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«Solo le storie sono capaci di colmare gli squarci del dolore.
Solo le storie ci aiutano a sopravvivere»

Autobiographic Traces in the Narratives of Dacia Maraini

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Abstract

The publication of Dacia Maraini's *Bagheria* in 1993 and *La nave per Kobe* in 2001 indicate a significant foray into life writing by the author, and the beginning of a more concerted move towards self-representation, which continues in texts such as *La grande festa* (2011) and *Chiara di Assisi – Elogio della disobbedienza* (2013). It is, however, a genre that Maraini had previously admitted to being challenging for her to confront. This article considers a number of 'autobiographic traces' in Maraini's earlier works as examples of fictionalized articulations of traumatic events and, likewise, how Maraini's perceived difficulty with the genre manifests itself in *La nave per Kobe* through a certain level of textual turbulence. It explores the trouble that Maraini has in constructing the autobiographic 'I' before arguing that the inclusion of her mother's diaries in this particular work gives Maraini the confidence needed to do so.

Introduction

Published in 1993, *Bagheria* marks Dacia Maraini's first overt foray into life writing. Of it, she has claimed: «più che un romanzo si tratta di un libro autobiografico, una “memoria”, che si è sviluppato da sé mentre scrivevo la storia della genesi di Marianna Ucrìa» (MARAINI 1993). In the text she returns to her childhood home, interspersing memories and flashbacks with evocations of present-day Bagheria; amongst what she finds is a portrait of her ancestor, Marianna. Since the text's publication, the «impulse» to autobiography, to borrow from Lejeune, appears to have become more evident in her oeuvre: 2001's

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La nave per Kobe consists of autobiographical reflections punctuated by extracts from her mother's diaries; *Il gioco dell'universo* (2008) is an annotated transcription of her father's notebooks; *La seduzione dell'altrove* (2010) is a collection of travel writings which point directly to moments in her own life; and *La grande festa* (2011) deliberates on loss and memory, providing a portrait of the loved ones who are no longer with the author: her sister, father and partners. Moreover, as I discuss further below, this move to considering her own life in more depth is echoed in some of her more recent fiction, through works in which Maraini can be identified as unconcealed narrating presence, subject matter or even character.

It is perhaps not surprising that in the latter stages of her career and life Maraini has become more self-reflective, and that she has, in turn, made a more concerted effort at self-representation in her work. The importance of women's autobiography has long been recognized in creating communities, mirroring women's lives and experiences, and revising previously held concepts of female identity (SMITH and WATSON 1998, 5-9). As such, one might not be surprised that Maraini, one of Italy's foremost women writers and feminist thinkers, would likewise be keen to approach the genre. Yet this move towards life writing conflicts with the stance taken by her soon after *Bagheria's* publication: in an interview she stated, «per scrivere un'autobiografia ci vuole un certo coraggio, il coraggio di mettersi al nudo, di non nascondersi dietro l'invenzione letteraria, dietro i personaggi inventati» (WRIGHT 1997, 72). This juxtaposition of Maraini's perceived hesitation around the genre of life writing and the therefore perhaps contradictory move towards it in recent years provides the starting point for this essay, in which I consider the construction of a notion of self in a number of works. The article's central focus explores *La nave per Kobe* within the context of the autobiographical dimension of Maraini's oeuvre, but it also offers a renewed reflection upon some earlier works which, in the light of disclosures made in *Bagheria* and *La nave per Kobe*, suggest that Maraini's autobiographical project can in fact be traced to the beginning of her career.

In proposing this line of argument, I by no means intend to oversimplify Maraini's oeuvre, by suggesting that it be read purely through an autobiographical lens, nor do I propose here a straightforward conflation of fact and fiction. Maraini's is a body of work spanning some five decades and numerous genres, and has rightly been interpreted in manifold ways; I hope to tease out some of the subtleties of her autobiographical project and bring a new dimension to existing Maraini scholarship through a reading that considers her life, her narrative work, and the intersections of the two.

Confrontations with the self

Women's autobiographical writing as a genre continues to raise important questions about notions of selfhood, female experience and identity. It has been recognized as a hybrid, malleable genre, which «allows for a constant redefinition of its boundaries and limitations» (PARATI 1996, 2). It is a space in which women can discuss the «boundaries of the domains that they have traditionally inhabited», and «experiment with the construction of a female "I" and, sometimes, a feminist identity» (*ibidem*, 2). It has become common practice to alternate the term "autobiography" with "life writing" allowing for the inclusion of manifold forms of writing, letters, diaries, memoirs, and published texts. The term not only captures the fragmented and often contradictory nature of both the genre and the self, but can also be used to describe texts that blur the line between "truth" and fiction. Notions of truth and authority have of course long been refuted in autobiography, with our recognition that they presume that the self is indeed knowable.¹ As Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson explain in their discussion of Italian women's life writing,

these writers shape a place in-between, a space with elusive borders that fluctuate between the real and the imaginary, and which is produced as much by the interstices as the conjunction of the selves inscribed in the conventions of different genres. (SCARPARO and WILSON 2004, 2)

Such uncertainties, multiplicities and fluctuations are certainly palpable in Maraini's recent examples of life writing. Of *Bagheria*, Judith Bryce has

identified how its «loosely formal» quality is created by the author's ordering of memories based on a selection of highly personal associations (BRYCE 1998, 221), whilst for the reader of *La nave per Kobe*, it may seem that Maraini is setting a challenge: to piece together a picture of her through the clues she offers, be they brief but random allusions to her present life, or recollections of experiences from her childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The text is a difficult one to pin down, to all appearances without structure or rules, but rather composed of Maraini's seemingly arbitrary wanderings between diverse times and locations. The episodes she relates are ostensibly prompted by extracts from her mother's diaries, yet the associations she makes are often vague: early in the text, for instance, she links a brief note by her mother concerning a stopover in Bombay with a memory of her own travels to India with Moravia and Pasolini. This leads to a lengthy description of Maria Callas, and an anecdote about her refusal to wear glasses on stage.

Maraini's structuring in these works resonates with other examples of female life writing and is in line with the hybridity of the genre as identified above. It also of course indicates the trouble she has in recognising and portraying her own identity as coherent and intact. In reality, her young life was more fragmented than many: her family's move to Japan led to their eventual internment in a concentration camp, whilst their return to Italy was marked by the troubled relationship that Maraini had with her maternal family's home near Palermo.² In *La nave per Kobe*, she returns frequently to the feelings she had as a child of being «out of place». Growing up, she learnt to speak Japanese before Italian and her childhood references are marked by Japanese cultural associations, to the extent that, «mi sentivo giapponese come quegli altri bambini» (MARAINI 2001, 127), and yet her Western looks would prevent her from ever being recognized as such. Even her name made her feel different when, on her return to Italy, she most longed to conform: «avrei voluto chiamarmi Maria, essere bruna con gli occhi neri, avere due genitori tranquilli, un padre che uscisse ogni mattina per andare al lavoro e una madre grassa e rassicurante» (*ibidem*, 120). As an adolescent, Maraini moved to Florence to live with her father and sister, whilst

her mother and youngest sister remained in Sicily. She refers to this separation as «una catastrofe» and «un terremoto» (*ibidem*, 93-94), underlining the disintegration of family (and self) it brought about. A sense of “non-cohesion” of self, then, can be seen as both cause and effect of the very “looseness” of the structuring of her autobiographical texts.

In addition, for Maraini in particular, such textual “incoherence” could be a consequence of her difficulty with the genre itself, of her preference for “hiding” behind literary invention rather than opening herself up to examination. Paul John Eakin suggests that, «the self at the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure» (EAKIN 1985, 3), and it might in turn be argued that, as an established author, Maraini’s autobiographic “I” could merge more readily with this fictive persona: her very renown and public status further promoting the construction of herself as a personality or character. Ursula Fanning, in her analysis of *Bagheria*, notes that in the text, Maraini «makes no claim to being comprehensive, nor indeed to truth-telling» (FANNING 2005, 25).

Knowing this, the apparently confused structure that Maraini employs in both this text and *La nave per Kobe* could instead be considered a very conscious narrative device used to present the version of herself that she wishes to make public, via the manipulation of a narrative that is supposedly led by memory alone. It is a technique that grants her the opportunity to discuss a far-reaching array of subjects, many of which are recurrent throughout her body of work, from her feminist concerns to her vegetarianism and affection for her beloved Abruzzo. In the version of herself that Maraini chooses to present, the personal, social and political are all represented.³ In one telling example in *La nave per Kobe*, Maraini follows a discussion of her classmates’ relationships with older men (in exchange for money and gifts), with a description of the relationship her «dolcissima madre» had with money and how she taught her daughters never to slip into debt (MARAINI 2001, 101). The abrupt change in tone and subject matter is characteristic of the text, and exemplifies the way in which, as Maraini attempts the reading of her own life, so too is she asking her audience to read “Dacia” – a character who seeks justice in the public arena, but remains bound by family love

and loyalty. Much like Barthes' Parisian striptease, she offers her readers only teasing glances of a naturalized self behind the facade, without ever uncovering a coherent whole: «the end [...] is then no longer to drag into the light a hidden depth» (BARTHES 1973, 85). Across Maraini's entire body of work the personal has always been ineluctably political, and it is no different in the complex space of autobiographical writing, where issues of power, agency and female identity are explored in both the public and private spheres.

Maraini's autobiographically-constructed voice and fictionalized public self further typify the difficulties and limitations of self-revelation and construction, and this relation between self and text is not just a feature of these examples of life writing, but of Maraini's recent fiction too. In works such as *Voci* (1994), for example, the careful reader will recognize similarities between the protagonist and author,⁴ whilst in the 2004 novel *Colomba* «la donna dai capelli corti» – an overt example of self-representation by Maraini – reflects upon her processes as an author and considers the nature of storytelling. Maraini is recognisable in a further motif in the novel: in a recurring scene, a young girl implores her mother to tell her stories, the descriptions of which mirror those elsewhere of the relationship between Maraini as a child and her own mother.⁵ In the short story collection, *La ragazza di via Maqueda* (2009), a fictionalized Maraini again appears, this time as the character «Giorgia», whilst other stories describe autobiographical experiences: the story *Il poeta-regista*, for instance, is a thinly-veiled account of her friendship with Pasolini.

Most recently, Maraini's *Chiara di Assisi – Elogio della disobbedienza* (2013) – a novel which, albeit non-fiction, already plays with genre and form through its merging of historical biography and epistolary literature – is noteworthy as a text in which the author becomes protagonist. The novel begins as an exchange of letters between Maraini and one of her readers, who urges the author to write about Chiara's life. Initially reluctant, Maraini becomes drawn to the saint's life, ultimately recognizing that in her choice of monastic lifestyle Chiara can in fact be seen as an antecedent of the rebellious women who have since populated Maraini's oeuvre. As in *Bagheria* and other works, the main narrative in *Chiara*

is punctuated by the author's voice, her reflections and commentary providing a window not only to her growing admiration of the saint, but to glimpses of her own life too.

Rather, then, than a straightforward transition from fiction to the overtly non-fictional genre of autobiography, Maraini's recent works fluidly interweave fact and fiction, whilst simultaneously offering a fragmented imagining of the author as character. How can we conceptualize this impulse? As Paul John Eakin reminds us, «responding to the flux of self-experience, we instinctively gravitate to identity-supporting structures» (EAKIN 1999, 20). Scarparo and Wilson likewise argue that, whilst notions of accuracy and authenticity are out-dated, «within certain discourses there emerges the desire for affirmation of self or origin [...]. [The] need to reconsider, reclaim and reconcile hybrid forms of self-definition is not just a moral, but also an epistemological requirement» (SCARPARO and WILSON 2004, 1). In other words, in spite of its inherent contradictions, the autobiographic impulse maintains its allure: «the allure of genealogy», writes Cynthia Sugars, may be «that it is shrouded in mystery and is therefore haunting, while it also offers an illusion of reassurance and continuity» (SUGARS 2005, 193). In *La nave per Kobe*, Maraini acknowledges this response in herself:

Ci si può innamorare del passato? *Longing*, come direbbe mia madre. *Longing for the past*. Il passato che appare sotto i miei occhi in queste fotografie. Fisso e lucido per sempre, è seducente come una medusa. Mentre il presente è scabro e spinoso, quasi rivoltante nella sua nudità. (MARAINI 2001, 134)

Jennifer Bowering Delisle has suggested that whilst it is oriented towards the past, nostalgia is in fact rooted in the present: «there is more than just a desire for knowledge driving [autobiography], but a nostalgia, a deep affective longing for connection with a place that has been lost, for an absence that continues to animate [the author's] life in the present» (DELISLE 2012, 137). For Delisle life writing is not, then, a memory of the past, but a momentary re-living of it. The “longing”, as Maraini's mother describes it, has similarly “animated” Maraini's present life. Be it through her mother's photographs and diaries in *La nave per*

Kobe, or the sights, smells and sounds of her childhood in *Bagheria*, Maraini has been seduced into remembering a past that she may previously have chosen to resist. Just as Proust's *madeleines* inspired his involuntary return to childhood recollections, Maraini is powerless to ignore the pull of her memories, and many of her works since 1994 subsequently contain traces of the self, some conscious, others not; some concealed, others more explicit.

Fragments of autobiography

It is my contention, however, that this desire to reconcile an incoherent sense of self-definition is not exclusive to recent texts, but instead originates early in Maraini's oeuvre. Manifold fragments of a concealed self are expressed through incidents and characters in her early fiction, which recall her life experiences – experiences that may, moreover, be perceived as traumatic. Before returning to *La nave per Kobe* in greater detail, questions around these expressions of the self emerge as significant concerns. There is one major exception to which I will return below and that is her apparent eschewal of a discussion – through fiction or autobiography – of surely the most traumatic event in her young life: her internment in the Japanese concentration camp. Nonetheless, by locating some traces of autobiography, I hope to further our understanding of both the later works discussed above and this continuing gap in her personal reconstruction of selfhood; more broadly, questions about the articulation of traumatic experience will also be raised.

In her debut works, *La vacanza* (1962) and *L'età del malessere* (1963), Maraini's focus is on adolescence, the period from which the author had herself just emerged.⁶ Maraini later claimed:

mi ispiravo in qualche modo a una esperienza vissuta da me, che avevo tuttavia sottoposto a un processo di trasposizione e trasfigurazione che ha modificato ambiente e personaggi. Alla fine di questo processo la storia non mi apparteneva più. (WRIGHT 1997, 76).

This rather hesitant pronouncement gains more weight when we return to certain episodes in the novels with our latter knowledge of the author's history:

the early sexual initiation of *La vacanza*'s protagonist is, for instance, thus described:

Gettai lontana la sottoveste e rimasi nuda. [...] Mi chiedevo se quello era l'amore. Che pure volevo conoscere. [...] Quando abbassai gli occhi tutto era finito. Giocchino inginocchiato per terra, con la testa fra le mani, [...] mi sorrise vergognoso, asciugandosi il mento sporco di saliva. (MARAINI 1998, 53)

In *Bagheria*, Maraini portrays an early sexual experience of her own in similar terms:

Era un amico di famiglia che [...] ha approfittato di un momento in cui eravamo rimasti soli, per aprirsi i pantaloni e mettermi in mano il suo sesso. Io l'ho guardato con curiosità, per niente spaventata. Eravamo a Bagheria, e io avevo una decina d'anni. [...] Io ripensavo con un misto di disgusto e di curiosità a quel suo corpo piegato in avanti, a quel fiotto di latte che mi aveva imbrattato le mani, a quella faccia vergognosa che si chinava stranamente su di me. (*Bagheria*, 41-45)

Both instances illustrate a mixture of shame and pleasure on the part of the man, coupled with a young girl's curious sense of detachment from what is happening to her. In *Bagheria*, Maraini notes how she was prompted to think back to the experience during an *autocoscienza* session, in which all the women present shared similar memories (*ibidem*, 45-47). Whilst she was thus already re-visiting the experience as an adult, and beginning to understand how it was part of a larger system of patriarchal oppression, Maraini's transferral of the experience onto her character perhaps demonstrates that it was not yet something that she could articulate as personal experience in narrative form. Painful events are often said to be «unrepresentable» (GILMORE 2001), they are beyond the realms of that which we have the language to articulate. As Kathryn Robson thus contends, in contrast to autobiographical writing, which «implies a knowing subject who can claim and narrate his or her own experience, trauma renders such (self)knowledge impossible» (ROBSON 2004, 15). The «knowing subject» necessitated by autobiography is already at odds with the realities of lived experience and memory; when that experience is a traumatic one, it is plausible that to articulate it may require a more creative, multi-layered voice.

Similarly disturbing for the adolescent Maraini was her discovery that one of her school friends was in a relationship with an older, married man who regaled her with gifts in return for her silence. The young Maraini would later discover that «era una pratica abbastanza diffusa fra le compagne di liceo» (MARAINI 2001, 101). Maraini's other adolescent protagonist, Enrica in *L'età del malessere*, is equally navigating a challenging initiation into the adult world. One of Enrica's romantic misadventures sees her propositioned by an older, wealthy lawyer in the street. She accepts his invitation to return with him to his flat, where they not only have sex, but – to Enrica's evident pleasure – she has a hot shower and enjoys the kind of meal that her poverty-stricken home life rarely affords. Before she leaves, Guido offers her money: «sgualcii il foglio, stupita e nervosa, fra le dita. Erano i primi soldi che guadagnavo» (MARAINI 1996, 80). Looking back on the period with an adult's perspective, Maraini understands in *La nave per Kobe* that in the difficult post-war years the girls were trading in the only merchandise they knew, their bodies. However, she also recognises that «quella cifra che a lei, ancora ignara del mercato del sesso, sembrava enorme [...] per lui era una piccola cosa di fronte all'enormità dell'acquisto» (MARAINI 2001, 101). The incident illustrates the pervasiveness of the control and commodification of women's bodies, a theme to which Maraini has returned throughout her career. Its presence in the early novel and later piece of life writing suggest that the often fervent political engagement evident in Maraini's narrative does at times directly correlate with experiences from her own life. It also demonstrates how an event that may have been problematic for Maraini as an adolescent, compelled her to re-examine it through her fiction. Discussing women writers' «autobiographical impulse» in response to crisis, Miriam Fuchs has argued that not only does it manifest itself in a variety of forms (biography, autobiography and fiction) but that, «creative women have responded to larger struggles that affected them profoundly but precluded their direct participation and could readily have consigned them to utterly passive roles» (FUCHS 2003, 4).

The “impulse” to narrate trauma becomes even more evident in the novel *Il treno per Helsinki* (1984), written during a period which Stefania Lucamante has

dubbed Maraini's «most overtly autobiographical fictional». Citing *Lettere a Marina* (1981) alongside the 1984 work as indicative of this, Lucamante argues that both involve the «fictionalization of personal pain and psychological suffering» (LUCAMANTE 2008, 189-191).⁷ In the novel, Maraini's protagonist undergoes the painful experience of losing of an unborn child, something which, as her readers will later discover, Maraini also suffered as a young woman.⁸ Just like Armida (the protagonist of *Il treno per Helsinki*), Maraini was hospitalized for almost the full term of her pregnancy, and, through this character, Maraini explores her own conflicting feelings around maternity. Armida's story demonstrates how pregnancy can become a traumatic experience for a woman, whilst also exemplary of the lack of control that women have over their own bodies. She becomes a vessel for the child, whose survival is desired at all costs, even if this means the decline in her own physical and psychological health: «gli ordini sono: immobilità assoluta mangiare molto riposare dormire bere molto e non pensare a niente» (MARAINI 2007, 65). The medical treatment Armida receives is aggressive, and yet she chooses to succumb to the orders of the doctors, her husband, and mother-in-law who all take the decision, «di fare questo figlio costi quel che costi» (*ibidem*, 72). She also surrenders to her unborn child, who «vuole che tutte le mie attenzioni i miei pensieri le mie voglie i miei languori siano per lui e solo per lui» (*ibidem*, 71). In an article for «Signs» in 1979, whilst not discussing the loss of her child, Maraini nonetheless talked about her experience of pregnancy and, as for Armida, described how: «I felt, for reasons that were not clear to me, that I *had* to adapt myself to motherhood, by changing myself in order not to “harm the baby”» (MARAINI 1979, 690). In an essay published in 1996 Maraini deliberates in a similar, but more general manner upon maternity: where it had once been a way for women to «provare [...] di essere dotata di un potere forte» it has become, «nella cultura dei padri, [...] un evento di estrema passività» (MARAINI 1996b, 18). Just like the events and memories of her adolescence, which informed Maraini's political consciousness, so too did the experience of losing a child fuel a more directly interventionist

piece of writing. Here too, her autobiographical project unsettles the boundaries not only between fact and fiction, but also between public and private spaces.

Early sexual initiation, witnessing the exchange of bodies for money and experiencing a miscarriage late in a pregnancy: it is undeniable that these are traumatic events that may be difficult for a person to speak about directly. In his discussion of Holocaust representation, Michael Rothberg describes a traumatic event as one which, «was not fully experienced at the time of its occurrence and that thus repeatedly returns to haunt the psyches of its victims» (ROTHBERG 2000, 12). Citing Cathy Caruth, he goes on to argue that «trauma always entails a coming after: “the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located”» (*ibidem*, 138). Rothberg and others have theorised trauma in terms of its «ghostliness», as something which «possesses» and «haunts» the person who experienced it (*ibidem*, 139; LACAPRA 2001). Whilst the traumatic experiences that I have related are not comparable to the horrors of the Lager, they are nonetheless events that have haunted and troubled Maraini in the way that Holocaust critics have described. Similarly, where they can be described as “traces” in her early works, they are experiences that are only fully articulated, to use Rothberg’s term, belatedly. Their fictionalization gave Maraini the early tools with which to confront them: the imposition of similar events onto her characters providing an objective distance from which to explore her personal trauma. All the works cited conclude with the “coming-to-consciousness” of her female protagonists, almost as though, through them, Maraini too has developed self-awareness and, ultimately, some form of emotional release.

Yet a gap still remains. I noted above that these early traumas should not be seen as equivalent to experiences of Holocaust survivors, but of course Maraini’s childhood did involve just such an experience of internment. The Maraini family were held in a Japanese concentration camp from 1943 to 1946 for their refusal to recognize the Japanese military government. In the final section of this essay, I would like to return to *La nave per Kobe*, a text which is focused on Maraini’s childhood and the years leading up to this particularly traumatic period, in order

to unpick some of the questions and inconsistencies that persist in Maraini's complex, fragmentary articulation of the self.

Intertwining lives

In a significant episode in *La nave per Kobe*, Maraini revisits her pregnancy and miscarriage: she recalls a trip to Hong Kong where she stayed with a family who kept chimpanzees in their home and remembers the affection she felt for the animals, questioning,

mimavo forse le tenerezze di una maternità interrotta bruscamente? avevo perso un figlio qualche anno prima, al settimo mese. Col bambino avevo smarrito ogni affezione per una famiglia che mi ero messa in mente di coltivare e accudire. (MARAINI 2001, 32-33).

The episode is emblematic of Maraini's autobiographical voice. Whilst it demonstrates her ability to articulate a traumatic, and heretofore rarely vocalised experience, it is done so almost in passing, never to be mentioned again. As other passages in *La nave per Kobe*, it is also prompted by an extract from the diary her mother kept during the family's voyage to Japan, and, as critics have been keen to note, it is in this work that Topazia becomes – for arguably the first time in Maraini's oeuvre – a central figure. Cinzia Sartini Blum posits that the goal of «returning to the mother» is reached (SARTINI BLUM 2008, 161), whilst for Ursula Fanning, the work represents Maraini's «furthest step» to «rework[ing] the mother-daughter relationship and acknowledg[ing] its long-buried significance» (FANNING 2005, 126-27).

This scholarly enthusiasm can be considered due to two factors, the first of which is the potentially difficult attitude towards mothers in general that exists elsewhere in Maraini's oeuvre. As Tommasina Gabriele would have it, in her texts we are confronted by, «a host of indifferent, dominating or dominated mothers [...] negative, devouring, conformist or victimized mothers» (GABRIELE 2004a, 65). Second is Maraini's well-documented «passion» for Fosco, her father, which is so conspicuously articulated in other works. *Bagheria*, for example, has been described as the «tale of a daughter who is initially in thrall to her father, often

ignoring her mother» (FANNING 2005, 125), and a work in which the «intense and unreciprocated passion for Fosco», contrasts sharply with a «comparative silence concerning [Topazia]» (BRYCE 1998, 221). In the text itself Maraini admits as much, describing the shame she felt at her mother's nobility and instead how, «io appartenevo a mio padre [...], mi consideravo nata dalla testa di [lui]» (MARAINI 2001, 125-127). Fosco is an equally prominent figure in Maraini's early poetry, whilst in *Storia di Piera*, a conversation with the actor Piera Degli Esposti, she admits: «anch'io volevo sedurre mio padre e portarlo via a mia madre» (MARAINI and DEGLI ESPOSTI 2004, 54). Reading *La nave per Kobe* as an attempt by Maraini to “fix” this problematic relationship with the mother figure would thus certainly be constructive, especially of course if we share Italian feminists' belief in the centrality of the mother (biological or “symbolic”) in female development.

The text itself prompts such a reading: it is subtitled *Diari giapponesi di mia madre* and its cover image is a photograph taken by Fosco of Topazia and a young Dacia. Inside, some forty pages are devoted to photographs of the Maraini family and reproductions of Topazia's diaries written between 1938 and 1941; as has already been noted, these extracts are also interwoven into the narrative itself. Moreover, in the opening pages Maraini explains the background and motivations to her decision to write the text: her father gave them to Maraini, telling her, «ti riguardano, prendili» (MARAINI 2001, 7). Reading them at some 60 years distance, Maraini describes how: «quello che allora mi provocava dolore, e che ancora oggi lo fomenta, è invece la perdita della giovinezza di mia madre, così fresca e tenera e lontana. La giovinezza di mia madre mi è quasi più cara della mia» (*ibidem*, 8). The text is an example of what Eakin dubs «relational autobiography» (EAKIN 1999): a work in which the self's story is viewed through the lens of its relation with some other key person, and as Eakin notes, in which «the stress is on the performance of the collaboration and therefore on the relation between the two individuals involved» (*ibidem*, 59).

Yet on first sight it might appear that rather than a text about, or for, Topazia, she in fact is somewhat eclipsed. Maraini may have perceived of the text as one for which she would write a small preface and let the diaries speak for

themselves, but the extracts instead are mostly short and act predominantly as springboards for Maraini's own recollections. The result is that Maraini's voice often overshadows that of her mother. What's more, in the episodes that relate to Maraini's childhood, Topazia is often relegated to the domestic sphere, whilst Fosco occupies and dominates public spaces. He is depicted as an adventurer, leaving the family for weeks at a time, whilst his wife remains at home to care for their daughters. As the young Dacia grows up, she is sometimes allowed to join him, but Topazia must stay at home, often too weighed down by pregnancy to travel.

Fosco also remains a key presence, with Maraini even noting, «sono proprio quelli gli anni del grande innamoramento per mio padre, il tritone, il seduttore impenitente, il rubacuori» (MARAINI 2001, 140). In passages detailing her paternal origins, she focuses on the difficult relationship that Fosco had with his father; her own memories of this grandfather are negative, seemingly influenced by her father's antipathy towards him. These contrast with the highly flattering references to her paternal grandmother, whom Fosco greatly loved and admired, but whom Maraini never knew: she credits her «adorabile nonna Yoi» with her own vocation as a writer (*ibidem*, 136). Sidonie Smith has explored how the female autobiographer must negotiate both paternal and maternal narratives when constructing her own life, and argues that in order to assert her authority she often feels obliged to identify with the father and his law (SMITH 1987, 52). However, must this identification with the father necessitate the repression of the maternal narrative? Or is it rather that, whilst superficially Topazia may appear to have been silenced, the text should in fact be read as an intertwining – and not an eclipsing – of the mother's narrative with that of the daughter?

At various points in the text, Maraini begins to approach the complex issue of her differing relationships with her mother and father, questioning what this may have meant to Topazia: «bellini loro due, commenta mia madre [...]. Che ci fosse un senso di esclusione in quel "bellini"?» (MARAINI 2001, 140). On another occasion she explores how her mother may have felt at abandoning her own work as an artist in order to raise the children: «non si è mai lamentata di questa

interruzione del suo lavoro. [...] Mentre al marito era concesso viaggiare, scoprire il mondo, innamorarsi di altre donne e, quando tornava a casa, pretendere di essere accolto come un re» (*ibidem*, 118). The passage is conspicuous for being the closest Maraini comes to criticizing her father, who, as has been revealed elsewhere, conducted affairs with a number of other women.⁹ Indeed, as Topazia's diaries focus ever more exclusively upon her daughters, so too does Maraini note that her father's absences are becoming a constant. There is additionally a recognition of the uniqueness of the mother-daughter relationship, with Maraini identifying its perpetuation in her behaviour towards her younger sisters. Her investigations into her mother's family similarly shed light on this bond. Topazia's own mother was largely absent in her children's lives: an opera singer who spent her youth travelling, she felt trapped in the family home and, reluctant to spend time with her children, instead hired a succession of governesses. As Maraini comes to understand, «forse proprio per compensare questo vuoto [Topazia] è stata così generosa, quasi eccessiva, nel curarsi sulla mia piccola vita» (*ibidem*, 91). A motif in the text is Maraini's examination of the way in which her memory is constructed through literature, with allusions made to her own oeuvre, and two such references resonate with this latter understanding of her mother's difficult childhood. Maraini equates Topazia with another, now famous, ancestor, Marianna Ucrìa, who faced a similarly remote mother, but whose determination and hard work allowed her to forge her own path in life (*ibidem*, 49). Meanwhile, Maraini's maternal grandmother is called to the author's mind as she discusses her love of *Madame Bovary*, about which she wrote the critical essay *Cercando Emma* (1993). As Maraini recognises, whilst her own mother «è la persona meno bovarista che abbia mai conosciuto, [...] era scappata da una madre bovarista» (MARAINI 2005, 114). These passing references and at times seemingly throwaway remarks in fact serve to fill some of the silences that have previously surrounded Topazia and a sense of resolution begins to emerge.

Instead of viewing Maraini's use of her mother's diaries as an elimination of her subjectivity, the manner in which they act as catalysts for her own memories

could additionally be considered a productive framework that allows Maraini to better understand and articulate her identity. In the feminist practices of *autocoscienza* and *affidamento* (with which Maraini's work has previously been associated, PICCHIETTI 2002), the exercise of sharing experiences and finding common ground with another woman was considered an essential tool towards both self-understanding and the development of a productive feminist consciousness (BONO and KEMP 1991; PARATI and WEST 2002). If we consider the text a "conversation" between Maraini and her mother, in which the author is inspired by Topazia's diaries to find her own autobiographical voice, then the inclusion of such highly personal experiences as her miscarriage substantiates the idea of the text as a beneficial exercise in *autocoscienza* for Maraini. Something that she had previously considered through fiction is now presented as an autobiographic event; through their interwoven voices, Maraini can attempt to negotiate her early trauma.

Adalgisa Giorgio identifies the intertwining of narratives as a «recurrent aspect» in mother-daughter narratives in recent Italian literature. Drawing on Cavarero's philosophy of narration, she argues: «human beings can understand who they are [...] only through becoming aware of the story of their origins» (GIORGIO 2002, 122). *La nave per Kobe* is a two-way exchange which allows a daughter to confront the challenging issue of her selfhood, and, as Giorgio would have it, «transforms the physical and psychic magma of the mother-daughter bond into exchanges, signs and words that help the daughter to be in the world» (*ibidem*, 122). The entwining of Topazia's story with that of Maraini's gives the text its hybridity, energy and motivation, whilst its inclusion also allows a voice that was previously kept silent in the pages of a diary to be made public. Where, formerly, Fosco's had been the only version of the family's time in Japan,¹⁰ *La nave per Kobe* corresponds to the other side of their experiences, the domestic life of a displaced family, the expression of which (finally) grants the mother recognition.

In the latter pages of the text, as war approaches and the peace of the Maraini family is threatened by external forces, Topazia's diary entries lessen and

eventually become silent. At this point, Maraini gives the narrative voice almost fully to her mother and the text becomes a “proper” conversation between them. At a distance of nearly sixty years and without the constraints of a family to look after, Topazia becomes expansive about her experiences, recalling both familial events and her impressions of the political climate in Japan as the war approached. Her voice is here at its strongest and Maraini’s interventions are minimal. She even asks Maraini to remember that, «non sono andata in campo di concentramento giusto per seguire un marito amato» (MARAINI 2001, 176). As Giorgio reminds us, «the daughter’s longing for maternal recognition must be accompanied by her ability to recognise the mother as an individual» (GIORGIO 2002, 122).

However, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the text ends before any attempt at narrating the years in which the family were held in a Japanese concentration camp is made. Maraini offers readers an explanation for finishing her narrative at this crucial point: «questa è un’altra storia [...]. Ho promesso a mia sorella che l’avrei lasciata a lei» (MARAINI 2001, 176).¹¹ But is this the only reason for her silence on the matter? The final image in the text sees Maraini halt at the edge of a metaphorical wood: «per tanti anni ho cercato di raccontarla questa storia ma sul limitare del bosco mi sono sempre fermata, col fiato mozzo, un senso di pudore e di sbigottimento insieme» (*ibidem*, 177); this telling image suggesting that her experiences in the concentration camp continue to constitute a trauma that she is unable to confront. Then, in 2008, she published *Il treno dell’ultima notte*, a novel in which a young woman journeys across Eastern Europe in the 1950s in search of a childhood friend who was sent to Auschwitz. The protagonist is a journalist, who simultaneously investigates and reports back to Italy about others who were interned there. The writing of this novel demonstrates, most compellingly I would argue, that certain aspects of Maraini’s history will only ever be accessible to her through fiction. As she describes in *La grande festa*, «solo le storie sono capaci di colmare gli squarci del dolore. Solo le storie ci aiutano a sopravvivere» (MARAINI 2011, 34).

Throughout her career, Maraini's life, politics and fiction have collided, separated and re-connected. The traumas of her early life provided material for her fiction, yet an express recognition that the experiences were her own appeared more difficult to convey. Where her works have so often sought to give a voice to women, voicing her own life has been more problematic. Yet, in *La nave per Kobe* in particular, she does present the reader with a version of her identity, albeit a manipulated, occasionally incoherent and even, at times, fictionalized one. It is a text which offers the reader an insight into her past and present subjectivities, themselves suggesting reasons why she has had difficulty approaching the genre. Then, through an apparent reconciliation with her mother, it also demonstrates how, in part, this seemingly daunting task was achieved.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, BENSTOCK 1988, SMITH 1987 and SMITH and WATSON 1998.
- ² The relationship is explored in BRYCE 1998 and SIGGERS MANSON 2007.
- ³ As Graziella Parati notes, the author of autobiography surely always, «carefully selects and constructs the characters, events and aspects of the self that he or she wants to make public in order to convey a specific message about her past and present identity» (PARATI 1996, 4).
- ⁴ In one passage, for example, the protagonist recalls her fear as a child of losing her father, and the subsequent description is almost identical to a passage from *La nave per Kobe* (see MARAINI 2002, 93-94 and MARAINI 2001, 67).
- ⁵ See MARAINI 2004, 355 and MARAINI 2001, 116.
- ⁶ See GIOBBI 1995 for an interesting discussion of women writers' recourse to adolescent female protagonists.
- ⁷ SUMELI WEINBERG 1993, 87 and GABRIELE 2004b, 71 also point to the autobiographical nature of *Il treno per Helsinki*.
- ⁸ As I will discuss shortly, it was in *La nave per Kobe* that Maraini would return to this, unhappily brief, experience of maternity.
- ⁹ See MARAINI F. 2001 and MARAINI 2008.
- ¹⁰ See MARAINI F. 2001.
- ¹¹ Maraini's sister does carry on the story: see MARAINI T. 2003.

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