

Ioana Raluca Larco

Merging Territories:

(Anti)Feminism in Neera's *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX*

Abstract

This article reflects on the ideological ambivalence of Neera's autobiographical work, *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* (1919): on the one hand, the narrator openly disapproves, in the name of moral values and tradition, of those trends meant to expand women's domain beyond the domestic space through education and paid labor; on the other, the «narrated I» is insistently depicted as victim of her limiting domestic space. Such duality brings to mind the notion of 'contradictory consciousnesses' as coined by philosopher Antonio Gramsci in his theory on the birth of a new culture. He argues that any given historical moment is never uniform but composed of numerous contrasting forces (some predominant while others remain regressive) that are equally significant when representing the socio-historical picture as a whole. In Gramsci's view, a gifted writer must be able to capture indistinctively in his/her work all these forces. After briefly showing how Neera is indeed a writer of her period, given that *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* echoes the various contrasting tendencies that its author witnessed, I turn to the progressive component of her work and consider how Neera in fact implicitly proposes an alternative Feminism when overtly rejecting the feminist and socialist ideology of her times. Drawing on Cavarero's discussion of female autobiography as a *locus* that privileges the uniqueness of the sole individual over its multiple identities in the public sphere, I indicate how this situation applies to Neera's autobiographical narrative through the relationship with her readers and her father. In the final point of my analysis, I emphasize once again how Neera undermines her declared antifeminist position by means of ingenious narrative devices. I conclude by reiterating that the tension generated by the above-discussed dichotomy constitutes an innovative element and the force that propels Neera's work ahead of her times from an ideological point of view.

Se qualcuno mi domandasse a bruciapelo: Lei è femminista?—dovrei rispondere: Adagio colle parole; ed a mia volta domanderei; Le piace l'acqua? A questa domanda che è pure tanto semplice non mi meraviglierei di trovare il mio interlocutore imbarazzato, poichè l'acqua incomincia colla goccia di rugiada tremolante nel calice di un fiore, va alla fonte che disseta, al bagno che ristora, alla irrigazione che feconda, fino allo straripamento che sforza, atterra, e conduce alla rovina ed alla morte. (NEERA 1904, 5)

Introduction

Neera, the pseudonym used by Anna Radius Zuccari (1846-1918), witnessed some of the most tumultuous episodes in the history of modern Italy: the making

of the Italian nation, the rise of the socialist and feminist movements, and the socio-political turmoil of the First World War that made way for Mussolini's fascist dictatorship. One of her last works, the autobiographical *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX*, echoes some of these events. Left unfinished due to the author's death, this book was published posthumously in 1919 by the Milan publishing house Cogliati, with a preface by Benedetto Croce.

a. The return to tradition

In her narrative, Neera considers herself the representative of a dying world certainly characterized by many defects, but above all, by numerous virtues and valuable customs. Not only does she not question the prevailing social order of tradition, but she even maintains an austere conservatism based on the moral code of duty. While placing past and present in evident antagonism, she holds tradition in high esteem, as the only real source as well as the custodian of sound moral values. In fact, morality and tradition merge in her narrative to the point where they become interchangeable.

In the aristocratic families and the old bourgeoisie, Neera praises in particular the habit of frugality, «l'economia praticata per tradizione e con piacere» (NEERA 1919, 172) that, according to her, brings peace and harmony to the family for two main reasons: first, it eliminates excessive money-related worries, envy and the tendency to judge people based on material possessions, which she considers as being vulgar behavior; second, it spares women the need to work outside the house in order to contribute to the family finances. Last but not least, she holds the big industrialized centers responsible for having irreversibly corrupted the good old habits and values of the bourgeoisie by severing its contact with nature and exposing it to greed. In Neera's view, the only means to fight such a prospect remains the return to tradition, which she ultimately identifies with family tradition, given that «[la] santità della tradizione familiare [è] violentemente minata dal crescere delle officine, progresso forse necessario ma pauroso, che strappa la donna dalla casa e distrugge brutalmente le care intimità del focolare.» (NEERA 1919, 177)

b. Women's issues

Neera does not seem to share the feminist claims that equal access to education and a career in professions customarily deemed masculine will bring women more personal satisfaction and the improvement of their social status and rights. In her opinion, to force women out of the home and away from their husbands and children is to alienate them from their fundamental nature; she argues that the main feminine attributes are and should remain procreation and maternity. She dislikes the habits of the so-called modern women and condemns the idea of women working outside the household, ironically referred to as «frenetico sgonnellare fuori di casa delle modernissime» (NEERA 1919, 174). As bearers of children, the «narrating I»¹ affirms, women already have their own work defined for them; and Neera greatly exalts their crucial role as educators of youth and inspirers of high values and ideals in the young generations. She considers this to be an extremely valuable experience that no formal education can provide or replace.

However, the calm tone of this much-praised domestic joy is interrupted by the description of the unbearable frustration and boredom that the young Anna, the «narrated I», is forced to endure in company of her two paternal middle-aged aunts with whom she is sent to live after the death of her mother. The narrator then suggests a prodigious imagination and the passion for writing as her only escape. The young Anna finds enormous pleasure in reading, and writes stories which sadly, she cannot share with any of her family members. Consequently, although Neera basically adopts a traditional standpoint while manifesting a hostile attitude towards Feminism and Socialism,² her autobiographical narrative paradoxically expresses such a critique of family life and relations as well as women's condition that she could easily be associated with a feminist agenda.

c. Brief historical background

Having emerged as a movement of liberation in close connection to the struggle of the working class, both feminist ideas and feminist activity first took a

coherent shape in Italy in the mid-nineteenth century and were followed by a period of flourishing Feminism, extending from 1892, the birth date of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), until the beginning of WWI. Nevertheless, the Socialist Party essentially supported the needs of women workers, without independently addressing women's condition and emancipation in general. This was, to a certain extent, the program of a smaller group within the party, who turned women and the working-class movement into a common cause; among these, activist Anna Kuliscioff, a Russian revolutionary who contributed to the creation of the PSI, distinguished herself as a pivotal member. She made a distinction between feminism as a bourgeois movement, which she considered rather idealistically abstract, and feminism as the emancipation of the working-class women. Kuliscioff argued that women of the bourgeoisie were only exploited by men, while the proletarian woman was first exploited by the growing capitalism. Therefore, in her opinion, given that women are an integral part of the proletariat, their condition was implicitly to improve once the conditions of the entire class improved. Later on in her career, however, Kuliscioff revised her ideas admitting that the socialist ideology could not entirely solve, and was not doing enough to solve, the much more complex issue of women's emancipation. She became a passionate advocate of gender equality and women's suffrage by founding in 1911, the Socialist Committee for Women's Suffrage.

Another outstanding activist for women's rights, Anna Maria Mozzoni approached the issue more from the perspective of gender-related demands. Although an adherent of socialist ideas, she carried out most of her work independent of the party, in a post-Union Italy where women in particular were still widely affected by poverty and illiteracy. She believed that women were not granted the rights for which Italians had fought, nor given their well-deserved place in the reconstruction of the economic, social and political life of the newly-formed state. Much of Mozzoni's theoretical writing aimed at connecting «la questione femminile» to key issues, such as the means of production, that were being debated within the emerging democracy. Women's work had been almost exclusively limited to and conditioned by the economy of the household; this

generally meant unpaid work that did not entail any economic self-reliance or social recognition. For Mozzoni, extra-domestic and equally paid work was the first step toward the development of a feminine personality and consciousness.

In my article, I will analyze the double stance assumed by Neera in *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* with reference to the concept of «contrasting forces» developed by Antonio Gramsci as an indispensable premise for the emergence of a new culture. Arguing that a writer can successfully represent a socio-historical moment only if (s)he is able «to pursue the intrinsic aims of cultural struggle» (GRAMSCI 1985, 93), the philosopher explains:

A given socio-historical moment is never homogeneous; on the contrary, it is rich in contradictions. It acquires a 'personality' and is a 'moment' of development in that a certain fundamental activity of life prevails over others and represents a historical 'peak': but this presupposes a hierarchy, a contrast, a struggle. The person who represents this prevailing activity, this historical 'peak', should represent the given moment; but how should one who represents the other activities and elements be judged? Are not these also 'representative'? And is not the person who expresses 'reactionary' and anachronistic elements also representative of the 'moment'? Or should he be considered representative who expresses all those contrasting forces and elements in conflict among themselves, that is, the one who represents the contradiction of the socio-historical whole? (GRAMSCI 1985, 93-94)

Echoing the various divergent tendencies that form the blueprint of Neera's historical moment, her autobiographical narrative reveals indeed a 'contradictory consciousness' (of its author as product of her time) and offers multiple levels of interpretation. I will consider as «prevailing activity» the feminist and socialist ideas as promoted especially by Mozzoni and Kuliscioff; most of these ideas were developed in connection with industrialization and the capitalistic order, two emerging forces that profoundly marked the Italian society of this period. Given this premise, we could say that, at a more explicit level, through the direct reflections of the «narrating I» on topics such as: education, domestic economy, tradition, motherhood and female labor, *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* is «representative» of the «'reactionary' and anachronistic elements», namely the retrograde forces that perceived in Socialism and Feminism a threat to the old

economic structure, customs and moral values of the traditional bourgeois family. At the same time, through the numerous descriptions of the character's family life, dreams and disappointments, *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* gives an unwitting critique of the state of affairs within the same environment, thus denouncing the flaws of the very structures it has just acclaimed; and, in so doing, it implicitly reinforces many of the above-mentioned feminist demands and the emancipation of women.

Also, it seems to me that the autobiographical narrative in question reflects the challenges of Italian society between mid-1800s and the beginning of the following century, and that Neera's so-called «ambivalent feminism» (MERRY 1994, 291) is, in fact, «representative» of the process of transition and adjustment experienced by an entire society, still very much torn between the old and the new; a society in which women were entering the workforce and public life in increasing numbers even while the restriction of their legal rights had been confirmed yet again by the new Civil Code of the Italian state in 1865. In fact, throughout her autobiographical narrative, the «narrating I» repeatedly presents herself as the witness of a peculiar historical period, characterized – probably more than others – by fast and radical changes, like in the following passage:

Poche volte nella storia si avvertirono cambiamenti così radicali come dalla metà del secolo scorso ai nostri giorni, e se considero ciò che erano di arretrato, fin da allora, gli usi e le abitudini delle zie venute dalla provincia a dirigere la mia educazione, posso credere di non essermi ingannata troppo a giudicare che un parallelo sarebbe interessante a farsi fra quel che ero io e quel che sono le fanciulle moderne. (NEERA 1919, 214)

Probably most noteworthy though, is that *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* represents, in Gramsci's terms, a «'moment' of development»: that of Feminism itself. In my reading, while supporting her anti-feminist views with arguments that have a nostalgic and idealistic aura, Neera is far from relapsing into an obtuse traditionalism. Instead, she paradoxically goes ahead of her time by proposing a new concept of Feminism - quite progressive for her period - that is based on gender specificity and the intrinsic value of each individual, rather than on demands for economic and socio-political equality between genders. By

articulating this perspective on women, I maintain that *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* anticipates the notion of «sexual difference» as pioneered by Carla Lonzi and later theorized by Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero, two of the most prominent feminist theorists and philosophers in today's Italy.³

1. *Staging the self*

Arguing against the feminist politics of the 1970s that made equality a top priority on its agenda, Muraro affirms that such an approach implies, on one hand, admitting women's inferiority and submission to men and, on the other, positioning women with respect to a male-established system of values and social institutions. Drawing on Carla Lonzi, the Italian feminist and thinker from the 1970s who introduced the principle of difference between men and women as being «the basic difference of humankind» (LONZI 1974, 21) and echoing Luce Irigaray's views in *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* (1985) and *Sexes et parentés* (1989), Muraro discusses a way to go beyond equality and the politics of rights based solely on what differentiates each individual. She then proposes as an alternative a much-needed «politics of relations» (MURARO 2002, 80) that has the potential to eliminate dangerous hierarchies and discrimination by extending affection and inter-dependence to the public sphere.

In Cavarero, the political dimension of this relationship of entrustment is rather subdued in favor of a more philosophical approach. Inspired by Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1989), Cavarero's essay '*Who' Engenders Politics?* (2002) builds on the distinction between «who» and «what», two categories of identification that separate «the uniqueness of every being from the collective identities that are common to many» (CAVARERO 2002, 92), in addition to being socially constructed. Other than their interconnectivity, in the case of female identity, the above mentioned categories «who» and «what», put women in the situation of defining themselves in a relational context, the philosopher argues, because «The politics of 'relationships among women' is in fact, first of all, a politics of looking each other in the face» (CAVARERO 2002, 100). That said, this is a politics where «who» is more important than «what», given that «every

woman puts at stake not one of her many identities (philosopher, communist, lesbian, etc.) but simply her self; or rather, she directly stakes who she is; she exposes her self to others and responds from it» (CAVARERO 2002, 100). In my view, as I will explore further, it is precisely this unmediated representational mode, entirely based on the «rhetoric of sincerity» (RAVEGNANI 1960, 106), along with the constant need to interact with her audience/readers, that Neera seems to completely embrace in *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* and transform into the ultimate goal of her autobiographical enterprise.⁴

The Prologue helps frame this approach right from the beginning, through the reflection of the «narrating I» on the role of autobiographical writing, and of literature in general: on the temptation to invent names, facts and places, Neera posits her firm belief that, no matter what, sincerity and truth should be the only concern for an author of autobiography, which is also what must distinguish autobiographies from other genres. In this vein, Neera confesses:

[...] qualche volta, rievocando la mia giovinezza, la trovavo così diversa da quella delle fanciulle d'oggi, che mi avveniva di riguardarla non più come cosa mia, ma come buon soggetto di romanzo psicologico cambiando nomi, luoghi, fatti. E però neanche questo miscuglio di vero e di falso mi accontentava, perchè il solo pregio di un libro vissuto, soggiungo, la sua sola ragione di essere, è l'assoluta sincerità. In caso contrario, avviene come per i romanzi storici, che non sono nè romanzo nè storia. (NEERA 1919, 4)

Hence, autobiography becomes an encounter with her self, as «the autobiographical moment prepares for a meeting of 'writing' and 'selfhood,' a coming together of method and subject matter» (BENSTOCK 1988, 11). In addition to this view, which the «narrating I» constantly reasserts throughout her narrative, the preoccupation with truth extends to her own persona that she creates in her autobiography. This, she insists, should also closely resemble the real historical person, even at the risk of disappointing the expectations of her readers or damaging her self-image:

Ebbene, eccomi sono qui! Molti, purtroppo, troveranno una Neera diversa da quella, che il bel nome classico e la loro stessa fantasia, potrebbe aver suscitato; ne di tale disappunto mi vorrò soverchiamente dolere, perchè nella mia ansiosa ricerca del vero

preferisco essere conosciuta come sono, anziché avvantaggiarmi di meriti che non ho. (NEERA 1919, 11-12)

After a long passage in which the character is presented as being «triste e selvaggia» (NEERA 1919, 176), a clumsy, young girl living in absolute isolation who completely lacks natural grace, good taste and the art of pleasant conversation, the narrator cautions:

Non ho ancora finito di enumerare le doti negative delle quali ero provvista per brillare in società. Erano tante e tante, che probabilmente ne dimenticherò qualcuna, e qualcuna anche può essermi sfuggita, se è vero quel che affermano i saggi sulla difficoltà di conoscere se stessi. Mi felicito intanto di aver scelto per queste memorie il sistema di una semplice e veritiera esposizione dei fatti, per tal modo il lettore perspicace potrà fare da giudice nel caso che io mi dipinga troppo in bello [...]. (NEERA 1919, 183-84)

Here we notice how the reader is called upon to be the judge of the narrated story, but most importantly, the reader is the designated guarantor of a true story and depiction of the self. In fact, as I will show later on, the reader continues to play a crucial role during the process in which Neera reveals her individual identity. Neera *needs* her reader's assistance; it is as if, despite all her good intentions, she senses the difficulty of her initiative due to the ever changing nature of this truth.

James Olney defines autobiography as a context in which the author performs metaphors of the self, thus displacing the concept of truth in autobiography to the discourse on metaphors of truth, which are then presented through the modifying filter of memory. He describes this particular kind of metaphor as a mechanism that «allows us to connect the known of ourselves to the unknown of the world, and, making available new relational patterns, [a metaphor] simultaneously organizes the self into a new and richer entity» (OLNEY 1972, 32). Furthermore, according to Arnaldo Pizzorusso, autobiography, to the extent that it is a narrative, implies a structuring similar to the one carried out by the author of fiction. He argues that the autobiographer starts by constructing the character that is the narrated self, and organizes the narrative following a given internal order (PIZZORUSSO 1986, 188). This strategy is also intended to fill in the gaps in

the narrator's memory while accessing the materials of the past. Therefore, the writer leaves out episodes and transforms others, or sometimes, he or she uses pseudonyms; in short, the autobiographer constructs a narrative identity which replaces the biographical one. Hence, when trying to tell a story about him or herself, the autobiographer is transformed simultaneously into creator and creation; he or she becomes both the writer and that which is written about.

Nevertheless, the pact between autobiographer and reader is not as flexible as the one which binds the writer of fiction and the reader, as Sidonie Smith reminds us in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987). The fictional aspect of autobiography, she argues, is always kept in check by an historic entity with specific intentions that is willing to assign a meaning to his or her lived experience. For this reason, the reader's response to autobiography should not be as unrestricted as the response to fiction. While readers are aware of the lack of reliability in autobiography, they also agree on the necessity of suppressing their expectation to find objective truth there. Instead, the nature of truth that one anticipates in autobiography is highly subjective and should be interpreted as the struggle of the historic person to come to terms to her or his own past.

I maintain that the confessional mode that characterizes Neera's autobiographical narrative is the symptom of her visceral need to make sense of her life and past while staying truthful to herself; and the unsettling realization «sulla difficoltà di conoscere se stessi» brings out the significant role of her audience even more. Neera manifests a constant desire to establish a connection with this audience and attempts it continuously. This takes place on multiple levels: i.e., by writing her autobiography, Neera intends to give her readers a voice and educate them; through her writing, Neera lays the grounds for an affective relationship in which the readers are able to find comfort and guidance, this being in Neera's view the ultimate goal of literature, its *raison d'être*; finally, it is through her present and future readers that Neera hopes to live on and that her work will find its place in eternity.

When she acknowledges her fear that her life might lack the extraordinary events that could be interesting enough for her readers or even worth telling at

all, the critic Gustavo Botta appeases Neera's apprehension: «La storia di un'anima è sempre interessante e per quanto ella sia modesta vorrà credersi meno interessante della sua Teresa [the novel that brought Neera great fame not only among her readers, but also with the critics]?» (NEERA 1919, 5). Thus, by evoking an observation that reaffirms the intrinsic value of a personal story/autobiography, *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* seems to reflect once again Cavarero's theory, that the exceptional quality of an autobiography is inherent in the uniqueness of the «who» because «[...] every life narrative is the unrepeatable story of someone who is many things. Just as obviously, however, it is not the mere story of what he or she is, but rather the unique story of who he or she is» (CAVARERO 2002, 100).

This would explain Neera's choice – otherwise a recurring pattern in many other female autobiographies from the first half of the twentieth century – to devote most of her narrative to evoking her sad childhood and adolescence, spent in her family home, on Corso Vittorio Emanuele in Milan, with her maternal grandparents in Caravaggio, and with her paternal aunts in Casalmaggiore, as well as her first love encounters and experiences as a young writer. Neera agrees that, by becoming acquainted with someone's early years, one can know that person so much better, since we are able to grasp the profound factors that contributed to molding the future life and identity of that person; moreover, when it comes to writers, this information is especially valuable when later assessing their work. Neera explains her strategy for writing her autobiography as follows: «Inoltre preparando queste Memorie la mia intenzione era solamente quella di far conoscere le circostanze un po' eccezionali in cui si svolsero i primi anni della mia vita, quegli anni che sono per lo sviluppo dell'uomo ciò che il sole e la rugiada sono per la pianta» (NEERA 1919, 214).

In addition to such careful selection, the «narrating I» very often chooses to interrupt the flow of the events with rather lengthy digressions in which she reflects on psychology-related matters, education, social norms or tradition. By doing so, Neera attempts to explain herself retrospectively and to reveal the hidden mechanisms that made her think and behave like she did. In this

endeavor, she also demonstrates unflagging consideration for her readers whose interest in her story she not only wants, but is sure to capture, by offering an individual example that will resonate in their hearts and minds.

2. *The father*

When it comes to describing the formative years of the young Anna, the figure of her father receives special attention. Given that she lost her mother at a very young age, Neera is left with no choice but to attempt to know her mother better from indirect sources: letters and relatives. Hence, it is her father who plays a pivotal role in who she is and has become throughout the years. Her father prompted an immense admiration in the mind of the young Anna; an unaltered admiration that accompanied her all the way into adulthood and beyond. Her father had a profound impact on her imagination from a very young age, to the point where, having acquired epic dimensions, he developed into nothing less than the personification of all virtues. One day, for example, on a chance discovery of *The Divine Comedy*, since no one was really supervising her reading, the young girl became absolutely fascinated by two verses from Canto V of *The Purgatory*, in which she identified, with great joy, the name of her father (Fermo): «Sta come torre *fermo* che non crolla/ giammai la cima per soffiare di venti» (cited in NEERA 1919, 150).⁵

Reflecting on the influence that her father had on her upbringing, the «narrating I» talks in positive terms about his subtle but, at the same time, extremely efficient manner of teaching her valuable lessons about life, people and moral values. After a passage in which the father explains to the young girl the reason why one of his clients did not use in his interaction with her the proper words required by social etiquette, the narrator concludes: «Era d'altronde il suo sistema educativo; poche parole quando si presentava l'occasione, ma tali che non si dimenticavano» (NEERA 1919, 185).

In fact, on numerous occasions, the «narrating I» expresses her gratitude towards the father for being an exceptional role-model, and for all the good moral values, particularly, the love for truth and justice, that he inculcated into her

conscience; values that she wants to pass on to her children. Ultimately, in her autobiographical narrative, the father becomes the embodiment of truth, therefore acquiring a symbolic value that, on the one side, fully resonates with the idealistic dimension of Neera's writing and, on the other, overlaps with her own obsession for truth, as previously discussed here. Evoking her father's youth when he used to take part in carnival parties, and commenting on the great difficulty he always had to remain anonymous behind his mask, the «narrating I» concludes: «Si vede che mio padre non era nato per portare maschera» (NEERA 1919, 107).

Yet the father is also described as a taciturn and austere man, incapable of understanding the young girl's need for affection, her fears and the painful changes she has to face growing up. He was not supportive of her formal education, did not help her further her literary education, and, whenever he influenced her writing, it was mostly done indirectly. In addition, father and daughter were never able to reach a level of true communication, thus each remained isolated in his/her own solitude and pain. Ironically, these feelings are the two main realities they share and that draw them together.

This contradictory relationship with her father that «plays itself out primarily in the ambivalent quality of the paternal figure» (PASSERINI 1996, 26) is also linguistically expressed through the abundant use, in her descriptions of him, of the adversative conjunction «ma»: «Dolce, malinconico, distinto in ogni suo gesto, sobrio di parole, io lo veneravo, *ma* lo sentivo lontano» (NEERA 1919, 138); or «Mio padre era un silenzioso, *ma* nelle poche parole che profferiva non perdeva mai di vista i figliuoli che udivano, per cui posso dire che la nostra educazione morale, mia e dei miei fratelli, venne fatta non a mezzo di prediche, *ma* con pochi assiomi saldamente imperniati sull'esempio» (NEERA 1919, 139-40); and further on: «Mio padre si allarmava qualche volta di questa mia passione [for romance novels and love poetry], esortandomi a scegliere bene e di abbandonare i romanzi, *ma* non ebbe il gesto assoluto di indicarmi lui i libri che dovevo leggere, [...]» (NEERA 1919, 178).⁶ Paradoxically, it is only after the death of her father that the girl starts feeling really close to him; she will then find that

union of souls she had sought for so long in her father. From that point on, the father becomes her spiritual guide and an integral part of her inner life and strength.

At times, the «narrating I» tries to find excuses for her father's omissions, explaining the reasons why he did not contribute more to her upbringing, education and happiness in general. On such occasions, Neera essentially adopts a traditional stance as she reminds us once again that it is the woman (and not the man) who plays a vital and irreplaceable role within her family, and particularly in the life of her children. In fact, in an attempt to fill the void left in his children's lives after the death of their mother with another feminine presence, the father decides to bring his single, middle-aged sisters to the house and put them in charge of raising his motherless children.

From the very beginning, however, «zia Nina» and «zia Margherita» are presented in evident contrast with her father, due to their absolute lack of «principii educativi» (NEERA 1919, 77); they compensated for this deficiency through their extensive use of irony that profoundly hurt the sensitive young girl and gradually accentuated her anguish and seclusion. At the age of fourteen, Anna was deemed to have completed her necessary formal education. This marked the beginning of her prison-like existence, in total silence and isolation, always accompanied by her two aunts who made her endure their uninterrupted suspicion and cruelty. The narrator endorses a biological and psychological determinism when she maintains that the real reason why Aunt Nina hated her so much was not indeed voluntary wickedness. Born with strong instincts that would have made her an excellent wife and mother, Aunt Nina never had the chance to accomplish her mission as a woman. Hence, throughout the years, she accumulated numerous frustrations which, in the end, found an outlet in the hatred she developed for her niece. In other words, for Aunt Nina, the young Anna represented a constant reminder of her lost youth and illusions. Therefore, Aunt Nina was as much a victim as the girl was, the narrator argues, and her negative feelings were in reality a disguise for her great pain caused by her failure to achieve happiness.

Aside from this simplistic reasoning regarding human behavior, Neera continues nevertheless to challenge the traditional values of the bourgeois family through the depiction of the living conditions of the character. The youth of the «narrated I» is described as a buried treasure, «tesoro sepolto» (NEERA 1919, 95), in the bleak and unattractive paternal house where the young girl spent her unhappy and monotonous life, «metodica come una regola di convento» (NEERA 1919, 90), under the strict supervision of her paternal aunts, knitting almost uninterruptedly all day long. In addition to this, her suffering is amplified by an almost constant awareness of being different from the other girls her age, by her inability to communicate, and by the lack of affection and understanding coming from others. This made the introverted adolescent feel even more isolated in an environment adverse to all her needs and aspirations.

3. The fictional device

In such an oppressive environment, as a survival technique, Anna develops a prodigious inner life, helped by an already acute spirit of observation, a critical mind and a predilection for day-time dreaming; «[I]’attività interiore [...] fu veramente il perno di tutta la mia esistenza» (NEERA 1919, 5), the «narrating I» confesses in the Prologue; and later on, she confirms: «la mia esistenza si riassume nel pensiero» (NEERA 1919, 160). It is, in fact, this inner life that in the end becomes her spiritual nourishment, transforming her into a self-sufficient person and giving her the strength to fight the affective and intellectual aridity of her environment. She then relies on her fantasies and her passion for writing as her only means of escape to satisfy an ardent desire for freedom. Writing and reading represent for her the only window on the external world which she is so eager to conquer. It is only through the realm of ideas and her writing that the «narrated I» is able to discover and give a voice to her true self, hidden behind the mask that her pain and inadequate existence impose upon her.

Anna’s journey towards becoming a writer turns out to be quite difficult though, given that she receives no intellectual stimulation or guidance. The «narrating I» speaks with irony about her formation as a writer: «Quando

qualcuno vuol sapere gli studi preparatori che feci per scrivere la trentina di volumi da me pubblicati, rispondo: calze e camicie, camicie e calze» (NEERA 1919, 160). Nonetheless, despite her unmethodical study of literature and questionable formal education, she manages to publish her work and even to obtain recognition from her readers and critics. Among her works, the narrator focusses with particular interest on *Teresa*, the novel that brought her decisive triumph as a writer. At this point in my analysis, I would like to dwell in more detail on this text as I believe it contributes significantly to the reading of the present autobiographical narrative on two counts: 1. through its own content, and 2. for the place assigned to it by the author within her autobiographical narrative.

Teresa (1886) is the story of a girl from a provincial bourgeois family who sacrificed her youth for a man whom her father did not allow her to marry. In this novel, Neera gives a disillusioned analysis of love and marriage, and reveals the discrimination imposed upon women in the name of law and conventions. Meditating on the arranged marriages of her sisters, Teresa « [...] provò una vera repulsione. Quale infame ingiustizia pesa dunque ancora sulla nostra società, che si chiama incivilita, se una fanciulla deve scegliere tra il ridicolo della verginità e la vergogna del matrimonio di convenienza?» (NEERA 1976, 180) After several failed attempts to reconnect with her lover, and trapped among an arrogant father, a mortified mother and two unsympathetic sisters, Teresa considers her options and understands the drama of her situation:

Che cosa poteva fare? Ribellarsi al padre, far morire di cruccio quell'angelo della mamma, rompere tutte le tradizioni della famiglia, mancare ai doveri di figlia ubbidiente e sottomessa? La schiavitù la cingeva da ogni lato. Affetto, consuetudini, religione, società, esempi, ciascuno le imponeva il proprio laccio. Vedeva la felicità e non poteva raggiungerla. Era libera forse? Una fanciulla non è mai libera, non le si concede nemmeno la libertà di mostrare le sue sofferenze. Ella doveva fingere colla madre per amore, col padre per timore, colle sorelle per vergogna. (NEERA 1976, 156)

After the death of her father, she finally decides to make the ultimate gesture of rebellion, by joining the ill lover who needs her. To her scrupulous best friend who worries about what people will say about her decision, she answers with

immense sadness: «– Ebbene dirai ai zelanti che ho pagato con tutta la mia vita questo momento di libertà. È abbastanza caro nevero?» (NEERA 1976, 202).

Given its theme, the mention of *Teresa* and its discussion evokes within the autobiography all Neera's fictional writings in which she depicts with particular lucidity the precarious condition of women, and condemns the oppression they experience in both private and public life. In fact, there is a striking contrast between Neera's theoretical essays and her fictional works; a contrast that replicates, one might infer, the contradiction between a long desired ideal and the brutal reality that cannot be ignored. Speaking of this duplicity, Baldacci notes:

[...] dove Neera rappresenta, la donna le si rivela per quello che è, come classe subalterna e, in quanto tale, repressa nella sua vita istintiva e materiale; dove invece teorizza, la stessa donna le si rivela come ideale, termine fisso di sublimazione di ogni istintualità umana, vittoriosa sulla vita dei sensi e disposta quindi a quell'amor platonico per il quale non c'è davvero posto in un romanzo come *Teresa*, ma c'è posto, e come, nella vita della donna di lettere e di piccola galanteria quale fu Neera. (NEERA 1976, VII)

In this respect, it is particularly intriguing that the section in which the «narrating I» mentions her novel *Teresa* is closely followed by a passage in which she reveals her decision to interrupt her memories at a precise point in her past prior to her life as a married woman. Beyond the completely understandable tactfulness that it demonstrates, this choice gives rise to numerous speculations about her representational intentions and the parallel we might draw between the author and the protagonist of her novel. Did Neera find the kind of marriage and love that she endorsed so passionately in her theoretical writings? Or did these remain for her an unattainable ideal as they did for *Teresa*? It seems to me that she depicts this 'second life' as a loss of identity by claiming that she could not speak truthfully about herself at this new stage:

[...] giunta oramai alla fine de' miei ricordi, oltre i quali la mia personalità scompare entrando in una vita nuova, con un altro nome, in un'altra famiglia. Questa seconda vita non ho il diritto di rivelarla al pubblico; essa d'altronde aggiungerebbe ben poco alla veridica esposizione, [...] (NEERA 1919, 215).

Besides the confirmation of the belief that the first years of life are essential in the formation of an individual, as previously discussed, I am able to identify here traces of a disenchanting vision of marriage; even more so, given that Neera does, after all, talk about her life as a married woman, but only through her artistic accomplishments.

Moreover, through the story of its protagonist who chooses freedom by following her desires after a life in silent agony, Teresa mirrors the life of the young Anna who manages to break away from her painful and oppressive existence by means of her imagination and art. The autobiographical component of the novel *Teresa* emerges in the following passage: «[...] la patetica storia della donna a cui manca l'amore germinava da lunghi anni nel segreto delle mie sofferenze, nelle ingiustizie di cui ero stata vittima, nella persecuzione che aveva attossicato fin dalle sorgenti la mia ingenua giovinezza» (NEERA 1919, 213-14). Lastly, I maintain that Teresa can be considered a *mise en abîme* of such progressive and even feminist elements within *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX*: it implicitly highlights and presents them as the corollary of Neera's entire autobiographical narrative. This effect is obtained also through the positioning of the discussion of *Teresa* towards the end of *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX*, and is reinforced by the ideas developed in the Epilogue.

Conclusion

In the Epilogue, the «narrating I» meditates on love, intellectual life, and spirituality, on which occasion she reiterates her communion with her father and pays a last tribute to the beloved figure. Yet, when assessing both her childhood and entire life, she desolately concludes: «la vita mi fu matrigna e tiranna» (NEERA 1919, 248). She then gives a self-assertive explanation of how she fought unhappiness and the adversities of her childhood by completely relying on herself, on her inner strength and spiritual values. Additionally, the narrator presents love and intellectual activity as the cornerstones of her entire existence, and deems herself blessed for having had the opportunity to express both in her writing:

Pensando alla infinità dei beni che mi furono negati, agli ingiusti apprezzamenti, all'infanzia compressa che mi lasciò per sempre l'incertezza, l'impaccio, la timidità sofferente di coloro che portarono a lungo una catena al piede, dovrei concludere che la vita mi fu matrigna e tiranna. Eppure trassi da essa le maggiori gioie che io abbia mai desiderate: *amare e pensare* e avere nelle mie mani un strumento per esprimere tutto ciò. (NEERA 1919, 248)⁷

It seems to me that Neera attempts here to overcome her contradictions and finally give her life (and consciousness) some definitive coordinates. Moreover, she portrays herself as a complete and autonomous person, by merging two domains that, traditionally, are each separately assigned to a different gender, and considered irreconcilable: love, reserved for women through marriage and motherhood, and intellectual activity/thinking, the sphere set aside for men and made available to them through access to education and a socially recognized career.⁸

I would concur with Gramsci by saying that, due to the numerous «elementi contrari» (NEERA 1919, 215) that compose Neera's consciousness as reflected in her autobiographical writing, *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* is indeed representative of the contradictions of the historical moment of its author; but above all, this very text presents one consistent element: the suggestion that the issue of women's condition and emancipation is quite complex and cannot be simply resolved within the rigid scheme of an ideology. Hence, *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* constitutes a «'moment' of development» with respect to the first wave of Feminism that took place during the historical context of Neera's life. Moreover, by bringing forward the human aspect and experience in *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX*, the author offers us, the readers, her personal (interpretation of) ideology. In this way, «who» engenders politics understood as «a practice of "starting from oneself" [...] in which the unforsakeable meaning of the existing being is at stake» (CAVARERO 2002, 101).

Notes

¹ In my article, I use the terms «narrating I» (or narrator) and «narrated I» (with its versions: character and protagonist), as theorized by SMITH and WATSON 2001. Their theory states that the narrating I is «The 'I' available to readers is the 'I' who tells the autobiographical narrative», while the narrated I is «the object 'I', the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the narrating 'I' chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader» (SMITH and WATSON 2001, 59-60).

² Two other important theoretical works in which Neera defends her ideas on the subject are *Battaglie per un'idea* (1898) and *Le idee di una donna* (1904).

³ For more information on the feminist theory of difference in particular and Italian feminist theory in general, see PARATI and WEST 2002.

⁴ I consider that the same theoretical frame could help us better comprehend Neera the writer with, on one hand, her complete disinterest in attaining formal perfection and, on the other, her continual striving to better convey her thoughts and feelings in her narrative. She is very clear on this point: «La forma, dico il vero, non è mai stata la mia maggiore preoccupazione. Ora lo diventa, ma per servire meglio il pensiero. Non posso essere dell'opinione di Flaubert, per il quale la forma era tutto». And she insists along this line: «Se tento di scrivere bene è per esprimere bene il mio pensiero. Effettivamente, la mia passione, il mio diletto, la mia idealità è lo spirito, non la lettera» (cited in BORLENGHI 1966, 329).

⁵ The emphasis is mine. It is interesting to note here the use of the masculine form, «fermo», which replaces the feminine that appears in Dante's text. I think that Neera made this decision so that she can better represent the perspective of the «narrated I».

⁶ The emphasis is mine.

⁷ The emphasis is mine.

⁸ I find it interesting that, earlier in her narrative, she presented herself as someone who is more in need of intellectual life than of love, while her urge to write was stronger than her necessity for love: «prima ancora che all'amore il mio cuore si aperse a questo bisogno di intellettualità, che contribuì per molta parte all'isolamento in cui dovevo trovarmi per tutta la vita.» (NEERA 1919, 158); and «Il bisogno di scrivere era bensì nato in me prima del bisogno di amare, [...]» (NEERA 1919, 204).

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