altrelettere vol. 6 (2017)
Rivista di letteratura italiana e studi di genere
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DOI: 10.5903/al_uzh-35

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DOI: 10.5903/al_uzh-36
Abstract
Elena Ferrante’s first published novel Troubling Love deals with the dark side of the mother-daughter relation as no other of her works. The narration takes the form of a painful assembly of events, dealing with both rupture and continuity between the narrator Delia and the story’s protagonist, her mother Amalia. Essentially, Delia sews images together as they emerge from her visceral, rather than intellectual or even imaginative revisiting of her childhood and adolescence. Amalia’s drowned body is progressively dressed by Delia’s pieces of memory, equivalent to clothing items that shape the narrative’s fabric. Part of the communication among different characters happens through exchange of clothes, fabric and lingerie, corresponding to their attempts to tailor Amalia’s narrative in the name of their troubled love, which comes in different patterns. Delia’s recollections of episodes of domestic violence, however, convey laceration and amorphousness, as she continuously stitches and makes adjustments, whereas no clothes or narratives can contain the true Amalia. This essay intends to highlight the path along which the narration’s thread runs. It explores the correspondences between the text’s form and content, and analyzes the narrator’s struggle to come to terms with a character whose very substance remains unreachable, encrypted in her old garments that have resisted violence, manipulation, and imposition of forms.

Key-words: Mother-daughter relation; Elena Ferrante; narrative body; clothing; amorphousness

1. Dressing the narrative body
If each of Elena Ferrante’s published works deals with the dark side of the mother-daughter relationship while raising intentionally uncomfortable questions, her first novel Troubling Love revolves around such an intricate subject more than any other writings, by digging into muddy materials, from which uneasy matter emerges. Amalia’s drowning on her daughter Delia’s birthday immediately links life and death, preparing a narrative construction in which the two women face a disorienting conflict among different forces, such as attraction, resistance and repulsion. Amalia’s body is progressively dressed by Delia’s fragments of memory, each corresponding to clothing items that function as the narrative’s fabric, whose tears arise from the vortex of a voice that
struggles to re-sew it all together while narrating. The author’s use of a rich terminology pertaining to the process of making clothes throughout the text establishes a parallel between the acts of sewing and narrating, accentuating the centrality of clothing as both a thematic and a structural component of the novel.

According to a metaphor used by renowned author Mario Vargas Llosa, the art of narrating can be compared to a backward striptease, in which an initially naked body is progressively dressed with clothes created, one at the time, by the novelist’s imagination (VARGAS LLOSA 2002). This image suggests much more than the blank page to be filled with words; the conception of a naked story as a pre-existing body implies that the narrative’s substance is the result of the careful elaboration of an initial idea: even though such nudity is perceivable as a literary intuition, it needs layers of validation to take tangible form and reveal its physicality, so that the story can become public and be shared. Vargas Llosa’s idea of dressing the narrative body is comparable to Ferrante’s emphasis on seaming the fabric of the story in order to dress the body. Virginia Woolf’s novels often represent characters who are defined by their clothes, which have the ability to transform bodies and stories, since «it is clothes that wear us and not we them» (WOOLF 1973, 188). In Ferrante’s Troubling Love, each of the clothing items contributing to the narrative process is created with carefully tailored words, interlaced to fit every edge of the plot.

While the creative process is necessarily based on the author’s inspiration, it also relies on the narrator’s function, represented by the voice extending beyond the author’s domain. The narrator is the carrier who has to deliver the story word by word, using the narrating voice as the thread that acquires a life of its own and is the fundamental component of the story’s fabric. The novelist’s imagination provides the materials necessary to the fabrication, as well as the possibility of rendering the original idea associated with the body to be draped. Although the source of all narrative materials can be traced back to the author’s imaginative and intellectual intentions, the narrator is in turn empowered with the faculty to express a perspective and to manipulate the narrative elements, by combining and sewing them together before the reader’s eyes. Delia’s narrating
voice in *Troubling Love* transfers from the imagination to the contiguous sphere of unreliable memory, where reminiscence blends almost indistinguishably with imagination. Similarly, in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, «a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends» holds the fragments to which the biographer or the narrator has to give an order, and «the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that» (Woolf 1973, 78).

The semi-naked dead body of Delia’s mother, Amalia, clearly denotes an elaborate storyline, yet it resists all efforts of containment by means of narrative wear. Clothes represent not only the form that the story takes, but they are also a prevalent topic of *Troubling Love*, where part of the communication among characters happens through exchanges of new and old clothes, fabrics, canvas and lingerie. On the one hand, the new items are bare frames with no stories to tell; they are empty fabric without traces of memory. Still, they appear to be permeable to uncontrollable bodily fluids, as unconscious triggers of the past, able to threaten any potential narrative consistency. On the other hand, the old garments retain the smell and marks of time in each of their strands, which are all discursive elements: old but carefully mended bed sheets; noticeably worn-out garments; old-fashioned rags that would deter men’s attention and prevent the jealousy of Amalia’s husband; shapeless brassieres, contrasting with the embroidered, new one, sole initial clue found on her dead body and still smelling as if it had been just taken from the sore of the Vossi sisters, the elegant lingerie store where it was unthinkable that Amalia would ever buy anything. Nonetheless, the old clothes are the inspiration for imagined ventures and inconsistent memories, and the object of desire and obsessions. Their yellowish colors are as faded as the hazy setting of their stories, whose blurry lines transpire in the novel’s pages, while the folds and wrinkles of their fabric hide untold stories, sketching the impervious course that the narration has to undertake. The symbolism of these clothes is evident in the swapping and transfers from one character to the other, and especially in the exchanges between mother and daughter.
In spite of her expectation to feel relieved because she is finally separated by death from her mother’s body, Delia feels instead the weight of a story to be told that has transferred to her own body. Against her will, her most intimate forces are driven by the effects of a compulsory flow. After the funeral, the relief from both the concern for her mother and the weight of the coffin she insists on carrying is combined with a sense of culpability. The uneasiness of Delia’s repressed femininity becomes manifest. The linkage with her mother’s body would necessarily persist, regardless of the resolution of distancing herself as much as possible from Amalia who, on the contrary, was never able to repress her femininity. Doubt arises about Delia’s ability to be in control of her own body, once the body of her mother no longer interferes since, deprived of life, it no longer represents the rejected model, unbearable while alive.

Quando la bara era stata deposta nel carro e questo si era avviato, erano bastati pochi passi e un sollievo colpevole perché la tensione precipitasse in quel fiotto segreto del ventre. Il liquido caldo che usciva da me senza che lo volessi mi diede l’impressione di un segnale convenuto tra estranei dentro il mio corpo (FERRANTE 1999, 16).

By tracing the clues provided by the clothes she had found, and wearing them whenever possible, Delia navigates through recollection of past episodes of domestic violence. She is eventually willing and ready to follow the hints of the memory’s leaking, which unsurprisingly lead to a world that can not be completely obliterated, due to all the physical and psychological connections that still exist. In need of telling the story essentially to herself while narrating, Delia senses the stink of burned fabrics again, from the time when Amalia used to accept and to wear the dresses received as gifts by the family friend Caserta, without fearing her husband’s predictably furious reactions. As the narrator, Delia proceeds through the account by stitching scraps and sewing images together, as they emerge from her character’s visceral, rather than intellective or even imaginative revisiting of her childhood and adolescence. The narrative fibre loses its texture, just as the threadbare clothes do, and runs almost spontaneously, turned into liquid form, just as the body fluids do on different occasions. Intuition is paired throughout the whole novel with a visceral feeling, a combination of sources that clearly defines such a captivating narrative style.
that is so characteristic of Ferrante’s work.

The unfolding process is an effort to come to terms with the character of Amalia, whose very substance remains unreachable, yet all other characters, including Delia, charge Amalia with the responsibility of bearing

che mia madre portasse inscritta nel corpo una colpevolezza naturale, indipendente dalla sua volontà e da ciò che realmente faceva, pronta ad apparire all’occorrenza in ogni gesto, in ogni sospiro (FERRANTE 1999, 55).5

The idea of a «natural guilt» seems to suggest that the existence of her body alone makes Amalia blameworthy, no matter how she acts. The simple reality of her body evinced a potential for self-governing, intolerable to both the possessive husband and the resentful young daughter. Delia’s perception appears to be quite intricate, especially when associated with her father’s perverseness: not only did she disapprove of her mother’s behavior, but at the same time she was also able to understand her father’s thoughts and to foresee his reaction. In the aftermath of her mother’s death, Delia realizes how, as a child, she used to identify her own apprehension with her father’s suspiciousness, and unconsciously justified his brutal response, because his obsession paradoxically coincided with her own jealousy, particularly exacerbated during her mother’s absences. Delia envisions in many passages how Amalia used to behave when she was out of the house, eluding the implied rules of domestic boundaries and appropriate clothing. In Delia’s imagination, her mother felt free to use her body as she wished, making it noticeable, and exposing herself to possible dangers. These alleged behaviors are the same that Amalia’s husband had questioned, and are even transferred to Amalia’s own imagination. In the man’s view, Amalia was fully aware of what she would become and how she would look to other men when out of his sight; she had longed to be the uninhibited woman he would never tolerate to have as his wife:

come s’era immaginato che si comportasse sua moglie appena lui girava le spalle, come anche Amalia forse aveva fantastico per tutta la vita di comportarsi: una signora di mondo che si curva senza essere costretta a poggiare due dita al centro della scollatura, accavalla le gambe non badando alla gonna, ride sgualita, si copre d’oggetti preziosi e deborda con tutto il corpo in continue indiscriminate profferte sessuali, giostrando a tu per tu coi maschi nell’arena dell’osceno (FERRANTE 1999, 69).6
Once Delia acknowledges the fictitious nature of these mental constructions, it becomes problematic to replace them with a new version of the facts, as the process requires reopening old wounds and facing the senseless, tragic damage that both Amalia and Delia have experienced. As Laura Benedetti says, Delia realizes that her attitude «is linked to her incapacity to deal with her relationship with Amalia, to find a middle ground between identification and rejection» (Benedetti 2007, 106). Indeed, Amalia’s story remains as uncertain as the dresses she actually wore, beyond the fantasies of others. Delia’s pieces of memories remain too incongruous to be matched and basted together.

2. Threats of laceration and amorphousness
The painful compilation of events occurring within a fragmented frame has to deal with loss, emptiness, ruptures, as the effects produced by the sense of “frantumaglia”, a term that Elena Ferrante loads with meanings, using it especially with reference to her own mother. The word describes the mental and physical state resulting from the impression of being pulled by contradictory thoughts and heterogeneous, painful emotions. The author explains the sentiment of loss that marks this condition in one of the letters that, along with notes and answers to interviews, form the volume titled, in fact, La frantumaglia. Ferrante defines the term as

\[\text{il deposito del tempo senza l’ordine di una storia, di un racconto. La frantumaglia è l’effetto del senso di perdita, quando si ha la certezza che tutto ciò che ci sembra stabile, duraturo, un ancoraggio per la nostra vita, andrà a unirsi presto a quel paesaggio di detriti che ci pare di vedere (Ferrante 2003, 126).}\]

The “frantumaglia” has to do with the perception of both the individual and the universal crumbling of meanings as experienced by a woman who is wounded. In some cases, it may eventually become the reason for resolving to lift up the pieces and rearranging them back together by mending the fragments that still hold some life. It is also worth mentioning that Ferrante dedicates many pages of La frantumaglia to her fascination with the work of her mother, a seamstress like Amalia, which is likely to be an autobiographical element of Troubling Love. As Elda Buonanno Foley points out, the “frantumaglia” is a struggle that is common
to many women who are «in search of the antidotes to bear sorrow, death, loss, delusion, and the heaviness of life» (BUONANNO FOLEY 2011, 158). Delia is joined in her quest by other female narrators and protagonists of Ferrante’s novels, such as Olga in The Days of Abandonment and Leda in The Lost Daughter.

This “frantumaglia” is the “disease” that afflicts Ferrante’s protagonists, it is the filter through which they make sense of the world, it is the main cause of their alienation. Their struggles (and their representations) may appear an overly-discussed cliché, at times making these women pathetic and boring, but the author’s language calls forth profound interior discomfort in female readers, who experience guilt and sympathy at the same time, a kinship with an author they barely know (BUONANNO FOLEY 2011, 158).

As the voice that expresses such a distress, Delia has to confront the possibility of collapsing, and has also to deal with the constant risk of losing control over the form and content of the story she wants to reconstruct, a risk that could result in her losing awareness as the narrator, shrinking her role to merely embody the wandering condition of a bewildered character. This feeling would suppress surveillance, or “sorveglianza”, the term Ferrante uses to define self-consciousness and one’s perception of life, a much-needed mechanism for survival by resistance to breakdowns. Yet, as Elizabeth Alsop mentions, the weight of surveillance in the narration serves as a balancing pressure that has to constantly reestablish endurance against «a marked fascination with the theme of collapse – with the moments in which such systems of surveillance falter, or even fail» (ALSOP 2014, 466-67). Episodes of attraction toward failure and, to a greater extent, toward death, alternate with surveillance, resulting in consciousness of such fascination, resistance and eventually fight against it. It is within this conflict between attraction to downfall and avoidance that the narration unfolds. Surveillance creates self-control for both the character’s psychology and the narrator’s ability to detach and keep distance from the character. It produces meaningful words that give consistency and form to the narrative, unlike the ungovernable fluidity resulting from impulse, which may become as destructive as it is mesmerizing. To avoid chaos, the narrative has to rely on surveillance, the best protection from amorphousness. In Elena Ferrante’s subsequent novels, the manifestation of amorphousness is called “smarginatura”, a term that conveys
the loss of discernible margins. The character of Lila perceives the dissolution and disappearance of the margins that delimit objects, people and other bodies in different pages of The Neapolitan Novels. For instance, in My Brilliant Friend, Lila refers to dissolving outlines as both a personal and cosmic rupture,

come se in una notte di luna piena sul mare, una massa nerissima di temporale avanzasse per il cielo, ingoiasse ogni chiarore, logorasse la circonferenza del cerchio lunare e sformasse il disco lucente riducendolo alla sua vera natura di grezza materia insensata (FERRANTE 2011b, 172).8

The “smarginatura” is the vanishing of all contours and forms that melt into magma, a mental process of deconstruction that returns orderly reality to chaos. It may be the extreme consequence of the sense of “frantumaglia”, as experienced by some of Ferrante’s female characters through their perception of the fragility of reality. Disintegration appears likely to happen before their very eyes, particularly when violence, distress and the mortification of their own nature are part of everyday life. Delia knows about Amalia’s striving to endure all the abuses inflicted on her. To resist abuse, Amalia had resolved to almost disregard them, even when physically assaulted.

Delia’s perceptions, distorted by fear of abandonment and a failed identification with her mother, blend with the attempts by two male characters to tailor Amalia’s narrative in the name of their troubled love, which becomes manifest in different ways. One attempt is Caserta’s fetishism, a ritual observed even after the disappearance of the body to which the old, desired lingerie belonged. A second one is the abusive husband’s fixation with owning – even authoring – her uncontainable body, by restraining it on the canvas he obsessively paints. Violence is fomented by the combination of his jealousy and Caserta’s vicious games. The paintings are the husband’s only view of Amalia, always the same and continually reproduced: a half-dressed body that he considers his private property, all the while disclosing it to the eyes of all. The canvases are pieces of fabric, too, although of a different type, forcing Amalia into her husband’s interpretation of her story. Only one of the paintings mentioned in the novel is different from the others, one representing the profiles of two women that almost overlap in the Vossi lingerie store. Delia, however, does not believe
her father capable of such a refined composition that, unlike his vulgar portraits, reflects a clearly articulated idea.

The temporal order is often altered in the narration. In life, the presence of Amalia could singlehandedly accelerate time, as the lack of continuity between the mother’s and the daughter’s lives caused the vacuum of the present, a condition comparable to a suspended hiatus between past and future. In Delia’s independent life as an adult, Amalia’s visits interfere with her new self-contained domain and lead Delia to picture herself as an old, wrinkled child. Their contrasting lifestyles, cities and languages emphasize the distance established between mother and daughter. Delia has chosen to live far from her native Naples, which, in addition to representing southern disarray, is unique in its expression of decay in the novel. In Turin, conventionally considered a rather composed northern city, Delia can avoid social relationships and close contact with the neighborhood. She does not tolerate Amalia’s conduct during the days spent together in Turin:

La sua socievolezza mi infastidiva: usciva a fare la spesa e familiarizzava con negoziatori con cui in dieci anni avevo scambiato non più di due parole; andava a passeggiare per la città con certe sue conoscenze occasionali (FERRANTE 1999, 10).

Within the limits of the private space, conversely, Amalia has the habit of devoting a considerable amount of time to cleaning the house in order to achieve a flawless tidiness; Delia subsequently returns her rooms to disorder as soon as Amalia leaves. Another rejection of Naples appears in Delia’s use of Italian, expressly leaving her mother’s Neapolitan behind. Occasional contact with Amalia’s world, however, causes her to revert to the abhorred tongue that drags its heavy weight of tough memories and furious sounds.

The intrusion of the past, which happens with Amalia’s visits, takes many different forms; however it appears most notably in the chronological confusion due to Delia’s fears of proximity and juxtaposition when she sees herself as a young child with her body all wrinkled. Because she does not accept any presence of Amalia in her current life, she can only conceive their relation in the past, until the interruption of their shared storyline because of relocation. The linear chronology collides with the distance, and this physical rift is in turn embodied...
by the wrinkles that engrave time on her skin. The marker of time recalls an analogous image found in the novel *Colomba* by Dacia Maraini: «una bambina con la faccia tutta rugosa» (Maraini 2007, 252). In both cases, the wrinkles refer to the breach of time opened by a narrative absence that disrupts the connection between a mother and her daughter. In *Colomba*, the emblematic child recurrently asks her mother to tell a story. As soon as the storytelling stops, she sees time senselessly speeding, hair turning grey before her eyes. Immediately, she urges her mother to continue narrating because only tales have the power of detaining time: «Mamma, ti prego, svegliami, sto sognando che sto crescendo e che tu stai diventando sempre più vecchia. Ti prego, raccontami una storia! Solo le storie fermano il tempo» (Maraini 2007, 294). Whereas in Maraini’s text the daughter remains a child as long as her mother sits on her bed telling stories, in Ferrante’s text the adult daughter curls her body in a corner of the bed to avoid contact with her mother and to prevent turning into an aged, wizened child. In both texts, though, not only does the mother-daughter relation refer to their bodies; it is also inextricably intertwined with time. The stories told by mothers seem to bring messages handed down from generation to generation, delivered in the form of a narrative to be continued, whereas the stories told by daughters may be the quest for a narrative that the mother has been able to transmit only in a cryptic format that needs to be deciphered. Whether the stories are told by the mother or the daughter, they are always about the time between them, as either a reiteration or an interruption of a narrative body.

Behind Delia’s resolute denial of the language, the city and the body of her mother, there is her complete inability to connect with Amalia’s story. After Amalia’s death, however, the basis of the refusal disappears, leaving the tear visibly open and in need of being patched. This repair may only occur if Delia finds the thread of the potential storyline in the foggy memories, bringing back the story that happened but was too painful for the mother to tell and now can only be told by the daughter. The dissociation between mother and daughter yields to an intimate game of overlaying images and clothes, eventually resulting in a sort of restored connection that fills the gaps of time and space between the
two women. However, the continuity remains as imperfect as the verb tense chosen to describe it and as the very setting of memory: «L’infanzia è una fabbrica di menzogne che durano all’imperfetto» (Ferrante 1999, 160). The past tense mentioned in this passage and used by Elena Ferrante in many pages of the original text is, in fact, the “imperfetto”, a tense that lacks any sense of completeness, giving actions an indefinite tone. It has rightly been translated as «past tense» by Ferrante’s superb translator Ann Goldstein; however, it is a form of past tense that does not have an equivalent in English grammar, so that the translation cannot possibly communicate the linguistic implications of the original Italian tense. The memories recollected and all actions associated with the places revisited assume, in fact, an oniric dimension in which the verb form used corresponds to the possible unreliability of the memories. The Italian “tempo imperfetto” can mean both “imperfect tense” and “imperfect time”, and this ambiguity underscores the grammatical, semantic and symbolic equivalence of the two concepts in the narrator’s recounting. Delia’s reminiscences embrace altogether different connotations that such a tense may bear: they refer to what her life used to be, to the habits of her family members, to the deeds that her mother repeatedly performed (for instance, when sewing), as well as to her own emotions, sensitivity and fantasies as a child. In sum, Delia has to tell the story to herself, setting it amid the memories of what she had perceived, and expressing it in the storytelling tense of both remembrances and imagination. She has to reconcile at least three different stories, told through the eyes of the child, the mother, and the adult daughter, by eliminating contradictions and trimming superfluities.

With such an insubstantial elusiveness, the narrator gropes among bodiless clothes and accumulated assumptions, in a composition of stories that she remembers or imagines. Delia confronts these ambiguities by envisioning herself as the armed woman from Neapolitan cards, the eight of spades, equipped as a warrior in a game of men, and ready to risk by playing with determination the only chance she has in her hands. She has to disengage from her father’s moves in order to shift into her mother’s mind to gain her version of the story. To
do so, Delia goes back to the places Amalia visited, and looks for plausible answers beyond what she had imagined a long time ago. Unpleasant sounds and depraved behavior become acceptable, as they are naturally consonant with the urban deterioration, the malodourous passages, and the dark underworld of the subway station where she descends. They provide the context but not the text, which is instead found in the bits of stories that Delia eventually remembers hearing directly from Amalia’s voice: the forgotten accounts that the mother disclosed rarely.

Suddenly, the images of mother and daughter in their loud dresses overlap intermittently, and the narrative threads seem to converge when Delia crosses the hidden streets of her past, through which a very young Amalia used to pass in order to deliver the gloves she made, and, constantly chased by harassers, would run to bring her body out of sight.

3. The blue shielding suit
The darkest haunt of the past is gradually illuminated by feeble gleams, filled with memories, and inhabited by Amalia’s old garments, among them ultimately her blue suit. However, the possibility of re-dressing Amalia by returning that suit to her turns out to be illusory; the matching jacket and skirt are nothing more than silhouettes, hanging as if the body inside them had slipped out leaving its outline, and giving an incorporeal shape to the empty figure. To avoid losing herself, Delia descends into the hell of her most impenetrable memory in search of a residual sign of Amalia’s substance. She has to mentally deconstruct the armored suit that represents Amalia’s entire story, engraved in the blue fabric that has resisted time and countless adjustments. She has to connect the suit to actions and events, to place it within space and time frames, in order to subsequently re-assemble it, by emulating her mother’s ability to bast, to sew, to
unstitch, to turn inside-out, to re-sew. Expert seamstresses are able to create an outfit that can last forever, if they can renew it over and over again. Sitting on the bed as if ready for the storytelling to happen by itself, Delia stares at the silhouettes to read Amalia’s story encrypted in the suits. The narration itself takes the form of the art of sewing, although backwards:

Lasciai che ogni punto si scucisse, che la stoffa blu ridiventasse tessuto senza taglio, odoroso di nuovo, nemmeno sfiorato da Amalia che, giovane, [...] stava ancora scegliendo tra le pezze arrotolate [...] Stava ancora progettando di cucirselo addosso (FERRANTE 1999, 153-54).13

Again, it is interesting to notice how the Italian expression «cucirselo addosso», translated as «to sew it herself» by Goldstein, is extremely difficult to render in English: its literal translation – to sew it on herself – has a special meaning in the original Italian, beyond the reflexive form. The idiomatic expression ‘cucire addosso’ is actually ambivalent: it suggests the act of modeling the pieces of fabric by putting them in direct contact with the body to accurately reproduce it. It also means to assign certain features with the intention of either criticizing someone or fabricating a character. In the letter written for the jury of the Elsa Morante prize in 1992, Elena Ferrante uses another similar expression belonging to the same semantic field, ‘tagliare addosso’, which may be translated as ‘to cut to fit’ or, more literally, ‘to cut on somebody’. That year, Troubling Love won the prize named after Elsa Morante, possibly one of Elena Ferrante’s intellectual mothers.14 At the award ceremony, someone else read the letter, which was included in La frantumaglia later on. Its subject is particularly relevant because Ferrante quotes Morante’s words from Lo scialle andalusso (FERRANTE 2003, 15-17) about seamstresses who dress mothers. The idea is that a mother’s body is not the equivalent of a woman’s body, in the eyes of her children and everyone else, including seamstresses. These dressmakers cut the fabric in order to fit the archetype, and create shapeless dresses for the amorphous mothers who will inhabit them. In Morante’s short story, the protagonist Giuditta wears extravagant clothes both on stage and in the fantasies of her son Andrea. However, she changes into a black suit and a hat with veil once she is forced to leave her career and becomes an aging mother. The final unpretentious outfit is
ultimately appropriate for the role that her jealous son expects her to perform.

As the narrator of Woolf’s *Orlando* says of clothes, «we may make them take the mould of arm or breasts, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking» (WOOLF 1973, 188). The cutting and sewing of the seamstress can produce dresses that hide the body, but can also reveal the true body; they can build a protection (or a self-protection), and can even craft a new persona and her story. The dresses made by Amalia represent as many possibilities as the imagination can allow. On the one hand, in the whole process of sewing her own dress, Amalia is telling about herself, starting from the very beginning; on the other hand, Delia is interpreting the suit’s life according to her own versions, as a young girl who has witnessed the entire process and, fascinated, has developed parallel creations:

Mi incantava che da ordito e trama del tessuto lei sapesse ricavare una persona, una maschera che si nutriva di tepore e odore, che pareva figura, teatro, racconto. Se lei non mi aveva mai concesso nemmeno di sfiorarla, quella sua sagoma era stata certamente, fino alle soglie della mia adolescenzaa, generosa di suggestioni, di immagini, di piaceri. Il tailleur era vivo (FERRANTE 1999, 154).

The suit preserves Amalia’s desire for freedom that both attracts and terrorizes Delia, for the escape it would inspire, and for the distancing it would cause. The characters created, however, leave the true Amalia unknown, as in a Pirandellian situation, where female characters are particularly representative of alienation, exclusion and fragmentation, and are subjected to denial of will and form. The fluidity inherent in the state of amorphousness is overcome by the reconstruction of the woman’s contour behind the mask, although the process is described by a succession of terms expressing doubt. Only the word «maybe» (*forse*) recurs ten times in three pages, (FERRANTE 2006b, 126-28) in the final passages. Delia eventually recovers a patched equilibrium through tentative reconstruction of events, barely adjusting herself into Amalia’s old garments that have resisted violence, manipulation and imposition of forms, whereas no clothes or narratives can suit or contain the true Amalia. Memories re-emerge for Delia, although uncertain; facts take shape, although blurred and burdened by the weight of long-lasting lies that keep Amalia unreachable. Delia resolves to tell everything she can
to herself, as there must be some truth among the lies deriving from her own obsessive game, as a child, of identifying with her mother to the point of being her mother: «Ero identica a lei e tuttavia soffrivo per l’incompiutezza di quell’identità. Riuscivamo a essere ‘io’ solo nel gioco, ormai, e lo sapevo» (FERRANTE 1999, 161). Delia has to come to terms and be satisfied with that double represented by the empty old blue suit, the only garment to which she can cling. In fact, she resolves to wear it in order to return it to her mother’s intentions, considering the suit to be the final synthesis of her inheritance: the extreme narrative left to her.

The adjustment of the skirt using a diaper pin and the adaptation of both the jacket and skirt to her body are part of the progression toward Delia’s recognition of the need for artifice in telling the story: «bastava tirare un filo per seguitare a giocare con la figura misteriosa di mia madre, ora arricchendola, ora umiliandola. Ma mi accorsi che non ne sentivo più la necessità» (FERRANTE 1999, 165). Ultimately, Delia recognizes the destructive potential of that game, which coincides with manipulation as a feature of the narrative deed, due to the power inherent to creating a plot. As the daughter-narrator, Delia is no longer able to control the plot, because she is certainly not in control of Amalia’s character, even less she is able to engage in the risky, perhaps impossible venture of becoming Amalia’s narrative voice. The inability to complete the overlapping and reach absolute identification results in the essential admission of the ancient pain originated by detachment from the maternal body, loved and hated at the same time for having first (re)produced and then abandoned her double, a potential replica or at least an extension of her life and true self, a daughter who is instead «[…] lasciata nel mondo a giocare da sola con le parole della menzogna, senza misura, senza verità» (FERRANTE 1999, 164). With no chances of resuming her mother’s narrative, Delia is forced to resort to the few remaining signs that still tell about Amalia: an inherited story lying in an adapted suit, barely fastened with a safety pin, and a retouched picture found in her mother’s old purse. Retouching is all she can do to her own picture, as well, so that the images of the two women become equivalent. A picture, the fictitious representation of a double in itself, is
even more emblematic in this case, because it is the photo found on the identity card. The symbolism pushes both fiction and reality toward the psychological territory of construction and deconstruction of the self. The complexity intrinsic to the semantic value of “identity” is evident here. Although the term usually refers to the individuality, it actually means ‘being identical’. Delia’s and Amalia’s identity cards and pictures become interchangeable, as do the people who hold them, only by altering difference through artifice and a manipulation of images, analogous to the adjustment of the blue suit. Paradoxically, identity is allowed only within alteration, which literally enables transformation into other. Being identical is reached by being different.

The emptiness between the two women is eventually filled by a continuity that must necessarily be imperfect. Delia has speculated about Amalia’s invention of her own story every time her mother played with her scissors to design body parts made out of paper and fabric, or with her needles and sewing machine to create empty pieces of clothes with a life of their own. Nevertheless, before drowning, Amalia expresses a fear of being taken away wrapped in a rug, an image that suggests total imprisonment in a kind of fabric that would have put an end to her games of stitching, unstitching and re-stitching. Delia recounts how her mother felt her own tearing and slipping away, an image that recurs in many forms and different contexts in the novel, for instance in the frequent references to rips in garments, lacerations of the body, the surfaces and the urban fabric, as well as ruptures of the temporal order. Delia can only wish to be able to look through those slits, which are the result of suffering but also potential revelations of the reality beyond the facade. Similarly, the tearing of Amalia’s self is at the same time a rupture of her resistance and an opening suggesting, like Eugenio Montale’s flaw in the net, a slot through which it is possible to escape and, essentially, to vanish. The theme is significant in Ferrante’s work, particularly in the final volume of the Neapolitan Novels, where vanishing frees both Lila and her young daughter from narrative constrictions.

When asked whether Amalia’s disappearance is an act of surrender or not in an interview published by Paris Review, Elena Ferrante responds with another
«maybe», a sign of surrender, she says, but also one of irreducibility against manipulation of personality (FERRANTE 2015, 226). Delia acquires consciousness of both amorphousness and irreducibility, as the effects of the different forms of manipulation that are expressions of troubling love.
Notes

1 In his *Letters to a Young Novelist*, Mario Vargas Llosa says: «Writing novels is the equivalent of what professional strippers do when they take off their clothes and exhibit their naked bodies on stage. The novelist performs the same acts in reverse. In constructing the novel, he goes through the motions of getting dressed, hiding the nudity in which he began under heavy, multicolored articles of clothing conjured up out of his imagination. The process is so complex and exacting that many times not even the author is able to identify in the finished product — that exuberant display of his ability to invent imaginary people and worlds — the images lurking in his memory, fixed there by life, which sparked his imagination, spurred him on, and induced him to produce his story» (VARGAS LLOSA 2002, 16).

2 In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf also treats gender and the body in society and in fiction. However, it is in *Orlando* that clothing acquires the function of defining the body.

3 Translation in English: «When the coffin was set down in the hearse, and it had started off, a few steps and a guilty relief were enough for the tension to release that hidden stream from my womb. The warm liquid that was coming out of me against my will gave me the impression of an agreed-upon signal among aliens inside my body» (FERRANTE 2006 b, 17).

4 The function of disgust in Ferrante’s work is analyzed by Stiliana Milkova in her essay *Mothers, Daughters, Dolls: On Disgust in Elena Ferrante’s La figlia oscura* (MILKOVA 2013).

5 Translation in English: «inscribed in her body a natural guilt, independent of her will and of what she really did, and yet readily appearing as needed in every gesture, in every breath» (FERRANTE 2006 b, 47).

6 Translation in English: [...] the way he imagined his wife behaved as soon as he turned his back, the way Amalia, too, perhaps, had for her whole life dreamed of behaving: a woman of the world who bends over without having to place two fingers at the center of her neckline, crosses her legs without worrying about her skirt, laughs coarsely, covers herself with costly objects, her whole body brimming with indiscriminate sexual offerings, ready to joust face to face with men in the arena of the obscene (FERRANTE 2006 b, 58).

7 My English translation of the passage from the volume *La frantumaglia*: «The frantumaglia is the deposit of time without the order of a story, of a tale. The frantumaglia is the effect of the sense of loss, when one has the certainty that all that seems to be stable, lasting, an anchorage for our life, will soon go to join that landscape of debris that we think we see.»

8 Translation in English: «as if, on the night of a full moon over the sea, the intense black mass of a storm advanced across the sky, swallowing every light, eroding the circumference of the moon’s circle, and disfiguring the shining disk, reducing it to its true nature of rough insensate material» (FERRANTE 2012, 176).

9 Translation in English: «Her sociability irritated me: she went shopping and got to know shopkeepers with whom in ten years I had exchanged no more than a word or two; she took walks through the city with casual acquaintances» (FERRANTE 2006b, 11).

10 My translation of the two quotations from *Colomba*: «A child with her face all wrinkled» (MARAINI 2007, 252). «I beg you, mom, wake me up, I am dreaming that I am growing up and you are getting older and older. I beg you, tell me a story! Only stories stop time» (MARAINI 2007, 294).

11 Translation in English: «Childhood is a tissue of lies that endure in the past tense» (FERRANTE 2006b, 130).

12 Translation in English: «She ran in my head. Was it possible that I, passing through there, carried her in my aging, unsuitably dressed body? Was it possible that her sixteen-year-old body, in a homemade flowered dress, was passing through the shadowy light by means of mine [...]? Maybe, in the end, all that mattered of these two days without respite was the transplanting of the story from one head to the other, like a healthy organ that my mother had given up to me out of affection» (FERRANTE 2006b, 108-09).

13 Translation in English: «I let each stitch become unsewed, the blue material become again the uncut fabric, smelling like new, not even touched by Amalia, who, a young girl [...]», was still
choosing among the bolts of material [...] She was still planning to sew it herself» (FERRANTE 2006b, 125).

14 Stefania Lucamante writes of women novelists who, in their works, always play with their literary mother’s body, and considers Elsa Morante as the literary mother of Italian writers Di Lascia, Vinci and Ferrante (LUCAMANTE 2008, 28).

15 Translation in English: «I was enthralled by her ability to extract a person from the woof and warp of the fabric, a mask that was nourished on warmth and scent, which seemed character, theater, story. Even if she had never let me touch it, that silhouette of hers had certainly been, up to the threshold of my adolescence, generous with suggestions, images, pleasures. The suit was alive» (FERRANTE 2006b, 126).

16 One example is Marta in Luigi Pirandello’s novel The Excluded Woman.

17 Translation in English: «I was identical to her and yet I suffered because of the incompleteness of that identity. We succeeded in being ‘I’ only in the game now, and I knew it» (FERRANTE 2006b, 131).

18 Translation in English: «it was enough to pull one thread to go on playing with the mysterious figure of my mother, now enriching it, now humiliating it. But I realized that I no longer felt the need (FERRANTE 2006b, 134-35).

19 Translation in English: «left in the world to play alone with the words of a lie, without limits, without truth» (FERRANTE 2006b, 133).

20 The reference is to the poem In limine (On the Threshold) (MONTALE 1999, 5).
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Ortese and the theory of difference in Il porto di Toledo

Abstract
Anna Maria Ortese is considered today as one of the greatest women writers of all times. This essay analyzes her contribution to Italian Women’s Literature within the context of her relationship with two major waves of the Italian Feminist Movement: that of the 1970s, centered mainly on the idea of equality, and that of the 1980s, centered on the idea of sexual difference. While writing her autobiography Il porto di Toledo Ortese became aware that the very experience of reality, centered on sexual difference, had to be reassessed and, consequently a new feminine language had to be conceived. The contributions made by Ortese in Toledo proved to be invaluable in the creation of a new feminine language, distant from the Lacanian symbolic order and capable to express the experience of reality in a new and unique way.

a. Ortese, the Italian Literary Canon and Gender Literature

Anna Maria Ortese is today recognized as one of the greatest Italian women writers of the 20th century. As her literary career progressed, she moved away from Italian Magic Realism and the Fantastic tradition in order to reach her own literary style, one that would allow her to describe the world around her through her own personal vision. In her short stories and novels she used fantasy not to escape reality but on the contrary, as a tool to enrich our perception of reality, enabling us to criticize it and change it.

Because of her experimentation with different literary modes and genres, Ortese has been traditionally considered an impossible author to classify within the Italian literary canon. As a result, her work has often been either praised as visionary or dismissed as unreliable, frequently at the same time. Throughout her career, Ortese has certainly tried to adapt her writing style to the demands of several different literary movements of the 20th Century – which entailed a constantly changing relation in the representation of reality – but she could never bring herself to completely accept such demands. Therefore her initial neorealism was never mimetic in the traditional sense, her peculiar language never embraced elitism, as it would in the avant-garde, and her post-modernist writings would
always have a strong component of social criticism. In other words, Ortese always had her own perceptive and sensitive way of interpreting reality, based on compassion and emotional participation. It is relevant in this context to remember what Adalgisa De Giorgio writes about women’s writing and experimentalism:

Should women choose formal and linguistic experimentation, which is subversive, but potentially uncommunicative, or communicative representational modes, which perpetuate the literary as well as the social status quo? And is Realism inevitably conservative or reactionary, reproducing women’s oppression and experimentalism automatically subversive and therefore liberating for women? (De Giorgio 2006, 97)

This is a challenging question, particularly in the case of Ortese. Can we really affirm that formal and linguistic experimentations have prevented her from effectively communicating what she had to say? Moreover, can we confidently assert that her constant resistance against pre-determined stylistic rules, her extraordinary imagination and her experimenting with many different literary genres, have forced her to give up on Realism? We don’t think so. If we re-read some her works today, it is clear to understand how relevant they are in today’s society. It is almost as if her imagination and visionary qualities would allow her to better understand the world she lived in and the capability to talk about it like very few realist writers could do.

Within this context and to offer further clarification of her extraordinary contribution to Italian Women’s Literature: that of the 1970s, centered on the idea of equality and liberation, and the 1980s centered on the idea of sexual difference. This essay demonstrates how Ortese’s own emancipation, both in a literary and personal way, allowed her to overcome the ideological limitations of 1970s feminism and foresee a new form of feminist thought.¹ This new form of feminism, which would become popular in France in the 1970s and in Italy in the 1980s, would be no longer based solely on equality and liberation, but rather on exploring the differences between the two sexes. The very experience of reality centered on sexual difference had to be reassessed: consequently a new feminine language, quite different from the one proposed by the Lacanian symbolic order, had to be conceived.² The contributions made by Ortese and her literature proved
to be invaluable in the creation of this new language, one that would express a different and unique way of experiencing reality.

b. The feminists and Toledo. An unsolved mystery.

This is what Ortense wrote to Franz Haas in 1990:

Ma Toledo resta un imperdonabile e oscuro peccato letterario e morale per tutti. Credo che entri in questa condanna, l’ancestrale terrore di qualche cosa che la donna non deve esprimere: se la parità (inteiore) con l’uomo e la sua non appartenenza al luogo comune, non so. Ma temo che Toledo fu proprio un romanzo trasgressivo per le stesse femministe: dichiararono infatti, nel ’75, che bisognava toglierlo dalle loro librerie. E lo tolsero. (Per le sinistre letterarie fu anche peggio. E per le destre un poco) (ROGNONI-HAAS 2016, 82-83).^3

It is difficult to establish whether this comment represented one of the many fears that plagued Ortense’s mind, or if it were something that actually happened. Her perception that her novel could be considered transgressive since it revealed some sort of dangerous femininity was probably accurate. On the other hand, most her books, for various reasons, had been cause of contention among literary critics. It is remarkable how Carlo Betocchi, long before any discussion on feminism had taken front stage, had sensed in 1938 that Ortense’s writing «esprime e valorizza quel residuo di femminilità che rimane incontrollabile da parte dell’uomo»^4 (BETOCCHI 1938, 446) and attributed precisely to this residual the uneasiness that Ortense’s books caused in her critics and readers.^5

But then again, let’s go back to the 1970s. Who were indeed the feminists who, according to Ortense, had her book removed from their bookstores? This remains some sort of mystery, since even Franz Haas^6 can not explain whether Ortense was referring to a specific episode, or if she has simply seen her book disappear from the windows of Rome’s Women’s Bookstore located near Piazza Farnese, not far from where Ortense lived. It is possible that Ortense, embittered and offended by the sudden disappearance of her book, imagined some sort of conspiracy against Toledo. Such conspiracy, in Ortense’s mind, would have been planned not only by the publishing house Rizzoli – of this she was convinced – but also by the feminists who requested that her book be removed from the windows of the
Women’s Bookstores. This is how she will remember those times much later, in her essay *Dove il tempo è un altro*:


Going beyond Ortese’s fears and delusions, one thing is certain: when *Toledo* was published in 1975, very few copies were sold (around 8000 copies, according to Rizzoli) and very few reviews were published. If we consider that in the very same year and with the same publishing house, Oriana Fallaci sold 350,000 copies of *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* and Victoria Ronchey sold about 80,000 copies of *Figlioli miei, marxisti immaginari*, Ortese’s disappointment is not surprising. Ortese felt distressed and foiled by *Toledo*’s lack of success and meager sales, and not only for economical reasons. As far as the reviews were concerned, they were indeed very few and none of the reviewers was able to understand the originality and the revolutionary nature of *Toledo* especially in terms of gender literature. To offer a few example, Luce D’Eramo’s review, (D’Eramo 1976, 176-184) proposed an excellent linguistic analysis of *Toledo* but did not touch upon a theme that today appears essential to our understanding of the novel’s complexity: Ortese’s challenge to the patriarchal model of autobiography as well as that of *Bildungsroman*. Olga Lombardi’s review also remains indifferent to the linguistic originality of the novel, and states that the most convincing part of *Toledo* is the author’s use of her youthful short stories and poems (the famous *rendiconti e ritmici*) which she uses to reconstruct her early life. Lombardi writes:

Entro questa biografia visionaria, nella storia invenzione di un’infanzia reale e sognata si inseriscono le prove di «espressività» [...] queste liriche in cui è avvertibile l’eco di diverse suggestioni costituiscono il versante più valido del libro, quello in cui il linguaggio ritrova la sua naturale struttura e compagine. Tutto il romanzo è infatti impostato su un discorso fluente e dissipante che non si coagula in sintassi ma resta aperto e franto, spesso travolto, con clausole tronche e frequenti elisioni del verbo; nella ricerca del poetico il linguaggio si fa lezioso e artefatto, con costrutti infantili e alogici (Lombardi 1975, 410).
Going back to Ortese’s letter to Franz Haas we prefer not to believe in the conspiracy theory and we suspect that Toledo might indeed have been removed from the windows of the Women’s Bookstores, but only because it did not sell enough copies. However, we must also wonder if Toledo, while being physically removed from the windows, was not also removed, at a subconscious level, from the minds of the women leading the Women’s Bookstores. We wonder what would have happened if, instead of forgetting about it, the Women’s Bookstores would have actively promoted Toledo with presentations and debates. It must be emphasized again how Ortese’s book came out right in the middle of the 1970s, when feminism finally achieved a strong and intellectual pull and an unparalleled ability to influence the masses to a degree that it would never reach again at least in Italian society. In 1974 the divorce law was approved; in 1978 the abortion law was also approved, and finally in 1981 the codice Rocco – on the jurisdiction of honour crimes – was modified, and rape was finally recognized as a crime against the person and not against morality.

Among the 1970s feminists, this lack of curiosity and interest towards Ortese’s book is particularly thought provoking, since Toledo is, above all, a female Bildungsroman, a novel of formation; however its originality lays in the fact that the young protagonist, Ortese herself, does not have access to the tools which would allow that very same formation to happen. That is why she has to go back and reconsider her own youthful writings, the famous rendiconti e ritmici, which she does not even dare to call “poetry” and “short stories” since she feels excluded by that same literary tradition she is trying to infiltrate. So why did the 1970s feminists not embrace Toledo? It is possible to imagine that some of the philosophical questions posed by Ortese caught them by surprise or were misunderstood. In fact while the novel is based on the concept of inequality, Ortese goes far beyond the question of equality, rights and liberation, and confronts instead the much more complex problem of identity.

c. Why not a feminist?

During her lifetime, Anna Maria Ortese (1914-1998) never belonged to the feminist movement. Not only that, she was also not fond of it, and her relations
with the feminists of her era (as we have seen in the case of Toledo) were difficult and often polemical.

Although Ortese’s principles were often far more radical than those of the feminists, she always shied away from their practices and slogans. Her proud autonomy created a gap which, in time, became more and more difficult to bridge. Her reluctance to embrace a movement she seemed so naturally a part of is perplexing and at times mysterious, since Ortese’s life was, in many ways, a monument to women’s independence and equality. How can this incongruence be explained? Perhaps Ortese’s learned diffidence can be, at least partially, rationalized by considering three factors: the times in which Ortese lived her formative years, her own independent personality and the Italian feminism that was part of the 1970s.

Born in 1914 in Rome, Ortese was raised in Mussolini’s fascist Italy (1922-1943), an historical period when Italian Feminism – which had been rising in popularity at the end of the 19th century – was damaged by the Duce’s politics and practices. Although at first he seemed to be a supporter of women’s independence, Mussolini ended up creating a series of policies which not only threatened women’s independence but ended up accepting women’s presence in society only as fascist wives and mothers of the Italian nation. Given the historical circumstances, it must have been hard for a young Anna Maria Ortese to develop some sort of feminist awareness at a time when everything around her appeared to emphasize a submissive and passive model of femininity. Although unprepared to be a feminist at the intellectual level, Ortese was in her life a natural feminist, resisting Mussolini’s propaganda by rejecting the role of devout wife and prolific mother. She remained single all her life and supported herself through her profession of journalist and writer.

Ortese’s debut in 1937 with Angelici dolori made her a celebrity in her own time, and raised the endless and unanswered question of where to place her in the canon. If, in the beginning, Massimo Bontempelli – the Italian intellectual who invented Italian Magic Realism – took her under his wing, it would have soon been seen that Ortese was too much of what Italian feminist scholar Rosi
Braidotti would define as a «nomadic subject»,\textsuperscript{12} to be confined within one literary movement no matter how popular it was. Ortese soon moved on and started exploring the literary world around her with its many different literary genres. Despite her undeniable talent, she often ended up as an unwelcome guest in any literary movement whose poetics would try to impose rigid rules on Ortese’s writing.

It is well known what happened in 1953, when Ortese, by then part of \textit{Gruppo sud} and therefore, at least in theory, following the dispassionate Neorealist dictate, wrote an unusual and hybrid reportage: \textit{Il mare non bagna Napoli}.\textsuperscript{13} This book was destined to create turmoil for many years to come. What placed Ortese at the center stage of the Italian literary world was, this time, not only her harsh criticism of the Neapolitan leftist intellectuals who used to be her good friend, but also her writing style. What was supposed to be an impersonal and detached neorealist reportage, became in Ortese’s book something completely different. Ortese’s style conveyed a strong personal participation and an emotional closeness to the facts and the people described that was not contemplated by the strict dictates of the Neorealist poetics.

This famous episode in Ortese’s professional life points out, once again, the importance of Ortese’s artistically and ideologically independent personality. As we already mentioned, she was often a pioneer, exploring in her fiction themes and problems which would be seen as crucial many years later. Just to offer an example, \textit{L’Iguana}, published in 1965 is now seen as a key text in the field of ecocriticism.\textsuperscript{14} However, her independent personality also caused her grief and misunderstanding. Because of her uniquely personal way to interpret reality, she could never quite fit in with any group that, by necessity, would create its own imposed rules and limitations. If critics would later consider a personal way of experiencing and interpreting reality to be an important factor in assessing women writers’ production, it was not always so. The less homogenized point of view that women writers could offer – so important for a critical re-evaluation of historical times from a minority point of view – was initially devalued and degraded for the very same reasons. As Barbara Johnson would write in 1987:
Not only personal experience tended to be excluded from the discourse of knowledge, but the real of the personal itself has been coded as female and devalued for that reason. (JOHNSON 1987, 43-44)

By the time feminism had gained popularity and power in Italy, Ortese had long struggled through the battle for equality and further liberation that Italian feminists were embracing in the late 1960s. As Serena Sapegno points out, it is precisely at the end of the 1960s that the concept of liberation becomes popular in Europe and in Italy in order to express the need of a deeper transformation:

Adottando questa nuova parola d’ordine, la liberazione, si vuole esprimere il desiderio di trasformazione più profonda [...] Con la liberazione infatti si vuole auspicare anche un’ampia modificazione della società e dei ruoli di genere, messi esplicitamente in discussione. (SAPEGNO 2011, 133)\textsuperscript{15}

Ortese had long been aware of the necessity to go beyond equality and to question gender roles, and throughout her life and career she had constantly challenged them. Following are a few famous extracts from different interviews.

Dall’età di 17, 18 anni, mi sono sempre battuta [...] non avevo mestieri, non avevo denaro, né una famiglia che potesse servirmi da appoggio materiale. Ho potuto fare una sola cosa: scrivere. Non è stato facile. Per un uomo, essere uno scrittore, negli anni in cui ho iniziato io era un modo di vivere di tutto rispetto. Per una donna era diverso (SERENI 1993, 93).\textsuperscript{16}

La condizione di donna se non ha reddito o non porta il nome del marito, ma solo del padre, è condizione oltraggiosa (VACCARI 1974, 3).\textsuperscript{17}

In the 1970s Italian women experiment with Autocoscienza, a political practice coming from the United States where it was developed in the late 1960s in the form of Consciousness Rising Groups:

Il racconto di sé, che passa dall’una all’altra delle partecipanti secondo un filo di associazioni mentali che permette di individuare somiglianze e differenze, dà per la prima volta voce ‘politica’ alle vite personali e legittima un pensiero collettivo. [...] La Donna come nuovo soggetto collettivo nasce così attraverso una significativa inversione, quello spostamento nel privato che non costituisce un «ritorno a casa» ma al contrario un ribaltamento simbolico che dichiara la ‘politicità’ della dimensione del Personale [...] e la necessità conseguente di farne un’analisi per modificarlo (SAPEGNO 2011, 153).\textsuperscript{18}

When Anna Maria Ortese starts writing her autobiography in 1969, however, she is going through a profound personal crisis as a writer. She feels deeply
dissatisfied with her career and she has lost her artistic inspiration. While Italian feminists are trying to transform the woman subject into a political subject Ortese, on the contrary, is disappointed in politics and feels more and more distant from it. Here is what she writes:

Quando scrissi questo libro, a Milano quattordici anni fa, la città era già immersa nell’aria innaturale e infiammata della Contestazione. Non so se la cosa influì sulla scrittura di Toledo. In senso negativo, se questo avvenne. Il rumore, la violenza eterna della grande città dalla quale non potevo mai fuggire, si accrescevano di questo riverbero “politico”. Odiavo il “politico” di tutti i tempi e in ogni sua espressione. [...] Credo che in realtà fosse il mondo a non piacermi più (Ortese 1998, 551).¹⁹

In order to overcome depression and disappointment, Ortese decides to go back to the roots of her own vocation, to her childhood and to those famous rendiconti e ritmici which marked the beginning of her artistic career. She chooses to ‘start from herself’, she practices autocoscienza but not in the way the feminists are practicing it in order to find a collective female and political subject. Once again she resists and defies the boundaries of the group to delve into her personal journey. By doing so, she makes a discovery that brings her closer not to the feminists of her own times, but to the ones who are yet to come. Always a pioneer, she is once again shooting light years ahead into a different wave of feminism: beyond equality, beyond liberation, she realizes that her life experience was not only unfair and unequal; it simply was not real. It did not exist. Ortese’s autobiography Il porto di Toledo published in 1975 is considered now to be one of the most important works in women’s literary history because Ortese tried something nobody ever dared to do: she broke the bond between reality and fiction. Her autobiography is both. She defied the reader’s expectations by openly breaking the «autobiographical pact» (Lejeune 1986) which had always marked any respectable autobiography. In order to write her authentic life story, Ortese seemed to say, she could only write a false autobiography. However contradictory this statement may seem, we can clarify it by analysing her novel through the lens of the Theory of Sexual Difference.

The Theory of Difference was born in France in the 1970s.20 Luce Irigaray was the scholar who first theorized it in 1974, in her Ph.D. dissertation, Speculum, the concept that women find their definition as human beings only as opposites of men. Women therefore are always thought of as objects of discourse and never as subjects. Irigaray was also the first scholar to conceive the necessity of a female genealogy and to recognize the existence of a maternal language based on a symbolic order different from the traditional Lacanian one. Her ideas, together with those of other French feminist scholars (such as Kristeva and Cixous) became very popular in Italy in the late 1970s and early 1980s and led to the creation of the feminist Academic collective group Diotima, based in Verona, which embraced the ideas of the French Theory of Difference offering multiple original contributions. This essay refers in particular to the work of Adriana Cavarero and Luisa Muraro which can help us better understand the articulations of Ortese’s thought in her autobiography Il porto di Toledo.

I believe, in fact, that Ortese’s feminism is most apparent not in her public declarations, but rather in her peculiar way of conceiving the world and reflecting upon it. These reflections, once transferred into her literary works, reveal an unquestionable closeness to the philosophical thought proposed by the Italian Theory of Difference. The famous opening lines of Toledo read:

Sono figlia di nessuno, nel senso che la società quando io nacqui non c’era o non c’era per tutti i figli dell’uomo. E nascendo senza società o bontà io stessa, in un certo senso non nacqui nemmeno, tutto ciò che vidi e seppi fu illusorio come i sogni della notte che all’alba svaniscono (ORTESE 1998, 23).21

And again, in 1985, when Toledo was republished, Ortese wrote in a note that introduced the novel:

C’era in me una grande negazione del reale (lo vedevo come inganno e fuga), e oggi questo reale era tutto. Inganno e fuga erano tutto (ORTESE 1998, 552).22

Just from these two examples, we can see the close contact between Ortese’s ideas and one of the central questions posed by Cavarero, that is: How do we
define reality? Cavarero, recognized as one of the most important Italian philosophers within the Theory of Difference, writes in Dire la nascita:

Il problema che intendo pormi è: che cosa sia il reale. Una lunga tradizione filosofica, a partire dal platonismo, mi ha insegnato che il reale non è l’ambito dei fatti “nudi e crudi” ma piuttosto l’ordine simbolico che il pensiero (il linguaggio, la cultura, il codice sociale) attribuisce al mondo. Com’è noto, questo ordine simbolico è di marchio patriarcale [...] Così se rimango fedele all’insegnamento della tradizione filosofica, il mio essere donna rischia di risultare di per sé un fatto nudo e crudo – un mero esistere senza significazione simbolica e perciò irreale (Cavarero 1990, 93).

As we have seen from the very first lines of Toledo, Ortese was always instinctively and acutely aware of her unreality. Ten years later, when Toledo was republished, she was still questioning the actual reliability of the so-called real. Given these premises we can see how she could very well conceive the narration of her own biography as something unreal. We can also see how the supposed unreality of the life of a woman was destined to become both a limitation and a challenge to her narrative.

In Toledo, Ortese ends up choosing to trespass the limits of the autobiographical pact in the traditionally conceived autobiography in order to reach a new narration made up of additions and changes, so as to give voice to the sexual difference of her own life story. Unknowingly and instinctively she is lining up with the future feminist philosophers of Difference, those who have fiercely contrasted the inevitable necessity on the women’s side to find confirmation of their own existence within the system of patriarchal codes. Ortese embraces a whole new way of thinking and writing about her identity. Thanks to the category of ‘birth’ the Theory of Difference has been able to redefine the concept of ‘real’ itself, revealing therefore the existence of a maternal symbolic order which, according to Cavarero: «has given visibility to the unexpected (that is the woman) within the well established cultural codes» (Cavarero 1990, 93).

According to the Theory of Difference, the existence of every single human being finds new roots in the act of birth, which, paradoxically, is opposed to the patriarchal symbolic order as a real fact, «un fatto nudo e crudo» (Cavarero 1990, 93).
In *Toledo*, through a new symbolic order, Ortese cannot only create a new language, but she can also retrieve the memory necessary to reconstruct the story of her life. This thought process is mentioned in one of the following editions of *Toledo*, when Ortese explains what made her decide to write her false autobiography:


Therefore we see how in Ortese and in her autobiography, the theory and practice of Difference intersect with each other in the most fruitful way, so as to arrive at the comprehension of a reality that, in the light of the new symbolic order, uses memory as a key instrument of investigation. In this artistic process, Ortese reveals herself to be profoundly close, although always in her unique way, to the practice of «partire da sé» (Muraro 1996, 8) peculiar to the feminist movement of the late 1960s and later re-discovered by the feminists in the 1980s and 1990s.

Muraro, another important philosopher within the Theory of Difference, wrote:

Torno così al tema del partire da sé come filosofia pratica. Il suo pregio principale [...] è che non ti fa trovare dove gli altri ti aspettano, senza che per questo tu debba isolarti in solitudine. Non è strano perché gli altri si aspettano di trovarti nel posto ovvio, quello che ti è stato assegnato o che loro prevedono in base a certi segni prevedibili, mentre il «partire da sé» ti situa di volta in volta nella traiettoria del tuo essere che cambia, si muove, cerca (Muraro 1996, 8).  

Muraro’s words resonate not only with the creative process of Ortese’s own autobiography but also – as we read in *Toledo’s* preface – in the words destined to Anne Hurdle (to whom the novel is dedicated), a young counterfeiter who lived in England at the end of the Eighteenth century and who was sentenced to death:

Anne viveva in una miseria cieca, infinita. Quella era la sua parte di mondo [...]. Al processo non si difese mai. Sapeva di avere offeso orribilmente la Legge che la voleva nel buio, come suo luogo naturale. E non aveva voce per difendersi, stette sempre zitta (Ortese 1998, 13).  

In giving back to Anne the memory of her own story as an anticipation of her own, Ortese decides to let Anne and herself out of the obvious dark place to which both seemed to be destined. Ortese feels compelled to restore justice for this
young woman who has been robbed of her own life because of her crime and also her inability to defend herself. And justice can be made, not only by reviving her memory but also by making herself, the author of Toledo, responsible for Anne’s same crime: being a counterfeiter.

If Anne had counterfeited money to escape poverty, Ortese has to counterfeit her own autobiography to make it become what real literature, according to Ortese, must always be: a crime; more specifically a crime made of «aggiunte e mutamenti» (Ortese 1998, 14) to an otherwise unalterable reality. Only by doing so can Ortese try to reach the place where nobody expects to find her: transformed from an illiterate and poor young girl into an author whose work is worth reading. By ‘starting with oneself’ Ortese places herself within the trajectory of her own human being, which is constantly changing and evolving. Ortese writes:

Avevo dato il via a una falsa autobiografia, ma questo era il meno. Avevo soprattutto impiantato una discussione sul mutamento e le aggiunte (e questa era Anne). La vecchia natura delle cose non mi andava. Inventai dunque una me stessa che voleva un’aggiunta al mondo, che gridava contro la pianificazione ottimale della vita. Che vedeva nella normalità solo menzogna. [...] Toledo non è una storia vera, non è un’autobiografia, è rivolta, è «reato» davanti alla pianificazione umana, alla sola dimensione umana che ci è rimasta (Ortese 1998, 14).

It is well known that Ortese had declared: «Quella lingua - per esprimere quanto mi era caro – nel mondo di ciò che siamo non esiste» (Ortese 1998, 476).

We want to remember it, because it is with Toledo that Ortese starts to deconstruct the patriarchal language and invent a new language that can be called maternal. Ortese’s language does not limit itself to impartially recount the past, the so-called «fatti nudi e crudi» (Cavarero 1990, 93), because she senses that, according to the dominant male-centered philosophical tradition, such plain facts would be then deemed unreal since they do not have a symbolic representation. She also does not try to acknowledge her female childhood within the expected representation provided by the patriarchal codes, and therefore allows multiple and overlapping identities of the main character (herself) to constantly rise and disappear in the novel. The newly minted language of Ortese in Toledo must be capable of invention in order to voice a «nuovo evento
fantastico» (Ortese 1998, 14): her life. Her original journal, her first short stories and her first poems then become the many mediating objects (in the sense fantastic theory attributes to it) and serve the purpose of confirming that the unreal life that she talks about was really her life.

We can see then how Toledo has really been transformed into what Ortese initially wanted: a crime based on counterfeiting reality. Through the perpetration of this crime Ortese can not only reinvent her life, but also, thanks to a new language, translate into words the memories of her childhood in Naples and her first experiences as a writer. The youthful rendiconti e ritmici have now transcended into something more than simple notes scribbled on her youthful diary: they are now an essential part of her life-long journey to become a literary author.
Notes


3 Translation in English: but Toledo is and remains an unforgivable and obscure moral and literary sin for everybody. I think it has to do with the primitive fear of something that women are not supposed to express: if this is the equality (interior equality) with man and her not belonging to the same place, I really do not know. But I am afraid that Toledo really ended up being a transgressive novel even for the feminists: they declared, in fact, in 1975, that it had to be taken away from their bookstores and they did take it away. You can only imagine what the other ones did. (For the leftist intellectuals was even worse. Even for the conservatives, a little bit) (ROGNONI HAAS 2016, 82-83).

4 Translation in English: Ortese's writing expresses and increases in value that residual of femininity which remains uncontrollable by men (BETOCCHI 1983, 446).

5 Betocchi goes on: «L'uomo comune (vedi tutti noi) si trova a disagio al suo cospetto, agitato tra l'entusiasmo che suscita in lui l'avventuroso e il nuovo, e la repugnanza che insorge da tutta la sua educazione e quadratura spirituale» (BETOCCHI 1938, 446). Translation in English: The common man (that is all of us) does not feel at ease in front of this residual of femininity, and he struggles between the enthusiasm for all that is adventurous and new and the disgust, coming from all his education and intellectual formation.

6 I want to thank Franz Haas for answering to my e-mail and for sharing with me his opinion.

7 Translation in English: When I finished this book, it was 1975. It took me to finish it — in between moments of desperation — six years. As soon as it was published, it disappeared. It was not readable. And books that cannot be read cannot be sold, and this — immediate stop to the sales, more, immediate withdrawal from several bookstores — was the end of it (ORTESI 1997, 90).

8 On this particular issue, Franz Haas and Luca Clerici have a different opinion. Cfr. Franz Haas (ROGNONI-HAAS 2016, 177-184) and Luca Clerici (CLERICI 2002, 465).

9 Translation in English: Within this visionary biography, within the real story/invention of a childhood real and illusionary at the same time, the «expressivity» trials can be inserted [...] these lyrics, through which you can still hear the echo of various suggestions, are the most valid aspect of the book, the one in which the language finds its natural structure. The whole novel is in fact based on a fluid and dissipate discourse that cannot coagulate into syntaxes but remains open [...] while looking for the poetic the language becomes false, artificial, with childish and illogical constructions (LOMBARDI 1975, 410).

10 On this topic see Elena Brilli’s «Fare le italiane» Condizione delle donne e movimenti femminili dall’Unità alla grande guerra (BRILLI 2011, 47-75). For a recent study and a re-evaluation of Mozzoni’s work, see Sara Ceccarelli’s Anna Maria Mozzoni. La vicenda di una donna che si è battuta per altre donne (CECCARELLI 2016).

11 On this topic and to understand the contradictions on Mussolini’s politics towards women see Victoria De Grazia’s How Fascism Ruled Italian Women (DE GRAZIA 1992).


13 For an analysis of Anna Maria Ortese’s peculiar point of view and original style in Il mare non bagna Napoli, cfr. Storie di ordinaria agonia. I racconti napoletani di Anna Maria Ortese (BALDI 2003). See also Cristina Della Coletta’s Scrittura come utopia. La lente scura di Anna Maria Ortese (DELLA COLETTA 1999) and cosetta Seno’s Il mare non bagna Napoli. Due diversi tipi di estraniamento (SENO 2002).


altelettere
Translation in English: By adopting this new keyword, liberation, women want to express the need of a deeper transformation [...] With the word liberation in fact, women want to express the desire for a more profound renovation of society and gender roles, which are now openly challenged (SAPEGNO 2011, 133).

Translation in English: Since I was 17, 18 years old I always fought [...] I had no work skills, I had no money, I had no family who could support me. I knew how to do only one thing: write. It was not easy. For a man, when I started, to be a writer was a respectable way of living. For a woman it was different (SERENI 1993, 93).

Translation in English: Being a woman, if one does not have one's one source of income, or is not married, is a shameful condition (VACCARI 1974, 3).

Translation in English: When I wrote this book, in Milan, fourteen years ago, the city had already plunged into the unnatural and ignited atmosphere of the student protest. I do not know if this affected the writing of Toledo in a negative way. The noise, the eternal violence of the big city, that I could never escape, affected me even worse when the political echo of currents event increased. I hated “politics” of all times and in every expression. (...) I think that maybe it was the world that I did not like anymore (ORTESE 1998, 551).

Before proceeding further, I would like to underline that the last part of this essay does not intend to analyse in depth the Theory of Difference, in all its different aspects and ramifications both in France and Italy. For an excellent summary of the French Theory of Difference cfr. Daniela Palmeri La teoria della differenza sessuale nasce in Francia (SAPEGNO 2011, 158-159). Cfr. also Sexual Textual Politics by Toril Moi, and in particular the chapters devoted to French Feminism (MOI 2002, 100-166). Cfr. also Franco Restaino and Adriana Cavarero Le filosofie femministe (RESTAINO-CAVARERO 1999) for an analysis of the Theory of Difference in France and its ramifications on the Italian Feminist thought. Cfr. also Graziella Parati and Rebecca West (ed.) Italian Feminist Theory and Practice. Equality and Sexual Difference (PARATI and WEST 2002).

Translation in English: I am nobody’s daughter, meaning that when I was born society did not exist, or not for all human beings. And being born without a society and without goodness myself, I was, to a certain extent, not even born, and all that I saw and knew was illusionary just like night dreams, which vanish at dawn (ORTESE 1998, 23).

Translation in English: There was, in me, a great denial of reality (I used to see the ‘real’ as a form of deception and flight from one’s responsibility), and today this real was everything. Therefore deception and flight were everything (ORTESE 1998, 552).

Translation in English: The question that I intend to ask myself is what is the so called real. A long philosophical tradition, starting from Platonism, has taught me that ‘real’ is not about what simply happens to us: the mere facts. The ‘real’ is rather the symbolic order that our thought (in the form of language, culture, social manners) attributes to the world. And, as we know, this symbolic order has its roots in the patriarchal world [...] Therefore if I remain faithful to the teaching of our philosophical tradition, my being a woman can become a simple fact, something that just happened to me, a mere existence without any symbolic representation and therefore unreal (CAVARERO 1990, 93).

Translation in English: And I thought: where can I find something that is truly real, a continuum, as the philosophers say? And so I realized that it was memory. So I committed myself to writing a book of memories (ORTESE 1998, 552).

Translation in English: I am therefore going back to the topic of starting from oneself as a form of practical philosophy. Its most important value [...] is that it does not let you be found where people expected you to be, but in such a way that you do not need to isolate yourself. This is
not odd, because people expect to find you in the obvious place that has been assigned to you, or that they can predict, based on certain predictable signs, while the starting from oneself puts you from time to time always in a different place within the trajectory of your own self, which is changing, moving, searching (Muraro 1996, 8).

Translation in English: Anne used to live in a dreadful, endless poverty. That was her part of the world [...] At the trial she did not even try to defend herself. She knew that she had transgressed, because she had to obey a Law that wanted to keep her in the dark, as if it were her natural place to be. And she did not have the voice to defend herself she remained silent for the entire length of the trial (Ortese 1998, 13).

Translation in English: I had started a false autobiography, but this was my smallest misdemeanour. More than everything else, I had started a discussion on change and additions (and this was Anne). The old way of doing things did not suit me, and so I reinvented myself as somebody who wanted to change the world who was screaming against the optimal planning of human life. I reinvented myself as someone who saw all the lying behind the so-called ordinary life [...] Toledo is not a true story, it is not even a true autobiography. Toledo is an insurrection, Toledo is a violation against the planning of our human life, which, by the way, is the only human dimension we have left (Ortese 1998, 14).

Translation in English: That language – to express what was dear to me – in this world of ours, does not exist (Ortese 1998, 476).

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