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**Spaces of Female Friendship and Sexuality
in Silvia Avallone's *Acciaio* and *Un'amicizia***

Abstract

This article examines the representation of friendship between adolescent girls in two novels by Silvia Avallone: *Acciaio*, published in 2010, and *Un'amicizia* of 2020. After identifying thematic points of contact between the two texts, which include adolescent coming of age, and the separation from parents as a rite of passage, the question of social class, and literary setting, the article focuses on the girls' intimate friendship, their corporeal performances of sexuality, and their engagement with their surroundings. The adolescent girls adopt spaces of seclusion, or closet spaces (BROWN 2000), as a means of playing out the domestic sphere, exploring their sexuality and, ultimately, solidifying their friendship. I contend that in both of Avallone's novels, the centrality of the adolescent girls' friendship forms an original and highly engaging narrative strategy, as seen in the writer's exploration of the intensity of the bond between two best friends, including an acknowledgement of same-sex desire. I posit that the writer's depiction of female friendship is in part influenced by patriarchal norms, not only in her adoption of the male gaze, but also in that the relationship between the two girls is marked by rivalry, jealousy and conflict, thus undermining what might otherwise be deemed a feminist strategy and the potential for female solidarity (RAYMOND 1986).

A year before Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale* appeared on the scene, Silvia Avallone debuted with *Acciaio*, a novel which revolves around the intense and labile friendship between two adolescent girls. Published in 2010, when the author was only twenty-six years old, translated into over twenty languages, and winner of various awards, *Acciaio* centres on the characters Anna Sorrentino and Francesca Morganti, and their lives in the arc of a year from age thirteen to fourteen.¹ Three novels and ten years later, Avallone is clearly still preoccupied with female friendship, as indicated by the title and content of her most recent work, *Un'amicizia*, also published by Rizzoli, which features the bond between two adolescent girls Elisa Cerruti and Beatrice Rossetti, while revisiting the relationship when they have become adults in their early thirties. The two novels have many points of contact, to such an extent that *Un'amicizia* can be considered a re-elaboration of a number of *Acciaio*'s core elements and themes, while bringing them somewhat more up to date, in its tackling the issue of stardom in the age of social media.

There is no doubt that Avallone is invested in the foregrounding of gender, corporeality and sexuality in her fiction, as well as in her public life, a commitment illustrated by her speech for the Italian President at the *Quirinale* on the occasion of International Woman's Day on 8 March 2021, in which—in a personalized discourse—she denounces patriarchal society's suppression of female freedom and its foregrounding of women's bodies rather than their personhood (REDAZIONE BOOKTOBOOK). It is clear, too, that she, as a (young) woman writer, notwithstanding her considerable success, has been subjected to discrimination by a male-dominated press and literary system.² This discrimination may be in part attributable to the centrality of adolescent girls in the texts in question, a subjectivity which is often trivialized by a male-dominated canon and literary criticism in the Italian tradition, as well as in others. It is only in recent years, thanks to the work of committed scholars, that girlhood and adolescence have begun to receive the attention they rightly deserve in Italian Studies.³

Avallone has recognised the complexities involved in the developmental period of adolescence, as seen in an interview provided at the time of publication of *Acciaio*. When asked about the redemptive potential of two young women protagonists, the writer replies:

Sono adolescenti, vivono il momento delle infinite possibilità. Non sono ancora segnate, disilluse, sfiancate dalla vita. Ma la loro è un'età anche molto complicata, lontana anni luce dalla visione edulcorata. Sono inquiete ed impaurite. L'adolescenza è spesso un periodo terribile anche se molto intenso (Varì 2010).

Avallone's literary production in its foregrounding of adolescent girls' lives, with all their intricacies, illustrates the writer's preoccupation with female autonomy, the Body and sexuality, aspects which play a major part in both *Acciaio* and *Un'amicizia*, with coming of age associated with sexual experience and a breaking away from dysfunctional parents.⁴ In my analysis, after tracing thematic points of contact between the two texts and touching briefly on such notions as daughter-centric versus mother-centric narratives, the question of social class, and the separation from parents as a rite of passage, I will focus on the girls' intimate friendship, their corporeal performances of sexuality, and their engagement with their surroundings, namely, their adoption of spaces of seclusion as a means of playing out the domestic sphere, exploring their sexuality and, ultimately, solidifying their friendship. I contend that in both of Avallone's texts, the centrality of the adolescent girls' friendship forms an original and highly engaging narrative strategy, as seen in the writer's exploration of the intensity of the bond between two best friends, including an acknowledgement of same-sex desire. And yet, Avallone's portrayal of female friendship as invariably tumultuous and characterized by unmitigated rivalry would also indicate the undermining of what might otherwise be deemed a feminist strategy. This erosion of a potentially feminist message can be discerned, furthermore, in the author's insistence on the girls' sexualized bodies, viewed frequently via a male gaze.

Avallone's first novel *Acciaio* is a vibrant narrative about two thirteen-year-old girls living in the steel town of Piombino on the Tuscan coast in the year 2001-2002. This privileging of the two girls as central characters, the novel's less common setting, and its engagement with questions of class, environmental degradation and familial conflict, render *Acciaio* a refreshing and powerful text. Anna and Francesca live in a working-class neighbourhood,

in proximity to the sea. Francesca's father, Enrico, works at the local steel plant, the Lucchini, and physically abuses both his wife and daughter. Anna's family, while not plagued by the same kind of gender-based violence, lacks a reliable paternal figure, as her father has abandoned the home and is engaged in black-market activities. Instead, it is her mother, Sandra, and her brother, Alessio (who also works in the Lucchini), who provide stability. The earlier sections of *Acciaio* are dedicated to outlining Anna and Francesca's intense friendship and tracing how the girls engage with their surroundings as an embodied experience. Their bond, however, unravels, when Anna starts a relationship with Mattia, her brother's friend, leading to Francesca's sense of betrayal. The girls take different paths in terms of their education and livelihoods: Anna, who is more academically inclined, goes to a *liceo classico*, while Francesca starts playing truant and begins working at a strip club. It is only at the end of the novel, when Alessio is killed in an industrial accident in the Lucchini plant, that the two girls overcome their earlier falling-out, and rekindle their friendship.

Avallone's *Un'amicizia*, published in 2020, also highlights a female teenage dyad: the friendship between the protagonist Elisa Cerruti, originally from Biella but who moves to an unspecified seaside town on the Tuscan coast and remains there with her father—a Computer Science professor at a local (unnamed) university—at the age of thirteen, and Beatrice Rossetti, her classmate and a local beauty. Both girls, for different reasons, consider themselves outcasts from their *liceo classico*, and bond through these feelings of marginalization, their dedication to their studies, and the somewhat daring escapade of stealing a pair of designer jeans worth 400,000 Lire from an upscale boutique. Elisa finds adjusting to her new surroundings a difficult task and pines for her mother, Annabella, who has moved back to Biella with Elisa's brother. She meets a schoolmate, Lorenzo, also enamoured of literature, and after a tortuous courtship they eventually become a couple. Beatrice loses her mother to cancer when she is 17 and lives with Elisa and her father for a period of several months. Already in love with the working-class adult Gabriele, Beatrice eventually moves in with him when she turns 18. Unlike *Acciaio*, *Un'amicizia* delineates the girls' friendship beyond the age of thirteen and into young adulthood, up to the first year of university in Bologna, when an irreparable split takes place when Beatrice and Lorenzo—Elisa's boyfriend—

kiss and are witnessed by Elisa. In a complicated structure of flashbacks and reminiscences, the narrator-protagonist, now a thirty-three-year-old mother and *ricercatrice* at the University of Bologna, revisits their friendship, while reflecting on her friend's meteoric rise to stardom on social media.⁵ Elisa's re-examination of the friendship as an adult forms the self-reflexive expedient for the therapeutic writing of the novel, which centres on the absent Beatrice, who at long last manifests herself in the novel's concluding sequences when the two friends meet up after their rift of thirteen years.

Shared Themes across a Decade

Many similar themes can be identified across the two narratives and in their treatment of female adolescent friendship, family, the female body, sexuality and storyworld. A prominent shared aspect is both texts' emphasis on the bond between two adolescent girls and the ensuing rupture of their friendship due to jealousy over a boyfriend. Both books' friendships concern, at least initially, exactly the same period, namely, the turn of the Millennium, during the Berlusconi era and the rise of the *velina* figure. The two novels also comprise an analogous geographical location. Clearly Avallone's depiction in *Acciaio* of the industrial town of Piombino as a deprived and polluted urban zone made an impact, so much so that the author bore much criticism by *piombinesi* who were dissatisfied with her portrayal of the townspeople as predominantly downtrodden and the Lucchini steelworks as dangerous. In *Un'amicizia*, while the town of T is not actually named, it is clearly located on the Tuscan coast, too, with Elba visible on the horizon. Even though T is sanitized to be more of a *destinazione balneare* than Piombino, it nevertheless bears common geographical aspects with the setting of *Acciaio*, including unfrequented beaches. Both novels, furthermore, incorporate clear autobiographical elements, in that they feature a period and setting which Avallone herself experienced first-hand during her adolescence spent in Piombino with her father (AVALLONE 2017). *Un'amicizia*, however, contains even more elements which match with Avallone's biography. Elisa, the first-person narrator-protagonist is from Biella (like the author herself) and moves to live with her father on the Tuscan coast in the late 1990s/early 2000s. Elisa's dedication to

literature and writing—the self-reflexive *Un'amicizia* constituting her attempt as an aspiring author—is distinctly reminiscent of Avallone's own background in that the writer, like the fictional character, studied at the University of Bologna.

Both pairs of friends are depicted as excluded and exclusive, marginalized from their peers. In *Acciaio*, the girls are deemed different because of their good looks and perceived attitude of superiority; in *Un'amicizia*, Elisa considers herself an alternative misfit, and Beatrice is portrayed as a haughty glamour girl, with neither belonging to a wider group of friends. The question of class consciousness comes to the fore in *Acciaio*, where the girls' struggle to improve their circumstances emerges from a context of economic and social disadvantage. In *Un'amicizia*, on the other hand, the girls' provenance is from a more bourgeois context. In Elisa's case, while her working-class single mother Annabella is considered vulgar and has raised her children on a low income, Elisa's feelings of marginalization due to class are less convincing, given her father's position as an academic. That said, all families, whether bourgeois or impoverished, can be labelled dysfunctional in both novels, with at least one missing or abusive parent per family in *Acciaio*, and a largely absent or deceased mother in Elisa and Beatrice's cases in *Un'amicizia*.

The vilification of parents in both novels indicates a kind of distancing from the family unit, a breaking away which is traditionally considered a rite of passage for adolescent coming of age in the patriarchal narrative tradition, not least of all for young girls. North American feminists such as Debold, Wilson, and Malavé, as well as O'Reilly, among others, have problematised this accepted patriarchal narrative, one which relies on what they call the «lies of separation» (DEBOLD *et al.* 1993, 20). Such feminist scholars propose instead a model of mother-daughter connectedness that can help young women transition into adulthood without the conventionally mandated mother-blame and rupture from the maternal figure. Interestingly, an evolution along these lines can be traced from *Acciaio* to *Un'amicizia*, as the latter novel signals a move from a «daughter-centric» text which focuses primarily (but not solely) on the relationship between the two young girls, to a more intergenerational outlook, whereby the protagonist, Elisa, in becoming a mother herself, reflects on her own mother's role and her frustrated ambitions. Late in the novel it

emerges that Annabella's brief career as a bassist in an all-female rock band in her early twenties was cut short, something she has never mentioned to her children. Annabella's humanization helps to explain her deficiencies as a mother, something Elisa grows to understand by the later stage of the work, thus transcending, at least somewhat, her earlier, often matrophobic perception of her mother (RICH 1976, 235-36).⁶ In this later work of Avallone's, therefore, maturity is reached, eventually, through the recognition of the mother's own humanity and individual identity.

The Body and Sexuality

Over and above the thematic similarities just outlined, a core point of contact between Avallone's first and fourth novels is an insistence on the girls' physical appearance, especially the beauty of both Anna and Francesca in *Acciaio*, and of the unreachable Beatrice in *Un'amicizia*. When asked in an interview what she thinks of women's role in contemporary society and what beauty can give or take away from women, Avallone responds as follows:

Per troppi decenni abbiamo visto come modello proposto e pubblicizzato un esempio di bellezza femminile muta, che spesso non si accompagnava ad altre doti, ad altri meriti, ad altre competenze. E questa mercificazione della bellezza è l'ennesima implicazione di una cultura profondamente maschilista, vecchia, violenta. La bellezza non deve per forza essere connessa con la futilità, né svenduta, né svilita. D'altra parte, occorre dare finalmente il giusto risalto ai meriti e alle competenze delle donne, a quello che ogni giorno costruiscono con il loro lavoro, le loro voci, e le loro ricerche. Accendere i riflettori su esempi duraturi e forti, su tutte quelle donne che hanno molto da dire e da insegnare e che troppo spesso vengono marginalizzate. Saremo un paese veramente civile quando queste domande non avranno più ragione di essere poste (D'ONOFRIO 2014).

While Avallone publicly advocates for the valorisation of women's accomplishments rather than their appearance, her novels nevertheless display an insistence on female attractiveness. This conforming to what has been argued by scholars such as Stephen Gundle as a particularly Italian cultural obsession with women's beauty, results in excessive textual attention being dedicated to the girls' physique.⁷ The opening page of *Acciaio* illustrates this

obsessive quality, as Francesca's father watches her via the lenses of his binoculars while she is at the beach with her friends:

Nel cerchio sfocato della lente la figura si muoveva appena, senza testa. Uno spicchio di pelle zoomata in controluce. Quel corpo da un anno all'altro era cambiato, piano, sotto i vestiti. E adesso nel binocolo, nell'estate, esplodeva. L'occhio da lontano bruciava i particolari: il laccio del costume, del pezzo di sotto, un filamento di alghe sul fianco. I muscoli tesi sopra il ginocchio, la curva del polpaccio, la caviglia sporca di sabbia. L'occhio ingrandiva e arrossiva a forza di scavare nella lente. Il corpo adolescente balzò fuori dal campo e si gettò in acqua (AVALLONE 2010, 9).

While undoubtedly Avallone is critiquing Enrico's attempts to control his daughter's behaviour and sexuality, in *Acciaio* there is nevertheless a problematic tendency to align the gaze with that of the scopophilic male, reducing the girls' corporeality to object status.

Furthermore, Avallone stresses the girls' performances of sexuality, as seen in the episode where Francesca and Anna dance in front of a window, aware that their gyrations are titillating the men who watch from their apartments.

Restano seminude al centro della stanza. [...] Si sono truccate il viso, esagerando. Il rossetto sbava fuori dai contorni, il rimmel cola per il caldo e impiastra le ciglia, ma a loro non importa. Questo è il loro piccolo carnevale privato, la provocazione da lanciare fuori dalla finestra. In fondo sanno che qualcuno potrebbe anche spiarle e sbottonarsi i pantaloni (AVALLONE 2010, 27).

These and other scenes underscore the girls' nascent awareness of their bodies' changes and their potential for exerting sexual power over the male subject, essentially a kind of experimentation with corporeal agency. And yet, such instances of confluence with the patriarchal objectification of the girls' sensuality, I argue, undermine what might be deemed an aspirational feminist project in *Acciaio*.

Moreover, for many of Avallone's female characters, coming of age is equated with the penetrative sexual act with a man as a rite-of-passage: Anna, for example, loses her virginity on her fourteenth birthday with the adult Mattia, ten years her senior, in a scene that remains problematic in terms of his appropriation of her body.⁸ In *Un'amicizia*, too, coming of age is seen as directly

related to sexual intercourse, with both girls deciding to lose their virginity at fourteen. In this case, however, the girls are depicted as deliberately seeking out this sexual experience more or less at the same time, which can be read, perhaps, as their exerting a kind of sexual agency, in spite of their young age, in itself an (arguably) problematic interpretation given their status as minors. Elisa and Beatrice's sexual symbiosis being construed as a seal on their friendship recurs in another instance some three years later, when they are at Gabriele's apartment one evening:

A metà cena lei [Beatrice] e Gabriele si alzarono. Senza cercare scuse, si chiusero in camera. Io guardai Lorenzo alzandomi a mia volta e lui mi seguì in bagno. Perché un'amicizia assoluta pretende anche questo: che si faccia l'amore nello stesso istante con una parete di mezzo (AVALLONE 2020, 227).

The disproportionate objectifying attention paid to the female body which characterizes *Acciaio* reaches its apex in the figure of Beatrice in *Un'amicizia*, who in various instances incarnates the role of a mannequin. Beatrice's body is deployed as something to be clothed, moulded, and marketed. Elisa is distinguished instead as resistant to make-up and fashionable clothes, more at ease in the role of the alternative intellectual or proverbial *secchiona*. While on the one hand the author seems to critique—via Elisa's rejection of fashion—a superficial attention to clothes, much of the text is taken up with the details of couture and Beatrice's efforts to perfect and display her body. Beatrice's astute self-fashioning and her mastery of the digital tools at her disposal result, years later, in a vacuous, indecipherable image which is disseminated across the internet: «Intanto il volto di Beatrice si è calcificato nella maschera che tutti sanno. La sua immagine si è separata da lei, definitivamente, e congelata in quell'entità magica che il mondo invoca o insulta» (AVALLONE 2020, 373).

Operating on the assumption that the reader's point of view is closely aligned with the first-person narrator-character Elisa (many of whose traits resemble those of the biographical author), we are meant to interpret Beatrice's global media success as hollow, both on this occasion and on many others. And yet, following Avallone's train of thought, it would seem easier to inculcate Beatrice the media darling herself, than the patriarchal star system at play in contemporary Italian society (and beyond), one which rewards *veline* and

influencers while capitalizing on their corporeal performances. This common compulsion in the press and elsewhere to criticize the women who engage with the mediasphere has been analyzed persuasively by Danielle Hipkins, where she illustrates how the media tend to vilify women who experience success in such roles, rather than point the finger at, and attempt to change, the insidious mechanisms of television and other media that reiterate patriarchal norms in their exploitation of the female body (HIPKINS 2011).

Space, the Body and Sexuality

So how is the friendship between these two pairings of protagonists experienced within their surroundings? Italian anthropologist Franco La Cecla, in his book *Essere amici*, explains the importance of the spatial dimension of friendship: «C'è un aspetto «spaziale» dell'amicizia, la sua componente geografica. Essa ci amplia la mappa del mondo percorribile, ci rende familiari delle parti che non conoscevamo, ci consente di sentirci a casa in territori lontani e inesplorati. La nostra geografia segue le oscillazioni dell'amicizia, le sue ampiezze e le sue contrazioni» (LA CECLA 2019, 16). Avallone has in various instances recognized the enormous importance of place in her fiction, and space and the environment are clearly key to the girls' experiences in both novels under scrutiny.⁹ In *Acciaio*, abandoned beaches and semi-industrial zones constitute the stomping grounds for Anna and Francesca: such neglected areas in Piombino's periphery afford the girls secluded meeting places where they explore their corporeal relationship to the natural world around them, and to each other, as is witnessed in a beach scene where they kiss each other on the mouth (114).¹⁰ Also relevant in *Acciaio* are the more intimate spaces, such as an abandoned hut in a small children's playground, where the girls used to go as children to avoid their domineering, and at times abusive, fathers. For Anna and Francesca, the *capanna* functioned as a space in which to «play house» as children, a safe nook in which to recreate a happier, female-centric domestic sphere (145). When they revisit the location as adolescents, the small, abandoned park and the *capanna* become a place for corporeal proximity, as they lie down on the grass, face to face, and verbally express their affection for each other.

In contrast to the toponymical specificity of *Acciaio*, *Un'amicizia* employs fewer named and mapped locations, designating the Tuscan seaside town simply as T and going into greater topographical detail in the sequences set in Bologna. Yet without the backdrop of the industrial town, *Un'amicizia* does not engage as profoundly in environmentally evocative landscapes, which results therefore in a diminished engagement with the ecological implications of place. That said, the two girls frequent an out-of-the-way beach, and an analogous space to that of the *capanna* also plays a central function in *Un'amicizia*. An abandoned house that the girls break into, dubbed the *covo* by Beatrice and Elisa, becomes the surrogate home where they, too, «play house», away from their oppressive families:

Lo avevamo scoperto per caso, il covo, passeggiando su e giù di nascosto rasenti le siepi di via dei Lecci, un pomeriggio che Bea non aveva il permesso di uscire in motorino - una strategia della madre per evitare che venisse da me. [...] Poi l'avevamo vista: seminascosta dal cantiere, una vecchia casa isolata, collegata a via dei Lecci tramite un esile sterrato. Lo avevamo percorso d'istinto, senza metterci d'accordo. Una volta arrivate, ci eravamo sollevate in punta di piedi oltre la recinzione per ammirare il giardino ridotto a una giungla e la porta sbarrata dai sigilli. Che dovessimo entrarci lo pensammo subito. La nostra amicizia all'epoca - primavera inoltrata del 2002 - era in piena espansione, smaniosa di colonizzare. Solo che poi Bea aveva proposto di chiamare Gabriele e aveva rovinato tutto. [...] Ma io non potevo ammettere che qualcun altro condividesse un nascondiglio con la *mia* amica e le avevo fatto una scenata. «Lascialo fuori» le avevo intimato. «Sarà il nostro segreto, pena la fine irrevocabile della nostra amicizia». Lei, lo ricordo bene, aveva sorriso con sadica soddisfazione. «E tu cosa mi dai in cambio?» (AVALLONE 2020, 422).

In exchange for reserving the abandoned house as a domain exclusively for the two girls, Elisa volunteers to be the first to break into it and to clean it up. Years later, Elisa reflects on her gesture:

Solo adesso [...] mi rendo conto che addentrarmi in quell'abitazione, sbattere la testa contro le ragnatele, farmi schizzare il cuore in gola a ogni cigolio, è stato l'atto d'amore più spudorato che abbia mai compiuto (423).

Thus, already in adolescence, the *covo* assumes a powerfully symbolic role for their friendship, leading Elisa to guard it jealously. Elisa's equating her

breaking into the house as a daring act of love is also telling, as it alludes to the young women's powerful bond, about which more will be said shortly.

In the novel's concluding section, when the two protagonists are now adults, Beatrice insists on meeting Elisa on New Year's Eve in 2019 precisely in the *covo*, which has remained uninhabited all these years, but which Beatrice has modified for greater comfort. And while the kind of same-sex desire between Francesca and Anna is expressed less overtly in *Un'amicizia*, the two grown women take refuge in the *covo* and finally make peace in a tender embrace, inadvertently kissing each other on the mouth:

Bea e io ci guardiamo. Siamo solo noi due chiuse dentro una stanza, in silenzio, in quello che sembra un rifugio antiatomico, un nascondiglio per partigiani. Il mondo intero festeggia là fuori e forse, in questo momento, nessuno si chiede più che fine abbia fatto la Rossetti, dove sia. Compiamo un passo l'una verso l'altra, rischiando di perdere l'equilibrio. Non so bene cosa fare, forse non lo sai nemmeno tu. Mi sento goffa, indecisa. So solo che non ne posso più di questa guerra. Crolliamo l'una sull'altra e ci abbracciamo. Ci scambiamo un bacio che non sappiamo su quale guancia, ci confondiamo, finiamo per darcelo sulle labbra. Ed è strano, imbarazzante e tenero insieme, perché ragazzine non lo siamo più (AVALLONE 2020, 436).

In the seclusion of the *covo*, a word which denotes both an animal's den but also a hidden space where clandestine, or even illegal activity takes place, the two women acknowledge that their bond is both affective and visceral and, by naming it thus, on another level, unconsciously alluding perhaps to an unacknowledged mutual attraction.

It is significant that both novels employ such isolated, private spaces for the pairs of best friends to meet and communicate the intensity of their same-sex affection. The secluded nature of these sheltered places evokes the metaphor of the closet, so cogently articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her groundbreaking monograph, *Epistemology of the Closet*, which examines the repression and expression of homosexuality in the nineteenth century. While the phrase to «come out of the closet» is an English idiom, the spatial association between an enclosed, secluded area and the hiddenness of same-sex desire transcends languages and national contexts. Geographer Michael P.

Brown has insisted on the spatiality of the closet metaphor, in his study of marginalized spaces of queerness:

A closet is obviously a space: typically small and dark and bounded. [...] It is a space where things—not people—belong. Yet it is a belonging of a certain kind, for spaces, like closets, contain secrets. Its *location* and *distance* suggests [*sic*] proximity to some wider (more important, more immediate, more central) room, but it's a certain kind of proximity: one that limits *accessibility* and *interaction*. The ubiquity of gays and lesbians 'everywhere' means that on the one hand they are indeed close at hand, but enclosure of the closet means that they are separate, hived off, invisible and unheard. [...] The closet is not far away from the room, and it is certainly accessible, but one must look for it. [...] [B]y definition closet has a certain kind of spatial interaction with its room. It is separate and distinct, too. It segregates, it hides and it confines. Closets are spatial strategies that help one arrange and manage an increasingly complicated life (BROWN 2000, 7).

While the confined and segregated spaces of the *capanna* and the *covo* in *Acciaio* and *Un'amicizia* respectively are not closets *per se*, the defining characteristics of the spatial metaphor of the closet as laid out by Brown resonate with the girls' manifestations of reciprocal attraction in the space chosen by Avallone within which to enclose their desire. While Francesca's lesbianism is rendered patent in various instances in *Acciaio* (as is seen when she rejects Nino's request that she be his girlfriend, saying to him outright «a me non mi piacciono i maschi» [280]), Anna does not fully acknowledge her attraction to her best friend, experiencing shame about their intimacy. Nevertheless, when they make peace at the novel's conclusion, the nature of Anna and Francesca's relationship remains undefined, leaving its potential development open ended. In the case of Elisa and Beatrice, while the intensity of the relationship is made manifest throughout the text, and by the fact that the metafictional character of Elisa has devoted a 400-page manuscript to Beatrice, the women's same sex desire is not recognized as openly, despite the author's not shying away from the physicality of female friendship. In both novels, however, enclosed spaces serve as a means for the girls, and later women, to solidify their bond, away from the rest of the world.

Female Friendship at the Turn of the Millennium

Ultimately, the pivotal role of adolescent female friendship in Avallone's writings is in itself a literary achievement. The author's probing and nuanced investigation of the two best-friend dyads in her first and latest novels delves into the intimate and at times dramatic vicissitudes the young women undergo. Psychologist Elisabeth Morgan Thompson, in her article *Girl Friend or Girlfriend?: Same Sex Friendship and Bisexual Images as a Context for Flexible Sexual Identity Among Young Women*, published in the «Journal of Bisexuality» in 2006, indicates some key elements which define girls' friendships in the new Millennium: «Recent literature has characterized young women's friendships as not much different from (heterosexual) romantic relationships. Specifically, young women's friendships are characterized by companionship, preoccupation, jealousy, exclusivity, inseparability and physical affection» (49). Morgan Thompson proceeds to posit that greater acknowledgement of same-sex attraction between adolescent girls as seen in recent studies would seem to indicate increased flexibility in young women's sexual orientation, influenced in part, she maintains, by current media acceptability of female/female desire. The desire between women depicted in Avallone's two novels, much like the nature of friendship itself, eludes rigid classification. Indeed, it is not my intention here to label the attraction between the two young women in both texts, nor would it be productive to attempt to do so. Charlotte Ross, in her monograph *Eccentricity and Sameness. Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy*, has discussed queer and poststructural theories' emphasis on the fluidity of experience and states: «I am critical of the use of sexual categories and wary of imposing them myself. Numerous scholars have pointed to the lack of agreement about what is signified by the term 'lesbian' and emphasized the importance of moving beyond rigid definitions that risk ascribing an apparently monolithic sexual orientation» (2015, 13).

The female friendships represented by Avallone in both novels would in any case seem to resonate with the characteristics identified by Morgan Thompson and other researchers. As Celano points out in his review of *Acciaio*, «*Acciaio* è la storia di un'amicizia tanto forte da escludere il mondo circostante, di una complicità così vissuta da sfiorare l'innamoramento». In the novel itself, Anna

and Francesca's friendship is regularly characterized as analogous to a romantic relationship: «La mora e la bionda. Loro due, sempre e solo loro due. Quando uscivano dall'acqua si tenevano per mano come i fidanzati» (AVALLONE 2010, 20) (where, interestingly, the author has chosen to use the masculine plural form of the noun *fidanzati*). In a similar vein, the two friends in *Un'amicizia* promise each other that when Beatrice becomes famous, Elisa will be her manager, prompting Elisa to reflect on the importance of their bond: «Io volevo solo rimanere nella sua vita per sempre. Più di una sorella, di un marito, più di sua madre. Diventare la fonte segreta della sua luce, il suo specchio magico» (AVALLONE 2020, 299). Both friendship dyads profess their undying affection for each other and react jealously when their friend's attention is focused on others, especially male figures.

This blurring of the categories of friendship and love is, after all, not particularly surprising, as Marilyn Yalom notes in the preface to *The Social Sex*, co-authored with Theresa Donovan Brown:

The subject of friendship is less glamorous than the subject of love, which still commands centre stage in life and literature, not to mention the publishing world. I, too, have been guilty of contributing to the plethora of books focusing on love [...] without considering its near relative. During the many months of our collaboration, Theresa Donovan Brown and I have explored the overlap between love and friendship and have often found that it is difficult for us to make clear-cut distinctions. What is friendship? Is it so different from love? (YALOM 2015, x).

The passionate female friendships in Avallone's texts constitute a provocative reflection on this blurring between friendship and love. Avallone herself has commented on the love between the two girls in *Acciaio*, in an interview for WUZ.it. In response to the interviewer's question «Il lettore è spinto a tifare per l'amore saffico delle due ragazze. Anche se etero. Questa versione universale dell'amore è la salvezza?» she states:

Qualunque interpretazione di un testo è lecita. Qui posso solo dire la mia intenzione mentre seguivo, scrivendolo, l'evolversi del legame tra Anna e Francesca. Non si tratta tanto di un rapporto omosessuale, quanto di un'amicizia che per via dell'età (l'adolescenza: uno spazio di tempo potenziale, di trasformazione e di curiosità), e per via della particolare durezza della realtà

con cui le due protagoniste devono fare i conti, è paragonabile a un amore. AMORE IN SENSO AMPIO, CHE SFUGGE ALLE ETICHETTE. Ho tentato di rappresentare un legame, un'alleanza, una complicità che rifiutano una definizione definitiva. Spesso, descrivendo alcune loro tenerezze, ho pensato più a un senso materno dell'una verso l'altra, che ad altro (MARCHETTI 2010).

In her response, Avallone emphasizes the loving nature of friendship between two young women, choosing to describe their affection as maternal and, essentially, downplaying the potential for an actual lesbian relationship between the girls, while at the same time stressing the need to leave the friendship undefined. Silvia Antosa and Charlotte Ross have persuasively argued, in fact, that not only the authorial reluctance to define the girls' relationship as lesbian, but also her fictional characters' internalisation of the stigma against women's same-sex relations, renders *Acciaio* a lesbophobic text.¹¹

Paradoxically, while the loving nature of female friendship is central in terms of thematic importance in both books, such friendships are nevertheless characterized by rivalry and jealous conflict, to the extent that the relationship breaks down entirely for a lengthy period. In an interview for Sky TG24, Avallone reiterates the significance of adolescent friendship for identity formation and considers its demise as a kind of traumatic break that signals the passage into maturity:

In quegli anni [...] l'amicizia gioca un ruolo fondamentale nella costruzione delle nostre identità, diventando un enorme laboratorio etico di chi potresti essere e di chi vorresti diventare. E ciò cementa delle relazioni che per me, da narratrice, sono molto più interessanti dell'amore, specie se analizzate da una prospettiva adulta. Spesso infatti queste amicizie, così forti al liceo e all'università, si spezzano, quasi che ci voglia un altro tradimento per diventare adulti (BATTAGLIA 2020).

La Cecla reminds us that true friendship is in fact defined by its potential for rupture: «L'amicizia è sostenuta dalla sua potenziale rottura. [...] In ogni amicizia è sospesa la possibilità del tradimento. La revocabilità ne sostanzia l'esistenza» (26). Avallone's female characters' friendships would seem to validate La Cecla's claims: for example, Francesca angrily reflects on what she perceives to be Anna's lack of attention towards her, after their falling out when

Anna and Mattia become a couple: «Provava una rabbia acuta adesso. Quella stronza non si era neanche ricordata del suo compleanno, non le aveva fatto gli auguri di Natale, non le aveva infilato neppure un bigliettino sotto la porta in tutto questo tempo» (272). Feelings of hostility and jealousy often come to the fore in *Un'amicizia* as well. When, shortly after her mother's death, Beatrice is staying with Elisa and her father Paolo, Elisa becomes resentful of her friend's relationship with her parent, imagining it to be sexual:

Mi convinsi che avessero una storia, che si stessero baciando in quel momento, o peggio. Chi non avrebbe voluto una fidanzata come Beatrice, un'amante come Beatrice, una figlia come Beatrice? [...] la immaginai avvinghiata a mio padre e fantastica che morissero entrambi; oppure di morire io, far correre una corda intorno al tubo d'acciaio per la tenda della vasca, e soffocarmi. Gelosia è una parola che non voglio usare in questo libro: sarebbe troppo comoda per lei. Però è vero che un sentimento infernale, il peggiore di tutti, mi montò nell'addome come uno tsunami, travolse tutti gli organi e mi sfìnì (234).

Similar sentiments of rage, envy, or outright hatred recur frequently between the two pairings of friends in both novels. While *La Cecla* may see the potential for disintegration as part and parcel of friendship, my misgivings around Avallone's portrayal of specifically *female* friendship stem from my sense that the emphasis placed on such conflictual aspects of adolescent girls' relationships risks their degenerating into the misogynistic trope of young women as inevitably catty and destined to tear each other apart, often in jealousy over a man's attention.

While I am not advocating a saccharine or idealized version of adolescent female friendship, and while I welcome the recent success of Avallone's works which position the girls' bond at their core, I find disappointing that the author has not (yet?) produced novels which fully avoid representing women's corporeality via the male gaze and which in fact shine light on the potential for female friendships to empower young women. Such a female-centred conceptualization of friendship may risk seeming utopian, but feminist theorists, among whom Judith Raymond, have advocated for what the philosopher terms *Gyn-affection*, that is, a bond between women which is not predicated on *hetero-relations*, but rather, a relationship in which women care

for, recognize and *affect* each other.¹² Raymond states that her book *A Passion for Friends* (1986)

aims to restore power and depth to the word and reality of friendship. The word *Gyn/affection* was created with this end in mind. The best feminist politics proceeds from a shared friendship. This book is also concerned with returning friendship to a primary place as a basis of feminist purpose, passion, and politics. *Gyn/affection* is not only a loving relationship between two or more women; it is also a freely chosen bond which, when chosen, involves certain reciprocal assurances based on honor, loyalty, and affection. In this sense, one could say that friendship is a social trust. It is an understanding that is continually renewed, revitalised, and entered into not only by two or more individual women but by two or more political beings who claim social and political status for their Selves and others like their Selves.

While Silvia Avallone's pairs of girl friends incarnate literary examples of the power and significance of female friendship for young women, the paradigm adopted is one of rupture, rivalry, and discord. Ultimately, it would be refreshing if her work were to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of a female friendship which breaks free from such tropes and facilitates (young) women's resistance to patriarchal hegemony through solidarity.

Notes

¹ For an analysis of Avallone's first novel as global literature, see PENNACCHIO 2020.

² Avallone's work has received much acclaim as well as several distinguished literary awards. Nevertheless, *Acciaio*, which features adolescents and explores the industrial setting of Piombino, has been dismissed by major critics such as Marco Belpoliti or, indirectly, by the writer Valerio Evangelisti (who, in his preface to Prunetti's *Amianto*, alludes to «romanzetti di successo in cui la fabbrica è solo sfiorata, richiamata nel titolo e poi ignorata» [EVANGELISTI 2012, 7]), among others. Her treatment by Bruno Vespa at the award ceremony for the Premio Campiello 2010, where Avallone received the Opera Prima award, during which the veteran presenter instructed the camera crew to focus on her cleavage, constitutes a blatant example of the misogynistic objectification of a woman writer, one which was denounced by fellow author and presenter Michela Murgia, also an award recipient at the same event.

³ As can be seen in the 2017 issue of «gender/sexuality/Italy» and in the work of scholars such as Hipkins.

⁴ Mongiat Farina persuasively inserts Avallone's first novel within the relatively recent current of Italian fiction concerned with childhood, adolescence and coming of age, presenting it as a female *Bildungsroman*.

⁵ Avallone has explored similar topics in terms of female beauty and celebrity in her second novel, *Marina Bellezza* (2013), named after one of its protagonists, the ambitious *ragazza di provincia* who seeks fame as a performer. For a cogent analysis of the thematic and structural interconnections in Avallone's first three novels, see DAINO 2019.

⁶ This emerges in a scene in which Elisa, her brother and her mother watch an old video of her mother performing in her rock band: «Devo prenderne atto: Annabella Dafne Cioni non è stata solo mia madre, la donna impulsiva, inconcludente, disordinata, sempre troppo triste o troppo su di giri, che ci ha amati e abbandonati un'infinita di volte. [...] Mamma è stata prima di tutto, e forse sarà sempre, la formidabile ragazzina che guardo dimenarsi sul palco con energia, libera sotto il fascio di luce bianca, che scuote la testa a ritmo selvaggio, ride e possiede un innegabile talento» (AVALLONE 2020, 406).

⁷ «In all media and in much of the collective discourse about the country that takes place in Italy, the issue of female beauty and the women who over time have been deemed to embody it are recurrent reference points. Today, the annual Miss Italia pageant, that was founded in 1946, is still a national event that mobilises the energies of tens of thousands of people and engages many millions of magazine readers and television viewers. It is a central ritual in the perpetuation of the national community. Yet, at the same time, the question of female beauty is so primordial an aspect of Italian culture, so diffuse and embedded in the national psyche, that it scarcely occurs to many Italians that it is a distinctive feature of their culture, with a specific and highly controversial history» (GUNDLE 2007, xxvi).

⁸ «Non era pronta. Doveva tenerla ferma mentre le montava sopra con il corpo bruno e pesante» (AVALLONE 2010, 191). It remains unclear if, in this scene, the author is problematizing the adult male's appropriation of the fourteen-year-old girl's body, or if his «mastery» of a minor's corporeality is considered simply a matter of course.

⁹ In an interview of 2014, Avallone observes «I luoghi non sono mai solo «ambientazioni», né nei miei romanzi né nella vita. I luoghi agiscono su di noi, ostacolandoci, nutrendoci, orientando il nostro sguardo, concorrendo a forgiare la nostra identità e i nostri sogni» (D'ONOFRIO 2014).

¹⁰ For an analysis of the importance of space and the environment in this same text, see my article of 2019, Mongiat Farina's of 2014, and Cesaretti's monograph *Elemental Narratives*, in particular the chapter *Steel and Asbestos: Stories of Toxic Lands and Bodies in Tuscany and Beyond*, which considers the relationship between the Body and nonhuman materiality in *Acciaio* and other texts.

¹¹ «Sia le vicende delle due protagoniste che le affermazioni dell'autrice parlano di una persistente negazione del desiderio erotico tra donne, che viene discorsivamente trasformato in desiderio «materno» o in incertezza preadolescenziale. Il romanzo sembra chiaramente riferire di una reale e tangibile lesbofobia che riguarda sia l'auto-percezione delle protagoniste (che incarnano il destino eteronormativo delle giovani adolescenti della provincia italiana) sia le affermazioni della scrittrice, che nega a priori persino la possibilità che tra le due protagoniste possa esserci una attrazione/relazione sessuale valida e duratura o quanto meno plausibile» (ANTOSA, ROSS 2014, 65-66).

¹² «Gyn/affection is a synonym for female friendship. [...] Dictionary definitions of *affection* and *affect* shed further light on the meaning of Gyn/affection. The more commonly understood meaning of affection is a feeling, emotion, fondness, attachment, and love for another. In this sense, Gyn/affection connotes the passion that women feel for women, that is, the experience of profound attraction for the original vital Self and the movement toward other vital women. There is another meaning to affection, however, which conveys more than the personal movement of one woman toward another. Affection in this sense means the state of influencing, acting upon, moving, and impressing, and of being influenced, acted upon, moved, and impressed by other women. [...] Women who affect women stimulate response and action; bring about a change in living; stir and arouse emotions, ideas, and activities that defy dichotomies between the personal and political aspects of affection. Thus Gyn/affection means personal and political movement of women toward each other» (RAYMOND 2001, 7-8).

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