of writing and storytelling, on their meaning, ending, and limits. With a process of *mise en abyme*, many of the characters (women, above all), act as second-degree narrators, either in the first person or mediated in the free indirect speech of the narrator. Two examples among many are Cora and Catterina in the feminine and family-based

genealogy of storytellers in *Quando Dio ballava il tango*: they comment on both their own storytelling and that of others, on writing, on listening, and on reading, while often embedding other stories within the main one.<sup>6</sup> Also, the fact that the language of both narrators and characters tends to be a mixture of Italian, dialects, Spanish and other foreign languages has a double value. On the one hand, the autobiographical resonances are evident; on the other multilingualism contributes to the anti-illusionist strategy: by complicating the understanding of the linguistic code, it reveals the non-transparency of language under a metalinguistic perspective, thus underlining the unnaturalness of communication.<sup>7</sup>

While all of these elements break the realist illusion of the story told and emphasize its being an artificial construction in a non-naturalist perspective, they simultaneously heighten the reality effect of the act of storytelling and strengthen overall its aesthetic illusion and its claim for authenticity. The reader recognises, at the margins and in the textual interstices, the invariants of the different incarnations of the writer-character, who is then projected back outside the text onto the figure of the author.<sup>8</sup> The reader shares with the writer the intellectual complicity in the deciphering of textual constructedness (part of the postmodern game of overturning the traditional expectations of the reader of fiction), but s/he also develops an empathic trust in the ethical project of the storyteller, and in the truth content of the authorial macrotext. Birgit Neumann summarised well how some types of self-reflection (here, metanarratives) proceed in diverse directions, both exposing the artificiality of the narrated story and strengthening the ‘illusion of authenticity’ of the narrative act:

Metanarrative passages need not destroy aesthetic illusion (Wolf → Illusion (Aesthetic) [1]), but may also contribute to substantiating the illusion of authenticity that a narrative seeks to create. It is precisely the concept of narratorial illusionism, suggesting the presence of a speaker or narrator, that illustrates that metanarrative expressions can serve to create a different type of naturalisation, vis. what Fludernik (1996: 341) has called the frame of storytelling.<sup>9</sup>

As we will see later on, Pariani narrativises the thoughts and anxieties of the character-writer – an authorial double in turn mirrored and refracted in the narrating characters, readers, and listeners to stories. At the same time, through her metanarrative comments she highlights the ethical dimension of narration, in primis the empathic identification of the narrator with the narrated characters. The self-reflexive dimension of the text contributes to the creation of a relationship with the reader in which the ethical dimension is not put aside, but rather modulated in postmodern fashion. A narrative pact is established, marked by solidarity within a community that includes the narrated characters, the narrative voice(s), the female author, and readers.

To highlight how Laura Pariani constructs her ‘moral agenda [...] in postmodern disguise’,<sup>10</sup> this article investigates the intertwining of different traits associated with self-reflection in her work. Without aiming for an exact taxonomy of the phenomena and without entering into the terminological debate, the following pages will follow the distinction made by Ansgar Nünning between ‘metafiction’ and ‘metanarration’: ‘metafiction radically undermines our notions of stable realities, metanarration confines itself to thematising and reflecting upon narrative processes and structures. And where metafiction always works against illusion, metanarration works both against, and contributes to the building of illusion’. Nünning singles out moreover four basic aspects of metanarrative: formal (where the metanarrative aspect is situated in the text, between diegesis, intradiegesis, extradiegesis, paratext); structural (the quantitative and qualitative relationship with the rest of the text); relative to the content (what the metanarrative commentaries refer to); and orientated to reception (their function).<sup>11</sup>

Using a metonymical approach, my reflection starts with the analysis of an excerpt taken from the end of *L'uovo di Gertrudina*,<sup>12</sup> extending the suggestions emerging from this text, when appropriate, to other pages of the collection and other works by Pariani. My study brings together the practice of close reading with the Italian stylistic tradition of *curare de minimis* – in Gianfranco Contini’s words: ‘auscultazione molto attenta della superficie del testo.’<sup>13</sup> This approach is inspired by the empathic relation between author, story and reader suggested by Pariani’s work. It also follows the invitation extended by the editors of this volume to reassert the centrality of the text in a historical moment that seems to privilege the ‘distant gaze’ towards literary matters.<sup>14</sup>

Quantitative methods have seemed to predominate in the United States from the end of the 1970s, in polemical relation to the school of New Criticism. In the periodic oscillations of critical tendencies,<sup>15</sup> towards the end of the 2000s this methodological turn bore fruit in Italy too, as the stimulating maps and graphics of the *Atlante della letteratura italiana* show.<sup>16</sup> Yet, against the ‘background assumption [...] that “close reading”, like the aesthetic, can only be thought through in what are ultimately idealist terms’, one can still assert that ‘another kind of aesthetic is possible’.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, my article follows Werner Wolf’s proposal to recognise in self-reflection an ensemble of features that characterise narrative fiction as a genre, from its beginnings, but that are combined with diverse consistency and articulated with different frequencies, modalities, and functions in various epochs, literary currents and single authors.<sup>18</sup> The pages that follow reflect on how Pariani inflects a series of narrative strategies such as those enclosed under the umbrella term of self-reflection – not exclusive to, but certainly typical of postmodern literature – and how, at the same time, her literary project’s strong ethical imprint reconfigures these same strategies. In Pariani’s work, irony and disbelief are discarded, and the emphasis is instead on a renewed but not ingenuous trust in the ethical dimension of the act of writing, in the role of the storyteller, and in a narrative pact with the reader marked by empathy. After a section dedicated to the analysis of the proposed excerpt, the concluding section of this article will investigate the self-reflexive attitude of Laura Pariani as an example of the conflict between postmodern lack of belief in master narratives and the feminist desire of finding, in the interstices of History, fragmented and plural narratives, a minore, alternative to the hegemonic ones. In this way, this article wishes to contribute to the reconsideration and widening of the account of the Italian postmodern, which Italian critics have sometimes restricted to aspects of irony, lack of commitment, and detachment from reality.

### **Self-reflexive forms and themes in ‘L’uovo di Gertrudina’**

The passage cited above, taken from the sixth and final chapter of the eponymous collection, *L’uovo di Gertrudina*, gathers the metanarrative threads scattered throughout the five previous chapters and weaves them into a final tapestry, giving them new meaning. The fact that the chapter and the collection share a title is the first clue of the

metafictional game: a part in the all, a part for the whole, 'L'uovo di Gertrudina' is the whole book in essence, and, as is revealed in the end, is the key to reading it. United by narrating the lives of women who have chosen or were forced to take the veil, the chapters of *L'uovo di Gertrudina* are different stories, in time (from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries to a dystopian future), in place (from Piedmont and Lombardy to Tuscany and South America) and in their protagonists (respectively: Suor Assunta, Antonia Pusterla / Suor Carla Francesca, Suor Alice, Virginia Galilei / Suor Maria Celeste, and Suor Tránsito with Candelaria; in chapter 6, the young nun at the gallows in a folktale and the Gertrudina of the title, inspired by the Manzonian Gertrude). The first and last chapters, however, spotlight another female figure, the female writer-storyteller, and encapsulate the previous five stories in a deconstructed self-reflexive frame. As a result, what initially appeared to be a collection of stories united by a common theme, in the end could be read as an extreme case of deconstruction of the novel form, in line with a postmodern sensibility which has lost faith in linear, all-encompassing narration. Since her literary debut in the early 1990s, the short story seems to be the most congenial narrative form for Pariani, and the distinction between the (fragmented) novel and the interweaving of short stories is so feeble as to become useless.<sup>19</sup>

The first chapter of *L'uovo di Gertrudina*, 'Il colore del silenzio', is devoted to Suor Assunta. Born in the province of Novara, she was a volunteer with the Salesians in the Tierra del Fuego and Dawson Island. She returned to Piedmont in the 1940s and died in 1963, after a ten-year vow of silence. However, a large part of the text is occupied with the first-person narrative voice, who writes about her journey between Piedmont and Patagonia in search of witnesses and documents to reconstruct the character, with other embedded Argentine stories. Therefore, the reader explores not just Suor Assunta's story, but also that of the writer-character's journey in search the traces of her existence. The chapter is structured in paragraphs of varying length, and the weak chronological progression of the two levels (those of Suor Assunta and of the writer) is altered by prolepsis and analepsis, with jumps forwards and backwards in space and in time, and different focalisations and points of view. In chapters 2 to 5, the not predetermined multiplicity of narrative voices structurally reiterates the rejection of the naturalistic illusion: the story is entrusted to multiple female narrators in 'Se tu ti formi rosa', and to



an external, omniscient narrator, but strongly focalised on different protagonists, in ‘La voladora’, ‘Per maggiormente regalarla’ and ‘Arcangeli di fumo’. The final chapter, ‘L’uovo di Gertrudina’, is an eight-page-long declaration of poetics. At the end of the book, the narrative voice and her act of intense narrative crafting come to the forefront, while the previously told stories are subsumed as pieces of a new mosaic (the frame story).

In a discourse proceeding here too in a zig-zag of juxtapositions, interruptions and jumps, a coherent and explicit metanarrative reflection on the how and why of storytelling emerges, pivoting on a few points which I will list here before analysing them in detail: (a) the narrator’s empathic identification with her characters, who represent a marginal female community in which each woman is mirrored and identified in the other, thanks to the co-existence of lives, times and places made possible by the art of storytelling; (b) the ample intertextuality, including the relationship between spoken and written language, and between high and popular culture; (c) the resistance of reality to being told, and the circularity of reading, writing and life; (d) the ethical and salvific dimension of storytelling, in preserving the memories of the forgotten and in creating alternative realities and imaginary spaces of freedom for the female narrators and their characters (and, as a result, urgency, desire, and obsession becoming the driving forces of writing); (e) the physical pleasure associated with the voice and singing beyond the rationality of the written word, and the materiality of storytelling.

(a) ‘Ché mi pare che tutti i personaggi siano racchiusi nella stessa storia, la mia’

In the opening of the extract, the narrating voice spotlights herself and her identification with the protagonists of the stories, with an abundance of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives. ‘Mi perdo nel passato; smarrisco anni, secoli. Mi ritrovo con Assunta quindicenne’, she writes. She also finds herself together with the ‘vergini combattive dei racconti di mia nonna’, with the Gertrude of Monza, and with a image of herself as a child frozen in a framed picture: ‘il viso della bambina che sento ancora di essere qualche volta’. At the end of the excerpt, the identification is still between the nuns (in order: Candelaria, Antonia, Virginia, Gertrude) and a first-person narrator now in synchrony with the time of writing, who ‘nel contempo’, ‘dall’altra parte del mare’,

‘cammin[a] in una calda notte cilena’, and thinks about the story Suor Assunta and how to tell it. Nullifying spatio-temporal and interpersonal distance, storytelling allows for the co-existence of places, times and stories: ‘i nomi si mescolano, i tempi si incrociano’, and ‘ogni storia questa sera sembra avvenire nello stesso istante’.<sup>20</sup> Marked in the final chapter by the popular magical incantations of ‘apriti sesamo, chiuditi sesamo...’, ‘[o]jalá te abras, ojalá te cierres’, the narrative opens and closes the fragments of narrated life, in search of both their uniqueness and the points of connection and overlapping.

The female writer incarnates and becomes the spokesperson for a community which shares gender and the pain of existence,<sup>21</sup> and which leads from the ‘vergini combattive della favole [della] nonna’ towards the nuns she recounts in her writing. Through this process of plural identification, the reflection of the authorial self in the text is just not an autobiographical double – a distancing that objectifies the self as the Other, making it into a narratable character –, but also an element that justifies the connection between the parts, the relationship between the different characters (and their stories) and the voice which revives and narrates them: *je est un autre*, as in the title of Philippe Lejeune, turns into *je suis les autres et les autres sont moi*.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, Pariani’s fiction internalises the opposition between the pre-modern storyteller and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century novelist theorised by Walter Benjamin. While she projects on the text a twentieth century individual female novelist, with her neuroses and anxieties, she idealises instead the figure of the storyteller she aspires to be: an artisan of stories, the voice and interpreter of a community, who welcomes the experience in herself to transform it into a meaningful narrative for the benefit of others.<sup>23</sup>

(b) *‘quando si scrive’, ‘quando si legge’*

The excerpt above lists and reviews the sources of storytelling, whether biographical or literary, written or spoken, erudite or popular, textual or visual. The oral fairy tales of childhood are mentioned, together with scholarly texts (the Pirandellian ‘uno, nessuno e centomila’ and the ‘Seicento manzoniano’), and the suggestions of Francesco Guardi’s and Mosè Bianchi’s paintings (with a detail in the painting that comes alive and becomes a story: ‘le mani che si aggrappano a un soggolo che toglie il respiro’). The intertextual network of *L’uovo di Gertrudina* is wide and composite, and ranges across highbrow and

lowbrow culture, in a postmodern vein. The entire collection is interwoven with quotations from sacred texts (Ecclesiastes) and world literature (from Herman Melville to Lewis Carroll, from Dante to George Bernanos), but punctuating it and marking its rhythm are, above all, the extended quotations from songs: songs in Italian (e.g. *Il mare* by Sergio Bruni) and in dialect (among many: the Piedmontese *Prinsi Raimund munta a caval* and the Lombard *Amore inevitabile*, here *Se tu ti formi rosa*), lullabies (*Nina nana bobo*, *Cavallino arrò arrò*), and prayers (*Salve Regina*, the praises to the *Santissimi Arcangeli*). The folk dimension is well-represented: in the analysed passage there is the Lombard saying *‘l’è tua, l’è mia, l’è morta l’umbria’*, and the fairytale quote *‘apriti sesamo, chiuditi sesamo’*, reprised in the Spanish *‘[o]jalá te abras, ojalá te cierras’*. Nevertheless, here the dialect words and the folk tales are passed from an oral and instinctive storyteller, the *‘nonna illetterata’*, to the granddaughter, now a literate and self-aware narrator.<sup>24</sup> Their reuse in her fiction becomes part of a hyperliterary strategy that combines the plurality of cultural references with a refined style (e.g. the composite lexicon veined with multilingualism and multiform syntax) and articulated textual structures.<sup>25</sup>

*(c) ‘come le case in cui abbiamo vissuto e che ora occupano altri’*

The photo of the writer as a girl, which appears together with the paintings, adds an extra-literary dimension to the question of sources, and leads to the relation of writing to life. In the first chapter of the volume, writing is presented as wrestling with a reality which shuns the writer’s ambition of faithfulness and gives itself over only to transfigurations and reinventions.

Ché sono tanti anni che giro intorno a questa storia. [...] Ci ho provato spesso, cercando di essere fedele alle notizie ricostruite, disponendo gli episodi della vita di Suor Assunta con un certo ordine: ma non riuscivo a ottenere niente di *‘vivo’*. O forse succede sempre così: la realtà resiste a farsi raccontare, il linguaggio scritto non può resuscitarla. L’unica cosa che uno scrittore può fare è, paradossalmente, trasfigurarla, reinventarla. (p.20)

In a circular repetition of key-concepts, the first part of the sentence, ‘forse succede sempre così: la realtà resiste sempre di farsi raccontare’, is reprised twice in the final pages: ‘[f]orse succede sempre così quando si scrive’ and ‘[f]orse succede sempre così quando si legge’. Introducing the ‘scrivere’ / ‘leggere’ variations in the anaphoric tricolon suggests both the reflection and reciprocal nourishment between reading and writing, and the circularity of reading, writing and life. In the initial lines of the excerpt, when fifteen-year-old Assunta foresees in a book of devotions her future choice of silence and meditation, it is reading which inspires life. Similarly, every reader is awaited ‘da qualche altra parte, in qualche altro tempo’ by ‘una storia che ha a che fare intimamente con noi’, and the secrets ‘sigillosamente’ kept in the memory of the writer pass ‘sulla bocca di tutti, diventando interpretazioni di altri, pagine di libri’. Linked to this circularity are reflections on the ‘meccanismo del vivere, per cui una parte di noi trascorre in altre vite, come le case in cui abbiamo vissuto e che ora occupano altri’. Writing not only doubles and feeds life, then, but lives themselves are reduced to stories, assembled differently according to the point of view of the narrator-protagonist, in a kaleidoscope where everyone is ‘un personaggio secondario di un libro sconosciuto, una comparsa nel film della vita altrui’. In the central section of the excerpt (between ‘quando si legge’ and ‘ojalá te cierres’), the opposition of ‘sé’ vs. ‘altro’ is replaced by a plural ‘we’ – a collective ‘self’, containing both ‘I’ and the ‘others’, that returns in the final page of the book to represent the literary victory of ‘us’ (the community of oppressed women) against the oppressors (p.220). Protagonists, second leads, and secondary characters, real or imagined, exchange roles. Lives are rewritten, the centrality of individual events becomes relative, and we all recognise each other in our sameness and otherness, as in the unknown person who, standing by what was once our window, ‘guarda ora lo stesso paesaggio’.

(d) *‘tramutarsi in rondine fuggendo di là dal mare’*

The power of storytelling to preserve memory is very evident in the excerpt. The night-time walk in the barrio Brasil in Santiago demonstrates how places, people and their stories are subject to the wear of time and to oblivion (one notes the sequence of adjectives: ‘abbandonato’, ‘rovinato’, ‘stinte’, ‘sfondate’, ‘tristi’, ‘vuota’), but it also

entrusts storytelling with the task of slowing their decline. Here the 'barrio Brasil abbandonato' is brought back to life, 'all'imprevista', by the story-song of a little bird. Similarly, *L'uovo di Gertrudina* redeems and brings back to life the nuns of the book (the epitome of the weak, the defeated, the forgotten by history), thanks to the immortalising quality of memory and storytelling. Given the high mission assigned to literature, the mediator between life and death, memory and oblivion, it is not surprising that the driving force of the act of narrating, from the very first chapter, is identified in the desire-urgency-obsession triad: '[s]crivere una storia ha a che vedere con il caso, ma soprattutto con il desiderio: è la sua urgenza – direi quasi ossessione – che ti spinge ad andare avanti' (p.46).<sup>26</sup> With writing being presented as a fight against death, through an unpredictable balance between testimony and invention, its interruptions is therefore experienced as suffering ('Ché ogni interruzione del lavoro è una pena, ho fretta di tornare a Gertrudina', p.216) and silences or delays are marked by sadness, for example 'di non aver ancora raccontato a nessuno la storia di Suor Assunta'. The writer is represented as beset by the infinite possibilities of storytelling, taken in by the phantasmagoria of the 'mondi di tutte le possibili storie', 'nel multiverso che si agita intorno'.

As well as protecting memories, storytelling has the power to open spaces of freedom, unlike historical writing which is constrained by accuracy. At the intradiegetic level, Suor Alice, who resists torture by holding on to the memory of a childhood nursery rhyme, shows how words and sounds from memory can create a respite and mental escape from a present filled with unavoidable pain (cfr. pp.131-150 passim, and p.215). At the diegetic level, in the conclusion, the authorial voice proposes some rewritings of the stories told: in a fantastical turn, Virginia flies on a unicorn while 'Candelaria può tramutarsi in rondine fuggendo di là al mare'.<sup>27</sup> Contrary to the general trend in Pariani's writing, which tends to be elliptical and reticent and invites the reader to read between the lines and the unspoken, *L'uovo di Gertrudina* closes with the all-too-explicit declaration of literature as a potential 'gesto di libertà, di salvezza, perfino di redenzione', which immortalises the female protagonists, 'forzate and sconfitte', in a 'sguardo di sogno', while 'i principi padre e fratelli despoti, un tempo vincenti, ora sono schiacciati per l'eternità dalla luce del nostro disprezzo'. Storytelling not only hands down experiences,

but can even dramatically reverse their meanings: ‘Nel mondo di tutte le immaginazioni: apriti sesamo’ (p.220).<sup>28</sup>

(e) *‘il canto di un canarino che parla di rose in giardini fioriti’*

Other metanarrative clues from the selected passage direct the attention towards the physical pleasure of storytelling, associated with the joy of singing and the beauty of the voice. On two occasions, birdsong symbolises this joyful element of delight. For Antonia, the canary ‘parla di rose in giardini fioriti’ (my emphasis) when singing, thus recreating a reality of wellbeing opposed to the forced reclusion. For the writer, in the frame story, ‘all’improvista un uccellino si mette a cantare [...] raccontando di altri tempi, de antes, quando queste case erano ancora vive’ (my emphasis). A few pages earlier, one of the ‘apriti sesamo’s had led to a sequence of scenes in which the protagonist nuns sing, followed by the narration of the grandmother’s oral storytelling when the narrator was a girl (pp.214-215). Mentioning the pre-rational beauty of songs and voices focuses the attention on the need for the narrator to find an inner connection with her childhood self (‘la bambina che ancora sono’). The storyteller complements the reason of the word-logos with the pleasure of the song-phoné, which ‘proclama la legittimità del piacere di esistere’: ‘[p]erché la vita e l’anima ci sono sempre vicine quando cantiamo, e i versi delle canzoni non sono più di nessuno, escono dal nostro corpo che ci fa male’ (p.215).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, many passages insist on the ‘materiality’ of voices and their appeal. The ‘fragile’ and ‘glaciale’ voice of Suor Assunta, for example, is one of the triggers which push the writer towards her journey to research and reconstruct the woman’s story:

Questa sera mi basta rievocare la sua voce: l’ho sentita in una registrazione antidiluviana che agli inizi degli anni Cinquanta un ricercatore di storia orale raccolse nel convento in cui lei trascorreva i suoi ultimi anni. Una di quelle voci che rimescolano e, ascoltate, non si dimenticano più: incredibilmente fragile e al contempo glaciale. Come un cristallo di neve’ (p.16).

This last quotation is also a good example of the fixed series of topoi in which Pariani thematises the contexts of oral and written storytelling. Writing usually happens in the

lonely 'room of one's own'.<sup>30</sup> This is often represented as a silent room where the writer stands by the window looking at the external world, in a liminal position that also signifies her being at the border between the self and the other. In other cases, the writer sits at her desk, in front of a computer, focused on the task of recreating the world on a page. The time is the evening-night-dawn: an interruption and pause from everyday life which is the ideal moment for writing (cfr. p.216, p.79).<sup>31</sup> For oral storytelling, the idealised locus is the family hearth by which the female narrators sit and talk, such as 'il portico che odorava del ribollire di un pentolone di salsa di pomodoro', and before that 'il cantone di una fumosa cucina, [dove] una fantesca raccontava alla piccola Gertrude storie di monache' (p.215). There are abundant observations on the individual ways of telling stories, such as the grandmother who 'contava lentamente, girando la manovella del passaverdura' (p.215), or Asunción who '[r]accontava lentamente [...], con la sapienza delle grandi narratrici. Cerco di rispettare il colore della sua voce' (p.75). Furthermore, the page which tells the stories is filled with objects which transmit them: letters, diaries, books, notebooks, photocopies, documents, computers, video recorders, photographs. The emphasis on the tools of the writer thematises within the story the work that goes into the text, and therefore highlights its artificial constructedness. At the same time, these concrete objects are called to testify with their concreteness the claim of truth, not so much of the stories told, but of the act of storytelling as performed in the text and celebrated in the frame story, thus increasing its reality effect.<sup>32</sup>

The reading performed thus far shows that 'L'uovo di Gertrudina' is a metafictional, metanarrative and self-reflexive text. It shows its own artificiality in its division of the main story into several non-linear stories, in its wide intertextuality, and multilingualism. Self-reflexivity is highlighted by the figure of the female writer, and reinforced by the mise en abyme of the many female narrators: oral storytellers, such as the narrator's grandmother, or writers, such as Suor Tránsito who puts together her memories or Suor Maria Celeste who composes a letter to her father. On the basis of Nünning's metanarrative parameters of form, structure, content and function,<sup>33</sup> from a formal point of view the metanarrative comments are situated mainly in the diegesis, with the narrator speaking in first person. As often occurs, however, the situation is more fluid than the

categories used to describe it. On the one hand, the narrator is a character among the others, and, on the other, the notes on ways and forms of narration are not exclusively hers but are also expressed by the intradiegetic characters of narrators, readers, listeners, either in brief mentions or longer forms. Under the book's structural profile (quantitative), the metanarrative observations are in balance with the rest of the narration in the first chapter, present to a lesser degree in the next, and become central in the final chapter, where they constitute the main focus. In terms of content, the specific issue of the modes and meaning of storytelling is developed from a personal perspective by the narrator, but is then taken to a higher level to represent the narrative processes tout court ('succede sempre così', my emphasis). The functions of the metanarrative sections are fundamentally ethical and empathic. Here the narrator is not the interpreter of History, but is presented instead as a collector and transcriber of unwritten stories of women.<sup>34</sup> The authorial alter ego is invested with the task of preserving the memories of the multifaceted female community; as both a literate writer and heir to a female line of producers and receivers of stories, she can fulfil her mission by bringing together the ancient art of storytelling and the most refined techniques of late 20<sup>th</sup> century literary fiction. Outside the text, the mission of keeping memory alive is projected onto the reader, who, responding to the personalised voice of a biographically recognisable 'teller' (the character of the writer Laura) is invited to feel empathy/identify with the stories told and to share the writer's ethical project of storytelling.

Such a significant accumulation of self-reflexive features leads us to consider their role in the definition of the poetics and ideology of Pariani, placed at the intersection between belonging to the cultural and literary climate of the postmodern, which no longer permits linear or ingenuous narratives, and feminist engagement, which requires the female narrator to find a gendered standpoint that would found a practice of action in the world.

### **At the intersection of postmodernism and feminism**

It may be useful, at this point, to tie together the analysis of self-reflection in Laura Pariani to the key points of some feminist theorisations. Such an operation is also justified by the fact that Pariani was an active member of feminist collectives and of



politically antagonistic groups of the student movement during her formative years spent as a university student in philosophy and history in Milan,<sup>35</sup> one of the liveliest cities of Italian counterculture in the first half of the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> Beyond the focus on the perspective of women and on the stories of the outcasts and defeated, other elements in her works seem to relate to this context. Among them is the concept of storytelling as a practice of relationship: in fact, it develops into a narrative topos the collective sessions of the consciousness-raising groups, in which life stories were shared and interpreted. It is not a question of narratives marked by an intimist and subjective female withdrawal into oneself, but the first step in understanding patriarchal structures ‘partendo da sé’, on the basis of the conviction that ‘the personal is political’.<sup>37</sup> As Alessia Ronchetti summarises,

[i]n termini generali, partire da sé significa legittimarsi in quanto soggetti del discorso sulla base di un sapere derivante dal proprio vissuto e dal proprio desiderio. Intesa in tal senso, questa pratica lascia spesso visibili tracce nella produzione femminista, dove grande rilievo acquistano ad esempio narrazione ed autonarrazione.<sup>38</sup>

Another of the elements that have emerged in the preceding section is the delineation, in metanarrative commentaries and thematisations, of a phenomenology of oral storytelling, in which the abstract rationality of the word-logos finds its natural corporeal complement in the voice-phoné, thus incorporating pleasure as a key element of the telling and sharing of stories: the ‘perfetto concerto tra voce ed espressione del viso che si sviluppa nel canto e nelle narrazioni orali’ (p. 215). In *A più voci*, a counter-history of the presence of the voice in Western culture, Adriana Cavarero reminds us how the enjoyment provoked by listening and the fascination emanating from voices are connected to the feminine dimension all the way back to Greek myths, with the Homeric representation of the enchanting song of the sirens, and demonstrates how the bases of philosophy have been constructed on their marginalisation and repression (the sirens vs. Plato). If in Cavarero’s reflection the sphere of relation is associated with vocality, this link is well-represented in Pariani’s works, both in the thematisation of the contexts of female storytelling and in the metanarrative comments. Pariani’s self-reflexive structures intensify the relational action of individuals who communicate with one another,

reciprocally, while remaining different and unique: a 'mondo umano delle voci singolari e plurali che, parlando, si comunicano l'una all'altra'.<sup>39</sup> One should also look at the cases in which the story is presented as part of a dialogue, which can happen from afar, in the letters that Virginia writes to her father (pp.158-170), or in person, in 'Se tu ti formi rosa', whose paragraphs are ten responses to the questions (not transcribed) of the 'Reverendo Padre' who is investigating the murder of Antonia. The dedication of the volume further strengthens the relational dimension of storytelling, as a transmission of stories marked by sharing and emotion: 'a tutti coloro che, / raccontandomi storie, / hanno suscitato dentro me emozioni / spaventosamente imprevedute' (p.7).

The interpretation of storytelling as a relational act and the question of the unique individuals involved (both the narrator and the person who is object of narration) can also inspire a Gramscian-feminist reading, following on the tracks of the postcolonial theorisations of Gayatri Spivak on female subalternity.<sup>40</sup> From this perspective, the projection of the female author to the margins and interstices of the narrated stories (but never at the centre) is not only part of the metafictional paradox of postmodern narrative as 'narcissistic narrative', i.e. texts that end up mirroring themselves and the processes of their creation.<sup>41</sup> It also signals on a fictional level the positionality of the narrating subject (the researcher as well as the writer) in relation to the narrated subjects to whom she lends her voice and whose cause she espouses. Spivak illuminates the impasse in which the (well-intentioned) intellectual finds himself/herself when studying and narrating the feminine subaltern: even when one takes a challenging or denunciatory position, his/her discourse necessarily develops within the parameters of the hegemonic culture, and proceeds by manipulations and silencings of the Other. The sole only honest intellectual honest path in such a situation is to present the research (and the story) as the result of an encounter. Against the pretence of scientific objectivity, the specific social, cultural, economic, gendered positioning of the researcher, writer, or storyteller is highlighted, because telling about others is also always telling about oneself. Within the narrative texts of Pariani, the autobiographical references of the double of the author function to situate her in a precise social and individual position, thanks to which the emphatic identification with the characters, in the simultaneity of their stories, spaces, and times, happens in an identity that doesn't annul their differences. The strategies of self-

reflection put into play and exalt the preservation within the text of the traces of otherness. 'La mia è, naturalmente, una ricostruzione', the female narrator in the first chapter warns (p.47). In its structures and contents, the story exposes its being the result of processes of construction, and the 'shadow zones' and the 'reticences' are thematised and commented upon, thus emphasising the resistance of the Other to the direct transcription in the story and in writing: 'Suor Assunta mi affascina soprattutto per le zone d'ombra della sua vicenda, per le sue stesse reticenze' (p.27).

Beyond functioning as a link between the narrator and characters, and between the female author and her stories, empathy is also the relation with the story told to which the reader is enticed.<sup>42</sup> As we have seen, many of Pariani's works present some sort of frame story, however although de-structured and articulated in various forms: sometimes it embeds or punctuates the story with a geometric exactness, while in others elsewhere it is deliberately inserted without precision. The frame simulates within the text the function of a metanarrative paratext that would explain the circumstances and the reasons for writing. Beyond this, in its repetition within the internal authorial macrotext, the frame composes a serial narrative of the character-writer, well-known to the reader for the constancy and coherence of the biographical and cultural references that refer to the extra-textual figure of the female author. According to Neumann, this 'narratorial illusionism', produces a different 'type of naturalisation':<sup>43</sup> self-reflection breaks the conventions of verisimilitude of the narrated stories ('costruzioni', which borrow the materials of lives and art to reinvent them), but at the same time it strengthens the illusion of truth in the narrative act, the claim of truth of the frame story, and the ethical position of the narrator. The female writer, with her mission of saving those who are historically marginal and forgotten from oblivion, invests herself with a high ethical status. The reader is called not only to actively collaborate with the writer in the deciphering of the text, in the postmodern play of cross-references, but also to share with her the research of a gendered, subaltern standpoint from which to observe and interpret the world. One can profitably extend to this narrative pact, the definition of 'ethics of metanarration' originally proposed for the works of the English writer Ian McEwan (rich in characters-protagonists who are writers):

McEwan has always been a writer with a moral agenda, and his belief in empathy and imagination as the building blocks of our moral system attest to this. What makes McEwan's case so interesting is that this moral agenda comes in postmodern disguise. [...] in his novels the different ontological layers always remain clearly identifiable and the boundaries between them stay intact. McEwan's model of empathy, the 'narrative imagination' [...] is loaded with social and moral responsibilities and has a clear moral function.<sup>44</sup>

The 'ethics of metanarration' is not in contradiction with Waugh's observation, according to which '[c]ontemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thorough sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures'.<sup>45</sup> Pariani shares, in fact, the suspicion and scepticism towards master narratives that, since the work of Jean-François Lyotard, is considered one of the principal characteristics of the postmodern cultural climate.<sup>46</sup> Following what in the Italian context are the lessons of oral history and microhistory, Pariani's methodological choice is not to deny History, but to look at it from below and from the margins, tracing minor stories and reconstructing them in their fragmented, limited, peripheral, and plural nature. In the postmodern awareness of being immersed in hegemonic all-encompassing master narratives, the writer's act of opposition lays in reasserting the constructedness of every form of narration and inviting the reader to recognise it as such. Nevertheless, the scepticism of a unique Truth does not lead to the negation of social commitment, but to the search for the neglected and repressed partial truths of the subalterns.

And yet, is can we still call postmodern a poetics that adheres to the de-doxifying mission, but that at the same time refuses absolute relativism in order to find its centre of gravity in the minor, interdiscursive and plural dimension of stories? Can we classify as postmodern a self-reflexive fiction that does not avoid dealing with the relationship between art and reality, and with the role of literature in society? Beyond the already cited reflection of Roland Weidle on how metanarrative strategies can 'express a certain view of the world',<sup>47</sup> it is helpful once again to look at the poetics and ideology of Pariani through the prism of feminist criticism, with particular focus on the spaces of

negotiation and alliance between feminisms and the postmodern.<sup>48</sup> The meeting ground between postmodern disbelief and the feminist search for alternative anti-hegemonic narratives (to be used as a standpoint from which to articulate a pragmatic project of intervening in reality) can be found in the common ‘caution’ towards absolutes, the objections to master narratives, and the recognition of the complexity and plurality of experiences, voices, stories and narratives. As Linda Hutcheon observes, ‘feminisms are not incredulous towards their metanarrative, even if they do contest the patriarchal one.’<sup>49</sup> Pariani plays writes precisely on within this terrain, in a balancing act between the incredulity of the dominant doxa and the militant opposition to it.

The question is put differently if we use the traditional critical categories developed in the Italian context, where an interpretation of postmodern narrative centred almost exclusively on the aspects of intellectual play and lack of social engagement was widespread for a long time. This was frequently, in opposition to the issue of ‘impegno’, a topos in Italian arts and literature of the second half of the Italian 20th century.<sup>50</sup> Such a limiting approach, and limited to some mainstream phenomena, has been questioned since the beginning of the 21st century. After the publication of *Fragments of impegno* by Jennifer Burns (2001),<sup>51</sup> the question is not whether postmodern literature can be committed or not, but what artistic forms the question of *impegno* can assume if based on the cardinal points of the postmodern: the shift from macro to micro, a concept of reality experienceable and expressible only in fragments (in an anti-absolute perspective), disbelief, irony, disenchantment, playfulness, and the recovery of the pleasure of the text.

‘The intrinsic reflexivity of postmodern art’ – Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug suggest – should therefore not be misunderstood as a mere ‘style’, but treated as the structure and modality by which aesthetics come to the foreground. Postmodernism foresees as its core a mature, complex, and intelligent reader, ready to share the author’s aesthetic and ethical responsibility.<sup>52</sup> We can therefore consider their call to action to be still valid, and continue the discussion of contemporary Italian culture as ‘a particularly interesting testing-ground for the multiple, pluriform struggles which we associate here with the idea of postmodernist *impegno*. [...] A more constructive and less “apocalyptic” analysis of the cultural climate of the past two decades in Italy, we believe, must pay attention to disillusionment and disengagement – a relapse towards the

private; a radical commodification of cultural values and products – but also investigate the importance of new forms of political and ethical awareness'.<sup>53</sup> In a reading of the postmodern not opposed to, but deeply intertwined with ethical issues, the complexity and many facets of self-reflection in the work of a writer 'from the margins' like Laura Pariani also invites critics to return to studying, theoretically and historically, postmodern Italian narrative, a category that should possibly be rethought over a longer period, with less rigid classifications, and with more receptivity to possible interdisciplinary fertilisations.<sup>54</sup>

### Biography:

Gigliola Sulis is Associate Professor of Italian at the University of Leeds. Her research interests are mainly in the field of modern and contemporary Italian fiction, from a stylistic and narratological approach. She has worked in particular on the multilingual novel, regional and dialect literatures (especially Sardinian and Sicilian); language and style of 20th and 21st century Italian writers, and women's writing. She has edited the *Scritti giornalistici (1966-1995)* by Sergio Atzeni (Nuoro: Il Maestrale, 2005) and is co-editor with Francesca Billiani of *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic. Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson, 2007).

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Pariani, 'L'uovo di Gertrudina', in Ead, *L'uovo di Gertrudina* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003), pp.213-220 (pp.217-219).

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.6, and later: 'In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction.' For a survey of definitions and studies of 'metafiction' and 'metanarration', sometimes used by critics almost synonymously with self-reflection and sometimes with diverse meanings, see Birgit Neumann, 'Metanarration and Metafiction', in Peter Hühn et al. (eds.), *the living handbook of narratology* (Hamburg: Hamburg University): <<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de>> (based on Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, Wolf Schmid (eds), *Handbook of Narratology* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009). For this and other cited websites, the last access date was 3 July 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Pariani, *La valle delle donne lupo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), p.8.

<sup>4</sup> An historical figure, Carlo Pariani was Campana's doctor in the mental hospital at Castel Pulci, and he also wrote a biography of the poet. See Laura Pariani, *Questo viaggio chiamavamo amore* (Turin: Einaudi, 2015), p.191.

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5 Biographical data, bibliographical references, and an archive of reviews are available on the writer's site, <[www.omegna.net/pariani](http://www.omegna.net/pariani)>. For an introduction to the work of Pariani, see the following: Domenica Perrone, 'L'ossessione di raccontare. La narrativa di Laura Pariani', in Giovanna Caltagirone (ed.), *La coscienza e il coraggio. Esperienze letterarie della modernità* (Cagliari: AM&D, 2005), pp.809-21; Claudia Nocentini, 'Laura Pariani and the Value of Experience', in Rossella Riccobono (ed.), *The Poetics of the Margin: Mapping Europe from the Interstices* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), pp.133-56; Gigliola Sulis, 'Dare voce alle vite marginali. Plurilinguismo di genere nella narrativa di Laura Pariani', *The Italianist*, 33 (2013), 405-26.

6 Laura Pariani, *Quando Dio ballava il tango* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002), e.g. pp. 22, 79, 83.

7 On the emphasis on verbal musings in metafiction, see Waugh, p.48.

8 It is evident that Pariani's game of mirroring herself in the text is not comparable with the recent phenomenon of 'autofiction', characterised by the intended confusion between fact and fiction, and linked to issues of aesthetic consumption within a culture dominated by the mass media and the internet, as exemplified by authors such as Walter Siti and Mauro Covacich. In addition to the contributions by Raffaele Donnarumma and Mara Santi in this volume, see also Donnarumma's *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

9 Neumann, section 2. The texts mentioned in the quotation are fundamental reference points with regard to self-reflection and narratology: Werner Wolf, 'Aesthetic (Illusion)', in the living handbook of narratology, and Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

10 I am borrowing the concept from Roland Weidle, 'The Ethics of Metanarration: Empathy in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Child in Time*, *Atonement*, and *Saturday*', in Pascal Nicklas (ed.), *Ian McEwan: Art and Politics* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), pp.57-72 (p.68). I will return to this aspect below.

11 Ansgar Nünning, 'On Metanarrative: Towards a Definition, a Typology, and an Outline of the Functions of Metanarrative Commentary', in John Pier (ed.), *The Dynamics of Narrative Form. Studies in Anglo-American Narratology* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2004), pp.11-58 (p.17). The theoretical account is complemented by Monika Fludernik's distinctions between metafiction (centred on the artificiality of the story), metanarrative (on the constructiveness of the discourse) and non-narrational self-reflexivity (e.g. structures of *mise-en-abyme*): see Monika Fludernik, 'Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary: From Metadiscursivity to Metanarration and Metafiction', *Poetica*, 35 (2003), 1-39. Nünning and Fludernik both refer to Werner Wolf, 'Metafiktion' (1998), in Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Metzler Lexikon Literatur – und Kulturtheorie* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), pp. 447-48.

12 Laura Pariani, 'L'uovo di Gertrudina', in *L'uovo di Gertrudina* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003), pp.217-19. All of the following references to this volume will be indicated in parentheses in the main body of the text; when referring specifically to the excerpt given at the opening of the essay, the page numbers of the original are not given for practical reasons.

13 See 'I ferri vecchi e nuovi. Ventuno domande di Renzo Federici a Gianfranco Contini', in D'Arco Silvio Avalle, *L'analisi letteraria in Italia. Formalismo, Strutturalismo, Semiologia* (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1970), pp. 216-28 (p.221)

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14 With 'distant gaze' I translate the Italian title of Franco Moretti's volume, *La letteratura vista da lontano* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005) [in English, cfr. *Graphs, Maps and Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso Books, 2005)].

15 See Joseph North, 'What's "New Critical" about "Close Reading"? I.A. Richards and His New Critical Reception', *New Literary History*, 44 (2013), 141-57 (p.155): 'In the late 1970s and early 1980s [...] a consensus began to build around the idea that aesthetic criticism of all kind had to be rejected, on the grounds that the category of the "aesthetic" was irredeemably essentializing, universalizing, and idealist – which, to many, mean politically conservative.'

16 Gabriele Pedullà, Sergio Luzzatto (eds), *Atlante della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010-12), 3 vols.

17 North, p.155.

18 Wolf, 'Metafiktion'.

19 Pariani's first publications were two collections of stories, *Di corno o d'oro* (1993) and *Il pettine* (1995). In the following collection, *La perfezione degli elastici (e del cinema)* (1997), the stories are held together by the common theme of cinematography. The other works tend to be short and/or fragmented narratives. This also goes for the novels which seem to have a more unified plot, whether they focus on a main event, as in *La Signora dei porci* (1999) or *Dio non ama i bambini* (2007), or reconstruct biographies of real or invented characters. See for example Garcilaso de la Vega in *La spada e la luna* (1995), Friedrich Nietzsche in *La foto di Orta* (2001), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *Tango per una rosa* (2005), the vagrant Dante in *Milano è una selva oscura* (2010), the old Fenísia in *La valle delle donne lupo* (2011), and Dino Campana in *Questo viaggio chiamavano amore* (2015). Specular, almost a diptych, are *Quando Dio ballava il tango* (2002) and *L'uovo di Gertrudina* (2003), choral works constructed as series of female biographies held together by a contemporary frame story. While in the first book the frame story is so relevant for the plot that the text can be defined as a novel, in the second the centripetal force of the individual portraits prevails, hence its presentation as a collection of short stories.

20 One notes how even minimal lexical elements suggest the overlapping and confusion of space and time: an example is the 'Fin del Mundo' quoted here and elsewhere, which, as well as the reference value of the toponym, acquires the literal meaning of 'fine del mondo' and becomes the post-apocalyptic chronotope of the story of Suor Tránsito, the last survivor of the convent of Verapaz and perhaps of humanity itself.

21 Such a recurring and explicit identification has been read by Giovanni Pacchiano as a potential limit of the writer, '[f]orse troppo portata a esternare sulla pagina la propria identificazione con i suoi personaggi e con il loro tormento esistenziale' (Giovanni Pacchiano, 'Recluse per liberare l'anima. Sei storie di monache nell'ottimo romanzo di Laura Pariani', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 16 March 2003). On pain and suffering as the existential features of Pariani's work, see Perrone, p.809.

22 See Philippe Lejeune, *Je est un autre: l'autobiographie de la littérature aux médias* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

23 See Walter Benjamin, 'Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows' (1936) [Eng. transl.: 'The Storyteller. Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov', in *Id. Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 2007), pp.83-109].



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24 On self-awareness (a typically postmodern issue) in relation to the narrator, see Gerard Prince, *Narratology. The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1982), p.12.

25 On the re-use of orality in literature, on the the mimesis of spoken language, and its thematisation in the text, see Elena Porciani, 'Studiare l'oralità letteraria. Dalle figure del parlato al tema della parola', and 'La narrazione come performance in *Ragazzi di vita* di Pier Paolo Pasolini', in Ead., *Studi di oralità letteraria* (Pisa: ETS, 2008), pp. 23-36, pp.39-56.

26 Also in the *mise en abyme* that sees Suor Tránsito turn from a nun-guardian to a writer of her love story (prelude to the metanarrative chapter that ends the book), it is still desire that generates the story and writing (pp.206-07). For an explicit declaration of writing as an act of love, see *La perfezione degli elastici ( e del cinema)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1997), p.107: 'L'ultima cosa che ci resta è la letteratura. Tutto lo scrivere è un atto d'amore, perché ogni forma di comunicazione è testimonianza della voglia di comprendere. È l'amore che insegna a parlare. Tutto il resto è cianfrusaglia, un pizzico di nulla.'

27 Flight as a symbol of women's fantastical escape from reality (the only one they are allowed) is a topos of Pariani's stories (see the end of 'Se tu ti formi rosa', p.129, or *La Signora dei porci* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1999), p.253) and also appears in her paintings and comics. Some figures from *La fata rovesciata*, a comic signed with the pseudonym Laura Picco (Milan: Ottaviano, 1976), including that of flight, are gathered and commented on by the author in Gigliola Sulis, 'Il racconto come militanza: sulle radici femministe dell'opera di Laura Pariani', and 'Gli anni settanta, il femminismo, l'arte. Conversazione con Laura Pariani', in Filippo Fonio, Lisa El-Gahoui (eds), *I Gender Studies e il caso italiano, dagli anni Settanta a oggi* (Grenoble: Éditions Universitaires de Grenoble, 2013), pp. 303-324 (cfr. image 6, p.324). Real and sinister, on the other hand, is Suor Alice's flight from an aeroplane to her death at the end of 'La voladora' (pp.131-150). This is the most realistic of the stories in *L'uovo di Gertrudina*, retracing the kidnapping and murder of the French nuns Alice Domon and Leonie Duquet under the Argentine dictatorship, as explained in the chapter's post-scriptum commentary. Suor Alice is the only protagonist to be mentioned only once in the final chapter; a symbol of a reality which 'resiste al racconto', this quasi-absence is also a sign of how, for Pariani, the violence of the military dictatorship in the seventies is too deep and too recent a wound to allow her to find peace through the imaginary rewritings of literature.

28 That this end is threatened by rhetorical excess has been noted by Pacchiano: 'Ci dice, la Pariani, nella pagina finale, di credere al valore salvifico della letteratura. Tesi ammirevole e astratta; se non fosse, qui, avallata da una scrittura sussultante e terrosa, con una lingua colloquiale solcata da parole dialettali e gergali; senza esagerazioni. Tale da dare corpo e anima alle sue storie.'

29 See also: 'Potenza della musica e del canto: ché sento il mondo delle mie storie srotolarsi come una pergamena, liberando altri tempi e altri spazi.'

30 See Virginia Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own' (1929), in *A Room of One's Own. Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.1-150 (p.4): 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.'

31 In the analysed extract, see 'le finestre in cui si siamo affacciati', 'Antonia [che] dalla finestra di palazzo Pusterla sta ascoltando il canto di un canarino'; or, a little later: 'io me ne sto seduta al computer a scrivere questo racconto, imprecaando se il telefono squilla

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riportandomi a questo tempo: cièrrate sésamo...’ (p.216), or the table on which Suor Tránsito sets her writing instruments in the last pages of ‘Arcangeli di fumo’. In other books, see ‘la Scrittrice’ who, at her window at night, during breaks from writing, discusses the story told with the ‘Mietitore’, or also the narrator in *La straduzione*, who asks herself: ‘E quale senso ho io, seduta davanti a una finestra; quale importanza hanno gli scontri con mia madre, ora che lei non c’è più, se io adesso non li rievoco con qualcuno? Con te. L’unica cosa che ha senso è il raccontare’ (Laura Pariani, *La straduzione* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2004), p. 46). A similar attention to the relationship between the female body and the female artist’s room, in particular to its confines, can be noticed in the poetry of Antonella Anedda, *Dal balcone del corpo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007).

32 See Roland Barthes, ‘L’Effet de Réel’ (1968), in Id., *Le bruissement de la langue. Essays critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), pp.167-74 [Eng. transl: ‘The reality effect’, in Id., *The Rustle of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp.141-48]. This effect is pursued in several ways in the text, including the spatio-temporal notations presented as accurate references, such as those that seal the final chapter and the book: ‘Santiago de Chile, 2000 - Orta San Giulio, 2002’ (p.220).

33 Nünning, ‘On Metanarrative’ (and see above supra, [note 8](#)).

34 It is not coincidental that the writer uses the verb ‘raccoliere’ in the final paragraph of *L’uovo di Gertrudina*, in reference to her work as a writer: ‘nelle pagine che voglio raccoliere’ (p.220). On storytelling as the work of gathering and spinning clouds, see the elderly farmer (the embodiment of a mythological Parca) in *La Signora dei porci* (pp.5-6): ‘Voglio una storia con una donna seduta a filare in un cantuccio, nel tempo del c’era una volta e una volta non c’era; una vecchia contadina che, di quando in quando, alzando verso il cielo grigio una mano rinsecchita, artiglia con le sue lunghe unghie nere un ciuffo dei nuvoli e, zac, l’infilza nel suo fuso.’ In a broader discussion on ‘spinning’ and ‘weaving’ as metaphors for storytelling, Corrado Bologna focuses on ‘la presenza e la funzione genetico-testuale della figurazione tessile in àmbito prosastico, ove la sua pertinenza appare in linea teorica ancor più limpida, anche tecnicamente congrua, dal momento che il filo del discorso sembra replicare con plasticità, nella trasposizione retorico-linguistica, l’inattigibile, complessa e molteplice “nuda verità” degli eventi, cioè il filo della storia.’ (Corrado Bologna, ‘Il filo della storia. “Tessitura” della trama e “ritmica” del tempo narrativo fra Manzoni e Gadda’, *Critica del testo*, 1 (1998), 345-406; now in *Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies* (EJGS), <<http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/archive/influences/bolognfilo.php>>).

35 It is worth highlighting how these are also the years of development of oral history and microhistory, connected with the research methods of anthropology and ethnography; fertile beyond disciplinary confines, they are central for Pariani’s literary project. Among the most representative texts of this cultural climate see at least Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del ’500* (Turin: Einaudi, 1976) [Eng. Transl.: *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980)].

36 For the context, and the relevance of this period in the formation of the writer, see Sulis, Pariani, ‘Gli anni settanta, il femminismo, l’arte’, and Sulis, ‘Il racconto come militanza’. On Italian feminism in the 1970s, see Judith Adler Hellman, *Journeys among Women. Feminism in Five Italian Cities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), and in particular ‘Milan: Feminism in a Cosmopolitan city’, pp. 81-110.

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37 The preference and symbolic relevance of the feminine do not in fact exclude male protagonists, provided they respect the criteria of marginality (social, geographical or individual); in chronological order, from Carlén in her first published story, 'Di corno o d'oro', to Dino Campana in *Questo viaggio chiamavamo amore*.

38 Alessia Ronchetti, 'Postmodernismo e pensiero italiano della differenza sessuale: una questione politica', in Pier Paolo Antonello, Florian Mussgnug (eds), *Postmodern impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture* (New York-Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp.99-119 (p.107).

39 Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003), pp.53-54 [Eng. Transl: *For More than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005)].

40 See Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 271-313 [now in *A Critic of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)].

41 Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London-New York: Methuen, 1984).

42 Beyond defining the emotional link of sharing that ties the oral storyteller (from Homeric times) and his/her public, empathy has been highlighted by some scholars as a specific characteristic of female fiction. For example, an empathic reaction to the 'uncanny' (i.e. an attitude of openness, compassion, even affection and love for 'the strange'), is considered the defining element of the female declination of the Fantastic in twentieth-century Italian women writers (see: Monica Farnetti, 'Anxiety-Free: Readings of the Freudian "Uncanny"', in Francesca Billiani, Gigliola Sulis (eds), *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic. Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson, 2007), pp.46-56).

43 Neumann, 'Metanarration and Metafiction'.

44 Weidle, p.68.

45 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p.7.

46 Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979) [Eng. transl. *The Postmodern Condition. A report on knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)].

47 Weidle, p.57.

48 On postmodernism as a 'natural ally' of feminism, see Linda J. Nicholson, 'Introduction', in Ead (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London/New York: Routledge, 1990), pp.1-16 (p.5). See also Ead., 'Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism', *boundary 2*, 19 (1992), 53-69. Among the few scholars to focus on the relation between the postmodern and feminist philosophers in Italy, see Alessia Ronchetti.

49 Linda Hutcheon, 'Incredulity toward Metanarrative: Negotiating Postmodernism and Feminisms' (1989), in Kathy Mezei (ed.), *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp.262-67 (p.266).

50 The first introduction to the postmodern published in Italy was Remo Ceserani, *Raccontare il postmoderno* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997), followed on the philosophical side by Monica Jansen, *Il dibattito sul postmoderno in Italia: in bilico tra dialettica e ambiguità* (Florence: Cesati, 2002) (for an update, see Ead., 'Has

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Postmodernism Ended? Dialectics Revisited (Luperini, Belpoliti, Tabucchi)', in Antonello, Mussgnug, pp.49-60). As for the ideological opposition to the postmodern, in favour of a broadly defined 'realist literature', see Romano Luperini, *La fine del postmoderno* (Naples: Guida, 2005); Raffaele Donnarumma, Gilda Policastro, Giovanna Taviani (eds), *Ritorno alla realtà? Narrativa e cinema alla fine del postmoderno*, themed section of *Allegoria. Per uno studio materialistico della letteratura*, XX, third series, 57 (2008), 7-93.

51 Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001), and Ead., 'Re-thinking Impegno (again): Reading, Ethics and Pleasure', in Antonello, Mussgnug, pp.61-81.

52 Pier Paolo Antonello, Florian Mussgnug, 'Introduction', in Antonello, Mussgnug, pp.1-30 (p.20).

53 Antonello, Mussgnug, 'Introduction', pp.3-4.

54 For surveys of the contemporary novel, see Gianluigi Simonetti, 'Sul romanzo italiano di oggi. Nuclei tematici e costanti figurali', *Contemporanea*, III, 4 (2005), 55-85, Id. 'I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana (1996-2006)', *Allegoria*, XX, third series, 57 (2008), 95-136, and Alberto Casadei, *Stile e tradizione nel romanzo italiano contemporaneo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007). Owing to the lack of a shared contemporary canon (Casadei, p.27), it is perhaps more useful to follow the various blogs of both academic and ideological critics. For example, *Le parole e le cose. Letteratura e realtà* hosts in 2015 an ongoing survey, edited by Claudia Crocco, *Letteratura e critica. Sei domande a scrittori e critici nati negli anni Ottanta*. In the fifth part, which appeared on 30 June 2015, one of the interviewed critics, Carlo Tirinanzi De Medici, cites Pariani's *Milano è una selva oscura*, generally absent from contemporary reviews, as a significant work in contemporary literature (< <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=19538#>>).