

Laura Dolp and Eveljn Ferraro

**Casting Sound: Modality and Poetics in
Gabriella Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle***

Abstract

This article investigates Gabriella Ghermandi's novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007) through two disciplinary perspectives: the first considers music as a historical and social practice through historical observation of Ghermandi's characters who reference Ethiopian oral traditions; the second explores the contemporary dynamics of migration and transnational identity through textual analysis that critiques how storytelling practices are carried into an Italian context. We argue that the novel reflects a dissemination of oral memory across generations and gender and into a postcolonial setting, and that its characters reflect adaptations to institutional and twentieth-century technological change. Crucially, and more specifically, the fate of singing and storytelling in Ghermandi's fictional world mirrors the author's experience of moving between orality and recorded and written forms, not as an evolutionary process but as a reciprocal process. Her fictional tradition bearers (Aron, Yacob, and Mahlet) embody these malleable modes of transmission, reconfiguring stories for a new generation of Ethiopians and Italians.

Mediating between her Ethiopian and Italian cultural background, author and musician Gabriella Ghermandi has spent the majority of her adult life delivering powerful stories of Ethiopian communities torn apart by the Italian occupation, internal dictatorship, and the challenges of modernization. Her first novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007) illustrates the effects of the Italian colonial project through a polyphony of voices and stories that the young girl Mahlet collects during her journey to adulthood. The Ethiopian elder, Yacob, prophesies that Mahlet will continue his legacy of storytelling. It is not until her journey to Italy and eventual return to Ethiopia, that she remembers her childhood promise and embraces her role as the bearer of stories. Instead of privileging narrative form, as has frequently been done in the analysis of diaspora literature, our study focuses on the decentered qualities of Ghermandi's novel, thus inviting the myriad possibilities offered by both its claims and silences regarding tradition, modernity, gender and race (PINTO 2013, 10-11). For example, our analysis strives

to contextualize Mahlet's non-linear account and the ways in which that account evidences the changing gender roles in Ethiopian society since the 1970s.¹

Ghermandi's project has already been the focus of several literary studies but our approach is slightly unorthodox, in that our interest lies primarily with the narrative importance of performative practices and how the vivid sonic world of *Regina* expresses the tensions of dislocation and home.² To that end, we explore *Regina* from the standpoint of two disciplinary perspectives: literature (Eveljn Ferraro) and music (Laura Dolp). Laura Dolp investigates the specifics of this music as a historical and social practice, through historical observation of Ghermandi's characters who reference Ethiopian oral traditions, while Eveljn Ferraro explores the contemporary dynamics of migration and transnational identity, through textual analysis that critiques how storytelling practices are carried into an Italian context. We argue that the novel reflects a dissemination of oral memory across generations and gender and into a postcolonial setting, and that its characters reflect adaptations to institutional and twentieth-century technological change. Crucially, and more specifically, the fate of singing and storytelling in Ghermandi's fictional world mirrors the author's experience of moving between orality and recorded and written forms, not as an evolutionary process but as a reciprocal process.³ Her fictional tradition bearers (Aron, Yacob, and Mahlet) embody these malleable modes of transmission, reconfiguring stories for a new generation of Ethiopians and Italians.

Regina is now acknowledged to be a pioneering critique of Italian colonial memory. It has also largely escaped categorizations such as migrant writing or literature of migration, terms coined in the 1990s to officially recognize the proliferation of a new body of texts, in Italian, within the Italian literary scenario. For more than a decade those narratives were regarded with skepticism, relegated narrowly to stories that merely captured the changing social dynamics of immigration to Italy. In a new line of thinking, Gnisci (2003), Parati (2005), Lombardi-Diop, Romeo (2012), and other scholars, have emphasized instead the linguistically and culturally challenging nature of this contemporary literature in relation to the formation of Italian national identity in a globalized world. Our

project examines *Regina's* reciprocal agency not only for its formal modalities, mentioned above, but also in light of what Wendy Laura Belcher calls a «reciprocal enculturation model of encounter» in her theoretical quest for new literary models of African agency vis-à-vis European agency (BELCHER 2009).⁴ In direct contrast to the appropriation model of a projected other that enables self-fashioning, the reciprocal enculturation model understands both cultures as «actively engaging and changing the other» (BELCHER 2009, 220) rather than eliding the agency of each other.

In the afterword of *Regina's* first edition, this quality of relational influence is characterized by Cristina Lombardi-Diop as operating through concentric narratives that create a «choral» effect (LOMBARDI-DIOP 2011, 308). In another study of voice and chorality, Gregoria Manzin has drawn on Adriana Cavarero's concept of «relational identity» in order to emphasize how Ghermandi's orchestration of unique human voices and stories creates a «meaningful forward-looking *ensemble*» (MANZIN 2011, 111) and places the novel outside the traditional postcolonial paradigm. Manzin positions *Regina* within a transnational space where Italy and Ethiopia become «active agencies in the co-creation of a reciprocal Otherness» (*Ivi*). In addition, the novel has been recognized to weave together multiple narratives of resistance, with the «potential to evoke transhistorical and transnational connections, real and imagined, among other anti-colonial and antifascist struggles in Italy, Africa and beyond» (CLÒ 2010, 35). Repeatedly, Ghermandi's project allows us to understand that the process of rediscovering and unearthing a shared past, when sustained by a political consciousness, leads to the production of identity (HALL 1990, 224). In the case of *Regina*, this production of identity is mainly built around historical distance (from the colonial past) and its re-interpretation within a present.

Considered from our vantage point we find that within the concentric narratives of *Regina*, music is a crucial tool in chronicling and formulating a character's self-image through a variety of music making practices and storytelling strategies. The figure of the male poet-singer within Ethiopian society, the *azmari*, serves as the pivotal cultural model for the female *cantora* of

Ghermandi's Italian novel. The historical basis for Ghermandi's transference of agency from a male to a female protagonist is mirrored by the changes brought about the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which pushed Ethiopian women to be active in the public sphere during the revolution. More particularly, women were trained as soldiers and were also allowed to work outside the home. Previously discouraged from performing in the public sphere, the young women of revolutionary Ethiopia were given new permission to participate, just as Mahlet is given permission in *Regina* (TSE 2000). The character of Yacob serves the purpose of passing down the traditional role embodied by Aron *l'azmari* into the formation of Mahlet as a contemporary poet-singer. Aron's poetic rehearsals of conflict, which occur at decisive points in the novel, reinforce the values of heroism and sacrifice in her cultural imaginary. Other lessons of music making in *Regina* include the communal aspects of worship and celebration, such as the religious festival of *Timket*, where Ghermandi underscores communal transformation through the collective experience of singing. Overall, we conclude that as a shaping force in Ghermandi's narrative, music is both epic and instructive (songs of war) as well as experiential, corporeal, and unifying (sacred songs).

Given the transnational character of Mahlet's experience, we examine the marginality of Ghermandi's *cantora* in relation to the *azmari*, as well as the challenges and opportunities that the *cantora* faces in conveying historical memories beyond the original community and in another language. The poetics of place characterize Mahlet's emerging role as a storyteller and articulate the values of private and communal in the market, the house, and the city. Her judgments embody the tension between Ethiopia and Italy, and by extension, community-based and capitalist values. While Mahlet's oral stories must be first written down in order to communicate them to an Italian audience, we argue that within the form of Ghermandi's novel, the modalities are intertextual. Here, we draw on Eileen Julien, whose 1992 study dismantles the remnants of «evolutionist theories» of oral forms and urges us to consider them not as the «concrete literary simulacrum of African essence» but rather a «manifestation of social

consciousness, vision, and possibility...» (JULIEN 1992, 11, 155). In other words, as the product of what Julien calls a «thinking architect», *Regina* is fully reciprocal, structurally and in terms of narrative (JULIEN 1992, ix). Our final assertion is that Ghermandi's authorial voice capitalizes on the opportunities for social and political critique previously championed by the *azmari* tradition, thereby ensuring its survival in a new modality.

Singing Stories, Aron through Yacob

Laura Dolp

In *Regina*, the character of Aron references a class of semi-professional singers and storytellers of largely male gender that have played an active role in Ethiopian culture since well before the Christian era. Their songs have survived through centuries of oral transmission and the *azmariwoch* (plural for *azmari*) pride themselves as repositories of local legends and history.⁵ *Azmari* practice has been characterized by fierce social critique. Before the modern era, they were largely itinerant and sang in a variety of contexts (including weddings and other public gatherings) and told ironic stories that praised or critiqued their patrons, and commented on the fallacies of war or the conquests of love. Political and cultural currents have molded their lives. In some eras they have flourished, in others they have been persecuted. Because of the unpredictable nature of their allegiances, they have been regarded with both suspicion and respect in Ethiopian society.⁶ Aron's fictional life begins around the First World War and spans the major political events in twentieth-century Ethiopia. He represents not only a long-standing *azmari* tradition of performance but also a specific generation of those practitioners, whose political resistance during the Italian occupation was central to their adult lives. As one might expect, the stories of the *azmari* embody harsh political realities. The earliest diegetic time in *Regina* corresponds to the 1935 invasion by Mussolini into Ethiopian territory, during which time *azmariwoch* like Aron denounced and then deployed traditional storytelling techniques to articulate their concerns.

In particular, songs about war recur in *Regina* and Aron is committed to their performance. As Richard Reid has shown in his study of war, remembrance, and transmission, the battle has a central place in Ethiopian historiography and the popular imagination; and in a manner unique to the rest of the African continent (REID 2006, 93). Within a tradition of oral poetry and praise singing, songs of war (*fukerà*) serve several functions in Ghermandi's narrative: as a didactic tool, as a forewarning for war, and more generally as an evocation for collective memory. In both cases, as a presentiment to conflict and an evocation of past conflict, songs of war are crucial to the creation and consolidation of identity. As the novel progresses, Mahlet's own sensitivity to and identification with the role of a female warrior mirrors an increasing historical acceptance to this kind of social identity in the public sphere.⁷

Historically, *azmariwoch* were specifically identified by their instruments and the virtuosity of their singing practices. They were expected to be virtuoso players of the *masinqo*, a one-stringed instrument with a triangular face. In Ghermandi's fictional account, the *masinqo* also has metaphoric value. During a conversation between Yacob and his sisters, the taut and suspended resonator of the instrument serves as a metaphor for the tension of the human body and the psychology of impending war (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 20). Like their historical counterparts, the songs in *Regina* are valued primarily for their sophisticated language rather than accompanying melodies. In practice, a performer's virtuosity is determined through the skills of improvisation and creating a double meaning in the texts, a poetic tradition known as «wax and gold» (*sem-enna warq*). The technique involves two semantic layers: the apparent meaning, on the surface, is known as *sem/wax*, while the underlying true, and, at times, spiritual meaning, is known as *warq/gold* (LEVINE 1972, 5).⁸ The puns are valued for their chameleon-like and provocative qualities; for example a performer could parody a type of Ethiopian Christian hymn (*melk'e*), traditionally sung in praise of a saint, but borrow the tradition of listing parts of the saint's body that are relics, and instead sing about a young woman's body in the audience (SHELEMAY 1994, 29).

The *azmari* practice of wax and gold was also utilized for political purposes,

and more broadly supported nationalist ideology. It has also been widely perceived to highlight the unconventionality of Ethiopian civilization, culture and identity among the African nations. For this reason, the wax and gold paradigm is conceived as essential to «Ethiopian-ness» (BEKERIE 1997, 3). When Aron is first introduced in *Regina* and sings a song that memorializes the resistance, his modality is music, but in accordance with tradition his storytelling capabilities and the effectiveness of his linguistic delivery are the aspects of his performance that are most highly valued (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 14-15).

Eveljn Ferraro

There are multiple mechanisms for storytelling in Ghermandi's novel. Aron figures as a mediated storyteller in the first part of the novel («The Promise») since his storytelling is embedded in Yacob's account. Aron punctuates stories of war that the old Yacob passes down to the young Mahlet hoping that one day she will bring them to Italy: «You will be the voice of our history that doesn't want to be forgotten» (*Ibid.*, 2). When Mahlet encounters a mysterious trunk at the foot of Yacob's bed, she imagines the heroic deeds performed by the three elderly men in the family, Selemon, Yohanes, and her favorite one, Yacob. Soon after, Yacob delivers a narrative of armed resistance against the Italian soldiers during the time of their occupation in the 1930s; a narrative that highlights the courage of the *arbegnà*, patriotic valiant male and female warriors. Aron performs songs of war (*fukerà*) that are included in the stories that Mahlet expects to hear «one grown-up to another» (*Ibid.*, 12). Aron appears predominantly at two points in the long reconstruction of past events. The first time, his improvised verses and his music rehearse and honor Yacob's deeds in front of his sisters while hiding in the forest (*Ibid.*, 14-15), while the second time his songs trick the Italians and enable the *arbegnà* to take possession of a full load of weapons (*Ibid.*, 33-34). At another point, we read about Aron's willingness to teach the *fukerà* to Daniel, an Italian soldier who, having been sentenced to five years for violating the Italian Fascist law that banned mixed marriages, chooses to continue his relationship with Yacob's youngest sister Amarech, and join the Ethiopian resistance forces

(*Ibid.*, 50). In all of these instances, the performances of Aron are filtered through Yacob's storytelling, which Mahlet listens to with curiosity as a child in the 1980s, along with the stories that she hears from women gathering at home for coffee in her hometown of Debre Zeit.

Abba Yacob acts as a formidable mediator between two generations of *cantori*, the *azmari* of the colonial era and a new lineage born under the dictatorship of Mengistu. In this respect, he holds a crucial role in the formation of Mahlet as a modern *cantora* inscribed in a new historical phase that demands a revision of categories of dislocation, itinerancy, alliances, and poetic modalities. Yacob's storytelling not only rehearses and reinforces past collective memories of war and resistance that highlight the atrocities of Italian colonialism, but also reveals the often untold intricacies entailed in the colonizer-colonized bind, as illustrated by the story of Amarech and Daniel, who after the birth of their daughter Rosa are brutally killed.

Characters like Daniel, the farmer-soldier from the Northeast of Italy, the sergeant who tries to cover up Daniel's relationship with Amarech, or the Southern Italian who becomes an informant for the Ethiopians (*Ibid.*, 17), embody various forms of disengagement from their fascist *patria*. On the other hand, Yacob, as an Ethiopian warrior, deplores the relationship between his sister and the white enemy who has upset their family life with the unexpected weapon of love. Yacob's hard feelings toward Daniel eventually dissolve and are replaced by a sentiment of protection for the little orphan Rosa who bears the colors of earth and sky of her parents. It is with his formal submission to the Italians to protect Rosa that Yacob concludes his long oral narrative.

Yacob's storytelling is didactic in scope, since ultimately it aims to instruct Mahlet about a shared collective past that she will disseminate through her own voice in Italy. It is worth noting that in this view of the postcolonial *cantora* oral and written modes of communication are fully integrated. At the end of his oral story, Yacob writes in a notebook the names of the battles and other information so Mahlet will remember them correctly for her Italian audience:

Then make a solemn promise in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary. When you

grow up, you will write my story, the story of those years, and you will take it to Italy, so that the Italians won't be allowed to forget (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 58).

Moreover, it can be argued that like the *azmari* performance of war songs that prepared the *arbegnà* for the battle in the field in the 1930s, Yacob's storytelling prepares Mahlet for the challenges of a post-Derg Ethiopia in the 1990s. Such challenges included not only material reconstruction but also intellectual rebuilding, as we read in a key section on Mahlet's exploration of the marketplace. In this space she observes the flow of adult life and is exposed to stories of internal guerrilla forces as well as Ethiopian students abroad.

Un unico corpo

Laura Dolp

In tandem with the relative autonomy of the *azmari*, communal music making also shapes the sonic world of *Regina*. Religious festivals on the Ethiopian calendar such as *Timket*, as well as the liturgical practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, highlight the potentials for social cohesion and personal bonds created through ritual practices in music.

In one instance, Yacob recalls the ancient origins of the words «Lord have mercy on us, Christ» (*Egzio Meharene Kristos*) and the numerous generations that had sung this prayer, including «warrior men, monks, warrior women, women hermits [...] a whole crowd that grew behind me, reaching to infinity [...]. They were all my ancestors» (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 40). Later he speaks of their existential effects:

They were there next to me, liberating me from my loneliness [...]. I began to pray even in my sleep. Over the following days, the fog began to lift, to rise toward the sky with the prayers, and the pain began to emerge like the bare earth [...]. I was beginning to live again, clutching at hope. On my lips, the name of God was born again (*Ibid.*, 39-40).

Likewise during *Timket*, Mahlet is mesmerized by the atmosphere of occasion: the music, the prayer, the fire and the dance. The expression «unico corpo» (single body) occurs twice in Mahlet's account to signal a larger manifestation of cathartic movement and the relationship of its participants with one another (*Ibid.*, 108). The communal singing that takes place during *Timket* is representative of a ritual reenactment of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River and celebrated during Epiphany in January. The liturgy takes place during the night near a stream or small body of water. Before dawn the water is blessed and sprinkled on the participants, thereby symbolically renewing their baptismal vows. *Regina* refers to the contemporary practice of embarking on a procession from the ritual site to the church in order to return the Ark of the Covenant (*Tabot*). The participants consist of clergy and laymen who sing, elders who march with their weapons, and children playing games. Women are dressed in festival clothes. When the *Tabot* has been safely returned, people return home to a festive meal (LEVINE 1972, 63). In *Regina*, the procession is also given a political cast. Yacob proposes to be part of the *Tabot* procession, in order to appeal to the saints to help them overturn the Derg leader Mengistu (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 106). Later, *Timket* is again referred to as a metaphorical baptism into a new political era (*Ibid.*, 108).

Mahlet's experience of *Timket* in Addis Ababa is characterized by a sense of personal investment and a heightened awareness of her own heritage, although she observes that while she sings with her family, they are reticent to take part in the public ceremony. Their uncertain relationship to the crowd is due largely to their unfamiliarity with the urban environment, having recently fled an anticipated clash between the Revolutionary Front and the Ethiopian aviation force in Debre Zeit (*Ibid.*, 104-107).

In other words, for Ghermandi's characters, acts of collective singing, dancing and music-making help measure sites of intimacy in relation to family, the larger urban environment and culturally as Ethiopians. The celebration of *Timket* in Addis Ababa takes place in an atmosphere of war and renewal, and draws together symbolically the functions of war songs and communal practices. In the

narrative, the festival is introduced as an occasion to renew one's vows of faith and it closes with the images, songs and verses that honor the warriors as liberators. This communal renewal features a plurality of experiences. Ghermandi creates a dissonance between the family's sense of dislocation, Mahlet's resulting suspicions about the potentials for a «single body» of its devoted participants, and the general atmosphere of the event, which invites the nation into this unified condition. These observations aside, in the vernacular of *Regina*, the phrase connoting the «unified» body originates not from ritual but rather from an earlier scene in the market, when Mahlet and her cousins are introduced to the autonomy of their adult selves (*Ibid.*, 76-77).

Eveljn Ferraro

In *Regina*, the public space of the market is described as transformative to Mahlet's self-identity. The docile girl, curious about stories circulated by and among adults inside the house, grows into an adolescent eager to explore the external world and make her entrance into it.

I wanted to get out, take the first steps toward discovering and taking hold of what one day I would need in order to build my own life as an adult. I was like the water in the bed of a river, racing toward the sea, incapable of looking back. Back toward its source (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 62).

Like many aspects of Ethiopian life, adolescence is presented in the novel as an event that involves the community. Mothers share concerns and advice about their rebel daughters, while young women like Mahlet, the only daughter and youngest of five children, and her numerous adolescent cousins seek the unknown beyond the house gates. By no means a new place to girls who are used to running errands for their families and neighbors, the market takes on a new meaning as a communal place of exhilaration and freedom, relieved from family duties. As Mahlet puts it: «We tumbled out onto the street like spilled water from a bowl running over the earth in a tangle of rivulets» (*Ibid.*, 73). The girls feel elation as the market comes alive with vendors setting up stands of vegetables, fruit, and *tej*

(Ethiopian honey wine), hanging rows of colored dresses, bags of spices, incense, and other merchandise. The air is filled with the voices of people greeting each other and negotiating prices. Mahlet and her cousins enjoy watching the activities of adult life at the market, however they gradually lose interest in its ritual activities and cease to wander as a younger «body», [...] «a busy swarm that moved compactly in unison» (*Ibid.*, 77).

The disaggregation of the group marks Mahlet's transition into adulthood. Once again the wise Yacob plays a crucial role, thanks to the authority and trust that Mahlet's parents bestow on him. After granting Mahlet permission to go to the market, he points out to her that she and her cousins have so far observed the adult world «just like someone looking in a restaurant with his face stuck against the window, without ever going in» (*Ibid.*, 80). Becoming an adult, he suggests, requires more than curiosity and the ability to take action and responsibility for one's actions.

While Mahlet soon forgets her old promise, Yacob seizes the opportunity to teach the future *cantora* the value of engagement. He skillfully recommends that she work at her cousin Legesse's hair shop, a small place located at the margins of the market. The shop becomes a transformative space for Mahlet, as it turns out to be a social meeting point for farmers from different regions of Ethiopia who bring their merchandise, their Debre Zeit stories, and news about the weakened Derg and the spreading guerilla forces. Despite promising her family that she will not become involved, Mahlet cannot help but listen and formulate ideas about the heroic men and women who, like their historical counterparts by the early 1990s, were fighting against the dictatorial regime.

The women who frequent Legesse's shop to have their hair done, also tell stories that deeply resonate with Mahlet's curiosity for the external world. She learns about young Ethiopians who have left the country to study abroad in order to return to Ethiopia after its liberation from Mengistu. Such accounts inspire Mahlet, in fact, she promises to herself that she will obtain a scholarship to attend university in Italy and join the heroic endeavor of returning to Ethiopia with this newly-acquired knowledge (*Ibid.*, 97).

In the unfolding of Ghermandi's novel, the outdoor and indoor venues of the market are thus portrayed as spaces of freedom and political awareness. Once a witness to old stories, Mahlet collects a plurality of new ones, thus effectively setting up herself for the role of «queen of flowers and pearls». In these spaces, she also apprehends the current state of her country, and assesses her place in a larger transnational context.

Addis Ababa to Bologna

Laura Dolp

Mahlet's final position as a modern storyteller is precluded historically by a century of rapid social, political and cultural changes in Ethiopia. The manner by which the *azmariwoch* negotiated these changes was largely dependent on their proximity to Addis Ababa, where opportunities arose as the country shifted away from an agrarian-feudal system toward the model of the new urban and cosmopolitan capital. Some *azmariwoch* became permanent residents of the city while others became royal messengers from outlying areas. Before the First World War, *azmariwoch* spoke not only on behalf of the lower strata of society but also for political power. Emperor Menelik (1889-1913) was particularly skillful at harnessing *azmariwoch* for his own ends, including having them serve during his 1896 campaign at Adwa, and as a tool of propaganda for new technology and political stability.⁹

For Aron and the older storyteller Yacob, the act of championing the counterinsurgency through storytelling is characteristic of the polarizing effect after 1930 by Emperor Haile Selassie, who forced *azmariwoch* to choose their allegiances between those who publicly supported him and those that defied him. When the danger became more acute after 1935, the newly formed public institutions by the *azmariwoch* became rallying points for Ethiopian nationalistic sentiment.¹⁰ Still, there were heavy penalties for protest messages, and *azmariwoch* were executed if they did not comply. For those individuals that protested, the acerbic, but subtle, double meanings of their lyrics provided thinly

veiled protection. Their puns were so subtle they were often concealed even to those Italians who spoke Amharic (BETREYOHANNES 2008, 42-43).

That said, the Italian presence was not solely defined by obstruction to *azmari* performances or destroying of traditional practices. When it suited their interests, new aspects of improved technologies and infrastructure positioned *azmariwoch* as spokesmen for colonial interests. They transmitted propaganda through a new, more powerful broadcasting system in Addis Ababa giving live performances that advocated agricultural productivity, including songs that advocated planting cotton, sowing grains, and growing coffee. Local recording capabilities were improved through imported gramophones and records. Finally, local music scenes provided opportunities for Ethiopian *azmariwoch* and Italian musicians to play together (BETREYOHANNES 2008, 43).

The arrival of the military junta (Derg) in 1974, which demarcated Mahlet's generation, destroyed once and for all the aristocratic patronage of the *azmariwoch*. In the two decades before the Derg, Selassie had placed even greater restrictions on public critique, and replaced *azmari* music with state-owned media. Ironically this action by the socialist reformers to denude the *azmariwoch* was also accompanied by a new anti-West ideology, which promoted their role as authentic bearers of culture and allowed them to perform in the service of state. Small clubs (*kinet*) or groups of *azmari* singers, *masinqo* players and other musicians were organized locally. Mahlet's perception of Aron as a respected, but antiquated, bearer of cultural legacy is representative of her generation, who had new levels of social freedom in work, education and land ownership. In the 1990s during the period of economic and political liberalization by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the perspective of that generation broadened to include a more globalized context for *azmariwoch* performance.¹¹ In other words, the fictional Mahlet leaves Ethiopia at a time when her destiny as a bearer of stories has finally become less fraught politically. Upon her return to Ethiopia and at the conclusion of *Regina*, we understand her future role as open-ended, not only by Ghermandi's personal narrative for Mahlet but by the socio-political conditions of Ethiopia.

Thus within the historical trajectory of *Regina*, Aron's generation associates *azmariwoch* with itinerancy and defines them by aristocratic alliances, whereas Mahlet's generation perceives them as entertainers in established and problematized social spaces. Ghermandi's narrative evidences this historical reality, particularly in the way that dramatic political appeals are made through storytelling by the older generations and are received by those younger.

Eveljn Ferraro

With Mahlet's passage into adolescence and her decision to study in Italy, the promise of becoming the *cantora* of her original community is forgotten. Mahlet travels to the Italian cities of Perugia and Bologna, which in her eyes seem to be affected by the «diseases» of the West, including its «loneliness and individualism» (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 124); illnesses that thwart the communal practices of storytelling that she had learned in Ethiopia.

In her estrangement, Mahlet rehearses memory in the form of a ballad of love and loss, the *tizita*. During her first year in Italy, a line from a song by Mahmud Ahmed drums into her head: «Nostalgia is a ship upon which dark thoughts travel» (*Ibid.*, 123). In order to express the narrator's longing for home, Ghermandi adopts the *tizita*, which not only stresses the act of memory but also relies on the rich polysemy and double meanings of the Amharic language (WOUBSHET 2009, 630). Originally introduced into the secular repertoire by the *azmariwoch*, who have witnessed life from a liminal position in Ethiopian society, the *tizita* has been used both at home and in the Ethiopian diaspora. It has been employed particularly by female performers to express longing toward another time or an elsewhere, and to reflect images of home (WEBSTER-KOGEN 2013). In Mahlet's case, the ship inhabited by dark thoughts is the embodiment of her longing and inner crossings between there/then and now/here, which positions her in a sea of nostalgia.

Such a nostalgic view of home is heightened by the linguistic and cultural alienation, or what Ghermandi terms «straniamento», of the narrator who does not have other Ethiopian students to connect to at the university. Observing

Italian society from a marginal position, Mahlet's sense of isolation grows when Yohanes and later Selemon die and nobody can share in her grief. Eventually, also Yacob dies while she is still in Bologna. These events mark her return to Ethiopia and gradual transformation from a reluctant listener into a public cantora.

In the second half of the novel («Il ritorno»), Mahlet's grief for the loss of Yacob is mixed with confusion and numbness. In order to fulfill Yacob's wish, she occupies his old room, but a voice inside her prevents her from praying. Abba Chereka, an old hermit who is revealed to be the head of the *arbegnà* resistance in the old times and thus a close friend of Yacob, tries to help Mahlet recall her promise through a series of hints. He first encrypts a hidden message to her with the wax and gold technique of the *qene*, in which one word embeds two meanings. «My dear child, your name is almost a *qene*. If you remove the 'h' and shift the accent slightly, Malet means 'the significance,' while Ma'let stands for 'that time', thus «the significance of that time» (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 134). Later, in the long mornings while she waits for Abba Chereka, several people sit next to Mahlet under a tree to narrate (in the first person) their stories of the Italian occupation and the heroic opposition of Ethiopian women and men. Mahlet curates these stories without realizing that they are meant to revive the memory of the original promise made to Yacob. Not even her dreams of Yacob enable her to remember.

Finally Aron, now in his old age, is introduced to Mahlet directly. Playing his *masinqo*, he sings verses that explicitly evoke Yacob's wish: «I'm counting on you, child. / Don't lose the story. / Carry it to the final resting place / Of Saints Peter and Paul» (*Ibid.*, 260). Aron's sung storytelling rehearses the war stories that Yacob had entrusted Mahlet with as a child. He uses an improvised poetic form that Ghermandi identifies as *ghitm* (COMBERIATI 2009, 152).¹² Despite her recognition of such stories, the memory of the promise remains hidden inside Mahlet until Abba Chereka shows her the green notebook on which Yacob had annotated the battlefields' names of the war years. Finally disentangled, Mahlet sets forth to write down the story of Debre Zeit, of her promise, of Yacob, and concludes by addressing the Italian readers: «And that is why today I am telling you his story. Which is also my story. But now, yours as well» (GHERMANDI 2015^b,

270).

Modalities

Laura Dolp

I should reiterate that *Regina* is indeed a work of fiction, and by reading a novel for its historical record of music making I run the risk of misinterpreting it, or worse, doing its poetic world an injustice. So far I have offered a form of parallel history, and implied that Ghermandi's project belongs in a renewed critical space that considers the mechanisms of narrative and recollection, in light of the traumas of a colonial past and dislocated present. From this perspective, the novel leaves behind the cynicisms of a postmodern denial of fiction to bear witness to the «unknowable» past. Her own formulation that «history is made of stories», and in particular of individual stories, justifies the structure of her novel and implants the tangible presence of history in it while leaving the reader to grapple with which past is being told, and how (GHERMANDI 2014).

We could also say that the “musicking” of *Regina* – to borrow Christopher Small's notion of music as a shared site of transmission processes and performance – is epic and instructive as well as experiential, corporeal and unifying (SMALL 1998, 9). Individual as well as communal stories that recount the past are empowered through the agency of music. But what of this parallel history? What can we say about music and storytelling in its capacity to realize a meaningful diegetic *past*? Alan Robinson's (2011) insightful critique of historiography and memory in the novel highlights the peculiarities of these entanglements with history that are often fraught and built from the individual agency of characters. The narrative functions of the past are the focus of Robinson's analysis; specifically how in some cases the reader is alerted to a character's selective editing of their own past, in the narrative present. His central question involves the utility of these narrative moments, which are crucial to the character involved, but can remain hidden to that character while they are instead anticipated or understood in hindsight by the reader. By «fraught» history, I

mean that this nexus of time, space, and meanings involve pasts that are traumatic historically and personally. Their understandings involve psychologically high stakes, especially for women whose subjugation to men was complete in Ethiopian society before the twentieth century. Similarly, in *Regina* Ghermandi employs music and storytelling to construct a progressive time and place for Yacob, Mahlet and the other characters. Political and personal histories permeate these accounts. Often the impact of these stories appears to pre-determine a character's present and future, though differently than is evidenced in the character's reaction, such as Mahlet's ongoing reluctance to enact her new-found freedom until the very end of the narrative.¹³

Ghermandi's portrayal of Ethiopian music also highlights the tensions of colonialist practices. By definition, writing is selective and Ghermandi makes choices when she describes characters as musicians and listeners. There are notably few references to European instruments in *Regina* despite its characterization of a milieu where instruments from the west were fully present in Ethiopian life. Other important exceptions are scenes about the Italian occupation where the horn (*il corno*) is used as both an offensive and defensive herald of the resistance (GHERMANDI 2015^b; 23, 200-202). In a moment of poetic justice as a tool of the resistance, brass instruments had European associations, having been first imported to Ethiopia in 1924 by an Armenian band that served as the first official national ensemble.¹⁴ By contrast, Ghermandi's abundant references to indigenous Ethiopian instruments such the *masinqo* (*Ibid.*, 14, 20, 259-260), the *kebero* and *negarit* («tamburi» *Ibid.*, 20, 88, 107), and the *sistrum* (*Ibid.*, 108) emphasize a pre-colonial sound world, and actively frame music-making as a cultural practice more quintessentially Ethiopian than European. This is congruent with some perspectives of contemporary Ethiopian musicians, who embrace traditional instruments in a globalized context and associate them with older forms of native music-making.¹⁵

There is also the issue of aesthetic legibility in *Regina*, in the context of western cultural assumptions about music as an art form. For example, the move from oral to recorded texts described above as *azmariwoch* performance traditions and

representative of Aron's generation was not a dichotomous process from a fluid practice to a fixed one. Kofi Agawu has pointed out that in oral cultures, a reliance on memory for its creative expressions configures sung stories as «irreducibly multiple» (AGAWU 2003, 18). Likewise the move from oral to written was not categorical (or more ontologically concrete) since recordings can have several possible performances and no performance of a written text can occur without relying on the variable body of knowledge to realize it. If we understand the multiple fictional performances as a kind of text within *Regina*, so as to more fairly consider its fluid ontology, we dis-privilege origins and align closer to the values of Ethiopian music that rest on the «creative violation» that attends each performance (*Ibid.*, 97-98).

Just as Ghermandi appeals to the individual composites of history in *Regina*, music is also valued in individual experiences. The story resonates with the specific experiences of Mahlet, Aron and Yacob more than critical associations with types, repertoires or genres. Nor does the music in *Regina* warrant distinctions between functional and contemplative music, which is a pre-supposition of many western critiques (*Ibid.*, 98). Crucially, the most potent unsounded qualities of *Regina* are the inseparability of its music from its languages (Amharic and Ge'ez), since these linguistic systems drive the inflections and meanings of its music-making and oral storytelling. It is distinctive to Ghermandi's postcolonial craft – especially for those readers for whom the earlier poetics between language and music is lost – that the novel's originary sonic world can sometimes retreat into the distance, while one equally rich is built in its place.

Eveljn Ferraro

The question of storytelling and its capacity to realize a meaningful and legible past is also central to the relationship between *Regina* and its audience. The novel has an explicitly circular narrative structure since Mahlet's story coincides with its beginning, or in other words, where the time of the narrative ends, the writing begins. As Lombardi-Diop has observed, the act of collecting oral stories into a

choral narrative is the building principle of *Regina*, as those stories make the reader «an active part of a collective ritual of remembrance, which connects yesterday to today, past to present, Italy and Ethiopia» (LOMBARDI-DIOP 2011, 309). By preserving and sharing that historical memory, Mahlet is invested with a powerful role comparable to that of the traditional *azmari* in relation to the original community. As a transnational *cantora* traveling between cultures and languages, Mahlet the student must, however, reinvent the model that Aron has provided in order to speak to her audience. In the new Italian context, storytelling survives into a different mode through the transition from the improvised and the oral to the newly printed page. It is crucial that in this transition Ghermandi adopts a language that, in a 2008 interview, she has defined as «Italian of Ethiopia» or «italiano d'ascolto», a language that resists assimilation and reverberates with sounds, images, and collective stories of her native country.¹⁶ It is a language that defines the sonic world of Ethiopia, and evokes a sense of home in a country that the protagonist of *Regina* experiences in terms of estrangement and loneliness. In this regard, estrangement is as useful for Mahlet as a storyteller invested in the writing process as it is impactful for the Italian audience.

On the one hand, Ghermandi uses the word *straniamento* (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 138) to articulate the condition of cultural and emotional displacement that Mahlet shares with other foreign students in Italy. Mahlet experiences another form of *straniamento* once she rejoins her original community after Yacob's death. People regard her as a young woman who has embraced Western costumes. Only after a long period of disorientation, numbness and unsolicited listening to stories of colonialism, is the memory of that promise recovered and the prophecy fulfilled. On the other hand, by addressing (through direct speech) both a character in the story and the reader of the book,

the author powerfully draws the audience into her story [...]. Like Mahlet, the reader/listener must follow the unfolding of the story, and its multiple narratives, in all their detours (CLÒ 2010, 35).

While facilitating identification, this technique of oral storytelling also immerses the Italian listener/reader in an unfamiliar world. Moreover, the adoption of a

vast repertoire of metaphors drawn from the Amharic culture enriches, shapes and defamiliarizes the Italian language thus making the reading experience «avventurosa e straniante» (LOMBARDI-DIOP 2011, 309).¹⁷

Mahlet's gradual transformation from listener into a *cantora* creates the possibility that the purpose of Ghermandi's story goes beyond expressing longing for Ethiopia, or illustrating conflict between Italians and Ethiopians given the colonial past. Indeed, several internal narrators, by passing their own stories about Italians, remind Mahlet of the storyteller's obligation to be hospitable, as «talking about people is like turning them into guests. Guests of their own words. And for us, guests are sacred» (GHERMANDI 2015^b, 161). The novel suggests that the Italian audience must be informed and educated about its own past, in a respectful way. Ghermandi has stated that she finds it more constructive to work on the ground of emotions since it «makes us all feel brothers and sisters» thus implying that a real dialogue can only take place if Italian people can «feel» and «think» about the effects of colonialism on individuals and communities.¹⁸

In a cogent essay that rethinks the margins of Italian literature through the inclusive lens of mobility, rather than in terms of binarisms, Loredana Polezzi, argues that linguistic and cultural «straniamento» (estrangement) is characteristic of many forms of transnational writing in contemporary Italy (POLEZZI 2008, 125). She adds that such *straniamento* becomes a «vehicle of a growing consciousness of the complexity of our daily life, of a reassessment of difference that [...] denotes a space open to intersections» (*Ibid.*, 125-126). In my view, Polezzi's assertion resonates well with the concept of *straniamento* in *Regina*, as a technique of defamiliarization that frees space for reciprocal agency, or what Belcher terms the reciprocal enculturation model of encounter. Consistently seeking to operate from and for a space open to intersections, Ghermandi's postcolonial *straniamento* redirects the readers' perception of historical truths that still haunt the Italian nation with their plethora of untold stories. In *Regina*, the past makes itself felt through its potential to awaken readers to the complexities of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia beyond the reassuring colonial myth of «Italiani brava gente». At the same time, the author's aesthetic practice of

straniamento that characterizes both her novel and her performances, engages her readers to understand cultures as actively shaping each other within a plural and diverse world. Ghermandi's postcolonial *straniamento* is discordant with the conservative epistemology of other formulations of estrangement that posit an unalterable substance of objects, and an authentic, pristine relationship between word and object that the artistic process is able to restore through deautomatizing the perception of language.¹⁹ Rather, Ghermandi's integration of Amharic metaphors, the wax-and-gold technique of *qene*, war songs and music making of the *azmari* repertoire into the Italian text, reinforces the notion of estrangement as a delegitimizing device that operates at multiple levels (political, social, religious). For instance, one of the first stories that Mahlet collects is that of a stupid lion that considers himself invincible, and a subdued monkey that eventually finds revenge. The story metaphorically illustrates the arrogance of the Fascist leaders in Ethiopia, and the parallel with the lion and the monkey serves to debase official authority.²⁰

Besides *Regina*, Ghermandi conjures up the concept of *straniamento* as a form of cultural displacement (*spaesamento*) in other media and with respect to her personal experience. This aspect of Ghermandi's writing is extraordinary for the influence that existential *straniamento* has had on her approach to writing in Italian, and for the political significance of this kind of aesthetic practice. I contend that her *straniamento* emerges from the «ex-centric» (HUTCHEON 1988, 66-67) Italianness and plural belonging of the writer, and that it emphasizes relationality between people and cultures rather than evoking authenticity. In the section of her website titled «La scrittura» Ghermandi comments that, contrary to her expectations, when she arrived in Italy she did not find that sense of solidarity that she was accustomed to in Ethiopia. Her search for a welcoming place led her to a special abode, the language of her father.²¹ Ghermandi has later pinpointed the contrast between her *forte spaesamento* and her trust in her «father» tongue (*lingua padre*) as a refuge.²² And as I suggested above, Ghermandi's affiliation with Italian is complicated by the specificity of her Italian as «italiano d'Etiofia,» which reflects the structural rules governing standard Italian, but teems with

Ethiopian landscapes and cultural images, and the words in the Bolognese dialect that permeated the storytelling of Ghermandi's father during her childhood.

In other words, uprootedness and linguistic and cultural legacy shape Ghermandi's artwork and propel a «new» Italian language which she consciously utilizes to transform her audience's self-perception in the world and in relation to other people. In a recent personal correspondence (GHERMANDI 2014^b, 23.9.2014), she has stated:

Being a native speaker of both Amharic and Italian, sometimes I don't have an accurate sense of the degree to which they influence each other. Without a doubt, in my works I have wanted to convey the defamiliarization of another language to the Italian readers in order to give a sense of the lived experience of the migrants who arrive here. Often the inhabitants of a country have an unusual perception of their own language, almost as if it were «the language of the planet» and it's never clear to them that their language is a small slice of world languages. To defamiliarize can help us come to the realization that we are only one part of a kaleidoscope.²³

Fully aware of her complex background, Ghermandi stresses difference, including her own, with respect to Italy, where immigration is a consolidated reality but migrants are marginalized presences. The author underscores how languages migrate with people, tell their stories from a position of *spaesamento*, and can foreground new perspectives for native Italians. Ghermandi's postcolonial *straniamento* deautomatizes the perception of language and repositions the ethnocentric gaze within kaleidoscopic trajectories of gazes.

If Ghermandi's *Regina* closes, diegetically, on an open note that only suggests a forward-looking dialogue, the sonic defamiliarization that informs the entire novel, here investigated primarily through storytelling, allows for a new critical space designed to alter perceptions of past and present Italian national identity from a transnational perspective. In this regard, Mahlet's journey from listener to *cantora* shows how storytelling in *Regina* does not simply survive dislocation from Ethiopia to Italy, but actively preserves its *azmari* legacy as a historical practice of social and political critique.

Conclusion

In its historical allegiances, Ghermandi's novel describes a process whereby *azmariwoch* are assimilated into contemporary popular music, and have lost their traditional roles in public discourse and socio-political criticism, but more specifically it enacts a living ecosystem where musical traditions are reinvented, redefined, and recontextualized. As a literary repository of stories and songs, *Regina* illustrates the continuities and changes that intervene in the dissemination of oral memory across generations and into a postcolonial setting. The bearers of these stories have to adapt to institutional and technological change, as suggested by the transition to recorded and written forms of singing and storytelling. In this sense, Aron, Yacob, and Mahlet are integral agents that affect and are reciprocally affected by a transnational ecosystem characterized by reinventions of the semantic play of wax and gold, the formation of female warriors, and singing as sites of intimacy, nostalgia and transformation (PICKETT AND CADENASSO 2002, 7). Mahlet's character reflects the full and sometimes contradictory expectations of this ecology, including the ideals of shyness and modesty of the native Ethiopian woman while at the same time being positioned as an empowered and vocal witness to the past as well as to the future. The act of storytelling is thus re-tooled and rejuvenated for a new generation of Ethiopians and Italians. It remains to be seen how the reciprocal and interrelational dynamics that Ghermandi practices through casting sounds and words will be practiced by new generations in our contemporary world.

Notes

¹ Cfr. ALEMU 2007. The critical study of oral literature and gender in Ethiopian studies is still underdeveloped.

² Cfr. in particular LOMBARDI-DIOP 2011 and CLÒ 2010.

³ For a discussion of Ghermandi's musical performances involving her other written texts «A Song for Mamma Heaven» (*Un canto per Mamma Heaven*) and «In the Shadow of the Shameless Branches Laden with Bright Red Flowers» (*All'ombra dei rami sfacciati carichi di fiori rosso vermiglio*) as well as an analysis of her musical Atse Tewodros Project (2013), cfr. Laura DOLP and Eveljn FERRARO.

⁴ In her article, Belcher articulates this new model of agency in literary studies (African, in particular), but originating in the social sciences, in opposition to four dominant scholarly models of agency in the cultural encounter, which she names static, annihilation, resistance, and appropriation models. The latter has particularly resonated with gender studies, with Felicity Nussbaum being one of the first to gender it, while Mary Louise Pratt has theorized the reversed appropriation model (where the indigenous cultures appropriate European identities) and termed it «transculturation» in her seminal work *Imperial Eyes*.

⁵ Recent studies have proposed that the crucial role that these musicians claim for themselves may not be entirely consistent with traditions of cultural practice, which do not always value their presence as much as they have proposed. Cfr. BOLAY 2004, 815-839.

⁶ Their performances in the Gondar area in the north can be seen in various social settings including life cycle celebrations, annual events of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, Zar-spirit possession, etc. The abundance of musical activities counters the dominant image of *azmari* as musicians just found in local bars. Moreover, *azmari* in Gondar share a self-designation based on genealogical ties. These ties define them as part of a folk tradition, reinforced by an active code of communication. These self-imposed group markers strictly distinguish the group from those outside it. Cfr. KAWASE 2005.

⁷ In a series of unpublished field notes (1972), Cynthia Mei-Ling Kimberlin describes a public scene on Emperor Haile Selassie's birthday in 1972 when a small group of women rallied the audience by singing war songs (*shillela*). They also wore military uniforms. Cfr. TSE, 243-244.

⁸ Amharic lends itself to puns and hidden meanings because many verbs have double or triple meanings due to the variations in the basic verbal stem and the absence or presence of germination of some consonants. See LEVINE 1972, 1-17.

⁹ These included individuals such as Wube Goshu and Wz/o Tadike. Cfr. BETREYOHANNES 2012, 8.

¹⁰ One in particular, Yehager Fikir Mahiber (Love of the Motherland) had prominent artists and intellectuals as members, including the *azmariwoch* Tesema Eshete, Asefa Abate, Ketema Mekonnen, Ferede Golla and Nigatuwa Kelkay. Cfr. BETREYOHANNES 2012, 12.

¹¹ Before this period, women had been discouraged from singing publicly, although there were two exceptions: first, women participated as *melkesti*, singing ritual funeral songs (*melkes*) that could include political critique; second, women traveled as *hamien*, singer-poets that practiced a form of sorcery as retribution to individuals. They were accompanied by male *masinqo* players. Cfr. TSE 2000, 244.

¹² *Gitim* in English. The term generally indicates «poem» or «spoken word» but is also used in the context of «song». Getie Gelaye has identified several genres of Amharic oral poetry: *qärärto* (war chants), *fukkära* (heroic recitals), *yäsira gitim* (work songs), *yäsärg gitim* (wedding poetry), *yäljo gitim* (children's and cattle herders' songs), *yäbisot gitim* (grievance poetry), *yäläqso gitim* (funeral poetry), *haymanotawi gitim* (religious poetry), *yämuggäsa gitim* (praise poetry) and *wäqtawi inna tarikawi gitim* (contemporary and historical poetry). Cfr. GELAYE 2011, 8.

¹³ In a study of traditional oral narratives from the Oromo community (the largest single ethnic community in Ethiopia) 350 kilometers to the south-west of Addis Ababa, Abreham Alemu observes that the ideal traits for native women include «forbearance» and «obedience,» as well as qualities of being docile, modest and shy. Mahlet's character often exhibits these qualities in *Regina*, in counterpoint to her narrative positioning as a representative of the new public and vocal witness to the Ethiopian past. Cfr. ALEMU 2007, 59.

¹⁴ The influx of instruments and musicians from the West started immediately after the Ethiopian victory at Adwa. Tsar Nicholas II sent approximately 40 modern brass instruments and a musical instructor to Ethiopia as a tribute to their successful military resistance. Cfr. PAWLOS 1984, *Dagmawi* 340.

¹⁵ Ejigayehu Shibabaw (known as «Gigi»), a contemporary Ethiopian singer-songwriter distinguishes an authentic lineage of *azmari* from her own more singularly vocal creative process, saying that «real» *azmari* both sing and play the *masinqo*, like that member of her trio Weres G. Egeziaber, who engages in both. The other member of Shibabaw's trio, Fantahun Shewakoche Mekonnen, plays *krar*, percussion and also sings. Shibabaw emphasizes the prevalence of traditional musical practices in contemporary Ethiopia and relates that it was easy for her to learn old songs by ear because many people know them. Cfr. LEYMARIE 1997, 48-49.

¹⁶ As quoted in SOSSI 2014.

¹⁷ By comparing and contrasting Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* with Ennio Flaiano's 1947 novel *A Time to Kill*, a text that also explores Italian colonialism, Lombardi-Diop underscores the relevance of an Italian postcolonial discourse that addresses and critiques the past in depth.

¹⁸ As quoted in SOSSI 2014. Ferraro translation.

¹⁹ The notion of defamiliarizing language, of making unexpected by removing it from dull, automatized, repetitive usage and perception, is the main tenet of *straniamento* as it was first postulated by the Russian Formalist theorist Victor Shklovsky. In his 1917 essay «Art as Device,» he states: «The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition» where the latter bears overtones of repetition and generalization (*Theory of Prose*, 6). In his investigation of the politics underlying the aesthetic theory of estrangement [*ostranenie*] in the context of the First World War, Galin Tihanov has argued that Shklovsky's call for the «resurrection of the word» (title of a prewar essay) and the thing or object contains «an implicit norm of authenticity» (672) that extends both to the reader's perception and the objects themselves. The tacit expectation of a pristine relationship between word and object that the artistic process is able to restore, for Tihanov, eventually compromises Shklovsky's proclaimed radicalism and his «determination to remain forward-looking» (672). Here lies for Tihanov the paradox of Shklovsky's *ostranenie*. The past appears to be setting «the norms of truthfulness,» that is, «the past makes itself felt through its potential to remind us of what the true being of things might consist in when the artist manages to awake them (and us as readers) from the current coma of automatization.» (673).

²⁰ Cfr. GINZBURG 1996. Ginzburg claims that animals, like savages and peasants, with their proximity to nature, provide «a standpoint for a critical detached estranged approach to society» (15). In his view, estrangement is an antidote to the risk of taking the world and ourselves for granted (22), and is cognitive in its approach.

²¹ <http://www.gabriella-ghermandi.it/?qq=la_scrittura>

²² Cfr. «Il mio italiano di spezie e sicomori contro l'intrusione dell'inglese» and CLÒ 2006.

²³ Ferraro translation.

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