

Writing for Freedom:
Body, Identity and Power in Goliarda Sapienza's
Narrative

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Abstract

This thesis explores the theme of freedom in Goliarda Sapienza's narrative, focusing in particular on three works: *Lettera aperta* (1967), *L'arte della gioia* (1998, posthumous) and *Io, Jean Gabin* (2010, posthumous). The analysis concentrates on the interplay between body and power in processes of identity formation; the main aspects taken into consideration are gender, sexuality and political ideology, with specific attention to the power involved in human relationships.

This thesis comprises four chapters. The first three develop a close textual analysis of individual works, each one progressing from the exploration of the internal composition of the self to the analysis of identity in its interpersonal and socio-political dimension. The fourth chapter engages with a comparative analysis of the same works' narrative structures, accounting for the role of writing in the evolution of Sapienza's narrative.

I identify the pivotal tension of Sapienza's works in the ideal of freedom, and propose to define her narrative as Epicurean and anarchic, characteristics that place it at the intersection of post-structuralist and Marxist-feminist discourses. Overall, I argue in favour of Sapienza's originality and significance within the context of 20th-century Italian literature. I suggest an affinity between Sapienza's works and the literary legacy

of Pirandello and Svevo, as well as certain tenets of postmodern fiction, but also a significant difference, concerning the presence of a tension towards agency and subjectivity, extraneous to the trajectory of the modern and postmodern subject.

From a position of marginality and ex-centricity, Sapienza gives voice to a radical aspiration to individual and social transformation, in which writing and literary communication are granted a central role. Her works trace the parable of a strenuous deconstruction of oppressive norms and structures, aimed at retrieving a space of powerful bodily desire, which constitutes the foundation of the process of becoming a subject.

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Long Abstract

This thesis engages with the critical exploration and interpretation of Goliarda Sapienza's narrative, focusing in particular on three works: *Lettera aperta* (1967), *L'arte della gioia* (1998, posthumous) and *Io, Jean Gabin* (2010, posthumous).

Sapienza's work is characterised by a subversive and ex-centric attitude towards norms and institutions, joint with a strong aspiration to individual and social transformation, in which writing and literary communication are granted a central role. From a position of marginality and ex-centricity, Sapienza gives voice to a radical aspiration to freedom and new, creative ways to conceive personal identity and human relationships, addressing a subversive criticism to the very centre of Western thought and society, and representing an alternative and original voice in 20th-century Italian literature.

After a long period of oblivion, Sapienza's works, and *L'arte della gioia* in particular, are now achieving critical recognition, on a national as well as international level. Sapienza studies currently represent a new and fast-growing field, characterised by an initial effort to explore her works in several directions, identifying their main themes and features and reconstructing her life and artistic activity. The body of research is still very fragmented, consisting of several survey-like critical interventions,

and a few more detailed, specifically focused analyses, which nonetheless do not give a full and organic picture.

My thesis represents the first wide-ranging monographic analysis of Sapienza's literary production. I identify in the notion of freedom the overarching inspiration of her narrative, which orients her representation of the construction of identity in the interplay between body and power. Keeping together the analysis of the self and its social, political and historical context, I focus specifically on the major factors informing Sapienza's representation of a struggle for freedom, namely gender, sexuality and political ideology. On these grounds, patriarchal and heteronormative structures of society, jointly with a left-wing political commitment perceived as reductively ideological and the power involved in interpersonal relationships, occupy a central position. Sapienza's works indeed trace the parable of a strenuous deconstruction of oppressive norms, aimed at retrieving a space of powerful bodily desire, which constitutes the foundation of the process of becoming a subject and an agent of social transformation.

The specific challenge of this critical operation, which is also its distinctive value, consists in the connections established between different levels implicated in the world represented by Sapienza, from the articulation of body and identity, to interpersonal relationships and the properly political dimension of the texts, and between different aspects of this world, namely gender, sexuality, class and ideology. The key interpretative focus on the notion of freedom keeps together these different levels and aspects, providing structure and cohesiveness to the analysis.

Overall, the aims of my thesis can be summarised as follows. First, I argue in favour of the significance and originality of Sapienza's works, which earn her a

prominent place in the context of 20th-century Italian literature. Secondly, I propose the theme of freedom as a central interpretative key, providing a first in-depth analysis of her narrative. Thirdly, I define her works as Epicurean and anarchic, characteristics that place them at the intersection of post-structuralist and Marxist-feminist discourses. Finally, I suggest an affinity between Sapienza and the literary legacy of Pirandello and Svevo, as well as specific tenets of postmodern fiction, but also a significant difference, concerning the tension towards acquiring agency and subjectivity, extraneous to the trajectory of the modern and postmodern subject.

In my analysis I adopt a composite theoretical framework, set out specifically in each chapter as well as more generally in the introduction. A plurality of approaches is indeed rendered necessary by the coexistence, in Sapienza's works, of different perspectives and tensions. The key elaborations that orient my approach to the analysis of a struggle for freedom and identity formation in the interplay between body and power are provided by Adriana Cavarero's reflections on voice and narration, Donald Winnicott and Alice Miller's psychoanalytical categories of 'True' and 'False Self', Marxist and anarchic thought, and Rosi Braidotti's notion of 'nomadic subjectivity', with its original combination of feminism and post-structuralism

My theoretical approach aims to evidence how Sapienza's narrative is informed by and dialogues with a series of cultural, political, philosophical and artistic perspectives. In addition, I employ theoretical notions that are not part of Sapienza's own cultural background but that prove useful in order to illuminate those aspects of her works that appear to anticipate later reflections. In particular, her narrative combines the theoretical anti-metaphysical and anti-logocentric perspective of post-structuralism,

deconstruction and queer theory, with the ethical and political struggle for freedom and aspiration to social transformation proper to Marxism and first and second wave feminism.

This thesis comprises four chapters. The first three chapters develop a close textual analysis of individual works. *Lettera aperta* in Chapter 1; *L'arte della gioia* in Chapter 2 and *Io, Jean Gabin* in Chapter 3. I look at the representation of identity formation and the qualification of freedom in each work, progressing from the exploration of the internal composition of the self to the analysis of identity in its interpersonal and socio-political dimension. The fourth chapter deals with a comparative analysis of the same works' narrative structures, accounting for the role of writing in the evolution of Sapienza's narrative.

I chose to focus on these three works because they all engage with a process of identity formation and criticism of social norms. Despite the differences in length and genre – *Lettera aperta* and *Io, Jean Gabin* are short semi-autobiographical novels, whilst *L'arte della gioia* is a long fictional novel – , and each work having its distinctive features, themes and style, they form a rather compact group. I privileged separate analyses of individual works over a thematic comparative approach in order to maintain the distinctiveness of each work and evidence the dimension of a writing in evolution, avoiding the impression of Sapienza as an *auctor unius libri*. The last two novels written by Sapienza, *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, similar to one another in topic and style, mark a turning point compared to Sapienza's previous production, hence the choice to exclude them from the present analysis. First, they are no longer concerned with processes of identity formation in connection to childhood

memories, and focus exclusively on the narrator's present situation. Secondly, the focus shifts from the narrator herself to the representation of other characters, with their own voices and stories.

In Chapter 1 I analyse the representation of the child protagonist's identity formation in *Lettera aperta*. I also include extensive references to *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969), which is thematically linked to *Lettera aperta*, but does not require a separate critical discourse.

My analysis accounts for the forms in which power affects the child protagonist's formative path, represented by the patriarchal and heteronormative structure of society, emotional neglect, ideological intransigence and conflicting ethical models, which result in the protagonist's isolation and disorientation. The adult narrator seeks to undo these forms of oppression and retrieve or reconstruct contact with her own body, a source of desires and vitality.

The first part of the chapter explores the representation of the interaction between the protagonist's formation and power as concerns gender and sexuality, in dialogue with Ross's rich analysis of this topic. Secondly, I look at power in the form of educational inconsistency and ideological intransigence, which determine the protagonist's failed integration into her social context. Finally, I discuss the role of emotional neglect and its distorting effects on desire.

Chapter 2 follows the long journey of Modesta, the protagonist of *L'arte della gioia*, towards the realisation of a radical freedom, from her initial experience of sexual

pleasure to her exercise of violence and ultimately her acceptance of relationships of dependence and care.

The first part of the chapter analyses the type of subject that, in this novel, takes on a struggle for freedom, pointing out the centrality of the body within the construction of the protagonist's self and the instrumental use of rationality, ascribable to Epicurean ethics. The novel is characterised by the coexistence of different configurations of the self, which I put in relation to different positionalities with respect to power. Specifically, the adoption of a strong and oppositional attitude is rendered necessary in order for a subaltern subject to reject oppression, but the protagonist's ultimate objective consists in escaping the replication of a binary logic of domination and accessing the enjoyment of a weak and fluid identity, centred on the pleasure of the senses and empathic relationships of care.

The second section of the chapter engages with the collective dimension of the text, exploring the interaction between personal identity and power social structures. From a political perspective, *L'arte della gioia* continues and expands the deconstructive stance put forward in the autobiographical works. It addresses several centres of power and domination and realises a form of properly anarchist commitment, entrusting to the relationship with the readers the task of inspiring a yearning for freedom.

Io, Jean Gabin, analysed in Chapter 3, reconnects to *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* as it focuses again on Sapienza's autobiographical recollection of her childhood, although this is intensely contaminated with fiction. This work, characterised by an ironic and light tone, plays with the protagonist's identification with the French

actor Jean Gabin, assumed as a model of a male identity, opposed to women's submission, an anarchist hero, distinguished from mass conformism, and the example of dream and imagination against the constraints of reality and ideology. The child protagonist's and adult narrator's search for identity finds here an accomplishment, consisting in the position of an anarchist artist.

In the first section of this chapter I analyse the complex process of the protagonist's identity formation from the perspective of gender and sexual orientation. The role of the body in the construction of identity is the object of discussion in the second section, while the final part of the chapter investigates the other semantic functions of the identification with Jean Gabin, related to imagination and marginality, focusing on alternative modalities of identity and communication and their political implications.

Chapter 4 considers the evolution of Sapienza's writings by looking at the narrative structures and the characterisation of the narrating voice. The discussion approaches the question of the interaction between body, identity and power by looking at the role played by narration in the narrator's re-construction of her identity, her rejection of external impositions and her attempt to bring into the text the present and presence of the body, as an active force.

I define her works as performative, in two correlated senses: they are represented as theatrical texts, with the narrator as an actor addressing her speech to an audience, and they perform the narrator's process of becoming a subject, since by narrating her own story she reconstructs a sense of agency. In *Lettera aperta* and *L'arte della gioia* the narrator simulates the contemporaneity of narrated story and narration, speaking

from a position in the middle of the events rather than looking back at a concluded past. The narrating voice, with her mimesis of a present in action and her appeals to the reader as a physically present interlocutor, tends towards the reinstatement of a corporeal dimension into language, which is represented as irreducibly embodied and relational.

Io, Jean Gabin is in a relationship of continuity with previous works but also departs from them as it features a more detached relationship with the past and a more linear narrative structure. The reader, who no longer participates in the narrator's reconstructive effort, is addressed as a friend and ally of the anarchist protagonist against mass conformism. Overall, my analysis postulates an evolution, from a performative and deeply unstable narrating 'I', prevailing in *Lettera aperta*, to a reinforced narrating voice, which achieves a certain degree of detachment from her past, in *Io, Jean Gabin*.

The combination of post-structuralism and Marxist-feminist approaches developed in this thesis provides insightful tools to analyse literary works that engage with the disruption of identity brought about by modernity, but which do so from a position that cannot be assimilated to the trajectory of dominant subjects, and therefore look at the process of implosion of abstract rationality from an alternative perspective, thus repositioning the 20th-century 'narrative of the crisis' as *one* version of the story, to which other narratives can be opposed.

Through the representation of female characters who struggle to reconstruct their own identity, radically criticize any normative structure and look for personal freedom beyond and before power, *Sapienza* provides a compelling literary example of women's

position with respect to the disruption of identity brought about by modernity and described by post-structuralism. She tells the story of a subject who fights to access a locus of agency, in order to affirm the opening up of the self to multiplicity and weakness. In doing so, she recuperates the emancipatory aspirations of Enlightenment and Marxism, but in view of the creation of a new subject, Epicurean and anarchic, embodied and relational.

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List of Abbreviations

AG: *L'arte della gioia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008)

FM: *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2003)

JG: *Io, Jean Gabin* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010)

LA: *Lettera aperta* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1997)

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the representation of freedom in Goliarda Sapienza's narrative, by looking in particular at the interplay between body, identity and power. The main aspects of this interplay taken into consideration are gender, sexuality and political ideology. Sapienza's literary production is characterised by a subversive and ex-centric attitude towards norms and institutions, joint with a strong aspiration of individual and social transformation, in which writing and literary communication are granted an important role.

Sapienza was born on 10th May 1924 in Catania, Sicily.¹ Her mother, Maria Giudice (1880-1953), originally from Lombardy, was one of the most prominent members of the Italian Socialist Party, as well as a feminist activist.² She collaborated with national and international left-wing intellectuals, among whom Antonio Gramsci, Umberto Terracini, Angelica Balabanoff and Lenin, and was on the front line fighting for women and workers' rights both through demonstrations and journalism, activities for which she was repeatedly imprisoned. In 1919 Giudice moved to Sicily in order to help organise the local socialist divisions and trade-unions. Her former partner had died fighting as a soldier in World War I, leaving her with seven children. In Catania, she met

¹ See Giovanna Providenti, *La porta è aperta. Vita di Goliarda Sapienza* (Catania: Villaggio Maori Edizioni, 2010).

² For a more detailed account of Maria Giudice's biography, see *La porta è aperta*; Vittorio Poma, *Una maestra tra i socialisti. L'itinerario politico di Maria Giudice* (Milan-Bari: Cariplo-Laterza, 1991); Jole Calapso, *Una donna intransigente. Vita di Maria Giudice* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1996) and Umberto Santino, 'Maria Giudice', *Enciclopedia delle donne* <<http://www.enciclopediadelledonne.it/biografie/maria-giudice/>> [Last accessed: 28 July 2014].

Peppino Sapienza (1880-1949), a socialist comrade himself, who was born from a working class family but succeeded in becoming a lawyer.

Maria and Peppino started a new family. Goliarda was their only child, while many step-siblings from her parents' previous families lived in the same house in Via Pistone, Catania. During her childhood, Sapienza was surrounded by a non-conformist environment, characterised by loose boundaries between family and non-family members, the mix of different class backgrounds and an active political involvement, oriented towards feminism, anti-fascism and anti-clericalism.

Since Goliarda Sapienza's father did not want her to be indoctrinated by fascist propaganda, when she was fourteen years old she abandoned formal schooling. She taught herself drama and piano, and at the age of sixteen she won a scholarship from the *Accademia d'arte drammatica* in Rome, where she moved together with her mother. In 1943, after the armistice, she fought as a partisan with her father, who was involved in Pertini and Saragat's jailbreak. After the war, she went back to acting in theatres and also started to work in the cinema industry. In 1947 she met the Neorealist cinema director Francesco Maselli, who remained her partner for twenty years and with whom she frequented Roman intellectual circles, comprising prominent figures such as Moravia, Pasolini, Visconti, Bertolucci, Zavattini and Morante. In 1953 Maria Giudice died, after a long period of psychological decline. Her death coincided with Sapienza's first steps in writing, initially with a preference for poetry.

In the late 1950s Sapienza started suffering from serious depression and, after a failed suicide attempt, was subjected to a series of electroshocks, which caused her to partially lose her memory. She recovered thanks to psychoanalytical therapy and through writing, publishing two semi-autobiographical novels: *Lettera aperta*, a journey

into her childhood, and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, the recount of her own therapeutic experience.³ She then dedicated herself completely to writing, spending approximately ten years on her major novel, *L'arte della gioia*.⁴ She descended into poverty and spent a month in prison after being convicted of theft. She recounts her experience in prison in *L'università di Rebibbia*, and in *Le certezze del dubbio* she tells the story of the transition from prison to freedom of women she met in Rebibbia.⁵ In the last years of her life she taught acting at the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia* in Rome and wrote other literary works, some of which remain unpublished. She died in Gaeta in August 1996.

Overall, her narrative is closely informed by the experiences that characterised her life – her multifarious upbringing, the early encounter with socialist and feminist political commitment, the work in theatre and cinema, depression, the encounter with psychoanalysis, poverty and prison. From a position of marginality and ex-centricity, Sapienza gives voice to a radical aspiration of freedom and new, creative ways to conceive personal identity and human relationships, addressing a subversive criticism to the very centre of Western thought and society, and representing an alternative and original voice in 20th-century Italian literature.

During her life, Sapienza published four works: *Lettera aperta*; *Il filo di mezzogiorno*; *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*. To these, should be added the publication in 1970 in *Nuovi Argomenti* of *Destino Coatto*, a collection of

³ *Lettera aperta* (Milan: Garzanti, 1967; Palermo: Sellerio, 1997; Turin: UTET, 2007). The editing for the Garzanti edition was carried out by Enzo Siciliano. *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (Milan: Garzanti, 1969; Milan: La Tartaruga, 2003).

⁴ *L'arte della gioia. Romanzo anticlericale* (Rome: Stampa Alternativa, 1998).

⁵ *L'università di Rebibbia* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1983; 2006; Turin: Einaudi, 2012). It was translated into French: *L'Université de Rebibbia*, trans. by Nathalie Castagné (Paris: Attila-Le Tripode, 2013); *Le certezze del dubbio* (Catania: Pellicanolibri, 1987; Milan: Rizzoli, 2007). It won the 'Premio Casalotti' in 1994.

short monologues characterised by hallucinations and obsessions;⁶ *Vengo da lontano*, a short text on the theme of peace, published in 1991 in a collection of articles by a group of women writers in the occasion of the Gulf war;⁷ and the first part of *L'arte della gioia*, in 1994.⁸

Sapienza's major novel, *L'arte della gioia*, written between 1967 and 1976, was rejected by several publishers in the course of over twenty years, was published in full only after Sapienza's death in 1998, and finally met popular success thanks to the French, German and Spanish editions.⁹ This led to the Einaudi edition in 2008, which launched her work in Italy,¹⁰ and to the posthumous publication of a number of other works: a short semi-autobiographical novel, *Io, Jean Gabin*;¹¹ two collections of poems, *Ancestrale* and *Siciliane* (the latter in Sicilian dialect),¹² and two volumes of diaries.¹³ The list of Sapienza's posthumous publications might expand in the future, since, as Angelo Pellegrino (Sapienza's husband) told me during an interview, there are more works awaiting publication. These comprise the novel *Appuntamento a Positano* and three plays, *L'isola dei fratelli*,¹⁴ *Il prezzo del successo* and *Due signore e un cherubino*.

There is some uncertainty concerning the editing undergone by the posthumous works, since none of them contain a critical apparatus. In particular, the poems collected

⁶ 'Destino coatto', in *Nuovi Argomenti*, 19 (July – September 1970); *Destino coatto* (Rome: Empiria, 2002; Turin: Einaudi, 2011).

⁷ 'Vengo da lontano', in *Il cuore, la guerra e la parola* (Siracusa: Ombra editrice, 1991), pp. 128-32.

⁸ *L'arte della gioia* (Rome: Stampa Alternativa, 1994).

⁹ Further details of the history of the publication of *L'arte della gioia* and its foreign editions are given in Chapter 2.

¹⁰ *L'arte della gioia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008).

¹¹ *Io, Jean Gabin* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010). It was translated into French: *Moi, Jean Gabin*, trans. by Nathalie Castagné (Paris: Attila-Le Tripode, 2012).

¹² *Ancestrale* (Milan: La vita felice, 2013); *Siciliane* (Catania: Il Girasole Edizioni, 2012).

¹³ *Il vizio di parlare a me stessa. Taccuini 1976 – 1989* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011); *La mia parte di gioia. Taccuini 1989 – 1992* (Turin: Einaudi, 2013).

¹⁴ Argia Coppola had the possibility to read the manuscript of this play; she discusses it in 'La Rivolta dei Fratelli. Un dramma di Goliarda Sapienza', in 'Quel sogno d'essere' di Goliarda Sapienza. Percorsi critici su una delle maggiori autrici del Novecento italiano, ed. by Giovanna Providenti (Rome: Aracne, 2012), pp. 205-19.

in *Ancestrale* and *Siciliane*, and the two volumes of diaries, do not clarify the selection and editing criteria.¹⁵ Only a careful investigation into the manuscripts will shed light on the editorial processes and choices involving Sapienza's works.¹⁶

1. Readership and Criticism

Since Sapienza's success is very recent and her work is not established yet in the Italian literary canon, the choice to make this author the object of a monographic study already contains an implicit argument in favour of her relevance and significance. Two orders of considerations support my choice. First, I personally believe that Sapienza is an author of substance, who deserves a place in the panorama of Italian and European literature, and through my exploration of her texts I endeavour to point out the elements of interest and originality that render them worthy of critical attention and appreciation. Secondly, after a long period of oblivion Sapienza's works, and *L'arte della gioia* in particular, are now meeting popular success and achieving critical recognition, on a national as well as international level. Against major publishers' resistance, the success of Sapienza's works has been supported by readers and independent publishers, who allowed *L'arte della gioia* to circulate and find in France, Germany and Spain its way to a wider readership.¹⁷ Since the Einaudi edition of *L'arte della gioia* in 2008, literary reviews, blogs, cultural events, readings and talks are multiplying in and out of Italy. Moreover, Sapienza's life and literary works have become a source of inspiration to other artists,

¹⁵ Fabio Michieli raises some philological issues concerning *Ancestrale* in "'Ancestrale" di Goliarda Sapienza. Appunti di lettura, con una nota impropriamente filologica', in *Poetarum silva*, 7 November 2013, <<http://poetarumsilva.com/2013/11/07/ancestrale-di-goliarda-sapienza-appunti-di-lettura-con-una-nota-impropriamente-filologica/>> [Last accessed 13 August 2014].

¹⁶ The archive of Sapienza's works, currently kept in Pellegrino's house in Rome, has been made partially and intermittently available to individual researchers, but is currently closed to public consultation.

¹⁷ See Adele Cambria, 'Goliarda Sapienza e la terribile Arte della gioia', *L'Unità*, 26 September 2006.

sprouting into drama plays, performances, life writing and music.¹⁸ Sapienza's success of readership qualifies her work as half-way between experimentalism and legibility, as she blurs genre boundaries, intensely manipulates linguistic and narrative structures, and expresses radical social criticism, but maintains nonetheless an affable attitude towards the readers, who are invited to participate in her search for identity and freedom.¹⁹ Whereas for a long time the figure of the reader postulated by Sapienza did not produce fruitful encounters, contemporary readers appear to be finally receptive to her works. If Sartre described the work of art as 'a spinning top which exists only in movement', implying that the text becomes communication only through a reader, Sapienza's texts, ignored for decades, are undoubtedly spinning fast.²⁰

Participating in the rising interest in Sapienza's works, in the past few years critics have begun to explore her texts. Core academic literature to date comprises Sapienza's biography, *La porta è aperta*, by Giovanna Providenti; the critical introductions and afterwords that accompany most editions of Sapienza's works; two essay collections in Italian, *Quel sogno d'essere*, edited by Providenti, and *Appassionata Sapienza*, edited by Monica Farnetti;²¹ a number of journal articles in Italian, English, Spanish and French; among these, I dialogue extensively with Charlotte Ross's papers, focused on the representation of gender and sexuality in Sapienza's narrative.²² To these, must be

¹⁸ For a list of artistic works inspired by Sapienza's life and writings, see the website 'Goliarda Sapienza in Context' <<http://goliardasapienza2013.weebly.com/inspired-by.html>> [Last accessed 13 August 2014].

¹⁹ For an analysis of the relationship between experimentalism and readership in Italy, see Giovanna Rosa, *Il patto narrativo* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2008); Vittorio Spinazzola, 'Le articolazioni del pubblico', in *Letteratura italiana del Novecento: bilancio di un secolo*, ed. by Alberto Asor Rosa (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), pp. 180-202.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* 1947, trans. by B. Frechtman (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 34.

²¹ Monica Farnetti (ed.), *Appassionata Sapienza* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2012).

²² Charlotte Ross, 'Identità di genere e sessualità nelle opere di Goliarda Sapienza: finzioni necessariamente queer', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 223-42; 'Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions: Multiple Selves, Gender Ambiguities and Disrupted Desires', in *altrelettere* (2012) <www.altrelettere.uzh.ch> [Last accessed 19 July 2014]; 'Goliarda Sapienza's "French Connections"', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context. Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture*, ed. by

added the growing number of literary reviews in several languages, boosted by the publication in the UK and the US of the English translation of *L'arte della gioia* in 2013.²³ Finally, in May 2013 an international conference on Sapienza took place in London, and a volume in English with the proceedings and invited contributions is forthcoming in 2015.²⁴

Criticism so far has endeavoured to reconstruct Sapienza's life and artistic activity and identify the main themes and characteristics of her works, evidencing the centrality of autobiography, the relationship between selfhood and writing, the nonconformist representation of gender identity, motherhood and sexuality, the conflictual relationship with psychoanalysis and the original depiction of female prison. In addition, the conference *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, and the related edited volume, begin to trace a map of intertextual relationships and affinities with Italian and European literature and thought. Sapienza's studies thus represent a new, fast-growing field, characterised by an initial effort to explore the author's works in several directions. Consequently, the body of research is still very fragmented, consisting of several survey-like critical interventions, and a few more detailed, specifically focused analyses, which nonetheless do not yet provide an organic picture.

My thesis represents the first wide-ranging monographic analysis of Sapienza's literary production and seeks to delineate its central poetics, which, I argue, has its pivotal tension in the ideal of freedom. Sapienza's works indeed trace the parable of a strenuous deconstruction of oppressive norms and structures, aimed at retrieving a space of powerful bodily desire, which constitutes the foundation of the process of becoming

Alberica Bazzoni, Emma Bond & Katrin Wehling-Giorgi (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, forthcoming 2015).

²³ *The Art of Joy*, trans. by Anne Milano Appel (London: Penguin Books; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

²⁴ *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*.

a subject and an agent of social transformation. A distinctively original aspect of my research in this sense consists in the importance attributed to the political dimension of Sapienza's works, in terms of their attention towards ideology and commitment, and the close relationship established between individual and political spheres. The processes of identity formation and the political domain are indeed closely interconnected, having in the desiring matter of the body their main common ground.

2. Critico-Theoretical Framework

In analysing the interplay between body, identity and power as the main grounds or territories where Sapienza's representation of a search for freedom takes place, I adopt a composite theoretical frame. A plurality of approaches is indeed necessary in order to account for the coexistence, in Sapienza's works, of different perspectives and tensions. Overall, my theoretical approach tends to evidence how Sapienza's narrative is informed by and dialogues with a series of cultural, political, philosophical and artistic perspectives. In addition, I employ theoretical notions, such as Rosi Braidotti's 'nomadic subjectivity',²⁵ which are not part of Sapienza's own cultural background but prove useful in order to illuminate certain aspects of her works, especially those which anticipate questions and approaches that will be developed by other thinkers only later. In particular, her narrative combines the theoretical anti-metaphysical and anti-logocentric perspective of post-structuralism, deconstruction and queer theory, with the ethical and political struggle for freedom and aspiration of social transformation proper to Marxism and first and second wave feminism.

²⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *Nuovi soggetti nomadi* (Rome: Luca Sossella editore, 2002).

The specific challenge of this critical operation, which is also its distinctive value, consists in the connections established between different levels implicated in the world represented by Sapienza, from the articulation of body and identity, to interpersonal relationships and the properly political dimension of the texts, and between different aspects of this world, namely gender, sexuality, class and ideology. The key interpretative focus on the notion of freedom links these different levels and aspects, providing structure and cohesiveness to the analysis. While each chapter sets out its specific theoretical frame, I introduce here the key notions informing the thesis as a whole and in particular the elements highlighted in the title: body, identity and power.

The body represents, in Sapienza's works, a source of primary, vital impulses, with which contact is to be reconstructed beyond layers of oppression. Such a perspective is productively read through Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytical approach, focused on the reconnection to a live, perceptive and desiring body.²⁶ The body also represents the ontological dimension of the self, a being that precedes qualification, a perceiving and perceived unit in action, which recalls Husserl's phenomenological perspective as well as Adriana Cavarero's reflections on the subject, in continuity with Hannah Arendt's existentialism.²⁷ It represents the material condition of existence, particular and contingent, expelled by Cartesian rationality.

²⁶ I refer in particular the notion of True and False self developed in: Donald W. Winnicott, *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis* (London and Tavistock: New York, Basic Books, 1958); *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1965).

²⁷ As concerns phenomenology, I refer in particular to: Rocco Donnici, *Intenzioni d'amore, di scienza e d'anarchia. L'idea husserliana di filosofia e le sue implicazioni etico-politiche* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1996); Jean-Claude Coquet, *Le istanze enuncianti. Fenomenologia e semiotica*, trans. by Elena Nicolini (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2008), ed. by Paolo Fabbri; Elio Franzini, *L'altra ragione. Sensibilità, immaginazione e forma artistica* (Milan: Il castoro, 2007). Within Adriana Cavarero's vast philosophical and political production, I refer in particular to *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997) and *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003). Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

The body is, finally, a sexed body, on which patriarchal norms exert control and violence, forcing it into the limits of the reproductive function and denying it the right to agency and sexual pleasure. Maria Giudice's Marxist-feminist teaching here plays a fundamental role, for the reflection on the sexed body is never disjoint from a consideration of women as a social category, immersed in material conditions of exploitation and domination. Sapienza's narrative then seeks to re-establish contact with a live and desiring body, seen as the first ground for the exercise of individual agency and source of pleasure to which aspire.

The corporeal dimension of the self is not an enclosed and stable unity, but is rather always in interaction with the world, so that identity is defined in a situation of constant negotiation with social norms and human relationships. Sapienza's texts provide an insightful and articulated portrayal of the ways in which power intervenes in the process of identity formation, especially during childhood. First, she represents power in the form of explicitly oppressive social structures, institutions and legal systems, and in particular patriarchy and heteronormativity, but also fascism and the power of the Catholic Church. Marxist and feminist strands of thought play a central role for Sapienza and, accordingly, in my analysis. Her radical antagonism towards any hierarchy and her suspicion of all ideologies, including Marxism itself, is reconnected by Sapienza to a proper anarchic tradition of thought and political action. In addition to the political thinkers that directly influenced her world view, my analysis also employs Husserl's theory of anarchism, for it shows to have many points of contact with Sapienza's narrative.

Secondly, through cultural stereotypes and social expectations, power becomes internalised and the struggle against it is brought inside the subject. Social norms and

institutions exert a shaping force on individuals, conditioning and constraining their desires. This is the aspect of Sapienza's works that brings her closer to Freudian psychoanalysis, deconstruction and post-structuralism, and especially to Foucault's reflections on identity as always and unavoidably inhabited by power.²⁸ From the outset in *Lettera aperta*, identity is, in Sapienza's representation, socially constructed and internally divided. In this respect, she continues the line of modernist writers inaugurated – in the Italian context – by Pirandello and Svevo. As Pierpaolo Antonello and Giuseppe Fornari write, 'Gli eroi dei romanzi moderni sono costantemente attraversati dalla "falsità" dei propri desideri, ovvero dalla natura relazionale e "interdividuale" del loro sistema di volizione, dalla mediazione continua della loro "identità" e dei loro desideri'.²⁹

However, Sapienza also values a form of constant self-scrutiny that aims at distinguishing between different layers of desires, identifying those which are more heavily conditioned by social oppressive power, and those which conversely bring along a liberating potential, qualifying them, if not as 'authentic', at least as 'less inauthentic'. In other words, she introduces a degree in the constructiveness of desires, and bestows upon reason and self-knowledge an important role in retrieving contact with more authentic parts of the self, which are located in bodily desires. In this respect, her representation closely recalls Epicurean philosophy, with its emphasis on frequenting and knowing desires.³⁰

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. Volume 1, The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

²⁹ Pierpaolo Antonello and Giuseppe Fornari, *Identità e desiderio. La teoria mimetica e la letteratura italiana* (Massa Carrara: Transeuropa, 2009), p. ix.

³⁰ See Epicuro, *Lettera sulla felicità* (Rome: Stampa Alternativa, 1990). It is worth pointing out that Epicurus was translated by Sapienza's husband, Angelo Pellegrino.

Finally, Sapienza gives much attention – and it is a fairly original and anticipatory aspect of her works – to the power involved in the relationship between adults and children, which provides the pattern for power in the form of emotional dependence. In line with Winnicott’s psychoanalytical approach, with which she possibly came in contact through her own therapy, Sapienza represents the effects of emotional neglect on children’s development of a sense of the self. Power unbalance in human relationships is represented as having serious distortive and oppressive effects, which the narrator tries to undo and resist. Moreover, she does not reject the element of dependence involved in human relationships, but seeks firstly to construct a sense of the self that would not be crushed by such relationships, thus becoming capable of embracing dependence as a form of care rather than oppression.

Throughout her narrative Sapienza seeks to deconstruct and oppose the conditions that affected her identity formation, at the same time proposing, in the centrality of bodily desire and anarchic relationships of care, possible ways to escape the limits of both the fragmented and the unitary subject. It is precisely the role of the body, in interaction with power but not entirely coinciding with it, connected to a desired agency, that distinguishes Sapienza’s narrative from the elaboration of post-structuralism. Whereas for example for Judith Butler ‘the body is not a “being”, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field’,³¹ Sapienza, in line with thinkers such as Luisa Muraro, Adriana Cavarero, Rosi Braidotti and Stefano Ciccone,³² puts at the centre of her search for

³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 177.

³² Stefano Ciccone, *Essere maschi. Tra potere e libertà* (Turin: Rosenberg&Sellier, 2009). See also: Adriana Cavarero and Franco Reistano, *Le filosofie femministe* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002, c1999),

freedom the materiality of personal and collective experience, which should be understood in its constructed historical features but not dissolved through an unlimited theoretical deconstruction. In Muraro's words:

la pratica del partire da sé porta al disfarsi del soggetto senza disfarlo in una miriade di istanze scoordinate: mi disfa delle relazioni che mi fanno essere quella che sono e diventare quella che desidero, senza che io possa mai accamparmi al centro di questo essere e questo diventare. Questa è la porta stretta, questo è il passaggio che mi 'smarca' dal nichilismo del pensiero postmoderno.³³

As Ciccone notes, desires are not superimposed by power onto subjects, but rather 'si fondano proprio nel rapporto conflittuale con l'esperienza corporea'.³⁴ The body represents the 'punto di coincidenza tra fisico, simbolico e sociologico',³⁵ which mobilises identity at the same time anchoring its centrifugal fragmentation to a specific, irreducible individual position.

Sapienza, anticipating Luce Irigaray's point on women's need to become subjects, exposes the trajectory of the modern representation of identity as the product of a male universalized subject, at which subjects in a subaltern position, historically devoid of autonomous identity, look from a rather different perspective.³⁶ The representation of identity, Sapienza's narrative shows, cannot be separated from the socio-historical position occupied by a subject.

Through the representation of female characters who struggle to reconstruct their own identity, radically criticize any normative structure and look for personal freedom beyond and before power, Sapienza provides a compelling literary example of women's

and Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

³³ Luisa Muraro, 'Il pensiero dell'esperienza' in *Per amore del mondo*, 2006.

<http://www.diotimafilosofe.it/riv_wo.php?id=13> [Last accessed 15 August 2014].

³⁴ Ciccone, p. 73.

³⁵ Braidotti, p. 12.

³⁶ See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); *The Sex Which is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

position with respect to the disruption of identity brought about by modernity and described by post-structuralism. She tells the story of a subject who fights to access a locus of agency, in order to affirm the opening up of the self to multiplicity and weakness. In doing so, she recuperates the emancipatory aspirations of Enlightenment and Marxism, but aiming at the creation of a new subject, Epicurean and anarchic, embodied and relational. This is the sense of the title of the present thesis, with its reference to the interplay between body, identity and power, and to the act of writing as informed by the tension towards the realisation of freedom. Indeed, the act of narrating is entrusted with a fundamental function, consisting in the possibility for the narrator to create her own story and transform a concluded, suffered past into a chosen, active, and joyful space for action.

The peculiar publishing history of Sapienza's works suggests a double location for her texts, which should be contextualised both in the period of their composition or first publication (mainly 60s – 80s) and of their critical and popular reception (projected into the 21st century). The trajectory followed by Sapienza's works ascribes them to the tension between centre and margins noted by Alberto Asor Rosa in *Letteratura italiana del novecento*.³⁷ The critic describes the evolution of an important part of Italian literature in the 20th century according to a dynamic of initial marginalisation and later reconsideration. He mentions for example Svevo, Gadda, Campana, Slataper and Michelstaedter as authors who diverged from the canon – or canons – of their time and rather spoke to a future reader. Marginal authors, Asor Rosa argues, are worthy of particular attention, because they contribute to define shapes and limits, we could say

³⁷ Alberto Asor Rosa, "I fondamenti epistemologici della letteratura italiana del Novecento", in *Letteratura italiana del novecento: bilancio di un secolo*, pp. 5-33.

the ‘margins’, of an established dominant canon, inasmuch as they are ‘i portatori del più intenso movimento forma – coscienza’.³⁸ Marginal authors, whom he defines ‘disassati’,³⁹ are of central importance:

Centrali, naturalmente, non vuol dire esattamente ricollocabili nel dibattito storico-critico del loro tempo, dove al contrario sono risultati così spesso sacrificati: vuol dire, invece, che essi costituiscono ciò che del nostro ‘900 sembra sopravvivere alla sua conclusione cronologica e stendere sicuramente un ponte verso il futuro.⁴⁰

Similarly to the authors mentioned by Asor Rosa, Sapienza’s life and works, which ‘from the very outset [...] have appeared as excessive, eccentric and bizarre’ (to borrow Laura Fortini’s words),⁴¹ were fated to a tardy understanding. The ex-centric features characterising her works overlap with her position as a woman writer, for women writers have historically occupied, and continue to occupy, a marginal position with respect to the Italian literary canon.⁴² ‘The relationship between female writers and critics’, Fortini writes, is still ‘an unresolved matter’, as ‘in Italy, the debate regarding the admission of female writers into the canon of Italian literature is always open’.⁴³ Literary texts written by women often do not conform to the canon, and are rather characterised by the subversion of its hierarchical values. As Asor Rosa puts it,

³⁸ *I fondamenti epistemologici della letteratura italiana del Novecento*, p. 24.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 25.

⁴¹ Laura Fortini, ‘Beyond the Canon: Goliarda Sapienza and Twentieth-Century Italian Literary Tradition’, in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*.

⁴² On women’s writing and Italian literary canon, see also Alba Amoia (ed.), *20th Century Italian Women Writers. The Feminine Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996); Ornella Marotti and Gabriella Brooke (eds.), *Gendering Italian Fiction* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999); Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (eds.), *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Rita Wilson, *Speculative Identities: Contemporary Italian Women’s Narrative* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2000); Sharon Wood, *Italian Women’s Writing 1860-1994* (London: Athlone Press, 1995); Marina Zancan, *Il doppio itinerario della scrittura: la donna nella tradizione letteraria italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998).

⁴³ *Beyond the Canon*.

Le donne, dunque, non stanno dentro quel ‘canone’. Forse potrebbero entrare in quest’altro, che si determina a partire dalla peculiarità della scoperta gnoseologica, di cui il singolo scrittore si fa portatore, ossia della diversità – rispetto al passato – di uno sguardo sul mondo, e non della sua *conformità* a una qualsiasi visione predominante della realtà.⁴⁴

Sapienza’s ex-centricity and extraneousness to the canon concerns, on the level of forms and narrative structures, her manipulation and blurring of genres, which cross autobiography, fiction and historical narrative – a feature that connects her work to that of several other women writers, from Sibilla Aleramo to Dacia Maraini, Natalia Ginzburg and Fabrizia Ramondino.⁴⁵

Her attention to the internal composition of identity, the complex relationship between reality, perception and representation, and the contamination of narration and philosophical thought, brings her work close to the literary legacy of Svevo and Pirandello, and to post-modern suspicion of any metaphysical truth.⁴⁶ However, compared to Svevo and Pirandello’s representations of a split self and their linguistic ‘trasparenza e neutralità funzionale’,⁴⁷ and compared to Eco’s intellectual play and Calvino’s limpid use of imagination in his ‘narrativa strutturale’,⁴⁸ Sapienza’s narrative, crossed by contradictions and syncretism, voices a passionate and painful struggle to

⁴⁴ *I fondamenti epistemologici della letteratura italiana del Novecento*, p. 26.

⁴⁵ On Italian women writers’s use of autobiographical and historical genres, see for example Carol Lazzaro-Weis, ‘Stranger than Life? Autobiography and Historical Fiction’, in *Gendering Italian Fiction* (pp. 31-48), and Graziella Parati, *Public History, Private Stories: Italian Women’s Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ I refer to the interpretation of main strands of 20th-century Italian literature suggested in particular by Renato Barilli in *La linea Svevo-Pirandello* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003); see also Guido Guglielmi, ‘Tradizione del romanzo e romanzo sperimentale’ in *Manuale di Letteratura italiana. Storia per generi e problemi*, ed. by Franco Brioschi and Costanzo Di Girolamo, 4 vols (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), IV, pp. 556-615, and Vittorio Spinazzola, *La modernità letteraria* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2001). For critical accounts of Italian postmodernisms, I refer to JoAnn Cannon, *Postmodern Italian Fiction* (Associated University Press, 1989); Dino S. Cervigni (ed.), ‘Italy 1991: the Modern and the Postmodern’, special issue of *Annali d’italianistica*, 9 (1991); Remo Ceserani, *Raccontare il postmoderno* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997); Romano Luperini, *Lezioni sul postmoderno: architettura, pittura, letteratura*, ed. by Franco Marchese (Palermo: G. B. Palumbo, 1997).

⁴⁷ Barilli, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Cf. A. Asor Rosa, *Stile Calvino* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), p. 138.

become a subject and access a locus of agency, which reflects the subversive desire of a subject in a subaltern position. While deconstructing abstract and universal notions of identity, Sapienza also expresses an emancipatory tension that offers a different perspective on the crisis of the subject described by modernity and postmodernity.

3. Thesis Aims and Structure

The aims of my research can be summarised as follows. First, I argue in favour of the significance and originality of Sapienza's works; secondly I propose the theme of freedom as an interpretative key, providing a first in-depth analysis of her narrative; thirdly, I define her works as Epicurean and anarchic – two characteristics that place them at the intersection of post-structuralist and Marxist-feminist discourses. Whereas she displays an ex-centric and subversive attitude, she also gives voice to a tension towards becoming a subject and retrieving a space for personal agency, ultimately aspiring to individual and collective transformation. Finally, although situating Sapienza's works within Italian and international literature exceeds the objective of this thesis, I suggest similarities and points of contact with other authors regarding specific topics, narrative structures or stylistic features. These are to be considered as suggestions of potential directions of investigations, and in this respect the present thesis finds its ideal complement in the forthcoming edited book *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*. Overall, I suggest an affinity between Sapienza and the literary legacy of Pirandello and Svevo, as well as specific tenets of postmodern fiction, but also a significant difference, concerning the tension towards acquiring agency and subjectivity, extraneous to the trajectory of the modern and postmodern subject.

This thesis comprises four chapters. The first three chapters develop a close textual analysis of individual works. *Lettera aperta* in Chapter 1; *L'arte della gioia* in Chapter 2 and *Io, Jean Gabin* in Chapter 3. I look at the representation of identity formation and the qualification of freedom in each work, progressing from the exploration of the internal composition of the self to the analysis of identity in its interpersonal and socio-political dimension. The fourth chapter deals with a comparative analysis of the same works' narrative structures, accounting for the role of writing in the evolution of Sapienza's narrative.

I chose to focus on these three works because they all engage with a process of identity formation and criticism of social norms. Chapter 1 also includes extensive references to *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, which is thematically linked to *Lettera aperta*, but does not require a separate critical discourse. Despite the differences in length and genre – *Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* and *Io, Jean Gabin* are all short semi-autobiographical novels, whilst *L'arte della gioia* is a long fictional novel – , and each work having its distinctive features, themes and style, they form a rather compact group. I privileged separate analyses of individual works over a thematic comparative approach in order to maintain the distinctiveness of each work and evidence the dimension of a writing in evolution, avoiding the impression of Sapienza as an *auctor unius libri*.

The last two novels written by Sapienza, *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, recount the author's own experience in jail and her friendship with some of the ex-convicts after they have been freed. As Mariagiovanna Andriago and Giulia

Bicchietti point out,⁴⁹ these works, similar to one another in topic and style, mark a turning point compared to Sapienza's previous production, hence the choice to exclude them from the present analysis. First, they are no longer concerned with processes of identity formation in connection to childhood memories, and focus exclusively on the narrator's present situation. Secondly, the focus shifts from the narrator herself to the representation of other characters, with their own voices and stories.

However, these works are also in a relationship of continuity with Sapienza's previous writings. For example, they still feature a combination of autobiography and fiction; an interest for marginality, especially in relation to women; an attention for the corporeal domain of experience; an investigation of the relationship between individual freedom and society. The choice not to include these works in the present thesis therefore does not exclude that the critical and theoretical apparatus employed here could provide a useful approach for a future exploration also of *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*.

⁴⁹ See Mariagiovanna Andriago, 'L'evoluzione autobiografica di Goliarda Sapienza. Stile e contenuti', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 117-30; Giulia Bicchietti, 'Esperienze dal carcere', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 181-90.

CHAPTER 1. OUT OF THE NORM: THE RE- CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN *LETTERA APERTA*

Introduction

Lettera aperta, published by Garzanti in 1967, is Sapienza's first literary work. Narrated in the first person, it recounts the story of a double formation, of a young girl in Sicily and a mature woman in her forties in Rome. The focus on the narrator's childhood alternates with the representation of her own present, her struggle to survive by recollecting and reinterpreting her past, after her memory was ripped through by electroshock therapy. Episodes and figures mainly from the narrator's childhood, with some minor scenes belonging to other significant periods of her life, compose a multifaceted and fragmented portrait of a young girl's troubled upbringing, and an adult woman's endeavour to free herself from the weight of an oppressive past.

The double focus on the present and the past dovetails with an oscillation between adult's and child's perspectives. The complex relationship entwined by focuses and points of view shapes the text giving rise to vertiginous manipulation of time, space and narrative identities, often impossible to untangle. In addition, the complexity of the text is enhanced by the imitation, in the discourse, of the reconstructive work of an unstable and lacunous memory, so that narration proceeds by fragments, analogical links, gaps and densely metaphorical passages, reproducing the struggle of a disrupted self.

The adult narrator presents herself as a woman experiencing serious existential difficulties, which already led her to two failed suicide attempts. She states in the incipit of *Lettera aperta*:

Non è per importunarvi con una nuova storia né per fare esercizio di calligrafia [...] che mi decido a parlarvi di quello che non avendo capito mi pesa da quarant'anni sulle spalle. Voi penserete: perché non se la sbroglia da sé? Infatti ho cercato, molto. Ma, visto che questa ricerca solitaria mi portava alla morte – sono stata due volte per morire ‘di mia propria mano’, come si dice – ho pensato che sfogarsi con qualcuno sarebbe stato meglio, se non per gli altri almeno per me.¹

The literary work is closely interlaced with the author's own life. We know from Sapienza's biography that in 1962 she was hospitalised into a psychiatric clinic after an overdose of sleeping pills and was subjected to a series of electroshock therapies, which severely damaged her memory.² Afterwards, she spent the following four years trying to piece together her memories, at the same time struggling with depression and alcohol abuse, which led her to a second suicide attempt in 1964. During this period (1963-1965), she underwent an experimental psychoanalytic therapy with Dr Ignazio Majore, ‘un'analisi selvaggia’³ that bordered on an amorous relationship and was closely followed by Majore's deep personal and professional crisis.⁴

The psychoanalytic therapy helped her recover her memory and begin a process of deconstruction of the power that oppressed and devitalised her as she was growing up, but did not completely heal her. Moreover, it also burdened her with a new form of oppression, since the set of interpretations provided by the therapist are described as another rigid and constraining pattern. *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* were written during the period that followed those troubled events and both engage with the

¹ LA, p. 15. Further references to this work in short quotations are given in the text.

² See *La porta è aperta*, p. 151.

³ Angelo Pellegrino, ‘Un'analisi selvaggia’, in FM, pp. 5-12.

⁴ On the relationship between Sapienza and Majore, central to FM, see *La porta è aperta*, p.156: ‘Poco tempo dopo la loro relazione si conclude bruscamente. In futuro, trovando la cosa divertente, Goliarda avrebbe raccontato alle amiche di aver fatto impazzire il suo psicanalista. Succede che, in coincidenza o in conseguenza al rapporto terapeutico con lei, Ignazio Majore attraversa una crisi personale e professionale, che lo vede abbandonare la professione e troncane ogni relazione d'aiuto.’ Majore's account of those events can be found on his own website: ‘Nel 1965, in seguito a divergenze teoriche e di prassi, ha dato le dimissioni da Socio Ordinario e Psicoanalista Didatta della SPI’. <<http://www.psychomedia.it/neuro-snp/08-09/maiore.htm>> [Last accessed 15 July 2014].

author's self-reconstruction by revisiting and reinterpreting her past. *Lettera aperta* ends on the narrator's demand to be left free to enjoy her own body, newly reconquered thanks to writing: 'Vi lascio per un po': con questo poco di ordine che sono riuscita a fare intorno a me. Vorrei tacere per qualche tempo, e andarmene a giocare con la terra e con il mio corpo. Arrivederci' (LA, p. 59). Yet, in *Il filo di mezzogiorno* Sapienza feels the need to continue the exploration of the past to include an 'analysis of the analysis', for it recounts the therapeutic process by problematizing and challenging some of its aspects and tenets. In the concluding pages of the work, she refers explicitly to *Lettera aperta*, and the necessity to go beyond the analysis:

...poi imbucai quella lettera che vi avevo scritto e fui convinta di avere ritrovato il mio corpo e il mio passato... e andai al mare... ma il mare era troppo freddo e salato per il mio corpo senza pelle. [...] No, non potevo giocare col mare né col mio corpo. [...] Quel medico, nello smontarmi pezzo per pezzo, aveva portato alla luce vecchie piaghe cicatrizzate da compensi, come lui avrebbe detto e le aveva riaperte frugandoci dentro con bisturi e pinze e che non aveva saputo guarire.⁵

Sapienza's relationship with psychoanalysis, and in particular with a Freudian approach, which she appears to know well, is rich and complex, and would require a specific, extensive investigation.⁶ In my discussion I point out some aspects of this relationship, in particular when conflicts or discordant interpretations emerge, putting it in the context of Sapienza's representation of her identity formation and search for freedom.

In this chapter, I analyse the representation of the child protagonist's identity formation in *Lettera aperta* and include references to *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, pointing

⁵ FM, p. 178; p. 184. Further references to this work in short quotations are given in the text.

⁶ Some critics have begun to explore this important aspect of Sapienza's work. See Emma Bond, 'Zeno's Unstable Legacy: Case-Writing and the Logic of Transference in Giuseppe Berto and Goliarda Sapienza', in *Italo Svevo and his Legacy for the Third Millennium: Contexts and Influences*, ed. by G. Stellardi and E. Tanello Cooper (Leicester: Troubador Publishing Ltd., 2014), pp. 101-13; Manuela Fraire, 'Il filo di mezzogiorno. Goliarda paziente', in *Appassionata Sapienza*, pp. 127-31; Maria Arena, 'Il filo di mezzogiorno. Morte e rinascita attraverso la scrittura', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 149-56; Maria Teresa Maenza, 'Fuori dall'ordine simbolico della madre: Goliarda Sapienza e Luce Irigaray', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 243-60; Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, "'Ero separata da me": Memory, Selfhood and Mother-Tongue in Goliarda Sapienza and Elena Ferrante', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*.

out connections between the two texts. My analysis accounts for the forms in which power affects the child's formative path, represented by the patriarchal and heteronormative structure of society, emotional neglect, ideological intransigence and conflicting ethical models, which result in the protagonist's isolation and disorientation. The adult narrator seeks to undo these forms of oppression and retrieve or reconstruct contact with her own body, a source of desires and vitality.

The first part of the chapter explores the representation of the interaction between the child's formative path and power as concerns gender and sexuality, in dialogue with Ross's rich analysis of this topic. Secondly, I look at power in the form of educational inconsistency and ideological intransigence, which sanction Goliarda's failed integration in her social context.⁷ Finally, I discuss the role of emotional neglect and its distorting effects on desire. Winnicott's notion of True and False Self, further developed by Alice Miller, provide useful theoretical tools in order to understand the mechanism of oppression deriving from emotional dependence and educational inconsistencies.⁸ Winnicott's and Miller's psychoanalytical approach, with its emphasis on the body as a source of vitality and desire, also orients the definition of what type of authenticity and freedom the narrator is looking for, beyond and before oppressive power.

⁷ For purposes of clarity, I always use the name Goliarda only to designate the child protagonist, not the adult narrator.

⁸ Alice Miller, *The Drama of Being a Child: the Search for the True Self* (London: Virago, 1985).

1.1 Gender and Sexuality

1.1.1 The Mother's Feminist Model: Maria Giudice vs 'le donnette'

What models of gender identity and relationship between the sexes does the environment of Sapienza's childhood offer her? How does the young girl relate to these models? Charlotte Ross, who analysed extensively the representation of gender and sexuality in Sapienza's works, points out:

Attraverso la narrazione delle sue memorie, Sapienza mostra al lettore il suo processo di condizionamento socio-culturale e di apprendimento esistenziale. Subisce le norme dominanti di genere e sessualità, ma confronta anche i modelli di genere più progressisti proposti da sua madre.⁹

Maria Giudice is represented as the central female model for the young girl.¹⁰ In *Lettera aperta*, set in a period – the 30s – when fascist power was well established and ‘sembrò non dovesse cascare più’ (LA, p. 143), Maria has ceased any political activism.¹¹ The only references to her previous political activity contained in *Lettera aperta* consist in the definition of her as a ‘sindacalista’ (LA, p. 31), and a short story, told to Goliarda by her uncle Nunzio, concerning a fascist attack against the office of the magazine that Maria and Peppino used to co-edit.¹² The information refers to the past, whereas at the time when Sapienza is a child, Maria is a white-haired woman who spends her time in her room, studying, suffering from insomnia and headache and waiting for fascism to

⁹ *Identità di genere e sessualità*, p. 227.

¹⁰ The mother-daughter relationship will become a central topic in several works by women writers especially since the 80s; see for example Patrizia Sambuco, *Corporeal Bonds: the Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth Century Italian Women's Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

¹¹ ‘Nel ‘27 il fascismo la sottopone ad ammonizione. Gli anni che seguono la vedono isolata, vigilata, e stanchissima’, Santino, *Maria Giudice*.

¹² ‘La redazione era stata bruciata due volte. Peppino andava in galera per insulto alla morale, insulto alla religione eccetera: - tutte quelle scuse che pigliavano i fascisti. Maria allora si firmava direttrice responsabile. Se era Maria ad andare in prigione, si firmava Peppino: andavano avanti e indietro, dentro e fuori’, LA, p. 143.

fall.¹³ At bedtime, Maria tells Goliarda stories about the fight for social equality and historical personalities such as Cristoforo Colombo, Galileo Galilei and Musolino the bandit, who trigger in the child a dream of emulation. However, the little girl's aspirations are immediately confronted with a gender difference that stands between her and her heroes:

Anch'io dovevo diventare come loro. Ma cosa può diventare una donna? Tutte le donne che passavano per casa erano mogli di carcerati e cameriere: solo lei, mia madre, studiava, e allora dovevo studiare anch'io per diventare come lei, coi capelli bianchi e la voce forte quando discuteva con Ivanoe, con mio padre, con il professore Jsaya, con l'avvocato Castiglione.

Ho paura. Non è per me questo mestiere. 'Una femmina non può essere brigante'. No? Peccato.¹⁴

Through the stories that Maria tells Goliarda, she teaches her to aspire to achieve personal independence, a model that the child can see in practice only in her mother. Indeed, Maria appears to be the only woman in possession of the means needed to become like Colombo and Galileo, namely intelligence and the possibility to study, thanks to which she succeeds in being respected by men and to talk on a par with them. In addition, Maria has maintained a status of independence also by rejecting the bond of marriage. As Ross writes, for Goliarda 'il sentirsi diversa dai modelli normativi di genere deriva dal desiderio di essere protagonista della propria vita, un desiderio incoraggiato dal femminismo di sua madre'.¹⁵ Maria's example instils in the little girl the aspiration to become like her, strong and independent, thus marking the initiation to

¹³ 'Solo lei, mia madre, studiava', LA, p. 42; 'mia madre nella stanza in fondo leggeva o sgranava dalle dita tranquille scialli, coperte di fiori colorati', p. 145; 'aveva tutti i capelli bianchi e non si arrabbiava mai', p. 155.

¹⁴ LA, p. 42; p. 44. Of a different opinion, Maria Rosa Cutrufelli chooses a female bandit as the protagonist of her Sicilian novel *La briganta* (1990); figures of female bandits are represented also for example in Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1947), and, earlier, in Giovanni Verga's 'L'amante di Gramigna' in *Vita dei campi* (1880).

¹⁵ *Identità di genere e sessualità*, p. 227.

the idea of a troubled *dover essere*, in contrast with social norms and in fulfilment of her mother's example, a task for which she prepares by starting a proper training: 'Ma per farcela dovevo spiare (ed infatti spiavo) tutto quello che diceva agli altri, ed a mio padre specialmente. In un certo modo, ripensandoci, studiavo, mi preparavo a quel compito attraente e pauroso' (LA, p. 41).

Goliarda also has three sisters, Olga, Licia and Musetta, much older than her.¹⁶ Licia studies at university, a choice that introduces a distance between Sapienza's family and its social context: 'Come seppi dopo, casa nostra era considerata un posto di perdizione: "Le donne studiano, e in scuole pubbliche, anche!"' (LA, p. 62). Although Goliarda calls one of her imaginary children 'Licia', she repeatedly marks a distance from her sister and rather identifies herself with the other imaginary child of hers, Goliardo.¹⁷ As regards Musetta, apparently she was a 'donna autonoma e "di una disinvoltura più americana di quella americana"'.¹⁸ Yet in *Lettera aperta* such 'disinvoltura' is represented mainly as frivolity and maliciousness, an example that Goliarda does not seem to appreciate: 'Non volevo andare in quel buco [the school] che mi faceva diventare grande come Musetta, che urlava sempre ed aveva i peli sulle gambe: se li bruciava con la candela' (LA, p. 56). We know from Providenti's biography that Musetta, when still a minor, had a sexual relationship with her stepfather Peppino, which is the reason why Olga and Licia moved to Lombardy when Goliarda was still a child.¹⁹ What is relevant overall is that Sapienza's sisters provided her with examples of female independence, but the association between them and the sexual pressure exerted

¹⁶ Musetta (whose real name was Cosetta) was born in 1905, Licia in 1906 and Olga in 1913. See *La porta è aperta*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁷ Goliardo was also the name of Peppino's son who died drowning in the sea when he was fourteen. See LA, p. 38.

¹⁸ *La porta è aperta*, p. 62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 56.

on them by Peppino brings them closer to that central anxiety represented by sexuality, which the child seeks to escape.

The model of independent woman represented by Maria Giudice and her daughters clashes with the examples of power relationships between men and women observable by the young girl outside her family. The ‘donnette’, women who are weak and depend on men, constitute the negative counterpart of Maria’s model and represent the female stereotype in a patriarchal society. Through the words of Aunt Grazia, the narrator depicts women’s condition as undesirable, since their dependence on men marks their submission and lack of autonomy.

Erano orribili quei grandi. Zia Grazia piangeva sempre e diceva: ‘Che disgrazia nascere femmina: si ha sempre bisogno di loro.’ Loro erano gli uomini grandi e forti [...]. Come il ‘gigante’, giù in cortile, che picchiava sempre Teresa, la mamma di Teresa, e Turi. E loro, era vero, avevano bisogno di lui: Teresa e la sua mamma gli volevano bene, avevano bisogno di lui, erano femmine. Turi invece quando il padre lo picchiò, come quella notte che svegliarono tutto il cortile, gli diede una coltellata al braccio e scappò. È sì, perché era grande anche lui e maschio.²⁰

In the passage above, by looking at the sub-proletarian women who live in the same neighbourhood Goliarda notices their dependence on men, which exposes them to a situation of inescapable violence and subjugation. Whilst Maria achieved a status of independence thanks to culture and by avoiding marriage, ignorance and poverty are conversely the most relevant factors in determining female submission.

Faced with this destiny of forced dependence of women on men, the little girl asks her teacher Jsaya for an explanation. When Jsaya replies that women need men like men need women, she asks herself: ‘Cosa era questo bisogno, per quei brutti uomini grossi, come quello che alla Playa si era levato i pantaloni e si era mostrato?’ (LA, p. 57). Reflecting on the meaning of *bisogno*, Goliarda concludes that, while for women it

²⁰ LA, p. 56.

means lack of autonomy and subjection to men, men's need for women is located in sexuality, a need they fulfil through abuse and violence.

The story of Nica, Goliarda's best friend – and, as she will find out later, also her half-sister on her father's side²¹ – illustrates women's lack of autonomy and forced submissive destiny in a deeply patriarchal society. Nica is a creative and adventurous child, but, like most of Goliarda's friends, she belongs to a sub-proletarian family. The only opportunity available to her as a poor and uneducated girl consists in waiting for a husband. In order to do so, she must preserve her virginity, otherwise she would risk ending up like the prostitutes she and Goliarda see in the streets: 'Anche noi possiamo finire così; basta uno sbaglio per una femmina' (LA, p. 126). Hence, as soon as she has her first menstrual cycle, the sign that she has become an adult woman, Nica faces a sudden restriction of her personal freedom: 'Mi è venuto il sangue, e adesso devo stare in casa e aspettare un vero marito. Anche la spesa non faccio più, non devo farmi vedere per le strade' (LA, p. 109). Nica is represented as progressively losing her vitality, and Goliarda, using the conceptual instruments available to her as a child, interprets this change as a direct consequence of menstruation:

Cosa erano quel sangue e quei dolori? Dovevano essere forti se Nica era diventata così magra e seria, e non giocava più nel cortile. Adesso che sapevo, vedevo che non usciva più, se non con la madre o il fratello, né alzava la testa a salutarmi quando stavo con Carlo e Arminio: solo se non c'erano uomini mi salutava, ma senza sorridere. Dovevano essere terribili quei dolori, se lei era cambiata così.²²

Nica's development into an adult woman, marked by the physical phenomenon of menstruation, sanctions her role in society, which is thus centred on her reproductive function. As soon as she becomes fertile, suddenly her condition changes from child,

²¹ Peppino Sapienza will recognise his paternity only when Nica is already an adult.

²² LA, p. 110.

free to wander around and speak to anyone, to woman, restrained in her movements and actions. She dies young giving birth to a daughter,²³ and in the narrator's powerful metaphorical connection, the blood that marked Nica's passage to the status of woman is the blood that was sucked out of her by the imposed role of wife and mother: 'Chi si era succhiato il sangue di Nica? Quella bambina che urlava nell'altra stanza? Quel marito che l'aveva sposata [...]?' (LA, p. 116).

1.1.2 Peppino, Patriarchal Power and the Threat of Sexual Violence

While Goliarda forms the idea of an imposed destiny of submission by observing the women she sees around her, male power and violence are also revealed abruptly and directly to her by Carmine, her father's colleague who sexually harasses her. The experience upsets the young girl and severely conditions her future perspective on the relationship between the sexes:

[I maschi] ti fissavano tutti insieme ridendo, ridendo sempre, senza quasi aprire la bocca come l'avvocato e come quell'altro avvocato con la barba nera che veniva la sera da noi. Nell'anticamera mi aveva messo le mani dentro le mutandine, e poi se le odorò al naso. Io scappai. Si mise a ridere. 'Non scappare. Dovresti essere contenta, dall'odore si sente che sei quasi matura. Quando la mela è matura, è come la femmina; basta mettersi sotto l'albero, o sotto il balcone, e quella ti casca in bocca, dritta dritta.' No, non dovevo più alzarmi, né affacciarmi al balcone, come ieri. Carmine continuava a guardarmi da sotto. Aspettava.²⁴

This episode is followed by the girl's unavoidable physical development, represented in the text through a series of visionary and delirious images, after which the narrator informs the reader that she was in bed because she was seriously ill. Under the threat of sexual violence and the restriction of freedom, growing up is thus compared to a

²³ A different version of Nica's death is recounted in the poem 'A Nica, morta nel bombardamento di Catania dell'aprile 1942', in *Ancestrale*, pp. 65-7.

²⁴ LA, p. 56.

disease. When Goliarda wakes up after a long time, her perception of men has irremediably changed. In particular, she is scared of her father – she notices the black and stiff hairs of his beard, his strong hands that force her to open her eyes, his disgusting smile, and wonders whether he would take off his trousers like a man on the beach did (LA, pp. 60-1). While in the passage on Carmine quoted above she associated her father to the threatening attitude of ‘i maschi’, here for the second time Goliarda links her father to sexual threat. She wishes that her mother or her sisters were there, but at her bedside, together with her father, there is only the doctor, another man. She concludes:

Non avevo bisogno di loro, anche se ero una femmina. Finalmente la porta si richiuse. Non lo avrei più guardato in faccia. E se mi avesse costretto? Allora avrei dovuto ucciderlo. Non volevo sposare quell’avvocato come Licia e andare nel continente, non volevo nessuno. [...] Non uccisi mio padre, ma da quella notte lo chiamai sempre l’avvocato. Lo odiavo.²⁵

At this stage in the text, the reader does not have enough information necessary to understand this passage, but by the end some elements are revealed that open up the possibility of an interpretation. Licia is Goliarda’s imaginary daughter, who at some point in the child’s fantasies leaves Sicily to marry a lawyer. But Licia is also Maria’s real daughter, who in fact left Sicily to escape from Peppino Sapienza, who represented a sexual threat to her and the other sister Olga. The fact that in Goliarda’s imagination Licia marries a lawyer acquires meaning when put together with the reasons for her departure – Peppino is, indeed, ‘l’avvocato’. Through the dissemination of narrative details, Sapienza is piecing together the representation of her father’s threat of sexual abuse on her sisters.

²⁵ LA, p. 61.

At this point it is fundamental to highlight that *Lettera aperta* resonates with a refrain, the cry ‘don’t rape her!’ which Maria keeps shouting in the mental hospital where she has been admitted. With the exception of Castagnè, who points out ‘il tema dell’uomo violentatore, che ossessiona *Lettera aperta*’,²⁶ criticism has so far overlooked the theme of rape, which conversely is central for the formation of Sapienza’s representation of the power relationship between men and women in all her literary works:

Quel grido ‘Non la stuprare!’ che mia madre ripeteva legata nel letto del manicomio, era rivolto a mio padre. Oggi riesco ad ascoltarlo ed a capire quello che non volevo accettare. Probabilmente l’avvocato si era innamorato di qualcuna delle figlie di mia madre, e per questo le due ragazze scapparono verso il continente. A me sembrò terribile quel grido, tanto da seppellirlo nel fondo dello stomaco, intatto, senza averlo ascoltato. Ma è così, oggi lo vedo. Era così e piaccia o no, a te e a me che abbiamo le carni ammorbidite e pallide delle tante vergini Marie che ci hanno fatto fissare troppo a lungo. Sono riuscita a riascoltare quel grido e mi sono fatta coraggio, ma ho una paura terribile.²⁷

In this passage, the adult narrator tries to come to terms with her father by setting his freedom against her (and the reader’s) sexuality, described as weakened by moral and social norms, but her own attempt only results in renewed fear. Goliarda’s attitude towards her father is ambiguous, for she is attracted to his free, passionate and immoderate sexuality, but this also presents itself as threatening power and violence. Providenti points out the ambivalence of Sapienza’s relationship with her father and the positive vitality represented by Peppino, his ‘arte della gioia’, yet she does not identify in fear and hatred the other pole of the relationship:

In tutti gli scritti autobiografici e anche nei diari il rapporto tra Goliarda e suo padre appare sempre ricco di molte ambivalenze e anche molto pressante. Come se per tutta la vita la scrittrice avesse dovuto fare i conti con una parte di se stessa di cui al tempo stesso

²⁶ Natalie Castagnè, ‘Archeologia di Modesta’, in *Quel sogno d’essere*, pp. 81-91 (p. 7).

²⁷ LA, p. 133.

si vergognasse e desiderasse manifestare. Se non altro per quella incredibile capacità, che solo Peppino aveva, di cogliere, anche nei momenti più cupi, l'arte della gioia.²⁸

Peppino's sexuality is rooted in the same positive pole of passion and freedom that, as we shall see, Maria lacks. At the same time, however, Goliarda is repulsed by the logic of power and prevarication that his father's freedom entails. Such ambivalence has a clear parallel in Modesta's attitude towards her (alleged) father at the beginning of *L'arte della gioia*, where Modesta is initially attracted to her father's physical strength and vitality, set against her mother and sister's misery and submission, only to be raped by him straight after.

The connection between *Lettera aperta* and *L'arte della gioia* as concerns the relationship between the figure of the father and sexual violence is established also through the use of the same image of a blade. Indeed, in *Lettera aperta*, the image of the blade recurs in connection with the father's and other males' intimidating gaze and laugh, which scare the little girl.²⁹ In *L'arte della gioia* the rape is described by Modesta as a blade cutting a lamb's flesh: 'Entrava la lama fra le cosce tremanti dell'agnello – la mano grande affondava nel sangue per dividere, separare – e lei sarebbe rimasta lì sulle tavole del letto, a pezzi'.³⁰ It is interesting to note that the same image is used also in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, in this case to refer to the therapist's act of analysing Goliarda's past:

La sua voce [dell'analista] [...] si faceva più tagliente, come lama affilata entrava nelle connetture più profonde dei miei nervi segando tendini, legamenti, vene... [...] Ha smontato, ha scalzato col suo coltello le mie difese... ma solo questo? Forse mi ha staccato anche la pelle, la prima carne, la seconda, col suo bisturi psicanalitico.³¹

²⁸ *La porta è aperta*, p. 54.

²⁹ The image of the blade is used with reference to Peppino, LA, p. 117; Nunzio, p. 136; and Carlo, p. 118.

³⁰ AG, p. 14. Further references to this work in short quotations are given in the text.

³¹ FM, p. 93.

Here, as in *L'arte della gioia*, a blade cuts the woman's body into pieces, and leaves it suspended between life and death. Through the use of the same image, the narrator suggests a representation of psychoanalytical therapy as a relationship of power and even abuse, deeply implicated in patriarchal power: 'lui [the therapist] comanda qui' (FM, p. 23); 'Lui è potente' (p. 24). We will see that some psychoanalytical discourses are indeed partially opposed by the narrator as the expression of normative patriarchal power.

In *Lettera aperta*, Goliarda's father provides a male example that frightens her, and indeed his character comprises the distinctive features of domination: he is a strong and sexually aggressive adult male. In the child's mind, men become inextricably associated with power and power is in turn associated with threat and violence.

Lo odiavo. Quando avevo cominciato? [...] sembra abbastanza comune che una bambina, a un certo punto, cominci ad odiare il proprio padre, e, se vi interessa, consultate qualche trattato di psicanalisi. Sarà stato sicuramente quando dicono loro: le sanno loro queste cose. Io so solo che da quella sera mio padre fu l'avvocato.³²

In this passage, the adult narrator alludes to a psychoanalytical interpretation of her own fear and hatred of her father, discussed extensively in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*. When she talks about her relationship with her father, the therapist holds Maria responsible for teaching Goliarda to hate Peppino: "Io gli volevo bene, ma lo odiavo anche". "Lo odiava? Era sua madre che la spingeva a questo?". Disregarding, like on many other occasions, her reply – 'Ma che dice? Mia madre non spingeva ad odiare nessuno, solo i fascisti' (FM, p. 47) –, he interprets Goliarda's negative feeling of hatred (which he also describes as fear and disgust, without distinguishing between them) as due primarily to

³² LA, p. 61.

Maria's example: 'sua madre le ha trasmesso la sua aggressività, il suo odio per gli uomini' (FM, p. 126).

However, although the therapist is not able to recognize it, another possible reason behind Goliarda's negative feelings emerges from his own words. In discussing Goliarda's relationship with her partner Citto, he says that this was successful only because Citto has 'una personalità eccezionale; una dolcezza e una mancanza di volgarità' (FM, p. 90), thus qualifying 'common' masculinity as the opposite of those qualities. Citto is

una persona, come abbiamo già detto, eccezionalmente non maschile nel senso brutto che lei intende, che lei scorge in questa parola. Citto esce, si distanzia nettamente dal collettivo maschile e questo ha calmato le sue paure per parecchi anni. [...] Al primo uomo, con delle particolarità più maschili, più immerso nel collettivo maschile lei si è terrorizzata e per difesa si è irrigidita in quella che lei chiama frigidità. Questo ad un livello, ad un livello ancora più profondo: frigidità e paura coprono l'odio ed il disgusto che sua madre le ha trasmesso per l'uomo e per il sesso.³³

It is not difficult to read in the therapist's words a misrecognition of the fact that it is masculinity itself, that 'collettivo maschile' that causes Goliarda's fear. Similarly, while insisting on Maria's responsibilities, the therapist describes Peppino's features that could have scared her when she was a child, his 'passionalità eccessiva' and 'sensualità scatenata' (FM, p. 126).

The therapist acknowledges that, in the environment where the little child grew up, she was exposed to a situation in which 'le manifestazioni d'amore, d'erotismo intorno a lei si manifestavano in tinte brutali e tragiche' (FM, p. 89). Nevertheless, he does not hesitate to define the adult woman's resulting perception of the relationship between the sexes 'una visione distorta' (p. 89). In light of the relationship with the therapist recounted in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, the narrator's reference to a

³³ FM, p. 127.

psychoanalytical interpretation of her hatred and fear towards her father in *Lettera aperta* can be read as a subtle criticism, which to a certain extent anticipates the criticism of some tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis developed for example by Miller. For Freud, most women have the – untrue – phantasy of having been seduced by their fathers when they were kids. The phantasy, and not the real abuse, causes the neurosis.³⁴ Conversely, Miller shifts the focus of her analysis from the phantasy of abuse to the environment of the child, stressing real child abuse as a cause of neuroses. Sapienza's representation of the material condition of women in a patriarchal context goes in the same direction, looking for the causes of her own neuroses outside herself, in the actual oppression and abuse to which she was exposed.

As the world portrayed in *Lettera aperta* suggests, the protagonist is scared of men not because of her mother's inculcation, but, quite directly, because Peppino sexually threatens – and perhaps rapes – his stepdaughters; 'il Gigante' beats up his wife and his daughter Teresina, and Carmine sexually harasses the little Goliarda – in short, because the protagonist grows up in a patriarchal environment, where men's power over women constitutes the unavoidable context of the relationship between the sexes.

In this respect *Lettera aperta* reconnects to a number of literary works that unveil the reality of sexual abuse, or its constant threat, perpetrated by men, in particular – but not exclusively – on girls and young girls.³⁵ Significant similarities are apparent for example with Dacia Maraini's *Bagheria* (1993), Fabrizia Ramondino's *Althénopis* (1981) and Lara Cardella's *Volevo i pantaloni* (1989) – where, in all three cases, an episode of sexual abuse or its threat is perpetrated on the authors themselves, by men

³⁴ See Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity' (1933), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953-74), XXII.

³⁵ See Barbara Zecchi, 'Rape', in *The feminist encyclopedia of Italian literature*, ed. by Russel, Rinaldina, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 280-3.

who were close to their families (a friend of the child's father in *Bagheria*, a cousin in *Althénopis*, an uncle in *Volevo i pantaloni*). The topic is extensively present in Deledda's and Moravia's works, as analysed by Parisi in two recent studies.³⁶ And sexual abuse is also at the centre of Elena Ferrante's *L'amore molesto* (1995), again at the expense of a little girl. Morante's characters, for example Ida in *La storia* (1974) and Nunziatella in *L'isola di Arturo* (1957) are not spared their dose of sexual violence and abuse, nor does Franca Rame, who recounts her traumatic experience in the play *Stupro* (1975), or Sibilla Aleramo in *Una donna* (1906), one of the first women in Italy to represent and discuss overtly her experience of sexual and domestic violence. As Maraini writes in *Bagheria*, in the 70s and 80s the practice of 'autocoscienza' allowed this reality to emerge:

In quell'occasione scoprii che la cosiddetta 'molestia sessuale' da parte degli adulti sui bambini era una cosa comunissima, ben conosciuta a tutte o quasi tutte le bambine. Le quali spesso tacciono per il resto della vita, impaurite dalle minacce, dalle esortazioni degli uomini che le hanno portate negli angoli bui.³⁷

In line with Aleramo's example, Sapienza in *Lettera aperta* anticipates the social exposure of the problem of sexual and domestic abuse, which will be one of the achievements of the feminist movement in the 70s and 80s.

1.1.3 Resisting the Submissive Role: 'defemminilizzazione'

How does Goliarda relate to the models of gender proposed to her by her social context?

Thanks to the counterexample represented by Maria Giudice, the little girl is able to

³⁶ Luciano Parisi, 'Le adolescenti sole nella narrativa di Grazia Deledda', *Italian Studies*, 2, 69 (July 2014), 246-61; *Uno specchio infranto. Adolescenti e abuso sessuale nell'opera di Alberto Moravia* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2013).

³⁷ *Bagheria*, pp. 45-6. Maraini includes representations of sexual and domestic violence also in *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990) and *Voci* (1994).

resist the assimilation of the dominant patriarchal culture to which she is exposed outside her family. Her rejection is resolute – she does not want to be a ‘donnetta’. However, her resolution is represented as highly problematic, as it takes the form of a partial rejection of the identification with the female gender and a refusal to grow up, ultimately resulting in a deep sense of oppression.

Goliarda’s resistance focuses in particular on menstruation, perceived as the sign of a twofold metamorphosis: it marks the passage into adulthood and, at the same time, the acquisition of the status of ‘adult woman’, a situation in which patriarchal power exerts its control and domination much more strictly, as happened to Nica. In her effort to negotiate her own gender identity, the little girl resorts to her mother’s example. Since Maria is not submissive with men, Goliarda reflects, she surely does not have menstruation, which is where the submission of women begins.

Cosa erano quel sangue e quei dolori? [...] Veniva a tutte le femmine? Anche mia madre l’aveva? No, lei non l’aveva, lei parlava con gli uomini come un uomo. Forse non veniva a tutte. Mia madre non aveva detto forse: ‘Sono donnette che non sanno fare altro che aspettare un marito’? E anche aveva detto: ‘Tu Goliarda, non sei una donnetta’. Infatti io non volevo un marito ma un compagno, come lei... Certo, non veniva a tutte, ma solo alle donnette, e a me non sarebbe venuto. Sarei stata come mia madre. Avrei parlato come lei con gli uomini, e se non aspettavo un marito il sangue non sarebbe venuto.³⁸

Goliarda, who identifies entering sexuality with being under the control of men, hopes it is possible for her to become a woman instead of a ‘donnetta’ by eliminating the marker of her sexuality, identified in menstruation. Hence the little girl, helped by her brother Carlo, begins to train in boxing, in the hope of altering her sex – ‘per essere meno “bestiolina femmina”’ (LA, p. 110).

In the world represented by Sapienza there is no space yet for conceiving equality between the sexes without simply deleting the female component. To be an independent

³⁸ LA, p. 110.

woman, for the little child, implies to delete that component of women's physiology connected to their sexuality and reproductive potential, setting themselves apart from their own bodies. In a patriarchal context, such as the one represented in *Lettera aperta*, for a woman the achievement of agency and independence ultimately entails an assimilation to men.

Goliarda's reflection on her mother and menstruation is supported by the sexist perspective she absorbs from her context, for example from her strongly misogynist teacher Jsaya, according to whom being intelligent and well-spoken is a male characteristic: 'E sì, Goliarda: vedo che cominci ad esprimerti come un uomo, e non come un animaletto femmina. Sei come tua madre' (LA, p. 63). Jsaya's words couple with uncle Nunzio's, who in praising Maria reaffirms the idea that intelligence and courage are intrinsically masculine virtues: 'Maria impareggiabile, intelligente più di un uomo e coraggiosa più di un uomo' (p. 153).

In the end, the little girl cannot control her biological development and becomes, unavoidably, a woman. The process of growing up is described, as we have seen, as a disease, narrated as a long night of altered and delirious perceptions. When Goliarda wakes up, she does not identify herself with her own body, a decision marked by the refusal to look at her reflection in the mirror and leading to self-annihilation: 'Ero grande e non dovevo stare lì. Carmine già si voltava in su a guardare con la bocca spalancata, già aspettava: non dovevo stare lì, dovevo andare a letto senza guardarmi allo specchio, infilarmi nel letto e non muovermi più' (LA, p. 59).

In *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, causes and meaning of the child's 'gender troubles' are the object of negotiation between the narrator and her therapist. In the latter's interpretation, Maria is again responsible for the little girl's difficult development, as

she would have forced Goliarda to act like a man, suppress her ‘femininity’ and undergo a process of ‘defemminilizzazione’.

lei ha cercato di sfuggire a questo super-io [Maria] che la forzava ad essere un maschio, come da bambina la spinse ad allenarsi con Carlo per diventare un uomo, ed è per questo che non ha mai accettato le mestruazioni. [...] temendo che il rito magico che fece da bambina allenandosi alla boxe con suo fratello fosse veramente riuscito a cancellare seni e dolcezza con muscoli, si veste di pizzi e si finge di amare le sete [...] per nascondere il disprezzo che sua madre le inculcò per queste cose e che porta in sé intatto. [...] lei ha subito questo processo di defemminilizzazione [...]. Nel suo inconscio lei teme di essere stata sterilizzata e quindi di non essere una donna.³⁹

Femininity is characterised, in the therapist’s view, as ‘seni’, ‘dolcezza’ and, most importantly, in women’s reproductive function, to the point that being sterile is equated to not being a woman. He applies here Freud’s views, who considers the healthy development of a woman as coinciding with a heterosexual orientation and the desire for a baby (especially male) as a substitute for the penis.⁴⁰ Conversely, where penis envy and the Oedipus complex are not successfully resolved, possible reactions consist in the development of a powerful masculinity complex, neurosis and homosexuality. Internalising the therapist’s language, the narrator of *Il filo di mezzogiorno* partially acknowledges her own contempt for femininity, deriving from the identification of intelligence with masculinity, and charges early feminism (of which Maria was part) for it:

vede, per me essere una donna intelligente si identificava come direbbe lei, comincio a copiarla vede? Sì, si identificava con l’essere mascolina, in tailleur, coi tacchi bassi, senza trucco, insomma il solito errore che imperversava a quell’epoca, eredità delle femministe del primo Novecento.⁴¹

³⁹ FM, p. 108

⁴⁰ S. Freud, ‘Female Sexuality’ (1931), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XXI; *Femininity*, cit.

⁴¹ FM, p. 101.

Nevertheless, some aspects of Maria's feminist model – which aspires to women who are strong and autonomous, for example rejecting marriage until divorce becomes legal – are decidedly endorsed by Goliarda, while the therapist considers them as the real negative cause of Goliarda's 'defemminilizzazione' and pushes her towards a more traditional role for women. For example, he insists on calling Citto Goliarda's 'husband', although she keeps contesting it and remarking that they are not married, and he affirms that being married would have given her 'un senso maggiore di sicurezza, di protezione', something defined positive for her as a woman, trying, unsuccessfully, to distance her from Maria's views (FM, pp. 31-2). On a similar note, he defines her as 'troppo coraggiosa per una donna', where such feature, allegedly male, is considered negative when belonging to a woman. Her response, which denies such a difference between men and women, goes unnoticed, as always (FM, pp. 85-6).

As Ross points out, Sapienza 'è fermamente critica dei discorsi normativi di genere e sessualità che pervadono il pensiero psicoanalitico in generale, e quello freudiano in particolare'.⁴² Overall, therapist and patient agree that there has been and there still is a 'gender trouble' deriving from a clash with a normative model of female gender identity. However, the doctor interprets it as a wrong deviance from femininity and attempts to push her back into a normative role for women. Conversely, the narrator identifies in the material conditions of women, controlled and undervalued, the main polemical objective, but can only articulate the difficulty for women to be intelligent and independent without simply being assimilated to men. She refuses to be forced back into a normative gender role, but ultimately cannot find a solution, for the solution is not in the individual response of compliance, but in a difficult relationship with a material

⁴² *Identità di genere e sessualità*, p. 234.

context: “Ma deve ammettere che lei è stata educata da sua madre troppo rigidamente. [...]” “Sì, sì, lo so, ma che poteva fare? Lasciarmi in mano alle zie, ai fratelli che tendevano, da buoni siciliani, a ridurmi una femminuccia? La storia esiste, dottore.”⁴³

Sapienza’s contestation of the normative aspects of psychoanalysis is here very radical, and reflects a Marxist-feminist approach to the problem of the oppression of women. Such approach constitutes a fundamental interpretative frame and cultural reference for Sapienza, who since childhood was exposed to Maria Giudice’s example and, through her, to the thought and political action of figures such as August Bebel, Anna Kuliscioff, Alexandra Kollontai, Angelica Balabanoff, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.⁴⁴

In her investigation of the relationship between biological sex and gender identity in Sapienza’s works, Ross notes how Sapienza creates a multifaceted gender identity thanks to her rejection of a necessary connection between biological sex and a determined and fixed gender identity, in line with Foucault’s views on power and sexuality and anticipating Butler’s description of gender as performative.⁴⁵ However, Butler’s queer perspective is less interested in the material conditions of the oppression of women and rather focuses on the theoretical deconstruction of the connection between sex and gender. Whereas in *L’arte della gioia* Sapienza will explore queer identities and relationships, playing on the disconnection between sex and gender, in *Lettera aperta* she foregrounds the process through which social norms and reified gender identities are produced. Although Ross is right in describing Sapienza’s understanding of the relationship between sex and gender as post-structuralist and anti-

⁴³ FM, p. 112.

⁴⁴ Particularly important is Bebel’s *Women in the Past, Present and Future* (London: Reeves, 1885), cited and discussed in AG, p. 91; p. 184; p. 243; p. 335.

⁴⁵ *Identità di genere e sessualità*, p. 228.

metaphysical, in my view in *Lettera aperta* (as well as in *Io, Jean Gabin*, as we shall see) the central focus of narration is represented by the political criticism of the oppression undergone by the child and the material conditions of such oppression. In other words, in *Lettera aperta* Sapienza's main concern is not the arbitrariness of social norms, but the concrete power involved in their constitution and enforcement. Indeed, if sex and gender are not 'una serie di percorsi determinati biologicamente',⁴⁶ that is, they do not have the status of necessity from a theoretical perspective, they are nonetheless imposed as unavoidable identities in a highly regulated patriarchal society like the one portrayed by Sapienza.

The narrator of *Lettera aperta* seeks for a liberation from the imposition of social norms as absolute, necessary, metaphysical structures by retracing, in her narration, the process of formation of the norms themselves. The liberating 'queer' energy belongs to the narrator's deconstructive operation, while the child undergoes a path of progressive oppression. Sex, gender and sexual orientation are distinct in theory, but their connection to each other, their attachment to a specific social role and the imposition of the resulting structure as necessary are enforced by patriarchal power.

1.1.4 Maria's Betrayal

We have seen how Goliarda, thanks to her mother's feminist example, is able to resist a patriarchal model of gender. Nonetheless, the little girl finds in Maria's example also a crushing limit, for the old woman falls into insanity and dies in a psychiatric hospital. Goliarda's gender formation in *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* thus raises a central question, that runs throughout all Sapienza's literary works and personal

⁴⁶ *Identità di genere e sessualità*, pp. 225-6.

reflection. How is it possible for a woman to achieve independence and freedom without simply replicating the male model? Reformulated from a socio-political perspective, the same question would sound like this: if men have the power to shape and enforce structures, how can a woman, who does not have the same power, change such structures? How is it possible for a woman to change the balance of power between men and women, without adopting the same logic of power?

In *Lettera aperta*, the young girl's struggle to make sense of her mother's nonconformist model and the completely different rules in force outside her family offers an insightful representation of this challenge, the overwhelming difficulty of which both Goliarda Sapienza and Maria Giudice personally experienced in their lives. The child's conclusion that since her mother is independent she does not have menstruation is a compelling representation of the real difficulty women have in the material and symbolic operation of achieving independence without a serious destabilisation of their identity. In Sapienza's representation, Maria is a victim of this irreconcilable alternative. Whereas Modesta, the protagonist of *L'arte della gioia*, will be able to transgress social norms and deconstruct all sorts of internal and external constraints without paying any price on the level of personal identity or social punitive repercussions, Maria Giudice cannot afford the same freedom. Instead, she faces what Nozzoli defines a 'crisi d'identità inevitabile per la donna che non sappia adeguarsi alla condizione subalterna'.⁴⁷ Similarly, Michele Sovente notes: 'La presa di coscienza dell'inaderenza al modello femminile si traduce in perdita d'identità.'⁴⁸ Diotima's project of a 'double-alterity', a difference both from masculinity and normative

⁴⁷ Anna Nozzoli, *Tabù e coscienza: la condizione femminile nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1978), p. 97.

⁴⁸ Michele Sovente, *La donna nella letteratura oggi* (Fossano: Esperienze, 1979), p. 38.

femininity, which, in solidarity with Irigaray's thought, suggests a possible way out of the impasse, will be formulated only over twenty years later.⁴⁹

In Sapienza's representation, Maria sacrifices her personal needs and her individuality to the abstractness of her ideal. The independence that Goliarda admires carries with it a dangerous burden of intransigence, of which the child observes the outer effects: 'mia madre, così severa e inappellabile' (LA, p. 141), 'mia madre non rideva mai' (p. 143), 'così schiva di tenerezze' (p. 148), and remarks 'a casa mia non si parlava mai di cose concrete' (p. 131). The most effective example of Maria's strong ideology and detachment is her statement that she would never put her child before other children, even at the cost of starving her.⁵⁰ An important ground on which Goliarda establishes a comparison with Maria, together with women's independence, is indeed the performing of parental duties, identified here in the essential task of taking care and loving. By looking at her mother from the perspective of the task of taking care, the narrator introduces a painful break in the mother's model, for she accuses her mother of having privileged her idealism over the caring relationship with her children. Conversely, when Maria, old and insane, needs Goliarda's help, the latter accepts the task of becoming her mother's mother, and takes her revenge by showing her how to take care, thus in some way challenging Maria's example. The entanglement of love, imitation, frustration and rejection is highly dramatic:

Davanti alla sua carne lacerata, mi chiedo oggi, con timore: sono stata una buona madre per mia madre quando lei – per magia di quell'antico gioco – regredi a cinque, sei anni, quasi demente, paralizzata su una poltrona? Ho assolto il mio compito. [...]

⁴⁹ See Diotima, *Il filo di Arianna. Letture della differenza sessuale* (Rome: Utopia, 1987); A. Cavarero, *Diotima. Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1991).

⁵⁰ The episode is recounted also in FM, p. 151.

Il mio curarla era una vendetta. [...] Mi vendicavo di avermi tradito con la pazzia. Mi vendicavo facendole vedere com'è che si cura una figlia: facendolo vedere a lei, che occupandosi solo della mia mente mi aveva per il resto trascurata in tutti i modi.⁵¹

Why is Maria's insanity a betrayal of her daughter? The answer is disseminated through the whole text, but it is only at the end of the retrospective reconstruction of her childhood that the narrator is able to formulate it. Maria betrayed Goliarda because the path she indicated to her daughter resulted in a painful failure. Here, Sapienza dedicates to her mother one of the most intense passages of the text as well as one of the deepest understandings and most effective representations of the inner struggle of women who, contesting the patriarchal status quo, adopt an ideological and intransigent attitude:

Apro le mani e tocco il tuo scialle, comincio appena a riconoscere i colori delle lane; apro gli occhi e vedo la tua ossessione. Pazzia, come la chiamarono quegli uomini bianchi senza sguardo. Adesso vedo perché ti è scoppiata tra le mani proprio quando il tuo nemico cadde distrutto come tu pregavi. Cadendo lui, ti si rompe la tensione d'acciaio per la quale hai vissuto estraniandoti da te stessa, dalla tua carne; cadendo il contraddittore, sei restata muta e sola, con i fatti della tua vita denudati della corazza che ti permetteva di non ascoltare i particolari, le virgole della tua vicenda. E nuda con te stessa, le passività femminili, le emozioni tenere delle tue spalle morbide, del tuo seno grande, si ruppero le dighe che la tua intelligenza aveva alzato fra te e te, spalancando una fiumana di paure, che avevi ignorato di avere. Come tutte le donne, essendo intelligente, dovevi esserlo più di un uomo; coraggiosa più di un uomo. Ma non si sfugge alla propria natura: puoi sì affamarla, costringerla al silenzio anche per molto tempo; ma prima o poi la sua fame la spinge fuori coi denti le unghie affilate e ti dilania le carni e le vene.⁵²

In Sapienza's view, Maria's insanity stands for the failure of a strategy that seeks to erase the bodily dimension in favour of abstract rationality. In the specific context of Sicily in the first half of the 20th century, Maria's struggle for independence and equality entails the adoption of an ideology and a rigid attitude that overcomes individuality and represses the body. But the price she pays is too high, and in the end of her life her disregarded 'nature' floods back.

⁵¹ LA, p. 148.

⁵² Ibid. p. 147. Maria's descent into insanity is narrated also in FM, pp. 37-9.

The adult narrator is able to understand the mechanism beyond the phenomenology of her mother's removal of the physical dimension. As an adult, she compares her friend Franca with her mother: 'quel suo parlare scandendo sicuramente i concetti, quella sua "crudeltà", mi riportarono alla "crudeltà" di mia madre, che è poi, oggi lo capisco, il tentativo, da donna, di essere più rigorose degli uomini. Rigore di idee, di ricerca, di vita' (LA, p. 143). Maria's rigour is compared, by contrast, to Franca's sensual smile, which expresses the person's corporeal presence: 'Quando ridi – e tu ridi: mia madre non rideva mai – la tua fronte si distende luminosa, e le tue labbra si gonfiano di carne affamata e calda' (p. 143).

In a patriarchal society, such as in Sicily under fascism, Maria is trapped: she either accepts a submissive role, or has to pay a personal price that can lead to insanity. If Maria died insane, she clearly could not provide a viable example for Goliarda, and the narrator of *Il filo di mezzogiorno* is terrified at the idea of replicating her mother's destiny: 'Mi dica la verità. Sono stata rinchiusa perché ero pazza? Pazza come mia madre?' (FM, p. 38); 'Io non volevo somigliare a mia madre, ma purtroppo era chiaro che le assomigliavo se ero stata pazza come lei' (p. 47). In *Lettera aperta*, the adult narrator goes back to her mother's model and finds what went wrong, namely the cancellation of a corporeal dimension, where desires and love reside. Reinstating the body is thus the existential, epistemological, ethical and political endeavour that Sapienza undertakes through *Lettera aperta* and through her whole work.

At first sight, Sapienza appears to be asserting a binary model of gender difference. Maria adopts a rigid ideology, associated with the male domain, and represses the particularity and concreteness of her body, associated with the female sphere. Using Cavarero's terminology, such gender binary would belong to the 'ordine

simbolico patriarcale, notoriamente dicotomico, che concepisce l'uomo come mente e la donna come corpo [...].⁵³ Sapienza's interpretation of her mother's insanity would be entrenched in a tradition that associates men with *logos* (abstract and universal rationality), and women with *aisthesis* (fleshy concreteness). As Butler puts it, 'this association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom'.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, in *Lettera aperta* the conceptualisation of gender difference is more complex and actually rather different from the patriarchal dichotomy described above. Specifically, no necessary connection is established between abstract rationality and men. It is not men who represent a *logos* separated from the *aisthesis*. Such separation of *logos* and *aisthesis* pertains to those women who oppose their alleged natural submissive position. It is Maria who has to put her fleshy concreteness aside in order to access the position of power that alone can guarantee her independence. Here Sapienza to some extent anticipates a point, fundamental especially to Irigaray, well summarised by Burns: 'part of the project of creating a feminine subject is to dismantle the Cartesian and phallogentric separation of mind and body and push the woman's body, as part of her being, into the speaking subject.'⁵⁵

The patriarchal binary model – *logos* linked to men, body linked to women – does not take into account the different perspectives from which men and women relate to

⁵³ *A più voci*, p. 110.

⁵⁴ Butler, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2002), p. 85. For a clear and rich discussion of women's problematic position with respect to the body, see Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 1-23.

logos and *aisthesis*, laws and nature. Sapienza's representation deconstructs this model by showing that the difference is a difference in power, which forces women into an impossible position of choosing between their independence and their body, for in order to gain power they have to renounce parts of themselves. Conversely, as regards those men, like Goliarda's father, who enjoy a position of power, the relationship between *logos* and *aisthesis*, between laws and nature, would be much less conflictual, because they would be able to shape the laws according to their desires. In other words, subjects who are in a dominant position would be more free than subjects in a dominated position to listen to their physical instincts and express them, because they have the power to shape social structures on the basis of them. This difference between men and women as regards their relationship to *logos* explains why it is men and not women who in *Lettera aperta* are represented as closer to the *aisthesis*, a position that clearly overturns the patriarchal discourse. While Maria, in order to be independent, needs to delete and suppress her body, Peppino is free to express his immoderate and passionate sexuality.

1.1.5 Norms and Sexuality

In addition to Maria's insanity and Peppino's association to domination and sexual threat, *Lettera aperta* represents two episodes that increase the divergence from both her mother's and father's models of gender identity and relationship between the sexes. These episodes concern the parental repression of the young girl's sexuality: Maria slaps her when she finds out that she is engaging in a homosexual experience with Nica; Peppino and Goliarda's brothers Carlo and Arminio harshly reproach her when they catch her holding hands with a boy. Through these episodes, Sapienza expands her

discourse to question the very legitimacy of imposing norms on sexuality, including a controversial interpretation of homosexuality and incest.

The episode involving Peppino takes place when Goliarda is about to move to Rome, at the age of seventeen. The exercise of authority by the male members of her family confirms, in the girl's eyes, the impossibility for her to access the same sexual freedom as men. The unmasking of male power is represented through the girl's changed perception of her brother Carlo's body, involving the recurring image of a blade:

Fra la porta e la bussola, nel buio, i baffi neri lucevano appuntiti come lama, non l'avevo mai guardato bene. O lui era cambiato? Anche gli occhi taglienti e duri come i baffi, e le mani che mi spinsero nell'anticamera. [...] Ma i baffi, lì alla luce, tagliavano più forte, e lo respinsi con tutte le mie forze.⁵⁶

After being reproached by her brothers, Goliarda faces her father, who threatens to slap her (the text does not clarify whether he does it or not). Peppino's reaction reveals the deep inconsistency between the ideal of freedom he enjoys and professes, and the exclusion of women from it, between his personal example of sexual activity and the prohibition to Goliarda to follow it.

Maria's repression of Goliarda's homosexual experimentation is particularly relevant for the narrator, who dedicates a significant part of the text to the character of Nica and the sense of loss of natural vitality attached to the interruption of their relationship.⁵⁷ The story of the relationship between the two girls is told from Goliarda's perspective, who experiences it as joyful and unproblematic. When Maria finds out about it she slaps Goliarda, thus imposing a prohibition over the girl's previously unproblematic desire. As Giuliana Ortu notes, Maria's attitude is disorientating and

⁵⁶ LA, p. 118.

⁵⁷ See LA, p. 96. See also FM, p. 16; p. 21; p. 30.

incoherent: ‘da una parte, aveva censurato le sue scoperte sessuali e, dall’altra, l’aveva autorizzata a trovare la propria libertà nel mondo.’⁵⁸ In remembering this episode, the adult narrator reflects on how her mother’s ban deprived her of a possibility to understand her own body and desires, blocking her development. In *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, the therapist replicates the repression exerted by Maria’s slaps:

‘Deve finirla signora di fare all’amore con queste immagini di donna femminili che crede di amare e invece solo teme’. Le mani, ora, di ghisa, nel cerchio della luce, immobili sulle ginocchia mi schiaffeggiavano... deve finirla di fare all’amore... con... Nica... [...] avevo tanta voglia di abbracciarla... ma non dovevo... E quel pomeriggio quei due schiaffi psicanalitici mi strapparono dalle braccia Nica... Titina... Haya... sorella mia dagli occhi come ali buie di uccello notturno, Haya quale maleficio ci tiene lontane? ... Nica, non ci vedremo più?⁵⁹

He also argues that she has a ‘bisogno eccessivo di amicizie di donne’, and that ‘l’amicizia fra donne è sempre un po’ ambigua’.⁶⁰ Yet, the narrator does not accept the therapist’s heteronormative interpretation.⁶¹ She defines him, contemptuously, ‘piccolo borghese’, objects that his perspective is sexist and finally loses control and slaps him. While in *Il filo di mezzogiorno* Sapienza questions the legitimacy of heteronormative discourses, in *Lettera aperta* she appears to have partially internalised them.

La mia natura mi costringeva a non credere a quegli schiaffi, ma a cercare Nica in quello specchio. Potevo andare oltre Nica? [...] Non pensate che non ho avuto uomini: li ho avuti, ma da dilettante, senza sapere, con la paura di sbagliare. Lo stadio di omosessualità o di masturbazione, se esaurito nel suo limite, non è necessario alla comprensione di se stessi, del proprio corpo? Se bloccato, come avviene sempre, può provocare un arresto a dodici, quattordici anni: nel corpo e purtroppo anche nella mente. C’è forse qualche omosessuale adulto fra voi che copre una simile mancanza di crescita con ‘estetismi’, ‘vocazione di natura’, ‘destino’? Dico solo quello che si è fatto chiaro a me, solo per me,

⁵⁸ Giuliana Ortu, ‘Cosa vedono gli occhi di quella bambina. *Lettera aperta*’, in *Appassionata Sapienza*, pp. 148-79 (p. 173).

⁵⁹ FM, p. 109.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 70. On another occasion, he inquires about Goliarda’s friend: ‘Era un po’ morbosa questa Jane? L’accarezzava?’, p. 138.

⁶¹ On the notion of heteronormativity, see Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, trans. by Louise Turcotte (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), and Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, *Signs*, 4, 5, *Women: Sex and Sexuality* (Summer, 1980), 631-60.

nelle mie emozioni. Non vi arrabbiate, anche perché chi vi parla è stata bloccata a dodici, quattordici anni come voi. È una persona costretta come voi che dice queste cose. Un'omosessuale come voi.⁶²

In her analysis of Sapienza's representation of sexuality, Ross highlights a tension between a 'queer' perspective and internalised social norms: 'la narrazione della sua identità di genere e della sua sessualità [...] oscilla tra un rispecchiamento e una contestazione delle norme socio-culturali.'⁶³ In particular in *Lettera aperta*, we have on the one hand the child, who never questions the legitimacy of her desires, does not feel guilty and simply suffers from being prevented from enjoying her relationship with Nica; on the other hand, the adult narrator considers homosexuality and masturbation as forms of self-knowledge, a natural passage towards a mature sexual orientation, but this is nonetheless supposed to be heterosexual. Early experimentation is useful in order to fully enjoy heterosexuality, but not to question its limits: 'her comments are both transgressive for a text published in 1967, since she declares herself "homosexual", and rather homophobic, since this is cast as a problematic state of arrested development.'⁶⁴

As an example of the oscillation between rejection and internalisation of social norms, Ross notes the varied repetition of the act of slapping. In *Lettera aperta*, as we have seen, Maria slaps Goliarda to inhibit her homosexual desire. In *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, however, the narrator rebels against the therapist's homophobic and normative attitude by slapping him, and in doing so she 'repeats and resignifies her mother's gesture, potentially reversing the prohibition of homosexuality by accusing the accuser'.⁶⁵ While the narrator's rebellion against the therapist indicates a rejection of heteronormativity, in *Le certezze del dubbio* Sapienza herself acts to prohibit

⁶² LA, pp. 97-8.

⁶³ *Identità di genere e sessualità*, p. 225.

⁶⁴ *Eccentric interruptions*, p. 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 17.

homosexuality replicating once again the same gesture, as she slaps her friend Roberta, to whom she is nonetheless sexually attracted. Surprised by her own gesture, the narrator interprets it as directed against herself, as a self-prohibition. She is, as Ross points out, separated both from her own “‘homosexual’ self’ and ‘alienated from her own gesture’”.⁶⁶

Where it is true that Sapienza’s works show a persistence of this oscillation between norm and rebellion, her conscious choice to represent and discuss such oscillation can also be interpreted as a detachment from heteronormative discourses, rather than their internalisation. In other words, in her texts Sapienza gives voice to frustration at her own internalisation of norms, representing the difficulty of freeing herself from imposed constraints. The interpretation of such constraints as negative and oppressive is clear already at the stage of *Lettera aperta*, which represents the narrator’s attempt to retrieve an access to her own desires beyond and before the imposition of social norms and categories. Her choice to represent a pre-adolescent homosexual experience, in the absence of any reference to guilt, and her insistence on the negative consequences of the mother’s ban suggest that the author is knowingly using narration to denounce sexual repression and reconstruct her own desires.

In the adult narrator’s reconstruction, the loss of Nica deprived her of the freedom to discover and understand her own body, which explains the association of homosexuality and masturbation. The young girl’s desire for Nica has nothing to do with masturbation and much to do with homosexuality, as the narrator overtly indicates by representing the impossibility for Goliarda to hug herself or to replace Nica’s body with her own reflection in the mirror (LA, p. 97). Conversely, the adult narrator moves

⁶⁶ *Eccentric interruptions*, p. 18.

her attention from homosexual desire to the repression of experimentation in general. In other words, the narrator's main focus is not homosexuality as deviance from heterosexuality but sexual immaturity opposed to free experimentation, as she is interested in addressing and overcoming the restrictions she underwent by retrieving a physical freedom that preceded them. What she will do with her reconstructed autonomy, whether the result will be a homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual or fluid identity actually does not appear to interest the narrator as much.

The evolution of the issue of homosexuality and sexual experimentation throughout Sapienza's works provides a complex representation of the difficulty to free desire from oppression and internalised norms. By voicing such struggle, however, Sapienza's texts also work as a clear denunciation of the negativity of the repression she underwent, 'in linea con Foucault quando critica il potere disciplinare che controlla la sessualità infantile'.⁶⁷ Modesta's example, with its symbolic liberation, shows where Sapienza's aspiration of free sexuality would lead – to a fluid, joyful sexuality that disrupts any category of fixed identity and sexual orientation.⁶⁸ In *L'arte della gioia*, too, homosexual experimentation (this time, however, not in childhood but in late adolescence) is described as functional to a full and mature heterosexual relationship, but this idea is contradicted straight after by Modesta's own behaviour as well as her explicit opinions, when she discusses and rejects Freudian understanding of 'normal' sexual orientation as heterosexual.⁶⁹

Comparing the representation of sexual orientation in *Lettera aperta* and *L'arte della gioia*, Ross remarks: 'L'incontenibile energia queer di Modesta è assente nei testi

⁶⁷ *Identità di genere e sessualità*, pp. 230-1.

⁶⁸ See Lisa Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁶⁹ AG, pp. 347-9. Cf. the discussion of sexuality in *L'arte della gioia* in Chapter 2.

più autobiografici, che ci incoraggiano a nascondere dei ‘segreti’, piuttosto che a demolire i modelli normativi che rendono indicibili ed inesprimibili certi desideri.’⁷⁰ If *Lettera aperta* does not contain the same queer energy as *L’arte della gioia*, the difference appears to reside more in a lack of drive than of ‘queerness’. The literary operation of *Lettera aperta* consists precisely in reacquiring this lost energy, by deconstructing the norms that oppressed and interrupted her own desires. What the adult narrator associates with the abrupt interruption of her relationship with Nica is the loss of a direct relationship with her own body, associated to a source of vitality and creativity. Indeed, Nica is also a storyteller with powerful creative imagination:

Quante storie avrei ancora potuto ascoltare da lei, se quei due schiaffi che vennero dopo non mi avessero strappato dalle sue mani, dalla sua voce! [...] Non solo il suo corpo, ma la sua fantasia mi rubarono quei due schiaffi. E solo il suo corpo e la sua fantasia?⁷¹

The narrator’s deconstruction of dominant social norms sustains the passage from the issue of homosexuality to that of incest, introduced by the narrator’s discovery that Nica is her half-sister. She recounts three cases of incest she witnesses happening around her: Musetta and Arminio (LA, p. 123) (she will discover later that they are not siblings but stepsiblings); Teresa and her father, ‘il Gigante’ (p. 128); Ivanoe’s friend and his mother (p. 126). It is in the context of the narration of these incest episodes that Sapienza claims sexual freedom beyond any category and social constraint.

Mi viene il dubbio di non aver mai capito niente dell’amore, perché di tutte le parole, essendo essa la più vitale e libera, può diventare una leva pericolosa per la ricerca di se stessi, e quindi lo strumento attraverso il quale si smascherano falsi concetti, false leggi, false limitazioni, fisiche e morali. È questa la ragione per cui ‘amore’ è la parola più snaturata, incarcerata fra le sbarre dei codici legali, da censori, uomini politici e medici venuti dall’ordine. [...]

L’attrazione carnale e della fantasia non sopporta limiti e non ne nascono mostri né sventure se non come in tutti gli accoppiamenti. Non userò più la parola ‘incesto’: o

⁷⁰ *Identità di genere e sessualità*, p. 241.

⁷¹ LA, p. 107.

meglio, la userò per me quando per consuetudine, compassione continuerò a vivere con un uomo che non mi attrae più e che non è più attratto da me. La userò per te quando per pietà, per dovere, abitudine, continuerai a rotolarti nel letto di tua moglie che non ti dice più niente. Questo è il vero incesto dal quale nascono sicuramente mostri, dolori, sventure umilianti. Ma quella signora, Teresa: – penserò ai vostri abbracci come a un terribile fatto di natura, come la nascita e la morte.⁷²

Incest, arguably one of the deepest cross-cultural taboos, is used by the narrator to highlight the norms that give structure to society.⁷³ Sapienza overturns the meaning of the word ‘incest’ using it to designate not the infraction of a norm (which is presented as socially constructed), but the imposition of falsifying and de-naturalising constraints on individual sexual freedom.

It is interesting to point out that Sapienza carries out a defence of sexual freedom beyond categories not as regards sexual orientation but on the much more disturbing issue of incest, and in particular incest between parents and children. In the context of a narrative deeply concerned with power relationships and with male violence against women, a possible explanation of this particular approach to the issue of incest can be found in the disposition of the chapters. Indeed, the discussion of incest is followed by the disclosure of the meaning of Maria’s cry ‘non la stuprare’. Through the acceptance of incest as ‘nature’, the narrator tries to accept her father’s sexuality, to which, as we have seen, she attaches both positive (liberating) and negative (violent) connotations. By introducing the issue of her father’s violent sexuality through the defence of sexual freedom, the narrator is possibly looking for a direction from which to approach this disquieting issue. Yet, as we have seen, overall the attempt to accept her father’s sexual

⁷² LA, pp. 131-2.

⁷³ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, revised edition, trans. by James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); see also Arthur P. Wolf and William H. Durham (eds.), *Inbreeding, Incest, and the Incest Taboo: The State of Knowledge at the Turn of the Century* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

aggressiveness by conceiving it as sexual freedom beyond norms fails against the fear and hatred it inspires.

1.2 A Conflicting Education, a Failed Integration

Intertwined with the young protagonist's search for identity from the perspective of gender and sexuality is her attempt to orient herself in the series of contradictory examples to which she is exposed. In this section I analyse the conflicts that characterise Goliarda's identity formation, which is insistently articulated as a tiresome search for a position in society. The main challenge resides in the opposition between Sapienza's family's and the rest of society as concerns political ideology and religion, resulting in the absence of univocal and viable educative models for the girl. In addition, Sapienza's family's relative economic wealth clashes with the conditions of sub-proletarian and working classes she can observe in her neighbourhood, and is difficult to reconcile with socialist ideology. Finally, the child feels isolated also within her family, which expects her to act as an adult and emotionally neglects her, inducing in her a compliant attitude that will ultimately lead her to a deep sense of oppression and loss of the self. Inheriting from her family a critical attitude towards state and religious institutions, as an adult Sapienza turns her criticism against all absolute structures, including her family's ideology and its focus on an excessively responsible and autonomous individual.

1.2.1 Sapienza's Family: an Island within Fascist and Catholic Sicily

In *Lettera aperta* the representation of the relationship between the Sapienzas, the rest of society and the protagonist's own personal position crosses over cultural, political,

religious and class aspects. The Sapienza family, together with the tutor Jsaya, embraces an anti-fascist and anti-Catholic perspective, which in the context of a society whose official dominant culture is fascist and Catholic, entails the opposition to state institutions and norms. Such an anti-institutional position dovetails with a contempt for the middle class, which, for example in the Brunos, is represented as the social basis of fascist and Catholic conformism and respectability. These are the years of fascism's strongest power, and both Maria and Peppino have paid a high price for their opposition. Peppino's son, Goliardo, drowned in the sea at the age of fourteen, probably killed by the Mafia on behalf of fascism; both Peppino and Maria were repeatedly imprisoned and Maria was constantly under the strict control of fascist police.

The dictatorship leaves little space for political activism, which in Sapienza's recollection of her parents in the 20s and 30s is forcedly confined to the space of resistance against the dominant rhetoric. Goliarda's education is thus directly affected by her parents' effort to counteract the rhetoric of the regime. This contrast is particularly evident as regards state school, addressed as the place where the regime imposes its mystifying and conformist culture, which for the girl plays the role of 'controformazione'.⁷⁴ While Maria generically urges her to study, insisting on the importance of education for women's independence, Goliarda is instructed by her father and her tutor Jsaya to despise state schooling, repeatedly described as a 'buco marcio, dove insegnano solo bugie' (LA, p. 51). In order to confront the mystifying role played by educational institution, Peppino exposes Goliarda to brutal reality:

'Dove vai così presto?'
'A scuola'.

⁷⁴ Milagro Martín Clavijo, 'I luoghi della formazione di Goliarda Sapienza: *Io, Jean Gabin*', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 157-74 (p. 165).

‘Ma che vai a fare in quel buco? Vieni con me: così, almeno per un giorno, non sentirai bugie. Aspetta, hanno ucciso un bambino a Sciacca e andremo di persona a vedere com’è andata’.⁷⁵

Similarly, Jsaya counters the ‘cazzate’ taught at school by using crude language and behaviour. When he teaches Goliarda the poem *Romagna*, he insults Pascoli, described as subservient to power, and spits from the window on the soldiers in the street (LA, p. 140). The opposition between public and family spheres reaches its peak in the episode of Goliarda’s candid criticism of religion, when she repeats in class the expression ‘la droga della religione’ heard from Jsaya. Harshly reprimanded, she feels painfully isolated from her schoolmates: ‘E quel buco, già così orribile, divenne per me un posto di tortura’ (p. 64). The episode reflects the difficulty that Goliarda inherits from her parents’ position to relate to a social context while contesting its norms. When Goliarda is fourteen years old Peppino interrupts any contact between her and state institutions by removing her from school and burning her uniform. Martín Clavijo highlights the personal repercussions on the protagonist of the radical separation from the dominant culture of her social context: ‘Lasciare la scuola, bruciare la divisa come farà Goliarda, significherà imparare completamente da sola, integrare le diverse concezioni senza un’autorità, fare in pratica da autodidatta e al margine della società definitivamente.’⁷⁶

The contrast between family and dominant culture is clearly articulated as a fight against the lies spread by official propaganda. Against falsifying rhetoric, the little girl is expected to act as an already formed, strong and autonomous ‘individuo’ (LA, p. 46), able to orient herself among conflictual messages and take position. The disproportion between expectations of mature responsibility and the child’s still fragile personality is

⁷⁵ LA, p. 51.

⁷⁶ Martín Clavijo, p. 165.

evident, for example, in the passage in which Ivanoe reproaches Goliarda as she is caught lying about her name.

‘Non sai Goliarda che non si dicono bugie?’ Non potevo parlare, e credo di aver pensato: non lo faccio più, o qualcosa del genere. Lo avevo solo pensato: lo sapevo che a casa mia scusarsi era ritenuto un gesto dolciastro, cattolico: ma lui doveva aver sentito lo stesso [...]. ‘Non si chiede scusa, chiedere scusa è il sistema che usano le donnette per rifare i loro sporchi peccatucci. Sei un individuo, e sei responsabile delle tue azioni. Non chiedere scusa, ma cerca di riparare’.⁷⁷

Ivanoe’s intransigent perspective combines the criticism of the hypocrisy of Catholic practice of forgiveness with a call for individual responsibility and coherence, rejecting even the simple habit of apologising, when this is not accompanied by an actual commitment to change. The opposition is straightforward: on the one hand, there is a false rhetoric, linked in this case to Catholicism; on the other, false rhetoric has to be countered by authentic actions, founded on individual freedom and responsibility.

The notions Goliarda receives from her family about Catholicism reflect the same contrast between authenticity and institutions. Maria appreciates Jesus’s message, interpreted as an egalitarian call, as Jesus is ‘il primo rivoluzionario, il primo ad aver detto che sulla terra ricchi e poveri siamo tutti uguali’ (LA, p. 78), the little girl’s experience in a church shows a reality that contradicts Maria’s view. Inspired by her mother’s words and the positive example of Sister Maria, Goliarda decides to worship Jesus; brought to the local church for the first time, she notices the precious furniture, the strong scent, people’s smart clothes and listens to the priest’s unintelligible words.

La chiesa era fresca e profumata, mentre fuori c’era il mercato, il caldo, la puzza di pesce. Ma dove era il Signor Gesù Cristo di suor Maria? Quello sull’altare d’oro era tutto pieno di gemme e di argento come un pupo, e non portava il cuore in mano. Aveva gli occhi

⁷⁷ LA, p. 46-7.

duri e guardava soddisfatto tutti quei lampadari e quell'omaccio che parlava, parlava e non si capiva niente.⁷⁸

Through the child's gaze, the narrator sets up a contrast between Jesus's egalitarian message and the Church. Sapienza's approach to religion is here played on the political ground, closely recalling Gramsci's arguments on the Church as a power institution, mainly developed in the same years when he was collaborating with Maria Giudice in Turin.⁷⁹ Catholicism is criticised for realising a disconnection between words and actions, which would betray Jesus' genuine claim for equality and transform faith into mere external practices. Ivanoe, who declares himself an atheist, explains to Goliarda the difference between institutional religion and personal faith:

Ivanoe mi disse un giorno che questo mio pregare da sola non valeva niente, e che se avessi voluto servirlo veramente (veramente diventare come suor Maria o come S. Teresa) dovevo entrare nell'esercito del Cattolicesimo (in una chiesa vera) e non continuare in questa che mi ero fatta da sola, e solo per me.⁸⁰

1.2.2 Class, Political Commitment and the Rejection of Ideology

In addition to the elements of diversity highlighted above, Goliarda faces a difference between her family and its social context with regard to class position. The Sapienzas embrace the working class cause, but, as a wealthy family, they are at the same time distant from the poor and uneducated people they support. A vivid example of the author's acute awareness of the hierarchical structure of society is found in the description of her uncle Nunzio:

⁷⁸ LA, p. 79. Mass was celebrated in Latin until 1969.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Gramsci's analysis of the types of action purposely used by the Church to influence believers, in Gramsci, 'Stregoneria', in *Avanti!*, 4 March 1916, and 'L'appello ai pargoli', in *Avanti!*, 31 July 1916. Gramsci later ironically criticized the use of Latin as a means to confuse uneducated people, see his 'Letter to Teresina', 16 November 1931, in *Lettere dal carcere*, ed. by S. Caprioglio and Elsa Fubini (Turin: Einaudi, 1968), pp. 525-6.

⁸⁰ LA, p. 78-9.

L'avevo visto per tanti anni povero, solo, che veniva da noi con un bastone lunghissimo, e, dignitosamente, essendo lui calzolaio e mio padre avvocato e noi figli di avvocato, non entrava a parlare in cucina o nella stanza del pianoforte, ma aspettava fra i clienti, quietamente.⁸¹

Similarly, the spatial disposition of the setting in the text features an apparent vertical opposition between the second floor, the 'piano nobile' (LA, p. 66), and the courtyard, crowded with a varied population. Goliarda is allowed to wander around the courtyard and the neighbourhood and mix with their inhabitants, but the distance between the two environments cannot be erased, as marked by the path the girl has to follow to go back upstairs into her home. The hierarchical structure of society interferes with the free and playful dimension embodied by Nica:

Perché non ci lasciano giocare con la terra? Perché non mi hanno lasciata giù in cortile a costruire con la terra l'Etna? Avevamo cominciato a fabbricarlo con Nica subito, la sera che c'eravamo incontrate. Ma lei fu richiamata in casa per la preghiera e io tornai su al secondo piano a pensare di diventare un individuo utile alla società.⁸²

While themes related to gender and sexuality have already started to be explored by critics, the dimensions of class and political ideology in relation to identity have not yet raised specific interest, possibly because of Sapienza's conflictual, at times controversial and provocative, position on left-wing commitment. However, in *Lettera aperta* as well as in Sapienza's following works the problem of left-wing commitment and ideology and her positioning in society from the perspective of class and professional occupation play a central role.

Lettera aperta articulates this theme in a series of interconnected points, with personal and political repercussions. First, the child experiences an excruciating conflict

⁸¹ LA, p. 39.

⁸² Ibid. p. 89.

between political commitment and self-love, for she sees her parents' activism resulting in a sacrifice of themselves and their own children. Feeling neglected by her parents, who are too *impegnati* – here, both in the sense of 'committed' and 'busy' – to take care of her, she comes to experience her personal needs as egoistic drives in contradiction with the moral duty of political struggle. Secondly, because of this contrast between her own interests and political commitment, she feels oppressed by the perceived superiority of her mother's 'impegno rivoluzionario' and therefore blocked for a long time in the expression of her own reality, which is not that of the subaltern classes. Finally, she identifies in her parents' mentality – and subsequently in that of her left-wing friends' – a form of ideological intransigence that the narrator charges for being too similar, in its conceptual frame, to their antagonist – either religion or fascist power. Let us see how these themes are represented in *Lettera aperta*.

The child's discovery of poverty and her privileged condition is highly dramatic and initiates her to an inner conflict that will torment her throughout her life. She asks her mother: 'Se c'è tanta gente che muore di fame, perché io ho questo piatto pieno?', to which Maria replies:

'e se domani venisse il momento di nutrire te a discapito degli altri, non esiterei a dare ugualmente a te come agli altri, a costo di vederti pallida e magra come loro. Una madre che leva agli altri per la propria creatura è una bestia criminale'. 'Una bestia criminale'. Allora anche io ero stata una bestia criminale.⁸³

Feeling guilty for her privilege, she stops eating and falls seriously ill. The encounter with the reality of poverty begins a conflict between personal and collective good, which is formulated by Maria in terms of a contrast between moral duty and natural instincts, which would be egoistic. Maria's choice is definite: a mother who favours her

⁸³ LA, pp. 71-2. Maria's words are reported also in FM, p. 151, in the context of the child's feeling that she cannot count on her parents' love, and that she should not 'chiedere troppo'.

child over other children is a criminal beast, in which *beast* evokes the idea of individualism as a natural instinct, which breaks egalitarian and altruistic moral norms and is therefore *criminal*. Within a context of inequality, to the little girl the condition of the left-wing rich is represented as intrinsically contradictory, as the options they have are to transgress either their individual needs or moral principles. Altruism and self-love are perceived as antithetic, opening a lacerating conflict in the little girl's search for identity, a theme to which Sapienza goes back again extensively in *Io, Jean Gabin*.

Sapienza carries out a harsh criticism of her parents' strict ideology, compared to fascism itself for its Manichean rhetoric.

Bisogna scherzare qualche volta, è un modo per tirarsi fuori dagli impicci. Lo scherzo è il sale della mente. Per mio padre e mia madre – una delle poche cose sulle quali andavano d'accordo – il sale della vita era l'odio e la ribellione. Peccato che di ironia non ne sapessero niente. Certo, quando sono vissuti e hanno lottato, l'ironia era un lusso troppo grande, ma è un peccato lo stesso, perché si sono trovati a lottare il fascismo con la stessa ottusità e retorica del fascismo. Questo li faceva – l'ho scoperto con l'orrore che potete immaginare – un po' fascisti. Ma quello di combattere il nemico con le sue stesse armi mi pare sia un vizio che sarà molto difficile levarci.⁸⁴

She addresses a similar criticism to her contemporary left-wing friends. Through a number of brief extra-diegetic remarks, the narrator seems to express the author's own argumentative relationship with the intelligentsia gravitating around the Italian Communist Party (PCI) she used to frequent in Rome.⁸⁵ As Pellegrino notes, 'qui si innesta tutto il discorso dell'egemonia culturale: Alicata, Togliatti, Maselli, il partito. Goliarda non era allineata e glielo hanno fatto notare diverse volte, sia direttamente che indirettamente.'⁸⁶ Sapienza, through her works, advocates against the structuring of reality into absolute and fixed categories that overcome concrete individual experience,

⁸⁴ LA, p. 36.

⁸⁵ I gathered information about Sapienza's relationship with the Roman left-wing intelligentsia from a series of interviews with Sapienza's friends Paola Blasi and Adele Cambria (Rome, September 2013).

⁸⁶ A. Pellegrino, 'Un personaggio singolare, un romanzo nuovo, una donna da amare per sempre', in *Appassionata Sapienza*, pp. 69-88 (p. 81).

so that her radically anti-ideological approach clashes with a rigidly communist agenda. Venè's description of the ideological conditioning of Italian writers in the 60s and 70s offers a productive insight into the reasons why Sapienza's position was considered subversive:

Posti dinanzi alla netta spartizione del mondo in due blocchi, chiamati quindi a una scelta così perentoria da non consentire alcun libero esame della realtà nel suo insieme, gli scrittori furono ancora una volta aprioristicamente politici, sia pure in maniera diversa, più complessa che nel passato. Ossia credettero di poter identificare *tout court* la salvezza dell'individuo con l'alveo ideologico entro il quale si collocavano.⁸⁷

Sapienza also questions the possibility and the appropriateness of pretending to understand and speak for the subaltern classes when not facing the same troubles. In other words, the difference between the social condition of the relatively wealthy intellectuals, among whom Sapienza places herself and her family, and the subaltern classes, introduces an element of structural incoherence. This is probably the most controversial part of Sapienza's political discourse, as she shows herself to be painfully aware. Indeed, she accuses firstly her family and then her communist friends of supporting a mystifying and oppressive ideology that would prevent her from giving voice to her own reality. Confronted with the imperative to relate to society from a rigidly communist perspective, Sapienza literally rebels against what she represents as the oppressive imposition to limit her field of expression to political commitment. Interestingly, in the text the subject carrying out such imposition shifts from her family and friends to sub-proletarian women, emblem of the condition of victim.

Queste donne, oggi lo vedo, mi hanno chiuso la bocca per tanti anni. Come? Vi spiego: essendo derelitte, vittime della società, io fui costretta ad amarle, a conoscere le loro storie, metterle in un altarino, accendere lumini e a pensare solo a loro, scrivere solo su di loro. Così quando incominciai a desiderare di esprimermi, incominciai anche a pensare

⁸⁷ Gian Franco Venè, *Il capitale e il poeta* (Milan: Sugar, 1973), p. 417.

storie macchinose su di loro, ad immedesimarmi nei loro travagli che solo mi sembravano degni di essere raccontati, e, essendo io e nata e vissuta al secondo piano, *piano nobile*, come si diceva, che potevo saperne? Cercai, ma con terrore mi accorsi che non sapevo niente di loro e sotto quell'amore sacro che avevo per loro, si nascondeva una indifferenza affatto piccolo-borghese.⁸⁸

Addressees of a moral duty to be put before personal freedom and accomplishment, in Sapienza's representation the victims turn into frightening and oppressive figures. The obligation to speak about the victims is perceived by the author as a source of deep falsehood, an ideological constriction from which no social emancipating development can arise.⁸⁹

Her sense of oppression is strictly related to the perceived pressure of political ideology on her freedom of expression. It is not surprising, then, that the trauma inflicted on communism in Italy by the XX Communist Congress in 1953, which revealed Stalin's crimes, is put in connection with the possibility it opens for her to explore a personal way of expression.

E così venne il ventesimo congresso e allora tutto non fu così bloccato, così concluso, sicuro: allora, forse, potevo anche parlare di un figlio di avvocato di quel *piano nobile* nel quale ero cresciuta e non dovevo per forza scendere in cortile e fingere di essere Nina la cagna, o Teresa la figlia del gigante. Potevo. E come potei, incominciai. Mi venivano poesie d'amore, storie di bambini borghesi tentati dalla religione. Io dovevo accusare. Poesie d'amore! Se mia madre mi avesse vista!⁹⁰

In this passage, Sapienza recounts the path that took her to finally feel free to talk about what she really wanted, somehow transgressing her mother's example. In this respect, Pellegrino talked about a 'vocazione a lungo trattenuta per un malinteso pudore [...] nei

⁸⁸ LA, p. 66.

⁸⁹ Cf. Sapienza's discussion of the Communist Party in the film *Lettera aperta a un giornale della sera*, dir. by Francesco Maselli (1970) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtCNFMh1gzM>> [last accessed 5 June 2014].

⁹⁰ LA, p. 67.

confronti del superiore impegno politico e rivoluzionario della madre'.⁹¹ The impact of this historical event on Sapienza's personal and artistic path is discussed further in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, where the relevance of history is used to contrast the therapists' idea that everything in the life of an individual is set out in the first years of life:

il ventesimo congresso... il mio tentativo di uscire da una costruzione ideologico-religiosa che, a casa mia, mi avevano imposto, e che si era strutturata nelle mie ossa diventando il mio scheletro stesso. Non per niente incominciai a scrivere dopo il ventesimo congresso, ma rifarmi una verginità come si dice... rifarmi una libertà... anche questo mi confuse... e non me sola... molti si smarrirono a quell'epoca e girano ancora come individui che hanno perso la voce e le mani e che non riescono a rifarsi un linguaggio, un modo di gestire...⁹²

Sapienza claims the right to enjoy her freedom, secured by her status of wealthy person, maintained by her partner, and use it to talk about her real situation and personal interests, allegedly mainly concerned with love. Yet not only does she feel constantly under the poor women's observation and judgement: 'Lo sapevamo che ci avresti tradite. Tu parli di te, del tuo disordine di piccola borghese, delle tue camicette marcite: – e non vedi come siamo vestite di stracci?';⁹³ she also appears to lack the terms to talk about love as she would mean it. Indeed, she remarks, even this way of expression is impeded, because of the layers of traditional meanings deposited in the term 'love'.

Overall, Sapienza ends up putting her moral dilemma at the very centre of narration, instead of love. Despite her programmatic declaration according to which she would pursue indifference from moral duty, her inner conflict occupies the foreground as an unavoidable and irresolvable structural dilemma. As Venè points out: 'Quando la sincerità poetica entra in conflitto con il dogma ne consegue una lacerazione drammatica che ha il grande pregio di rappresentare la verità di una situazione etica,

⁹¹ *Un'analisi selvaggia*, p. 9.

⁹² FM, pp. 90-1.

⁹³ LA, p. 67.

sociale ecc.⁹⁴ What at first sight can be seen as the assertion of a bourgeois writer's nonchalant insensitivity towards the interests of the subaltern class, actually turns into the expression of a structural contradiction that the author is experiencing to its extreme consequences. As we have seen, when, as a child, Goliarda learns about poverty, she reacts very strongly, falling ill and stopping eating. She undergoes a similar physical reaction when she detects an analogy between fascism and her parents' political commitment. As an adult, she indicates the conflict between personal freedom and ideological conformism as playing a central role in her depression. Far from being able to enjoy freely her privileged position, Sapienza gives voice to the repercussion of structural incoherence and ideological distortions on her personal life. In doing so, she releases social and political issues such as class inequality from an ideological approach and still succeeds in including them in her narrative discourse.

1.2.3 An Empty Task

Confronted with a contradictory environment and pressed by her family's intransigence, the young protagonist struggles to make sense of her position in the world. Martín Clavijo analyses the different sources and directions of Sapienza's education as represented in her autobiographical works and describes them as a bombardment of conflicting messages that undermine the little girl's ability to interpret them autonomously.

L'educazione che riceve a casa non è regolare, non è programmata, non è progressiva né tiene in conto l'età della bambina. Goliarda riceve pillole o, tante volte, vere bombe formative da tutte le parti.

⁹⁴ *Il capitale e il poeta*, p. 254.

A volte si ha la sensazione che Iuzza sia al centro di una battaglia, una guerra di idee contrastanti, di forme diverse di vedere il mondo, la vita, di sentire, di amare.⁹⁵

Castagné too stresses the nonconformist features of Sapienza's upbringing, and puts them in relation to the marginal, radical and ex-centric position of her characters and narrative:

Una simile formazione [...] poteva senza dubbio soltanto produrre un personaggio fuori del comune, così come lo erano coloro con cui viveva dalla nascita: in mezzo ai quali – come lei stessa dice – era cascata nascendo. Fuori del comune. Si potrebbe dire anche: fuori della norma.⁹⁶

The result of this 'formazione eslege'⁹⁷ is a character defined by irreducible diversity, 'estrema singolarità',⁹⁸ which is initially represented as a sentence to solitude expressed in Goliarda's painful discovery of the uniqueness of her name:

E un pomeriggio, esasperata da questo nome che tutti, in cortile, al mare, notavano con meraviglia, cercai fino a notte sull'elenco telefonico di Catania, disperatamente, una sorella o un fratello che portasse questo nome. Piangendo doveti accettare la realtà: non c'era nessuna Goliarda o Goliardo in tutta Catania, e per me in tutto il mondo. Ero sola.⁹⁹

The ex-centric position resulting from Goliarda's upbringing appears to be extremely difficult to master for the child, for it entails both isolation and a lack of viable models with whom to empathise. The first problem, isolation, reflects the child's and subsequently the adult's difficulty in reconciling norm and singularity and put her emphasised diversity in communication with her social context. The second problem, the lack of viable models, entails for the child a difficulty to elaborate autonomous strategies of identity construction outside a recognisable position in her social context,

⁹⁵ Martín Clavijo, p. 162; p. 172.

⁹⁶ Natalie Castagné, 'Archeologia di Modesta', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 81-91 (p. 84).

⁹⁷ *Un personaggio singolare*, p. 83.

⁹⁸ Castagné, p. 82.

⁹⁹ LA, p. 38.

namely a difficult composition of the different possibilities of the self outside the unification operated by social recognition. Indeed, devoid even of a provisional orientating centre, the child is constantly at the mercy of conflicting forces, threatened by her own emotions and dependent on the adults' contradictory judgements. As Martín Clavijo points out 'Un'educazione alla ribellione non è una strada facile da seguire',¹⁰⁰ and Castagné remarks that it is precisely the imposition of autonomous responsibility on a child who does not have the instruments to master it that marks Goliarda's isolation also within her own family, composed by adults.

Goliarda, nei suoi romanzi autobiografici, illustra, senza transigere, l'aspetto negativo di un'educazione per molti versi ammirevole e gli effetti del rigore dei dogmi su una bambina ipersensibile, e troppo giovane per riflettere veramente su quei principi che prende troppo alla lettera a costo di finire ammalata; illustra, insomma, il suo isolamento in seno alla tribù stessa, al gruppo familiare che la circonda, e la mancanza di punti di riferimento quando si trova confrontata con il disordine della vita esterna.¹⁰¹

As Miller remarks, the development of a strong sense of the self, in contact with one's own instincts and desires, is an increasingly difficult task for a child when he or she is exposed to contradictory messages:

Today it is hardly possible for any group to remain so isolated from others who had different values. Therefore it is necessary today for the individual to find his support within himself, if he is not to become the victim of various interests and ideologies. This strength within himself – through access to his own real needs and feelings and the possibility of expressing them – thus becomes crucially important for him on the one hand, and on the other is made enormously more difficult through living in contact with various different value systems.¹⁰²

Goliarda, in *Lettera aperta*, is at the same time educated to freedom and not let free to discover, build and shape such freedom by herself, for she is required to act as a subject already formed whilst still a child. Her identity formation is thus characterised as a

¹⁰⁰ Martín Clavijo, p. 165.

¹⁰¹ Castagné, p. 84.

¹⁰² Miller, p. 80.

burdensome training, a ‘lungo lavoro [...]]: comprendere dove avrebbe potuto collocarsi nella vita’.¹⁰³ Expressions such as ‘dovere’, ‘allenarsi’, ‘cercare’, ‘provare’, ‘imparare’ recur throughout the text, contributing to communicate a sense of methodical application of energies to construct personal identity, departing from the auscultation and expression of her own desires. The idea of training dovetails with that of task, *compito*, which the narrator herself identifies as the kernel of her endeavour: “‘Compito’ deve essere la parola-chiave, dato che mi torna tanto alle labbra’ (LA, p. 130). Nonetheless, the girl’s task is precisely the identification of the task itself, the search for a personal aim, without which the training she undergoes would result in an empty effort, necessarily unsuccessful.

One episode in particular, in *Lettera aperta*, illustrates such a void in the girl’s training and her wish to be allowed to be a child, that is, to access a simple enjoyment of the present. Goliarda plays with Nica and other girls in a courtyard, and the game consists in pretending to be dead and resist tickling. When, thanks to prolonged practice, Goliarda wins, she does not know what to ask for a reward. She demonstrates she is able to do something properly, ‘la cosa fatta proprio bene’ (LA, p. 142), but the content of the training, the scope beyond the demonstration of ability, is irrelevant. She starts asking for anything that comes into her mind, and feels relieved when finally someone in her family tells her that she cannot demand too much, as this gives her at least an indication of where to set the limit and how to behave. Miller observes that, in those subjects who go through a process of severe disconnection and repression of desires, ‘in general, there is a complete absence of real emotional understanding [...] and no

¹⁰³ Ortu, p. 155.

conception of their true needs – beyond the need for achievement’, a description that provides a good commentary on Goliarda’s confusion in this episode.¹⁰⁴

In contrast with this type of search, when she wants to tell Nica about her discovery of the need to moderate requests, she changes her mind and prefers simply to enjoy her friend’s company and play with her:

Correndo mi immaginai di incontrare Nica, e di dirle: ‘Non si può chiedere troppo, non hai ragione, non si può chiedere troppo...’. Nica era davanti al portone, le andai vicina decisa, ma non so perché non le dissi niente: forse perché avevo corso ed ero tutta sudata. Forse perché lei: ‘Giochiamo a lassa e pigghia’?. Era un gioco bellissimo, e a lassa e pigghia giocammo fino a che il lampione accese il suo cerchio intorno a noi e in quel cerchio giocammo ancora ore e ore.¹⁰⁵

In the excerpt above, the dimension of a tiresome task that troubles Goliarda and that she wants to communicate to Nica is simply put aside in front of the spontaneity of playing with her friend. Consistently with the role played as regards sexuality, Nica is represented in connection with the positive pole of physical instincts, before and beyond norms. We can describe the relationship between the two girls as a ‘resonant’ communication, which in Cavarero’s terms expresses the correspondence of pre-semantic vocalic exchange between two interlocutors.¹⁰⁶ Resonance works as the recognition and enjoyment of each other’s physical presence without imposing an external reference and scope to the mutual participation. It corresponds to a specific political perspective, which aims at reinstating physical singularity and co-presence of the interlocutors into semantic language, with its generalising and abstract categories and norms. The expression of a harmonic and resonant communication between Nica and Goliarda is reinforced by the image of the circle of light that encloses the two girls,

¹⁰⁴ Miller, pp. 20-1.

¹⁰⁵ LA, p. 115.

¹⁰⁶ See *A più voci*.

as well as by the chiasmic structure of the sentence ‘giochiamo a lassa e pigghia – a lassa e pigghia giocammo’.

The enjoyment of simple and free play with Nica is set against the active task to which she feels called by her family, consisting in finding her way to become ‘un individuo utile alla società’ (LA, p. 89). Prompted by her family’s example, she then looks for her identity in terms of a social role, a profession that would define who she is. She initially gets inspiration from exceptional personalities (real and fictional) she sees around her or hears about, such as *il brigante* Musolino, Sister Maria and Norma (the protagonist of Bellini’s opera). This modality of identity formation closely reflects the one described by Freud, according to whom identity is formed through the identification with other people and the internalisation of their qualities and attributes.¹⁰⁷ In *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, the therapist applies precisely this interpretative approach, in particular when he discusses Goliarda’s identification with Nica and Maria (FM, pp. 61-2; p. 69); the same mechanism of imitation of a model is at the basis of the story of *Io, Jean Gabin*, in which the protagonist strongly identifies herself with the French actor Jean Gabin. However, the protagonist of *Lettera aperta* gives up these emulation attempts one by one.

The endeavour to achieve a personal position in society by imitating the actions of other characters results in an unsuccessful strategy for the child, for it requires a mature determination that she does not possess. As the narrator remarks, her limit is specifically a limit of will, of pursuing an objective at any cost, when she does not share the scope but only the external actions of the characters she wants to emulate. Her whole work is crossed by this painful tension between what she feels she should be, her moral call to

¹⁰⁷ See in particular S. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. by Joan Riviere (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927).

social utility, and the need to pause from this active search for identity to simply enjoy a given state of things.

After a series of failures, Goliarda is initiated by her neighbour Anna in the artisan work of manufacturing chairs. For the first time her training has a specific goal and she enjoys the secure feeling of having a place in the world, an activity commensurate her ability. Moreover, unlike Musolino, Sister Maria or Norma, the artisan job offers her the opposite of an exceptional social position, hence endowing her with a sense of belonging to her social context through manual work. Unfortunately, this pause from the protagonist's challenging and tiresome search is interrupted by Anna's sudden departure, which deeply upsets the child. In the narrator's interpretation, this episode marks the failure of her attempt to accomplish social integration by exerting a common profession. With the loss of the artisan work she loses the possibility of being useful to society, which would guarantee her a recognisable and legitimate place. Anna's departure corresponds to the interruption of the narrator's recollection of her path towards maturity, which stops on the threshold of Anna's house and never returns to it.

è per questo che ancora aspetto piangendo Anna la sediarà sulla sua soglia. La sua assenza mi strappò dalle mani un modo di 'essere utile all'umanità': mi ricacciò in quel secondo piano a vagare per le stanze con le mani in mano. E se sono ancora accasciata su quella soglia, non è per la stessa ragione? Non è Anna che piango ed aspetto, ma la Rivelazione. Di essere 'utile'. La rivelazione di essere una 'prescelta' da Dio o da Marx per redimere, è la parola, 'redimere l'umanità'.¹⁰⁸

1.2.4 Power and Human Relationships: The Child Entertainer

After these failed attempts to integrate in society, the protagonist is left with unresolved contradictions: on the one hand, the imperative of social usefulness and the tendency to

¹⁰⁸ LA, p. 91.

think of her own identity in terms of a burdensome imitation of models; on the other, the need simply to enjoy the pleasure of life and exert her own personal freedom. At the root of this failed identity formation lies a primary, fundamental form of power that oppresses Goliarda and undermines her task, her ‘compito’. This consists in the child’s dependence on her family’s approval and affection, which she feels is never secured, and the distorting effect this has on the expression – and ultimately even the recognition – of her own desires.

The child entertainer’s dependence on the audience’s appreciation is represented as a power relationship, not dissimilar from the one described between men and women. Women and children share a position of submission and dependence which threatens the possibility for them to develop an autonomous identity.

Dunque, torniamo a me: non era di altro che vi volevo parlare; torniamo a me oggetto malleabile e alla mercé per fame. Il bambino è il primo operaio sfruttato, dipende dai grandi e sempre, per un tozzo di pane, si abbassa a divertire, leccare le mani dei padroni, si lascia accarezzare anche quando non ne ha voglia: così comincia la prostituzione.¹⁰⁹

The process of compliance with external expectations and the inner conflicts this originates, condensed in the figure of the ‘child entertainer’, is represented in very similar terms in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*:

Cominciai a marciare intorno intorno e tutti applaudivano e ridevano... la recita andava bene, la memoria funzionava ma, man mano che dicevo le battute e marciavo sentii le mie gambe al ritmo della marcia diventare rigide, di legno, scricchiolavano e anche le braccia... la carne stoppa... le gambe scricchiolavano sempre più forte e caddi a terra rotta in pezzi.¹¹⁰

The reported therapist’s interpretation of Goliarda’s excessive dependence on others’ approval and love and the connection between neglect and depression (FM p. 43; p. 76;

¹⁰⁹ LA, p. 65.

¹¹⁰ FM, p. 118.

p. 118-9; p. 120-1), indicate that Sapienza probably came in contact with Winnicott's psychoanalytical approach (or a correlated version of it), through her own therapeutical experience. Winnicott's approach is centred on the role of a loving environment in fostering a child's sense of the self, which is linked to the experience of a 'spontaneous impulse' and the expression of a 'spontaneous gesture'.¹¹¹ This approach was further developed by Miller, who investigated children's adaptation to parental expectations when a loving environment is not adequately provided. She writes:

Children who fulfill their parents' conscious or unconscious wishes are 'good', but if they ever refuse to do so or express wishes of their own that go against those of their parents, they are called egoistic and inconsiderate.

Accommodation to parental needs often (but not always) leads to the 'as-if personality' (Winnicott has described it as the 'False Self'). This person develops in such a way that he reveals only what is expected of him, and fuses so completely with what he reveals that – until he comes to analysis – one could scarcely have guessed how much there is to him, behind this masked view of himself.¹¹²

In the representation of her role as entertainer, Goliarda's need to accustom herself to the fulfilment of others' expectations in order to conquer their love exerts a distorting pressure on the development of her autonomy. Whenever a power inequality is involved, as happens in the relationship between men and women and between adults and children, power relations seem to erase the possibility of an authentic expression and communication, leading to what Miller defined the 'tragedy of the loss of the self, or alienation from the self'.¹¹³ In this respect Sapienza's representation of the child entertainer is in line with a Marxist critique of alienation in a hierarchically structured society, explicitly evoked by the reference to the exploited worker: 'L'uomo si trova nella società borghese in un rapporto inessenziale (e quindi alienato) con gli altri; ma

¹¹¹ *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment*, p. 145.

¹¹² Miller, pp. 12-3; p. 27.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p. 47.

poiché questo rapporto con gli altri è, nella vita umana, essenziale, si trova essenzialmente in un rapporto inessenziale.’¹¹⁴

A similar condition of ‘alienation of the self’ emerges from the narrator’s ironic recollection of the record kept by her family of all the times she cried in a day. Beside the real reasons for crying, among which the sight of a beggar stands out – ‘Ore 19. G. ha pianto perché ha visto un mendicante che dormiva contro il muro’ (LA, p. 70) – Goliarda also stresses her instrumental use of weeping as a way to gain love, for she even trains to fake crying. Similarly, the narrator of *Il filo di mezzogiorno* recounts: ‘i miei fratelli mi volevano far piangere per mostrare come ero sensibile ai loro amici’ (FM, p. 43), and an analogous scene is narrated in *Io, Jean Gabin* (p. 59). One of the most communicative expressions of feelings, crying, becomes here the sign of the difficulty in establishing a sincere communication when dependence and power are involved: ‘Quella sera che cercando con gli occhi il mio bollettino, risultò composto di solo due righe, fui disperatissima. Possibile? Avevo pianto solo due volte? E piansi tutta la notte ma nessuno mi senti’ (LA, p. 70). The true weeping finds vent in solitude, outside the reach of a communication experienced as necessarily distorting, signalling the protagonist’s isolation from her family. Her crying is true, as is her passion for performing, but when these expressive forms are oriented towards the dependence on other people rather than towards the expression of an autonomous self they prevent communication instead of allowing it.

As she grows up, Goliarda chooses the profession of dramatic actress, for which she appears to be exceptionally talented, and moves to Rome. In one of the very few occasions in which the narrator talks about what she likes to do rather than what she

¹¹⁴ Giulio Preti, ‘Un concetto da chiarire: Alienazione’, *Il filo rosso*, 1 April 1963, cit. in *Il capitale e il poeta*, p. 343.

feels supposed to be training for, she states: ‘Mi piaceva cantare, ballare e si divertivano tutti quando lo facevo, anche in cortile’ (LA, p. 89). The choice to be an actress appears eventually founded on her personal inclination rather than on the wish to emulate her parents’ or others’ example. Nonetheless, as we have seen the narrator refers to her talent for acting and entertaining as a form of prostitution, carried out in order to attract love and attention. As such, acting shifts from the expression of personal enjoyment and desire to its opposite, namely the manipulation of the self to conform to other people’s expectations. In the end, she does not derive from this career choice the affirmation of autonomy she was trying to accomplish as a child:

A Roma con la borsa di studio tra le mani, che mi dava la prova tangibile che ero diventata grande, senza capire che quei soldi erano il prezzo che paga la società per prepararci a passare dalla parte dei guardiani del campo, entrai nel compromesso, mi rattappii nel servaggio di avere successo ai loro occhi, di piacere. Credevo alla loro serietà e alla mia, e per venti anni rimasi anchilosata a servirli, a dire parole ambigue. A fare finta di non avere paura e a non dormire per paura dei loro atti, delle loro decisioni che, come una volta, subivo.¹¹⁵

The representation of the child entertainer and the condition of inauthenticity has clear connections with the work of Pirandello, a fundamental artistic reference for Sapienza, which still awaits a dedicated study.¹¹⁶ Of particular importance here is Pirandello’s representation of identity as a ‘maschera’. In works such as *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904) and *Uno, nessuno, centomila* (1926), and in the plays collected in *Maschere nude* (1958), the mask represents the necessary and unavoidable mediation between the self and others, so that identity is always, and inescapably, split. If socialisation and

¹¹⁵ LA, p. 158.

¹¹⁶ The name of Pirandello is cited together with those of Verga and Capuana, in LA, p. 152. Sapienza played in Pirandello’s roles, particularly succesful in *Vestire gli ignudi*: ‘Aveva inaugurato negli anni Cinquanta il teatro Pirandello di via degli Acquasparta con *Vestire gli ignudi*. Silvio D’Amico scrisse che era la nuova Duse’, Maria Serena Palieri, ‘La Sapienza e lo scrivere’, *L’Unità*, 26 July 2003. <<http://cerca.unita.it/ARCHIVE/xml/95000/91219.xml?key=PALIERI+MARIA+SERENA&first=201&orderby=0&f=fir>> [Last accessed 07 August 2014].

inauthenticity are coextensive, for Pirandello rebellion is useless, for no emancipatory outcome can derive from it.¹¹⁷

In Sapienza's works, on the other hand, the narrator rebels against the distortion and oppression deriving from the compliant mask, considering it, at least in part, as connected more to power unbalances than to communication itself. The deconstruction of social norms and the acknowledgement of one's own desires, (in Winnicott's terms, the development of a True Self) help recognise the difference between adaptation and complete self-annihilation in the compliance with a role, which turns identity into the mask itself. This is necessary in order to recuperate a sense of the self enabling agency, precisely what women have historically been prevented from exercising: 'The unified self disperses, radiating outward until its fragments dissipate altogether into social and communal masks. Thus woman's destiny cannot be self-determined, and her agency cannot be exercised.'¹¹⁸ Miller herself attributes an empowering potential to the development of a sense of the self that enables agency, something that power – both as institutional power and as the power of adults over children – contrasts and undermines. The access to agency of subjects in a subaltern position thus have an inherently political dimension:

'Society' not only suppresses instinctual wishes but also (and above all) it suppresses particular feelings (for instance, anger) and narcissistic needs (for esteem, mirroring, respect), whose admissibility in adults and fulfillment in children would lead to individual autonomy and emotional strength, and thus would not be consonant with the interests of those in power. However, this oppression and this forcing of submission do not only begin in the office, factory or political party; they begin in the very first weeks of an infant's life.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ On the political dimension of Pirandello's understanding of identity, see G. F. Venè, 'È l'alienazione che condanna gli uomini alla loro classe sociale', in *Pirandello fascista: la condizione borghese tra ribellione e rivoluzione* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1981), pp. 103-12.

¹¹⁸ Smith, p. 13.

¹¹⁹ Miller, pp. 127-8.

The path of self-reconstruction undertaken by Sapienza diverges from the inescapability of Pirandello's mask for it aspires to access agency where this has never been exercised before. Participating in women's struggle to become subjects, the representation of identity provided by Sapienza appears incommensurable with the trajectory of the modern subject, for there is not the sense of a previously universal and rational subject falling apart, but rather the coming to being of a new subjectivity.

From this different perspective, although complete liberation from all forms of conditioning is not possible, some relationships, such as the one with Nica in *Lettera aperta* and the ones with the narrator's female friends in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, are represented as less distorting than others, and actually have the potential of strengthening rather than undermining the construction of identity. As we shall see, in all her works Sapienza carves out the space for relationships of friendship, often with a strong component of homosexual desire, that pierce the mask and allow the expression of the self and the achievement of true, empathic communication. In *Lettera aperta*, the narrator exposes and contests the conditions that, in her upbringing, led to the formation of an oppressive mask that drained her vitality, aiming at reconstructing a stronger sense of the self beyond social norms.

Overall, the protagonists' process of growing up traces the parable of a failed social integration and an unresolved construction of personal identity. On the other hand, by recounting the story of her childhood, the adult narrator identifies and deconstructs the forms of oppression to which she was subjected, seeking to undo them and reconstruct contact with her own desires – contact with her own body. Writing becomes for Sapienza the space where she can turn imposition and oppression into active creation and self-creation.

CHAPTER 2. ‘GIOIOSA FORZA NOMADE’: EPICUREANISM AND ANARCHISM IN *L’ARTE DELLA GIOIA*

Introduction

1. Editorial Issues

L’arte della gioia is Sapienza’s major work, both in terms of length and popularity. However, it took a long time before its importance was recognised, and the troubled history of its publication is now well documented.¹ According to Pellegrino, the novel was written between 1967 and 1976, a period during which Sapienza retired from her work in the cinema industry to undertake her vast literary project. When she finished *L’arte della gioia*, she was already known to the artistic and intellectual Rome environment, but this did not help her get her novel published. The publication of *L’arte della gioia* by Einaudi in 2008, which launched Sapienza’s success in Italy, came after a long series of rejections from several Italian publishers, two limited editions by Stampa Alternativa,² and the wide consensus achieved by the German, French, Spanish and

¹ See Maria Belén Hernández, ‘La fortuna literaria de Goliarda Sapienza’, *Arena Romanistica*, 5 (2009), pp. 140-52; ‘La fortuna letteraria de *L’arte della gioia* in Europa’, in *Quel sogno d’essere*, pp. 99-113; Cambria, *La terribile arte della gioia*, cit.; Pellegrino, ‘Lunga marcia dell’Arte della gioia’, in *L’arte della gioia* (2008), pp. v-x; *Un personaggio singolare*, cit.; Domenico Scarpa, ‘Senza alterare niente’, in *L’arte della gioia* (2008), pp. 515-38. An excerpt of a reading of the letters of rejection of *L’arte della gioia* by various publishers, realised by Pellegrino and Paola Pace, is available on Youtube, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsctDOZcrWU>> [Last accessed 05 August 2014].

² A first partial edition, comprising only the first part of the novel, was published by Stampa Alternativa in 1994. According to Marcello Baraghini, director of Stampa Alternativa, the large success of that first, partial edition, induced him to publish the whole work. In 1998, two years after Sapienza’s death, Stampa Alternativa published the first complete edition of the novel, with title *L’arte della gioia: romanzo anticlericale* (Rome: Stampa Alternativa, 1998). The subtitle *romanzo anticlericale* was chosen by Pellegrino jointly with the publisher (this information was provided to me in a private e-mail exchange with Marcello Baraghini, 17 March 2014); it disappears in the following editions.

Catalan translations.³ Since then, it has been translated also into Portuguese and English.⁴ Over forty years after the first edition of *Lettera aperta* and approximately thirty years after *L'arte della gioia* was brought to completion, finally Sapienza is beginning to be regarded internationally as a significant author worthy of critical attention.

Before describing the methodological and theoretical issues at stake with regard to *L'arte della gioia* and proceeding to a detailed analysis, some uncertainties concerning the editing of this novel must be mentioned. According to Pellegrino, the typescript of *L'arte della gioia* underwent a drastic reduction, from 800 to 500 pages.⁵ He declares he initially worked on the editing of the text jointly with Sapienza, straight after the completion of the novel, and then continued on his own in complete freedom.⁶ In another occasion, he states that he continued the editing even after Sapienza's death, and that this second editing coincided with the idea of a second, complete edition for Stampa Alternativa: 'Goliarda morì improvvisamente. [...] Dopo molte considerazioni, e molto dolore, ripresi il manoscritto, lo rividi ancora, e pensai di farne una piccola edizione di un migliaio di copie col marchio di Stampa Alternativa.'⁷ The final text of *L'arte della gioia* then would have undergone, by admission of Pellegrino himself, a substantial reduction and interpolation, even after the author's death. To this, another revision must be added, the one carried out jointly by Sapienza and Anna Maria Baraghini for the first, partial edition of *L'arte della gioia* in 1994, which might explain

³ *In den Himmel stürzen*, trans. by Constanze Neumann (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2005); *L'art de la joie*, trans. by Nathalie Castagné (Paris: éditions Viviane Hamy, 2005); *El arte del placer*, trans. by José Ramón Monreal (Barcelona: Lumen, 2007); *L'art de viure*, trans. by Anna Casassas (Barcelona: La Campana, 2007).

⁴ *A arte da alegria*, trans. by Simonetta Neto (Alfragide: Dom Quixote, 2009); *The Art of Joy*, cit.

⁵ This information was provided to me by Angelo Pellegrino in a private conversation (Rome, November 2011).

⁶ See Pellegrino, *Lunga marcia dell'Arte della gioia*, pp. viii – ix; *Un personaggio singolare*, pp. 77-8.

⁷ *Un personaggio singolare*, pp. 83-4. My emphasis.

the difference in concision and cohesiveness apparent between the first part and the rest of the book. A comparison between the manuscript, the typescript sent to the publishing houses before Sapienza's death and the published version of the novel could help understand motivations, directions and responsibilities of the substantial editing undergone by *L'arte della gioia*.

Finally, Giovanna Providenti suggests that Sapienza began writing the novel in 1969 (instead of 1967, as maintained by Pellegrino) and finished it in 1978, when it was sent to the publishing houses.⁸ Unfortunately, the manuscript of *L'arte della gioia* has not been made available to the public so far. Awaiting a proper philological research to be carried out, for my analysis I use the text published by Einaudi in 2008.

2. Plot

L'arte della gioia, consisting of four parts, recounts the story of Modesta, a fictional character born on the first of January 1900 in Sicily, in a valley near Catania.⁹ As a child, Modesta lives in a state of extreme poverty with her mother and her sister Tina, who suffers from Down's syndrome. One day, at the age of about nine, while Tina is shouting and crying, Modesta discovers the pleasure of masturbation. She immediately communicates her joyful discovery to Tuzzu, her playmate and first guide, who at first is shocked but then is seduced by the young girl. When Modesta arrives at home, she finds a man who claims to be her father, shuts the mother and Tina in a storage room

⁸ See G. Providenti, 'L'opera di Goliarda Sapienza tra ambivalenza e ambizione', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 289-302. Providenti bases her hypothesis on the draft of a letter to Attilio Bertolucci, dated 21 August 1969, in which Sapienza mentions her project to write a novel and which Providenti interprets as referring to the initial idea of *L'arte della gioia*.

⁹ Valle del Bove, a desert basin covered by lava flows, closed to the Etna volcano. In the novel it is called 'Chiana del Bove'.

and rapes her. Awoken still in shock, Modesta sets fire to the shack with an oil lamp. The mother and Tina die, while the police officers do not find the corpse of the father.

Modesta is rescued by Tuzzu and entrusted to madre Leonora, abbess of a nunnery. She grows up, committing herself to the study of piano and theological texts, surrounded by Leonora's love, but at the same time she suffers from the constriction and self-privation characterising life in the nunnery. She finds a true friend in Mimmo, the gardener. After discovering and saying overtly that Leonora secretly masturbates, Modesta loses the mother superior's favour and stages a suicide attempt. Madre Leonora, seriously ill, writes a will in which she leaves Modesta a small inheritance and orders that she has the chance to know worldly life before deciding whether to take her vows or not. Nonetheless, as Leonora appears to be likely to live long, Modesta secretly saws the hand rail of the astrological observatory of the mother superior, who falls and dies.

In conformity with Leonora's will, Modesta, who is now around sixteen years old, leaves the nunnery and is brought to Villa Carmelo, property of Leonora's aristocratic family of origin, the Brandifortis. There she meets the princess Gaia (Leonora's mother) and Beatrice (Leonora's secret daughter), with whom Modesta begins a love affair. The other inhabitants of the house are the maid Argentovivo, the servant Pietro, and Ippolito, Leonora's mentally ill brother. Modesta manages to make Ippolito grow fond of her and marries him, thus becoming part of the family and acquiring power in the administration of the patrimony. In the meantime, she falls in love with Carmine, administrator of Brandifortis' landholdings, and becomes pregnant. She finds a trunk full of books by Voltaire, Diderot, Marx, Bebel and other philosophers, which initiate her in socialism and anti-clericalism.

In 1918 the Spanish Flu devastates Catania and Villa Carmelo, leaving Gaia half-paralysed. When Modesta learns that Gaia wants them to remain in Villa Carmelo until their death instead of moving to Catania, and that Beatrice intends to obey, she does not hesitate to let Gaia die by not helping her during a stroke, burn Gaia's will and finally move to Catania. The arrival in the city marks the transition to the second part. Modesta sells most of the properties in order to escape the burden of the administrative work, and is abandoned by Carmine, who does not want to upset his sons.

She gives birth to her baby, Eriprando, and spends her time studying and writing. She meets the young doctor Carlo Civardi, who teaches her to swim (an achievement that marks her conquered freedom) and introduces her to the Sicilian socialists. Carlo and Modesta have a brief love affair that fails because of their sexual and emotional incompatibility, but they start a close friendship. Carlo marries Beatrice, whose relationship with Modesta had in the meanwhile turned into close sisterhood. On the day of the wedding, Carmine goes to Modesta's house and reveals to her that he is going to die soon because of a heart disease, and they start a new relationship which lasts until Carmine dies. At his funeral Modesta meets Carmine's son, Mattia, and the two begin a passionate and conflicted love affair. When Carlo is killed in a fascist assault, Modesta is suspicious of Mattia and this causes a fight in which they shoot each other.

The third part is dedicated to the romantic relationship between Modesta and Joyce, a political refugee split between communist faith and psychoanalysis. The house in Catania where they live is inhabited by a large and atypical community: in addition to Eriprando there are: Bambù, daughter of Carlo and Beatrice (who died mad after Carlo's death); Stella, a nursemaid, and her son 'Ntoni; Mela, a young orphan helped by Modesta, and Jacopo, son of Ippolito and his nurse. Against the background of rampant

fascism, Modesta educates this original community to anti-fascism, laicism and gender equality. Joyce, incapable of accepting her own homosexuality and disagreeing with Modesta's free lifestyle, decides to leave.

The fourth part is the most complex for the number of characters on stage. Modesta, now short of money, reconciles with Mattia who helps her by selling some precious canvases. Stella dies giving birth to a son, Carluzzu, conceived with Eriprando, while Bambù and Mattia fall in love. When World War II breaks out, Modesta is arrested for having secretly helped the communist party, at that time illegal, and in prison meets Nina, an energetic anarchist from Rome. In 1942 the two women are confined to an island where they suffer from hunger and thirst. After the armistice they are rescued by Jacopo, who brings them home and then leaves again to go fighting as a partisan. After two years of painful wait, Eriprando, Jacopo and 'Ntoni come back from the war, although the latter is psychologically devastated from his experience in a concentration camp. Modesta commits herself to the communist cause, giving public speeches and writing articles, but quits all political activities and rejects the offer of a place in the parliament as she disagrees with the conformist and rigid mentality of the PCI. Against the party and her own son Eriprando she defends her independence by opening a book store in Catania and beginning a new love relationship.

3. Chapter Outline and a Methodological Premise

How is the theme of freedom developed in *L'arte della gioia*? In continuity with the previous chapter, I answer this question by putting the relationship between body, identity and power at the centre of the investigation. In the first part of the chapter I analyse the configuration of identity represented in the novel, with a predominant focus

on the protagonist, Modesta. She emerges as a complex and internally divided character who features different, often conflicting, instances of the self. I start by looking at the representation of the corporeal dimension, whose prominence has been widely pointed out by criticism, and explore the dynamics of its interaction with other components of the self, in particular will and rationality. The unity of the self is alternatively sought for and escaped; similarly, the possibility of a bodily foundation of an authentic and harmonic expression of the self is alternatively presented as possible and ultimately unachievable.

After an exploration of the internal composition of the self, I trace the parable of Modesta's evolution throughout the novel, defining the type of subject that, in Sapienza's narrative, performs a struggle for freedom. Overall, Modesta embodies a powerfully transgressive tension towards the accomplishment of a radical freedom. This tension is rooted in the physical domain of existence, which does not suffer normative, abstract and metaphysical categories; it is triggered by the protagonist's discovery of sexual pleasure, and is sustained throughout the text by her determination to create the conditions of enjoyment of such pleasure for herself, thus pointing at a materialistic and Epicurean ethics. In the process of defining what type of subject Sapienza places as the agent of a struggle for freedom, I employ different notions of identity, drawing in particular from Husserl's phenomenological subject and Braidotti's feminist nomadic subject, as they account for a combination of strong and weak configurations of identity which, I argue, is a crucial feature of Sapienza's narrative.

The second section of the chapter engages with the collective dimension of the text, exploring the interaction between personal identity and power social structures. Gender, sexuality and politics constitute the main grounds of investigation. I propose

here an overall interpretation of the libertarian ethics of the novel and the type of subject conceived as its protagonist.

Whereas textual analysis is predominant in the chapters dedicated to *Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* and *Io, Jean Gabin*, the length of *L'arte della gioia* requires a more incisive synthesis, and this necessarily turns into a reduced presence of textual data. However, tracing comprehensive interpretative lines is a particularly risky operation with regards to this novel, as it is a deeply self-contradictory work – and clearly intended to be so. Centred on the ‘contraddizione che è il perno della natura’ (AG, p. 264), it intrinsically resists synthesis and systematisation. As Tullia Rodigari points out, Sapienza’s writing can be described as ‘*una scrittura che si fa carne: intenzionata a cogliere il reale nel suo divenire incessante e contraddittorio, nel suo tentativo di “mordere” il divenire senza bloccarlo*’.¹⁰ The analysis of the evolution of Modesta is therefore particularly challenging from a methodological point of view, for general interpretations cut through the live body of contradictions that are one of the defining features of the novel. The objective is then to provide an insight into such contradictions, balancing the systematic and definitory approach required by a critical discourse with the specificity of the work under analysis, with its fierce resistance to structure and univocity.

2.1 The Configuration of Identity: Epicureanism

L'arte della gioia is a novel that has at its core the ideal of individual and social liberation. How is identity configured within this struggle? We can observe an overall

¹⁰ Tullia Rodigari, ‘La personalità culturale e storica di Goliarda Sapienza’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca, 2011), p. 169. I thank Rodigari for allowing me to see and cite her work prior to its publication.

opposition between abstract thought, which divides reality into hierarchically oriented categories, and the freedom of the body, source of pleasure and locus of a fluid and mutable perception of reality. In order to achieve the right to exert her freedom, conceived as bodily pleasure and as philosophical and existential openness to change, plurality and experimentation, Modesta resorts to the contrary strategy, consisting in the strengthening of firm opposition and even violence against any constraint, whether cultural or physical. The two approaches to the self, one weak, open and fluid, the other one rigidly held together by self-determination and an instrumental use of rationality, coexist and alternate within the character of Modesta.

In *L'arte della gioia* abstract rationality is connected to logocentrism and power, in a process of criticism of the metaphysical foundation of social and philosophical structures carried out in the same years as *Sapienza* by post-structuralist thinkers such as Foucault and Butler. Yet, Modesta also adopts a form of instrumental rationality to oppose power, as a provisional tool aimed at overcoming the limits of rationality itself, while the primary drive to oppose such power originates from her powerfully desiring body. This interplay between body and rationality is connected to different configurations of identity coexisting and at time conflicting in the character of Modesta. One configuration sees the frontal opposition between a strongly desiring body and a constrictive power, with rationality used as a means to oppose and deconstruct the conditions of oppression, be they internal (e.g. emotional dependence and internalised social norms) or external (other people's will and material constraints). In this structure, there is a clear distinction between an authentic core of the self, rooted in physical desire, and oppressive power. Alongside this organisation of identity, we notice in Modesta another pattern, featuring a much more nuanced boundary between control and

uncontrolled emotions, dependence and independence, authenticity and performativity. In this second mode of functioning of the character, rationality, bodily desire and power are not so clearly distinct.

The difference between these configurations of the self goes together with the stratification of roles performed by the body in *L'arte della gioia*: on the one hand, the body is the source of a strong desire, which constitutes the authentic core of the self and enables Modesta to resist oppression; however, the body is also a disruptive force that can exceed rational control, and then needs to be channelled and governed by reason, and the carrier of inauthentic desires and emotions, insofar as they can be themselves constituted by power.

We then need to adopt a composite theoretical approach, which combines a phenomenological understanding of the body as the authentic ground of the self with a post-structuralist one, in which desire is itself constituted by power and always exceeds rational control. Overall, the character of Modesta conforms to an Epicurean ethics and understanding of the self, which qualifies rationality as the profound knowledge and understanding of one's desires, although this is never given once and for all. The body as the material ground of existence is to Epicurus the authentic core of the self, but reason, in the form of self-reflection and strong determination, is necessary in order to maintain contact with the body itself, deconstructing the falsifying and distorting effects of power.

2.1.1 The Centrality of the Body

I want to reflect here specifically on the position and role of the body within the configuration of identity of the protagonist Modesta, and its relationship with the

overarching principle of the text, the struggle for freedom. Indeed, the body is at the centre of an endeavour of redefinition of the subject, which is itself at the centre of a project of radical social transformation, but this process is richly problematic.

In *L'arte della gioia*, and in particular in the characterisation of Modesta, the corporeal dimension plays a crucial role. From the very opening of the novel, powerful and abrupt, the body is exhibited in its material existence and experienced in its physical perceptions:

*Ed eccovi me a quattro, cinque anni in uno spazio fangoso che trascino un pezzo di legno immenso. Non ci sono né alberi né case intorno, solo il sudore per lo sforzo di trascinare quel corpo duro e il bruciore acuto delle palme ferite dal legno. Affondo nel fango sino alle caviglie ma devo tirare, non so perché, ma lo devo fare.*¹¹

It is a properly existentialist incipit, which portrays a little child thrown into the world without mastering the conditions of her existence, nor its meaning. Giacomo Debenedetti's analysis of modern characters such as Zeno Cosini and Mattia Pascal, who find themselves in an 'epica dell'esistenza' that has neither internal coherence nor external justification, and suffer from the 'colpa di essere presenti, senza un perché, tra cose di cui ignoriamo il perché' provides here a suitable description.¹²

Modesta exposes herself to the reader's recognition, first and foremost in the material, perceptive and perceived dimension of the body. The identity of the protagonist is immediately presented through its physical and relational presence in the

¹¹ AG, p. 5. In FM there is a very similar description of a desert land, accompanied by the therapist's psychoanalytic interpretation: 'In quel campo sterminato di terra bruciata dal gelo... non c'era né ombra né alberi, non un filo d'erba solo il gelo della lampadina accesa, non c'erano case intorno...[...] "Lei percepisce sua madre come una terra sconfinata e brulla senza vita, senza alberi, gli alberi sono simbolo di vita, un campo sconfinato, brullo, impossibile a possedersi, ad abbracciarsi."' p. 111.

¹² Giacomo Debenedetti, *Personaggi e destino: la metamorfosi del romanzo contemporaneo* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1977), p. 126.

world.¹³ The centrality of the body in *L'arte della gioia* is pointed out by several critics. Modesta's passionate nature and her powerful sexual drive have been read in the direction of a re-evaluation of the material dimension of existence, against a universal and abstract rational subject, as well as a re-appropriation of agency on women's part. Trevisan talks about the 'corpo "tutto percettivo" della protagonista' and argues that Modesta's body is '*res cogitans e res extensa*, "carne viva" ed "identità piena", dunque in grado di sconfiggere il dualismo secondo cui il corpo è stato secolarmente connotato'.¹⁴ Similarly Rodigari, in a chapter of her doctoral thesis dedicated specifically to the theme of the body in Sapienza's work, describes Modesta as 'una donna in cui si fondono carnalità e intelletto',¹⁵ a definition that again stresses the original and productive reconfiguration of the pair body-mind. The centrality of the body is also noted in most literary reviews and comments by common readers, which exalt Modesta's powerful instincts, together with the sensual and erotic dimension of the text.¹⁶

While it is appropriate to describe Modesta as a sensual character and her body as a perceptive, desiring and passionate body, if we look at its role in the overall configuration of the protagonist's identity and her relationship with power, we find that this tension towards the overcoming of the dichotomy body-mind is not as

¹³ The exhibition of the body to external recognition, the impossibility to master one's own origin and the concrete, individual presence in the world are all themes Sapienza has in common with existentialist thought and in particular with the theoretical elaboration by Hannah Arendt and, more recently, by Adriana Cavarero in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*.

¹⁴ Alessandra Trevisan, "'La gioia è più che ogni volontà': sessualità e maternità ne *L'arte della gioia*', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 53-60 (p. 56).

¹⁵ Rodigari, p. 6.

¹⁶ See, for example: 'Proprio i sensi, la corporeità, la fisicità raccontano le emozioni, e i desideri sono quasi l'unico motore delle decisioni', *Centro donna Lilith di Latina*.

<<http://www.centrodonnalilith.it/images/L%27arte%20della%20Gioia%20-%20G.Sapienza.pdf>> [Last accessed 17 April 2014]; 'È una narrazione autobiografica in cui non c'è scissione tra mente e corpo. Ciò che riguarda il corpo è espressione di lucidità mentale, ciò che riguarda la mente trasuda di corporeità', review by 'Giugio' on Amazon, 5 December 2010

<<http://www.amazon.it/Larte-della-gioia-Goliarda-Sapienza/dp/8806199609>> [Last accessed 17 April 2014].

straightforward and univocal as it may initially look. From criticism an unresolved ambiguity emerges concerning the role of the body within the protagonist's identity, which requires specific analysis. Modesta is described as sensual and acting in accordance with her own passions, instincts and emotions. On the other hand, she is also driven by a strong determination, intellectual and calculating. For example, Claude Imberty argues that the body, and in particular sexual drive, is the real motor of Modesta's actions.¹⁷ She cultivates an acceptance of passions and an abandonment to the always renovated surprise of love, a hedonistic approach defined by the critic as radically different from the ethics of the control of passions which traditionally marks the final maturation in coming-of-age novels. Yet, Imberty also notes a sharp contrast between the characterisation of the protagonist in the first part and the rest of the novel.

He writes:

Come conciliare il ritratto di Modesta adulta con quello di Modesta bambina e adolescente? La donna intellettuale è tanto diversa dalla ragazza violenta che il lettore ha l'impressione di trovarsi di fronte a due personaggi o semmai di fronte a un solo personaggio con due personalità contrapposte.¹⁸

Not only, in Imberty's view, does Modesta dramatically change personality throughout the text, to the point of being unrecognisable. He also defines the adult woman 'intellettuale', thus pointing at a rather different characterisation of identity than the sensual and passionate one previously described. Modesta is, in fact, a complex character, internally divided, featuring conflicting instances of the self, whose complexity manifests in the discrepancy between her thoughts and her words, her inner desires and her awareness of them, her rationalist attitude and the eruption of her

¹⁷ Claude Imberty, 'Gender e generi letterari: il caso di Goliarda Sapienza', in *Narrativa*, 30 (2008), pp. 51-61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 56.

passionate emotionality. As Maria Belén Hernández rightly points out, ‘il suo carattere appare polimorfo, talvolta mostruoso [...] Le motivazioni della protagonista [sono] piene di conflitti interiori e ambivalenze’.¹⁹ Likewise, Rodigari discusses the ‘Machiavellian’ use of rationality by Modesta, who ‘sa calcolare e pianificare, decidere e agire; allo stesso tempo è fortemente intuitiva’.²⁰

In an essay dedicated to Modesta’s ethics, Andrée Bella stresses in particular the constant self-analysis practised by Modesta in order to understand and master her own emotions and motivations, and puts it in relation to the Cynics’ practice of *parrhesia*,

a constant practice of self-awareness that [...] involved mainly not to coincide arbitrarily with one’s own appetites and feelings, with the self in its immediacy, and aimed at the search for truth through critical thinking as an indispensable condition to achieve freedom and therefore a true happiness.²¹

At the opposite of a character abandoned to uncontrolled passions, then, we would have a character guided by strong rational will and who exerts strict self-control. In Bella’s words, ‘Modesta is very rigorous in analysing her own fears, desires and aspirations in her ceaseless exercises to improve herself and nourish “the joy of life”’.²²

So, we could ask: is Modesta sensual or intellectual – or both? Are her actions driven primarily by corporeal instincts and passions, by an unproblematic bodily desire, or is there a nuanced relationship or even a conflict between different aspects of the protagonist’s self? There seems to be an unresolved ambiguity in the character of Modesta, which criticism reflects, but does not fully articulate. Let us firstly analyse the different aspects of the role of the body in the representation of Modesta’s character, and

¹⁹ La fortuna letteraria de *L’arte della gioia*, p. 106.

²⁰ Tullia Rodigari, ‘Goliarda, Modesta e Machiavelli’, in *Quel sogno d’essere*, pp. 93-8 (p. 96).

²¹ Andrée Bella, ‘A Backbone Held Together by Joy’, in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*.

²² *Ibid.*

then proceed to an interpretation by looking at the interaction between the character and power.

2.1.2 The Body Before and Beyond Power

From the complexity of meanings attached to the body, I start here by drawing critical attention to the body as the source of instincts. The body may be intended here, phenomenologically, as the individual biological organism, a kinesthetic unit, the material ground of perception and a source of vital energy and physical pleasure. In Husserl's view – then re-elaborated for example by Winnicott's strand of psychoanalysis as well as cognitivism – thought is rooted in the physical interaction between the body and the world.²³ Between perceptions and thoughts there is a continuum, not a radical alterity, and the connection between the different layers of experience is sustained by a primary desire: 'La totalità della vita è un processo di costante essere-spinto, di bramare', Husserl writes.²⁴ At the very core of the subject, in other words, lies a drive, a desire, an aspiration which guides the body's kinesthetic interaction with the world, from the satisfaction of primary needs – such as hunger and sleep – to the search for knowledge and understanding. The same perspective is endorsed by Braidotti, whose combination of phenomenology and post-structuralism provides important insights into Sapienza's work. Braidotti writes:

Questo desiderio di sapere *fondante, primario, vitale*, necessario e quindi originario è ciò che rimane impensato al cuore del pensiero proprio perché è la condizione essenziale

²³ See for example Antonio Damasio, *Descartes's Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1994); Mark Johnson: *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁴ Edmund Husserl, B.I 21, p. 6, cit. in Donnicci, p. 203.

affinché vi sia una qualsiasi forma di pensiero. Il desiderio, essendo la condizione *a priori* del pensiero, eccede il processo stesso del pensare.²⁵

This originary impulse, founded in the *aisthesis*, is an aspiration to establish a complete knowledge of an object, shaped in analogy with the originary impulse to fulfil a drive. Desire thus establishes a continuity between *aisthesis* and thought, but is never fully reducible to thought, inasmuch as it constitutes its condition of possibility.

For Modesta ‘il corpo è desiderio e appetito’,²⁶ which from the very opening of the text constitutes the propelling force of her thoughts and actions. *L’arte della gioia* is framed by this primary desire, which takes the shape first and foremost of sexual pleasure, as the novel begins and ends on an orgasm – the first one experienced by Modesta as a child, and the last one when she is a mature woman. As Emily Cooke remarks in a literary review: ‘The discovery of pleasure initiates Modesta’s appetite more generally – for knowledge, for experience, for autonomy. It turns her outward, toward nonsexual things, by inwardly sustaining her.’²⁷ In the first pages of the book, Modesta experiences sexual pleasure for the first time, and her discovery is represented as belonging to a sphere before and beyond norms and ethics, that is, a realm completely extraneous to social structures and their constituting power. Surprised by her new, amazing experience, Modesta asks her friend Tuzzu about it: ‘Non dovevo lasciarlo andare via, dovevo chiedergli perché – quando lo guardavo prima, e ora che tenevo il suo braccio – mi nasceva dentro quel desiderio di accarezzarmi là dove...’. When the boy expresses dismay and disapproval – ‘Ma guarda se sono domande da

²⁵ Braidotti, p. 77. My emphasis.

²⁶ Rodigari, p. 179.

²⁷ Emily Cooke, ‘Disobedience is a virtue: on Goliarda Sapienza’s “Art of joy”’, *The New Yorker*, 24 January 2014.

<<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/disobedience-is-a-virtue-on-goliarda-sapienzas-the-art-of-joy>> [Last accessed 15 April 2014].

fare! E alla tua età! Una peste sei! [...] Non ti vergogni?’ – she replies: ‘se io l’ho scoperto che nessuno me l’ha detto, vuol dire che tutti lo sanno’ (AG, p. 9), thus stating – and the point is crucial – the idea of the possibility of a desire that exceeds social regulation, norms and categories.

Although the representation of Modesta, as we shall see in greater detail later on, has much in common with post-structuralist configuration of the subject, the prominent role of the body as source of a primary desire also partially distances her from these positions, placing her closer to phenomenological approaches to the body, instincts and desires. According to the post-structuralist theoretical reflections on body and power developed in particular by Foucault and Butler, there is no desire before and beyond the constitutive power of social regulation, because ‘the illusion of a sexuality before the law is itself a creation of that law’.²⁸ Identity is intrinsically constructed, desire is constituted and not just repressed by power. There is, in other words, no desire prior to repression to retrieve. In this absence of any ‘core’, ‘material’, ‘authentic’ or ‘own’ desire, even the ‘I’ dissolves, its unity being only a linguistic performance.²⁹ Conversely, in *L’arte della gioia* there seems to exist a material domain preceding or exceeding any category, and this belongs to the realm of physical desires.

By opening her novel with the representation of a character, the young Modesta, in a direct and unproblematic relationship with her own powerfully vital drives, Sapienza marks a clear difference from the autobiographical works. In *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* she focuses extensively on the circumstances and modalities of constitution of desire by power. Her autobiographical narrative investigates how identity is formed, and qualifies this process as a series of ‘disconnections’ – or, in

²⁸ Butler, p. 94.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 163.

Ross's words, 'interruptions' – of desire.³⁰ Nonetheless, these texts also feature a path towards the reconstruction of something perceived as less extraneous, a dimension of the self potentially closer to a desiring, live body, beyond alienating power relationships. In the conclusive paragraph of *Lettera aperta*, the narrator asks precisely for the freedom to frequent her own body: 'Vi lascio per un po': con questo poco di ordine che sono riuscita a fare intorno a me. Vorrei tacere per qualche tempo, e andarmene a giocare con la terra e con il mio corpo. Arrivederci' (LA, p. 159). It is from here that the narrative of Modesta begins, from that 'terra' and that 'corpo': a source of instincts, a ground of desire and vitality of the self.

Inasmuch as the primary motor of sexual pleasure lies outside power, it provides Modesta with a solid ground from which to contest power itself, whether in the form of socio-political institutions or conceptual categories, enabling her struggle for freedom. In *L'arte della gioia* the body is thus a locus of liberating pleasure, often exhibited in frontal opposition to oppressive power, as evident for example in the passage, set in the nunnery, in which Modesta cuts the bands constraining her breasts:

La corazza di malinconia si staccava a pezzi dal mio corpo, il torace si allargava scosso dall'energia di quel sentimento. Non respiro più chiusa nel grembiule. Che cosa mi pesa ancora sul petto?

Strappandomi il grembiule e la camicia, le mie mani trovarono quelle fasce strette 'perché il seno non si mostrasse', che fino a quel momento erano state come una seconda pelle per me. Una pelle dall'apparenza morbida che mi legava col suo biancore rassicurante. Presi le forbici e le tagliai a pezzi. Dovevo respirare. E finalmente nuda – quanto era che non sentivo il mio corpo nudo? Anche il bagno con la camicia si doveva fare – ritrovo la mia carne. Il seno libero esplose sotto le mie palme e mi accarezzo lì in terra godendo delle mie carezze che quella parola magica aveva liberato. [...] avevo ritrovato il mio corpo.³¹

³⁰ *Eccentric interruptions*.

³¹ AG, pp. 41-2.

Sexual pleasure is the source of the protagonist's strength, and creating the conditions for enjoying it is also the objective of her actions. It provides the initial inspiration to struggle for freedom and a resource to resist oppression, reflecting Husserl's statement that 'l'uomo deve essere già in libertà per poter realizzare la libertà'.³² In other words, the discovery of a pleasure beyond power is the ground on which the protagonist builds her aspiration to be able to access that pleasure in the future and therefore her tension towards freedom. Bodily desire is therefore at the same time a primary condition and an objective, a potentiality that is already within oneself and that must be achieved, in accordance with Epicurean ethics:

Per questo noi riteniamo il piacere principio e fine della vita felice, perché lo abbiamo riconosciuto bene prima e a noi congenito. Ad esso ci ispiriamo per ogni atto di scelta o di rifiuto, e scegliamo ogni bene in base al sentimento del piacere e del dolore.³³

Joy, the key word of the title of the novel that signifies physical pleasure, fulfilled desire and freedom, is a starting condition, and also the result of an 'art'. The circularity of the novel, inaugurated and concluded by two joyful orgasms, manifests on the level of narrative structure this circularity of pleasure and freedom.

2.1.3 Body and Rationality

So far I have approached the role of the body by taking into consideration its function as source of a strong desire. However, the representation of Modesta presents us with a highly self-conflicting configuration of the self. Similarly to *Lettera aperta* and, as we will see, *Io, Jean Gabin*, in *L'arte della gioia* physical instincts are inscribed within a polarity between agency and passivity, as they represent the locus of an authentic

³² Husserl, E III 4, p. 26, cit. in Donnicci, p. 250.

³³ Epicuro, p. 13.

identity, but also disruptive forces that destabilise the unity of the subject, exposing her to the oppressive force of power. Indeed, Modesta constantly finds herself between being overwhelmed by the insurgence of uncontrolled forces and an active self-analysis and self-regulation – quite a different picture compared to the sensual and erotic character described so far. The definition of ‘intellectual’ given by Imberly, and its coexistence with other critical definitions of Modesta focused on the bodily dimension, becomes then more clear. The combination of powerful desire and instrumental use of reason and self-control is particularly evident in the part of the novel set in the nunnery. In the passage below, for example, surrounded by the nuns’ hypocritical and oppressive rules, Modesta is able to channel her passionate ardour and use it to deceive the nuns:

Ecco come uscirne [...] Chiusi gli occhi per raggiungere Tuzzu e quel mare che dava terrore e affanno. E, con tutta la forza che il desiderio e il terrore mi davano, gridai forte, ma con una sola piccola variante. Invece del nome di Tuzzu, dicevo: – Madre, perdono, madre! –, e pensavo a Tuzzu dimenticato da tanto tempo: – Perdono, madre, perdono!³⁴

Here, Modesta wants to regain contact with that material and libidinal core of the self that she has for a long time neglected – represented by the image of the sea and the character of Tuzzu – but in order to do so she needs at the same time to escape the nuns’ oppressive power, and therefore to exert self-control. In the action of asking emphatically for forgiveness, then, the authentic ‘forza’, ‘desiderio’, ‘terrore’ combine with an instrumental use of reason and self-control in the deception of that ‘piccola variante’, a cunning lie. The control the character exercises on her own instincts is clearly presented as an instrument to resist oppression and to assert agency. Instincts, in *L’arte della gioia*, are a powerful source of vitality, as well as an objective; but they are

³⁴ AG, p. 29.

also a danger, and as such they need to be carefully monitored by a rationality always alert.

This particular understanding of the potential danger represented by the body, and the importance of conversely dominating it as an empowering exercise of agency, is evident in Modesta's ability to fake bodily symptoms. For example, Modesta's feigning the symptoms of an epileptic fit appears to be a direct response to the utter lack of agency that characterises the protagonists of Morante's *La storia*, Ida and Usepe.³⁵ While Ida is being raped, she has a seizure that takes her away from the violence she is undergoing. Conversely, Modesta simulates a seizure when she is being questioned by a police officer straight after she was raped by her father and killed her mother and her sister. She uses the fit as an instrument to avoid questions and cover her murder. The same episode where Morante represents Ida's extreme passivity is overturned by Sapienza to represent Modesta's rebellious agency.

When the conditions of enjoyment of bodily desires are not granted, the instinctual dimension of the body can become a counter-productive force, against which the character must resort to self-analysis and self-control. While Modesta's objective is to achieve bodily freedom, she cannot be continuously immersed in an unproblematic enjoyment of the senses, because such condition is not given in a continuum, nor is it given always in the same shape. The interruption of the enjoyment of freedom and pleasure, and the consequent use of calculating will, is evident when it comes from outside the character, in the form of patent oppression by other characters – the nuns,

³⁵ I am indebted to Katrin Wehling-Giorgi for pointing out to me the parallel between Modesta's faked epileptic fit and Ida's actual epilepsy in *La storia*. For a detailed comparative analysis of the two novels, see A. Bazzoni, 'Agency and History in Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia* and Morante's *La storia*', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*. For an analysis of Ida's lack of agency see K. Wehling-Giorgi, "'Totetaco': the Mother-Child Dyad and the Pre-Conceptual Self in Elsa Morante's *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*' in *Writing Childhood in Postwar Women's Writing*, Special Issue of Forum for Modern Language Studies, 1, 49 (2013).

princess Gaia or Prando. But power can also take the shape of incorporated norms, stereotypes, expectations and emotional dependence on others, thus leading to a subject who is internally split. When confronting new situations, Modesta learns throughout her life, instinctual reactions can be themselves conditioned – that is, constructed by the shaping force of social and cultural structures and by interpersonal dependence. In these cases, instinctive reactions and emotions must be carefully deconstructed:

Può tanta nostalgia assalirti alle spalle anche se non si vuole più bene come prima? Non avendo altro da fare, mi misi a cercare di capire cos'era quella nostalgia. Altro che pentirmi, dovevo studiare me stessa e gli altri come si studia la grammatica, la musica, e smetterla di abbandonarmi così alle emozioni, che bella parola, emozioni! Ma ormai non avevo più tempo per le parole, dovevo solo pensare a che cosa era quella nostalgia.³⁶

While Modesta practices self-reflection and tries to master her own emotions, on many occasions she conversely loses control, is unable to interpret her own reactions, transposes every thought directly onto the body. In these moments, the line between control and acceptance, between guiding and following emotions, is blurred. For example, the expressions 'devo', 'dovevo', recurrent throughout the text, mark at the same time an active choice and the acceptance of a condition: 'Ma dovevo avere pazienza' (AG, p. 169); 'E io non dovevo gridare, nè piangere, nè chiedere. Dovevo solo guidare' (p. 170); 'Dovevo essere cauta' (p. 178); 'Doveva accettare quella paura' (p. 193); 'Devo accettare il pericolo, se solo quel pericolo ha il potere di riportare in vita i miei sensi' (p. 238).

The ambiguity between rational choice and the predominance of instincts is particularly noticeable in the episode of the staged suicide attempt in the nunnery. Here Sapienza plays with the topic of the well, discussed in a public exchange between

³⁶ AG, p. 30.

Natalia Ginzburg and Alba de Céspedes in 1948.³⁷ The well is taken by the two writers to symbolise the deepest moments of depression in which women fall: ‘Le donne hanno la cattiva abitudine di cascare ogni tanto in un pozzo, di lasciarsi prendere da una tremenda malinconia e affogarci dentro.’³⁸ Ginzburg considers this ‘acquaintance with sorrow’ from a negative perspective, while to de Céspedes it represents a source of strength, for it provides a deeper understanding of ‘la debolezza, i sogni, le malinconie, le aspirazioni e insomma tutti quei sentimenti che formano e migliorano l’animo umano’.³⁹ In *L’arte della gioia*, Modesta recounts that many girls have committed suicide by falling in the well in the nunnery garden. She too is descending into a state of depression, after Madre Leonora and the other nuns have withdrawn their affection for her and hold her in contempt. Unlike the other girls, however, Modesta plans to fall in the well ensuring that the gardener Mimmo would save her, using the staged suicide attempt in order to regain the nuns’ favour. Sapienza thus overturns the image of the well from lowest depression into an assertion of vitality. Yet, the scene of Modesta’s falling into the well is strikingly ambiguous. For days Modesta looks for the strength to jump in the well, but when she finally resolves to do it, she is not fully in control of her actions:

Le mani sudate scivolavano sulla pietra levigata. Due volte caddi in terra e mi rialzai, ma poi fui in piedi sull’orlo. Che Mimmo mi vedesse bene... E, forse perché avevo corso tanto, o per la voce di suor Costanza che mi rintonava nella testa facendomi perdere l’equilibrio, o perché l’orlo del pozzo era levigato e viscido, scivolai giù senza nemmeno aver dovuto ricorrere a quel coraggio che tanto avevo invocato.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ginzburg, ‘Discorso sulle donne’, in Maria Rosa Cutrufelli et. al. (eds.), *Il pozzo segreto. Cinquanta scrittrici italiane* (Florence: Giunti, 1993), pp. 27-32; de Céspedes, ‘Lettera a Natalia Ginzburg’, in *Il pozzo segreto*, pp. 32-6. Sapienza herself is present in the same volume with ‘Gelosia’ a short story from the collection *Destino Coatto*, pp. 201-3. Fortini discusses the image of the well in relation to Sapienza’s prison works in *Beyond the Canon*.

³⁸ *Discorso sulle donne*, p. 27.

³⁹ de Céspedes, p. 34.

⁴⁰ AG, p. 39.

Surely, she is making sure that Mimmo is there, ready to save her – there is no doubt about the staged nature of her gesture. And yet, there is a degree of truth in her desperation, and the insisted plurality of reasons that made her fall, together with the intense alteration of her perceptions, blur the line between a calculated, strategic action, and an impulsive action beyond control.⁴¹

From the incipit of the text, in which Modesta drags a trunk without knowing why – ‘devo tirare, non so perché, ma lo devo fare’ (AG, p. 5) – to the recurrent explosion of uncontrolled emotions – ‘credevo di ridere e invece, con mia sorpresa, mi trovai a piangere sul suo petto’ (p. 79) – there is a structural ambiguity concerning the motor of the protagonist’s actions and her control of them, between active simulation and untamed instincts. Such ambiguity recurs throughout the text alongside those situations when conversely the components of instincts and rationality are clearly acting in solidarity, with a subject fully in control of her actions.

Despite her ‘Nietzschean will’,⁴² Modesta is not always able to see clearly through her own emotions and even her perceptions, subjected to the interference of imagination, analogies and hallucinations. The text features frequent syntactical constructions in which a perception is followed by a question about the nature of the perception itself, expressing Modesta’s difficulty to interpret what she is experiencing: ‘Era cresciuto, o era la sigaretta che lo faceva sembrare così grande?’ (AG, p. 7); ‘il suo pianto improvviso e disperato mi accecò. O era calato il sole?’ (p. 65); ‘Il silenzio della

⁴¹ This is particularly striking when put in relation to Sapienza’s own life. She attempted suicide twice, but on both occasions it is not clear whether she actually wanted to kill herself, or exceeded the dose of sleeping pills by accident, or was looking for a demonstrative action. Similarly, it is not clear whether she went to prison intentionally, as she herself stated (see for example her interview with Enzo Biagi, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojXxjHr6MU0>> [Last accessed 5 June 2014]), or the theft was due to other reasons, mainly her poverty.

⁴² Romaric Sangars defines Modesta ‘une héroïne nietzschéenne’. See ‘Goliarda Sapienza: l’art de la joie’, *Chronicart.com*, 13 November 2005 <<http://www.chronicart.com/livres/goliarda-sapienza-l-art-de-la-joie/>> [Last accessed 19 August 2014].

clinica mi urlò nel cervello [...] costringendomi dietro una parete invalicabile d'attesa. O era ancora la parete scivolosa del pozzo, da dove carponi cercavo di risalire alla luce?' (p. 170). The same construction reflecting the character's uncertainty extends from perceptions to emotions, which she struggles to read: 'L'odio l'abbandonava? O era tutto quel latte che la sera le facevano bere che annacquava il sentimento forte che prima la teneva in piedi?' (p. 144). Similarly, Sapienza often uses syntactic structures in which perceptions and emotions constitute physical forces acting upon the characters, a feature that recurs in all her writings: 'la scoperta di non essere la sola a dubitare di Dio m'aveva acceso una vampata nel sangue da essere costretta a serrare la bocca per non gridare di gioia' (p. 36). In Domenico Scarpa's words, 'nell'*Arte della gioia* [...] è il corpo a dettare legge: Modesta non fa che obbedire alla sua volontà'.⁴³

While Modesta's absolute will aims at conquering freedom and independence through self-control and simulation, her emotionality claims the right to inconsistency, fluidity, passivity, play and experimentation. The aim of this bodily reason is to annex as much experience as possible and not settle into any definitive identity. Hence, Modesta accumulates contradictory traits: she is intelligent, a talented piano player, a passionate lover both with men and women, a murderer; she writes tales and poems, manages the family's patrimony, speaks as an equal with lawyers and policemen and carries an undisputed authority over her and others' children. Sometimes she is cruel, aggressive and authoritative; on other occasions she is fragile, naïve, childish and needy. She oscillates between her contradictory features, propelled forward by her will to appropriate multiple experiences, to experiment with a construction of the self not aimed at anything but the richness of the experience itself. This multifaceted

⁴³ Scarpa, p. 522.

representation is enabled by the very configuration of Modesta's self: a cold and calculating will unifies Modesta's identity by working towards a goal, but such goal is the freedom for identity to be manifold and iridescent. When the conditions of enjoyment of a free emotionality are secured, this is represented as a positive freedom; otherwise, uncontrolled perceptions, desires and emotions are a dangerous force to be carefully monitored.

In her struggle for freedom, Modesta then needs to apply a strenuous deconstruction of her own emotions, in order to re-access that primary, vital instinct that constitutes the core of her desiring tension. In this respect, the body becomes itself a multi-layered ground, where some instinctual manifestations lie at a greater distance than others from an authentic core, and the intervention of conscious self-reflection becomes a necessary tool in order to orient the subject towards the understanding of herself. The power to be opposed is brought inside the character, contributing to her internal conflictuality. In fact, Modesta is characterised by continuous afterthoughts, oscillations back and forth and re-considerations. She is, in other words, almost constantly thinking, checking and controlling herself, because that freedom of the body that she seeks is not a stable condition, granted once and for all, but rather an objective that requires active fight, inside and outside oneself.

Overall, no choice is made in the text between self-control and unreadable perceptions and desires, between a rational and strong-willed self, acting in solidarity with a powerfully desiring body, and multiple, centrifugal and uncontrolled impulses. The possibility of an authentic self is, in other words, continually evoked and subverted. Here lies the core contradiction in the character of Modesta, and of Sapienza's narrative overall: it constantly oscillates between different instances of the self, instinctuality and

rational self-control, emotional outbursts and careful reflection. The relationship between body and mind, not at all pacified because power in all its forms impedes it, is then inscribed within the dimension of a continuous struggle for freedom from internal and external constraints.

2.1.4 A Weak / Strong Subject

A productive way to account for the contradictions and inner conflicts characterising Modesta is to look at the dynamics of the interaction between the different configurations of the self and power. The theoretical elaboration by Rosi Braidotti in *Nuovi soggetti nomadi* provides a useful insight into these dynamics. Braidotti, in continuity with Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari and, in the Italian context, Vattimo, argues for the dissolution of a metaphysical, strong understanding of the subject, to which she opposes the figure of the nomad.

La figurazione del soggetto nomade è in aperta polemica col soggetto stanziale, fisso, umanistico che gestisce da signore e padrone il capitale fallo-logocentrico. [...]

Un soggetto che non è più uno, né nessuno né centomila, ma puro divenire. [...]

Il soggetto è quindi un mosaico di parti frammentarie tenute insieme da un cemento simbolico: l'attaccamento a, e l'identificazione con, il simbolico fallo-logocentrico. Una marmaglia che si crede al centro dell'universo, un mucchio di carne piena di desiderio e di tremori che si innalza alle vette di una coscienza imperiale.⁴⁴

However, Braidotti, in line with the work of the group Diotima, notes how the notion of a weak subject – such as the post-structuralist, nomadic one – carries different values depending on the position of those who embrace it. For subjects in a subaltern position (such as, historically, women and ethnic or religious minorities), discourses on fragmentation, fluidity, openness and weakness of the self carry quite a different

⁴⁴ Braidotti, p. 16; p. 21; p. 28.

meaning than they do for subjects in a dominant position. The idea of a weak subject indeed can be used by strong subjects to keep the weak subjects weak. In Cavarero's words,

For man who has placed himself and who has understood himself for thousands of years as the strong subject – this recuperating of a weakness generously left in the custody of the 'more of the less' woman is indeed the flirting of a subject who does not uproot the foundations of his own representation (and why should he?) but replaces quite freely the categories of his logic... The path of 'pensiero debole' is not the path by which a woman can arrive to speak herself, to think herself, to represent herself.⁴⁵

A strong notion of identity is a tool of oppression and domination, when used by a subject in a dominant position, hence deconstructing dominant identities is inscribed in a process of making space for the emancipation of other identities, a 'welcome development for western philosophy'.⁴⁶ On the other hand, a strong sense of the self is not a means of oppression but rather an instrument of liberation, when used by a subject in a subaltern position. To say that the subject is weak and fragmented, before subaltern subjects can access a locus of agency and expression, serves the interests of those in a dominant position, for such discourse keeps the dominated groups in the position of not being subjects. Weakness, in other words, needs to be the result of an autonomous opening up of the subject to change and plurality, not the heteronomous imposition by a strong subject. As Braidotti puts it:

La verità è che non si può decostruire una soggettività che non è mai stata concessa appieno. [...] Per annunciare la morte del soggetto si deve innanzitutto aver ottenuto il diritto di parlare in quanto tale; per demistificare il metadiscorso ci si deve prima guadagnare l'accesso a un luogo di enunciazione.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cavarero, 'Per una teoria della differenza sessuale', in AA.VV, *Diotima. Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987), pp. 43-79 (p. 48), cit. in Renate Holub, 'Weak Thought and Strong Ethics. The "Postmodern" and Feminist Theory in Italy', *Annali d'italianistica*, 9 (1991), 124-143 (p. 135).

⁴⁶ Holub, p. 135.

⁴⁷ Braidotti, p. 136.

Similarly, Monique Wittig remarks:

I do not know who is going to profit from this abandonment of the oppressed to a trend that will make them more and more powerless, having lost the faculty of being subjects even before having gained it. I would say that we can renounce only what we have.⁴⁸

In their approach to deconstruction, these thinkers take into consideration different positionalities with respect to power. They qualify theories and practices, including deconstruction itself, as endowed with different power-values, because descriptions of identities are themselves political. Their perspective allies with minorities' emancipatory struggles and instrumental politics of identity, while nonetheless remaining radically anti-essentialist.⁴⁹

According for example to Michael Dyson, we need to distinguish between the violent and conservative pride of the dominant social group (in his discourse, white pride) and the potentially subversive pride of the oppressed.⁵⁰ The concept of pride here refers to a strong notion of identity, but it carries opposite values depending on who uses it and for what purposes, since 'not all identity politics are created equal.'⁵¹ The same approach is applied by Braidotti to feminist struggles, since the position of women is not symmetrical to that of men with respect to the crisis of the modern subject, which is and remains in fact a dominant male subject. Only after the subject has achieved a certain degree of agency and freedom from oppression can it open up to multiplicity and fluidity, otherwise, in Braidotti's words, 'rischiamo di passare d'un balzo dal neolitico

⁴⁸ Wittig, p. 57.

⁴⁹ The concept of a 'strategic essentialism' was firstly formulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. See Donna Landry, & Gerald MacLean (eds.), *The Spivak Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 214.

⁵⁰ Michael Dyson, *Pride* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). When Modesta firstly meets her alleged father, she expresses her admiration for his strength using precisely the word 'pride': 'il sangue mi rideva *d'orgoglio* per la sua *forza*', AG, p. 12. My emphasis.

⁵¹ Dyson, p. 54.

all'era postindustriale saltando la fase più importante: il processo del divenire storico in quanto soggetti'.⁵²

This perspective integrates post-structuralism by taking into account different positionalities with respect to power as concerns the deconstruction of identity. As such, it helps capture the core of Sapienza's narrative representation of the relationship between body, identity and power, accounting for the combination of strong and weak notions of the self. As we have seen, Modesta's objective in the novel is to liberate identity from normative and conclusive structures. However, in order to carry out such deconstruction, Modesta needs to resort to an instrumental use of those same categories she seeks to overcome. In fact, she is fighting on two front lines, against a strong, universal and abstract notion of identity, on the one hand, and against an oppressed, weak and voiceless subject on the other – that is, not to be one. The novel thus combines an antagonistic spirit, evident in Modesta's strong determination and even use of violence, with a much more nuanced and fluid representation of the character's identity and relationship with her context, for the various configurations of the character derive from her shifting positionality with respect to power. Through narrative, Sapienza mobilises and dramatises the representation of identity and its relationship with a changing context; specifically, in the evolution of the character, openness and disruption of the self change value, from a negative and painful condition to an affirmative and strong choice, that is, from oppression to agency. Let us now put our map of Modesta's configuration of the self into the temporal dimension of the narrative, following the evolution of the protagonist throughout the sixty years of her life.

⁵² Braidotti, p. 160.

2.1.5 Modesta's Parable

In the incipit of the novel Modesta is presented as a rebellious child, whose discovery of pleasure provides with the strength and vitality necessary to aspire to fight oppression. She begins where the protagonist of *Lettera aperta* was left, in a reconquered contact with her bodily instincts. Straight after the presentation of the material conditions in which she lives, Modesta tells the readers that she does not feel loved by her mother, and that she responds to the absence of a loving environment with hatred. This hatred is better understood when put in relation with the autobiographical texts and the theme of power in the form of emotional dependence there developed. In *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, indeed, the child protagonist experiences her mother's love as something that she must conquer with great effort. The primary, unfulfilled, need for love in the autobiographical texts puts the child into a state of painful dependency and is therefore represented as oppressive and distorting for the fragile child's self.

The homicide of the mother and sister in *L'arte della gioia*, I argue, can be productively interpreted as the initiatory rejection of this dependence. The murder of the mother and Tina has been read, together with that of madre Leonora and Gaia, as aimed against negative images of women. For example, Providenti argues: 'Nella prima parte del romanzo muoiono ben tre personaggi femminili, tutt'e tre figure materne della protagonista e simboli di un femminile da cui l'autrice vuole prendere le distanze: la vittima, la mistica, la donna mascolinizzata.'⁵³ Similarly, according to Maenza, Modesta kills 'l'immagine della madre che accetta e si sottomette al sistema patriarcale'.⁵⁴

As criticism suggests, the mother is doubtless a negative example of victim, from which Modesta wants to distance herself. However, to the child she is also and mainly a

⁵³ *La porta è aperta*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ Maenza, p. 255.

source of emotional dependence, an aspect that has been generally overlooked by criticism so far. By killing her mother, Modesta challenges one fundamental form of oppression Sapienza exposed in her autobiographical works, consisting in the primary distorting dependence deriving from a – neglected – need for love. The problem of power involved in interpersonal relations, emotional dependence and need for approval is indeed a major aspect of Sapienza's narrative, which in the previous chapter I read in its psychological and social dimension through Winnicott and Miller. In *L'arte della gioia* there is an initiatory rejection of such relationality within power, which determines the initial void of communication between Modesta and the other characters as well as her search for a radical independence.

Structured on parental dynamics, relations throughout the novel are invariably described through the lens of power imbalance. Sapienza maintains an acute sense of the power involved in human relationships, often embodying it in the characters' physical size: 'E come era grande così disteso! Era cresciuto o era la sigaretta che lo faceva sembrare più grande? Come gli posso parlare ora che è diventato così grande?' (AG, p. 7); 'O io ero diventata più alta, o lei era più piccola del normale' (p. 68); 'Come rimpicciolita dal tremore, mi si raggomitò fra le braccia. Come faceva a sembrare alta da lontano e così piccola fra le braccia?' (p. 73); 'Lei è strana Modesta, a volte sembra alta, forte, a volte come adesso piccola e fragile come una bambina.' (p. 292); 'Ridendo e andando verso la finestra, Joyce ridiventava alta, austera, irraggiungibile.' (p. 294). Joyce is a 'donna grande', Gaia is a 'grande vecchia', and the father, Mimmo, Carmine, Prando and Jacopo are all described as having a 'grande corpo'.

As Modesta grows up, power remains a fundamental component of human relations, but these do not threaten the very survival of the character, as she has developed

a sense of the self that allows her to accept emotional dependence at the same time rejecting oppression. The murder of the mother then can be read as the will to get rid from the very beginning of what, in Sapienza's narrative, is represented as a primary form of distorting power, namely an unsatisfied need for maternal love.

In the first part of the novel the characteristics of self-control, Machiavellian reason and strong determination prevail. Firstly in the convent, and then in Villa Carmelo, Modesta has difficulties in communicating with the other characters, is calculating, distrustful and radically split between will and emotionality. She practices the 'arte della prudenza', a combination of suspicion, simulation and cunning, and the 'preghiera dell'odio', the uncompromising rejection of oppression in any form. The turning point in the novel is represented by Modesta's marriage with Ippolito and the acquisition of the status of 'princess'. A fifth of the way into the book, Modesta has already attained riches, love and independence, and feels like 'un vecchio e saggio monarca' (AG, p. 99). Yet, this position of strength is not the final objective of the protagonist but only the enabling condition of her freedom. It allows her to enter a completely different dimension of existence, characterised by the possibility to experiment, change and enjoy life in multiple forms. The passage thus marks a shift from an oppositional characterisation of the self, where the exercise of self-control and instrumental use of rationality dominate, to a much more nuanced and joyful relationship with the body, powerfully and poetically represented in the scene of the first encounter between Modesta and the sea.

Sbalordita da quella vicinanza, aprii gli occhi per richiuderli accecata da quell'immensità di tetti nei lucenti al sole, precipitanti verso un cielo blu che si stendeva all'infinito, là dove lo sguardo poteva arrivare: il mare! Il mare di Tuzzu, blu! [...] E, forse perché mi aspettavo di vederlo dall'alto come prima, dovetti alzare gli occhi per trovare quel cielo liquido rovesciato che fuggiva calmo verso una libertà sconfinata. Grandi uccelli bianchi scivolavano in quella vertigine di vento. I polmoni liberati s'aprivano e per la prima volta

respiravo. Per la prima volta lagrime di riconoscenza mi scendevano sulle labbra. O era il sapore arso e forte di quel vento che si chinava sulla mia bocca a baciarmi?⁵⁵

When Modesta attempts to swim for the first time, her initial reaction is to try to grasp and contain the water: ‘Lottavo per afferrare quel corpo liquido che mi sfuggiva sorprendendomi da tutte le parti’ (AG, p. 137). After several failed attempts, she succeeds thanks to Carlo, who teaches her to surrender herself to the force of the sea rather than trying to control it. It is significant that, in the novel, Carlo is represented as a character embodying limpid and distinct rationality – originally from Lombardy, he is a doctor with a solid positivist faith in socialism. Modesta resorts to the advice of her rationalistic friend in order to learn to swim, that is, on a quite direct symbolical level, to accept the impossibility of full control and the openness to fluidity. However, although Modesta admires Carlo, she cannot love him with passion. Rationality is deprived of its totalising role and intrinsically relativised by being retrieved as a provisional and limited means, however necessary.

The arrival to Catania represents for Modesta the moment of highest strength, but also isolation and rigidity. From then onwards, she progressively loosens the strict control she exerts on herself and timidly opens herself to the possibility of establishing equal and sympathetic relationships with other characters. This phase also coincides with a shift in the narrative focus from Modesta’s inner reflection and identity formation towards outer reality. In the context of the advent of fascism, the text registers a growing presence of social and political issues, which goes along with an increase in the use of dialogues – although Modesta’s self-reflection and subjective perspective still have an important role.

⁵⁵ AG, p. 126.

In the second phase of her relationship with Carmine, for example, she has acquired that strength and self-knowledge that allows her to enter in a direct relationship with her inner feelings, emotions and joyful instincts, without having to control or repress them. The emotional and desiring sphere, inner and authentic core of the self, is described by the word ‘cuore’, a term previously despised because it was obfuscated and encrusted with falsifying concepts, but now finally liberated:

La parola cuore ripetuta dalla sua voce perde il significato ambiguo che me l’ha fatta odiare. E vedo il mio *cuore, occhio e centro, orologio e valvola del mio spazio carnale*. Nel buio con le palme ascolto il suo pulsare violento che dal seno alle tempie sudate grida di *gioia* e non si vuole quietare.⁵⁶

The effort to oppose and deconstruct oppressive structures allows Modesta to enjoy the pleasure of her body and accept love for and from other characters. However, whenever something or someone threatens her freedom, she does not hesitate to resume her strong and independent attitude. This happens for example with Mattia, whom she decidedly refuses to marry, not ceding to his pressure.⁵⁷ Modesta survives a violent fight against him, and the scar that runs on her forehead is said to symbolise precisely the joint between opposed forces in Modesta’s self – where the joint, the scar incised in the flesh, is a simultaneous unification and separation, symbol of the ‘contraddizione che è il perno della natura’:

Quella cicatrice che divide la fronte sta ora a dimostrare la saldatura del suo essere prima diviso. Rinasce Modesta partorita dal suo corpo, sradicata da quella di prima che tutto voleva, e il dubbio di sé e degli altri non sapeva sostenere.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ AG, p. 203. My emphasis.

⁵⁷ Similarly, later on she wards off Prando when he wants to force her to get married, and she is equally resolute in claiming her independence from the communist party.

⁵⁸ AG, p. 264.

After Carlo's death, Beatrice's insanity and the advent of fascism, Modesta reduces her initial ferocity and progressively learns to accept her own limits; she moves in the space of an accepted oscillation between control and uncontrolled reactions, dependence and independence. For example, she entrusts herself completely to Joyce:

Per la prima volta in vita mia il desiderio di abbandonarmi a qualcuno che non fosse me stessa mi prese furioso. [...] Senza più esitare, riaprendo gli occhi, versai nel suo sguardo che come un vaso raccoglieva emozioni, lacrime, durezza e dolcezze senza incrinarsi, tutte le tappe gioiose e aspre di quella che allora mi appariva la mia lunga vita.⁵⁹

In a game that recalls the one played by Goliarda with her mother in *Lettera aperta*, Modesta switches the role of care with her adopted son Jacopo and with Prando: 'Mamma, lo sai come ti chiamerò d'ora in poi [...]? La mia mamma bambina' (AG, p. 452).⁶⁰ Similarly, with Nina Modesta reaches peaks of dependence and regression to infantilism, particularly evident in the episode in which Nina helps Modesta to defecate – and in general in the scenes set in prison and in confinement:

Colpa di quel 'non ti trattenero' o del calore che i suoi fianchi comunicavano alle mie braccia, mi lasciavi andare affondando il viso fra le sue cosce... Io mi liberavo e lei in piedi mi accarezzava i capelli sussurrando: – Brava di mamma, brava, falla tutta, tutta che ti salva!... – E, cosa che non avrei mai potuto immaginare, nel lasciarmi andare un godimento più dolce del rosolio e della lingua di Tuzzu mi fa ora piangere e sospirare non di vergogna ma di piacere, ripetendo: – Nina, Nina non mi lasciare...⁶¹

The adult Modesta is thereby characterised as much more fragile and dependent than the strong-willed, hating, dissimulating girl and young woman of the first part of the novel. In remembering figures of her past, in particular Beatrice, Gaia and Leonora, she softens her memories. Towards the end of the novel, her perceptions are increasingly distorted,

⁵⁹ AG, p. 303.

⁶⁰ See also: 'Lo vedete come fa la mia mamma bambina?', AG, p. 459; with Jacopo: '– mi viene voglia di chiederti di adottarmi come figlia. – Che bello mamma, io adottarti? – L'adotteresti tu una bambina come me?', AG, p. 400.

⁶¹ AG, pp. 425-6. See also: '– Nina abbracciami, hai ragione ma ho ancora paura. Mi vergogno, ma ho paura! – Su, vieni calma fra le mie braccia che la paura passa', AG, p. 444.

her imagination interacts more invasively with her senses and we witness a loosening of her control and self-control. Nonetheless, her mature age also coincides with the culmination of her self-knowledge and conquered art of joy:

Ora solo una pace profonda invade il suo corpo maturo a ogni emozione della pelle, delle vene, delle giunture. Corpo padrone di se stesso, reso sapiente dall'intelligenza della carne. Intelligenza profonda della materia... del tatto, dello sguardo, del palato. Riversa sullo scoglio, Modesta osserva come i suoi sensi maturati possano contenere senza fragili paure d'infanzia tutto l'azzurro, il vento, la distanza. Stupita, scopre il significato dell'arte che il suo corpo s'è conquistato in quel lungo, breve tragitto dei suoi cinquant'anni. È come una seconda giovinezza con in più la coscienza precisa d'essere giovani, la coscienza del come godere, toccare, guardare.⁶²

The abandonment to the pleasure of the senses, the enjoyment of the body, constitutes Modesta's achievement in the novel, thus marking a space chosen and not suffered by the character, that is, a space of full mastery. This achieved freedom does not coincide with a final and crystallised form of identity; rather, it consists in the possibility of experimenting change and multiplicity. Nor does it sanction the full independence of the character. On the contrary, it involves allowing herself to establish sympathetic relations with others and enjoying emotional inter-dependence, as with Nina. Modesta's movement towards agency and mastery is thus constructed as a movement toward the freedom to experience the pleasure of the body and relationships of care.

What Sapienza contests through the character of Modesta is the abstract and metaphysical feature of the humanistic rational subject; conversely, the subject in *L'arte della gioia* is represented as internally divided and socially constructed, but also as carrier of creative imagination and subversive desires, through a phenomenological reconsideration of the body as a powerful perceptive and desiring ground. Overall, the configuration of Modesta's identity presents several blurred, ambiguous and

⁶² AG, p. 483.

contradictory areas. While criticism has rightly put much emphasis on the liberating energy and absolute will of the text and of Modesta, I have pointed out also a greater complexity, including the character's struggle, insecurity, oscillation between control and uncontrolled emotions, as well as her need for love and abandonment which her extraordinary strength cannot entirely efface. We need a multifaceted description to capture the complexity of the character and the tensions she embodies, her oppositional violence and her overwhelming emotions, her ability to kill in order to assert her independence and her regression to infantile need for love and care. Most importantly, freedom is ultimately achieved by frequenting, not by controlling the body, by listening to its drives, impulses, desires, emotions, and elaborating the strategies for enjoying pleasure.

We can read in the representation of Modesta a properly Epicurean understanding of the relationship between body and rationality and the role of pleasure in orienting choices. The art of joy is 'una ferma conoscenza dei desideri',⁶³ the auscultation of the material dimension of existence, the flesh and its desires. It is from the contact with this dimension that the subject can exert her freedom and open to complexity, multiplicity, contradiction and change. We can apply to Modesta the words Maria Serena Palieri uses to describe Sapienza: 'Fragile? Sembra piuttosto abbastanza forte da consentirsi di essere fragile.'⁶⁴

⁶³ Epicuro, pp. 12-3.

⁶⁴ Palieri, cit.

2.2 A Feminist, Libertine and Anarchic Novel

What do ‘power’ and ‘freedom’ mean in the socio-historical context represented in the novel, and what is the relationship established with it by the characters? We have seen how power determines the presence of multiple layers in the subject, and generates different responses and strategies. In this part of the chapter I investigate the representation of power in social structures and the feminist and anarchist response proposed by Sapienza.

From a perspective drawing attention to the explicit ideological content of *L’arte della gioia*, the general structures or centres of power Sapienza deconstructs consist in patriarchy and totalising ideologies. More specifically, she takes a stand against the oppression of women, heteronormativity, the traditional family, inequality among social classes, fascism, the power of the Catholic Church and the dogmatic attitude of the left. The ideology of the novel overall is configured as a rebellion against the hierarchy implicit in the reduction of existence to one dominating coordinate and a hymn to plurality and change.

2.2.1 Forms of Patriarchal Power

In the afterword to *L’arte della gioia*, Scarpa states: ‘Nell’*Arte della gioia* la Storia è un eccipiente a dispetto della sua vistosità.’⁶⁵ His interpretation is quite dismissive with regard to Sapienza’s philosophical and political perspective, and replicates the traditional bias which resists accepting women’s participation and right to participate in the public sphere. Contrary to Scarpa’s perspective, the historico-political dimension is a fundamental component of the novel, insofar as it constitutes the necessary context

⁶⁵ Scarpa, p. 522.

that generates and frames Modesta's struggle for freedom. In particular, the first and most evident form in which the historico-political context affects the character is represented by patriarchal power, which appears to be invisible to Scarpa and which conversely has been pointed out by several other critics.⁶⁶ Although in no way limited to opposition to patriarchal power, the representation of freedom in *L'arte della gioia* and Modesta's trajectory cannot arguably be understood without reference to that social context.

Patriarchal power manifests itself in various forms – as material oppression, such as sexual violence and legal constraint, and as cultural conditioning, such as the inculcation of a sense of inferiority in women. At the beginning of the novel, Modesta's intelligence is questioned on the basis of her sex by Tuzzu: 'Ma che vuoi capire! Locca sei e pure se non fussi locca, le femmine, come dice mio padre, da quando mondo è mondo non capiscono niente.' Modesta's rejection of the role prepared for her by society as a female is ready and determined: 'E invece capisco' (AG, p. 8). Similarly, the mother and Tina are described as victims, 'scimunita che piangono' (p. 12), from whose condition Modesta aspires to escape. Already as a child, then, Modesta is confronted with two opposite roles: women, who are stupid and subdued; and men, like Tuzzu and Modesta's alleged father, who are strong and independent. The representation of patriarchal power at this stage in the novel features a frontal opposition between two social positions, with an elementary form of domination of men over women.

Modesta's alleged father represents a better perspective to the girl than the one offered by her mother and Tina; he is tall, vital and strong, and he carries the promise of travels and adventures, which initially arouses Modesta's admiration. When he shuts the

⁶⁶ Most contributions in the two edited critical works on Sapienza published so far, *Appassionata Sapienza* and *Quel sogno d'essere*, acknowledge in one way or another the importance of the socio-historical context of patriarchal power in Sapienza's works.

mother and Tina in the toilet, she comments ‘il sangue mi rideva d’orgoglio per la sua forza’ (AG, p. 12), an expression which closely recalls another statement in *Lettera aperta*, referred to Sapienza’s own father: ‘perché non so dire del suo abbraccio, dell’ammirazione per la sua forza fisica?’ (LA, p. 50). In *Lettera aperta*, too, the figure of the father is admired for his strength, which is connected to his independence, his vitality and his powerful sexuality. But such position of power is also perceived as scary and threatening, and *Lettera aperta* resonates with the refrain ‘non la stuprare!’ shouted by Maria and addressed to Goliarda’s father.

We find the same ambiguity between admiration for strength and fear of violence in the opening pages of *L’arte della gioia*, but here the underlying violence inscribed in male power, partially concealed in *Lettera aperta*, comes to the surface and is made explicit from the very beginning, as Modesta’s father rapes her. If in *Lettera aperta* male power was a partially denied threat, screaming in the background, in *L’arte della gioia* it is exposed openly and directly in its most evidently sexed form. As in Morante’s *La storia* and Aleramo’s *Una donna*, an ‘initiatory’ rape frames the narration, showing how patriarchal power is the material context that can be endured, escaped or opposed, but it is there, the unavoidable starting point of these writers’ personal and historical discourse.

As Modesta grows up, she faces the oppression of women in the form of limitation of their intellectual and professional development. While Mimmo the gardener and doctor Milazzo tell Modesta about the world outside the walls of the convent, where the socialists are organising, the perspectives offered to Modesta as a woman are described through the nuns’ words. They discourage her from nourishing intellectual ambitions and suggest to her the only social roles suitable for a woman:

‘Sarta, ricamatrice, cuoca, sceglierai tu fra queste attività umili che sono le uniche che si confanno a una donna. Studiare è un lusso che corrompe’ (AG, p. 38). In the Brandifortis’ house princess Gaia is respected and obeyed insofar as she behaves and is perceived to behave in a manly manner, thus conveying the message that ruling is a male prerogative.

Later in the novel, Modesta manages to resist any form of patriarchal power, even though she is periodically threatened by external pressures: for example, Mattia wants to marry her at any cost, but she refuses – and she does the same when her son Prando insists that she either gets married or goes and live with him. Carmine, too, threatens Modesta to tie her to him by getting her pregnant: ‘Ma non scherzare con l’uomo perché, se voglio, t’inchiodo a me con un figlio’, to which she responds by talking about the possibility for women to access abortion: ‘con una semplice operazione, di una maledizione mi sono liberata. E lo rifaccio se ti prende intenzione di inchiodarmi’ (AG, p. 209). Sapienza here addresses two major themes of debate in the first half of the 70s, divorce and abortion, representing the material oppression marriage and unwanted pregnancies can exert on women and standing resolutely against them, in line with the core arguments and demands of second wave feminist movements.⁶⁷

Power connected to the patriarchal structure of society pervades the novel, affecting not only Modesta but also and more deeply the other characters. For example, Madre Leonora, seduced and made pregnant by Carmine, cannot accept the shame and takes refuge in a nunnery, repressing her sexuality; Nina, who is arguably the most determined and independent female character, left school because of the ‘antica autosvalutazione donnesca’ (AG, p. 441), and in prison is raped by several fascist

⁶⁷ Divorce in Italy became legal in 1974, abortion in 1978.

soldiers, as she tells Modesta: ‘Fatti ‘na ragione, parlando di scherzi da uomini in divisa che ponno fa d’altro per ridurti un colabrodo davanti e di dietro, eh?’ (p. 423); Carmela, the poor woman who gives advice to Modesta, was forced to prostitute herself since she was a child – ‘a dieci anni m’hanno messo un uomo tra le gambe’ (p. 102); Beatrice ‘è stata vittima della sua infanzia, o, come dite voi, del suo destino coatto’ (p. 315) and Carmine’s first wife dies after he tries to get her pregnant even though she is ill and exhausted: ‘E scavavo, scavavo oro dalle sue labbra e dal suo abbraccio, dovevo saperlo che troppo chiedevo perché sfinita e pallida era’ (p. 202).

In the last part of the novel, where discussions about the current political situation multiply, Sapienza, through the voice of Modesta, explicitly accuses left-wing men, and in particular the PCI, of which Prando is a member, of perpetuating patriarchal oppression; they undervalue women, exploit their work and treat feminist discourses with patronising condescension. The polemics against left-wing men and their contiguity with patriarchal power is an important reference for understanding *L’arte della gioia*, and I will come back to it.

– E va bene Prando, te l’ho detto e te lo ripeto: io voglio essere indipendente dagli uomini come Lucio. E state attenti perché di questo passo quando le donne si accorgeranno di come voi uomini di sinistra sorridete con sufficienza paternalistica ai loro discorsi, quando la tua Amalia si accorgerà di non essere ascoltata e di fare due lavori sfinendosi davanti ai fornelli e in laboratorio – perché non mi parli mai del lavoro di Amalia, eh? Perché devo sentire solo quanto è dolce, carina o gelosa? – quando si accorgeranno, la loro vendetta sarà tremenda, Prando, come in America. Vi negheranno e...
– Ma finiscila!⁶⁸

It is not only women who are victims of patriarchal power. Quite uniquely for the narrative of her time, Sapienza incorporates in her work a perspective on the male

⁶⁸AG, p. 479-80.

position with respect to power and the social construction of masculinity.⁶⁹ An interesting example is represented by the failed relationship between Modesta and Carlo. In Carlo's attitude towards sex Sapienza gives an insightful representation of the separation between sex (associated to prostitutes) and affection (associated to respectable women) which oppresses men as well as women. Carlo, prudish and nervous, is convinced that a 'donna per bene' should be reserved and completely passive; therefore he cannot accept Modesta's passionate and disinhibited attitude, he gets angry at her and calls her 'volgare' when she tries to talk about it, spoiling any possibility of harmony between them:

lui sudato di un lieve sudore di bambino mi smaniava fra i seni e le anche sussurrando: – stai ferma... così mi piaci, ferma con gli occhi chiusi –. Ora sollevava la testa felice. Cercai di restare con gli occhi chiusi e non parlare, ma le lagrime che malgrado me stessa cominciarono a sfuggire dalle mie ciglia serrate parlarono per me.⁷⁰

Through Modesta's voice, who firmly rejects the role of passive partner in which Carlo would want to force her, Sapienza explicitly charges the literary representation of the role of the sexes for forging Carlo's wrong expectations, thus attributing a prominent role to social construction in the formation of gender norms: 'ti eri fatta una tua santa un po' dantesca da amare. O preferisci Petrarca, come credo? [...]. Poveri ragazzi! A noi *Madame Bovary*, a voi *Laura*!' (AG, p. 165). Finally, Carlo agrees with Modesta on the necessity to break that 'solitudine fra uomo e donna che dura da secoli' (p. 169).

The construction of masculinity is, in Modesta's words, a 'demolizione al contrario' that teaches young men to be manly and virile, that is, to distinguish

⁶⁹ For a rich exploration of the construction of masculinity in the Italian context, see Ciccone, cit.

⁷⁰ AG, p. 166.

themselves from the weakness characterising women.⁷¹ Where some men, like Carmine and Prando, appear to fit conveniently into a dominant role and benefit from their position of power, others are rather limited by it, like Carlo and Mattia. Both men and women are conditioned and imprisoned by patriarchal structures, which regiment the complexity of reality and identities into a fix binary pattern, as stated in a dialogue between Mattia and Modesta:

- A me hanno insegnato che nell'anima di un uomo non c'è posto per dubitare.
- Questo vi insegnano per chiudervi, carusi, in una corazza di doveri e false certezze. Come a noi donne, Mattia: altri doveri, altre corazze di seta, ma è lo stesso.⁷²

2.2.2 From Gender Binarism to Coexistence of Differences and Sexual Fluidity

Within her criticism of patriarchal structures, Sapienza represents a multiplicity of approaches and responses to oppression. The only constant of Modesta's position is her utter and uncompromising rejection of the role of victim, jointly with her determination to pursue pleasure in diverse and changing forms; but the strategies towards the accomplishment of freedom vary depending on the context. This results in a multifaceted and at times self-contradictory representation of gender identities and sexual orientations, open to being read through different strands of feminist and queer theories. Overall, a binary opposition between men and women, which hints at an essentialistic understanding of gender and sexual orientation, coexists with a much more fluid and post-structuralist perspective, and with a Marxist-feminist critique of gender hierarchies. Moreover, Sapienza's polemical objective shifts, consisting alternately in women who accept their submission, women who perpetrate the submission of other

⁷¹ See also: 'Sei un uomo, devi dimostrare quanto sei virile, Carluzzu! Non una mezza donna come questi giovani d'oggi!', AG, p. 481.

⁷² Ibid. p. 343.

women, women who join men in positions of power, men who oppress women and the overall structure of patriarchal society.

The first part of the novel features a clear opposition between the condition of women and that of men, who play the role of subaltern and rulers respectively. Initially, as Ross points, Modesta's rebellion finds in the adoption of masculine behaviour a resource – the only one practically available to her.⁷³ More precisely, her characteristics of strength, self-determination and intelligence are considered 'masculine' by the other characters and by Modesta herself: 'Io non sarei stata una donnetta. Come la principessa volevo diventare, quella sì che era una donna forte e volitiva come un uomo' (AG, p. 61).⁷⁴ This statement at the same time expresses and undermines an essentialistic perspective on gender. While some features appear to be distinctively masculine, they can be nonetheless appropriated by a woman, although this constitutes a transgression of her gender characterisation, which Ross, drawing from Halberstam's notion of 'female masculinity', appropriately defines 'donna-uomo'.⁷⁵

Until Modesta's arrival in Catania, the adoption of masculine behaviour is the only way to gain respect and freedom, and she takes pride in being associated to men insofar as it means being attributed positive characteristics stereotypically associated to the male gender and from which women are conversely excluded. In a second phase, however, once she has attained independence and power and escaped the condition of victim, she reconsiders the title of 'man', once an appraisal, and distances herself from the characteristics of patriarchal domination attached to it, considering them as limiting:

⁷³ See *Eccentric Interruptions*, pp. 15-6.

⁷⁴ The expression closely recalls *Lettera aperta*, where the protagonist rejects the role of 'donnetta' and emulates her mother Maria, defined 'impareggiabile, intelligente più di un uomo e coraggiosa più di un uomo', LA, p. 138.

⁷⁵ *Eccentric Interruptions*, p. 16. See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (London: Duke University Press, 1998).

‘Voscenza principessa, se mi posso permettere, lei uomo doveva nascere.’ Un tempo quella frase mi sembrava il più alto riconoscimento che si potesse avere dagli altri, ma adesso il terrore di diventare come Gaia mi opprimeva il torace e mi levava il fiato.⁷⁶

As Ross points out, Modesta ‘is able to distinguish between different forms of “masculine” behaviour’.⁷⁷ It is useful for Modesta to appropriate those qualities from which women were secluded, but these must not turn into the exercise of domination. Power must be pursued insofar as it enables the exercise of freedom, not at the expense of it; it is, in other words, an instrument of liberation, not oppression.⁷⁸ Whereas in the first part of the novel Modesta is a ‘*donna-uomo*’, that is, in this context, a woman who adopts masculine behaviour in order to escape the limits imposed on her gender, as soon as she obtains power and freedom she opens herself to multiple and fluid gender identities. The necessary but limiting identity of the ‘*donna-uomo*’ becomes the free and joyful ‘*mezza caredda e mezzo carusu*’ (AG, p. 201),⁷⁹ a queer mix of femininity and masculinity, but also an emphatic femininity in other phases of Modesta’s life and in the context of other relationships.

Indeed, as Modesta grows up and matures she stops associating strength and independence with the male gender, thus exposing the socially constructed feature of both masculinity and femininity, rooted in the material oppression of one gender onto the other. Liberated from the power that dictates the hierarchy of the genders and their binary distribution of characteristics, gender constructs lose any naturalness, leaving the subject free to experiment with multiple identities. Modesta thus recognises the process

⁷⁶ AG, p. 131.

⁷⁷ *Eccentric Interruptions*, p. 16.

⁷⁸ See for example this dialogue between Mattia and Modesta: ‘-C’è ca noi Tudia non amiamo quelli che tu chiami schiavi. La frenesia d’assoggettare chi è libero ci spinge. -Lo so. Anche in me c’è questa tendenza, ma non la curo. Non porta a niente, Mattia! Quando hai assoggettato, resti schiavo a vigilare quelli ch’hai resi impotenti a nutrirsi da soli e ti si appiccicano addosso come remore’, AG, p. 404.

⁷⁹ *Carusu* and *maredda* are Sicilian terms for *boy* and *girl*.

through which gender division is constituted as essentially social, and tries to educate the children living in Villa Suvarita in contrast with gender binarism:

– Ma che c'è Stella, Elena, perché li dividete?
 – Ma correva come un maschiaccio, principessa! Si sporca il vestitino.
 Ecco come comincia la divisione. Secondo loro Bambolina, a soli cinque anni, dovrebbe già muoversi diversamente, stare composta, gli occhi bassi, per coltivare in sé la signorina di domani.⁸⁰

This fluidity of the categories of gender is reflected in the representation of the secondary characters, as Sapienza distributes 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits regardless of the characters' gender. In doing so, she does not only disconnect sex from gender but also destabilises the gender constructs themselves. All the binaries of traits which traditionally distinguish masculinity and femininity (strength/weakness; rationality/emotions; mind/body; independence/dependence) are displaced from male and female characters, as well as from one another, as they do not appear as a coherent system. In other words, male and female characters may have at the same time or in different times both 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics, thus disrupting the internal coherence of gender constructs. For example, Modesta is characterised as strong-willed, astute and able to fight against oppression, a representation that in the first part of the novel, as we have seen, appears to belong to the male construct. However, some characters – both female and male – do not have the same characteristics of strength and are rather submissive and in need for protection, something which would stereotypically belong to the female construct. For example, as Modesta tells Carlo, 'anche Jacopo come Bambolina non ha astuzia e crudeltà. È per loro che bisogna lottare' (AG, p. 466).

⁸⁰AG, p. 265.

The blurring of gender constructs is particularly evident when gender interacts with other social categories, such as class and ethnicity.⁸¹ For example, in the dialogue between Modesta and Marco that concludes the book, Modesta appears to affirm an essentialistic foundation of gender differences and a symmetrical complementarity between men and women:

Tu sei uomo, Marco, e non sai nel tuo corpo, o sapevi e poi nella fretta di agire hai dimenticato, le metamorfosi della materia e tremi un po' a questa parola. Ma se ti stringi a me, io, donna, ti aiuterò a ricordare e a non temere quel che deve mutare per continuare a essere vivo.⁸²

This passage evokes the stereotypical association of men to rationality and abstraction and women to a material, bodily and natural domain. However, the representation of the other male characters throughout the text does not support such a dichotomy. Indeed, most male characters are represented as in direct contact with the material dimension of the body and nature: Tuzzu is associated to the landscape of the Chiana del Bove and to the sea; Mimmo is represented as part of the wood: 'Il suo corpo fasciato di velluto marrone scuro, da lontano, sembrava un altro tronco cresciuto dalla quercia per capriccio della natura' (AG, p. 31); Carmine speaks a popular language, a mix of Italian and dialect, rooted in the ancient traditions of Sicily and in its wild nature.

It is Carlo, the positivist doctor originally from Lombardy, who breaks the connection between men and nature, so that rather than between men and women the distinction appears to be between Sicily and Northern Italy. Sicilian traditions, presented as close to natural rhythm and passionality, are opposed to Northern rational positivism:

⁸¹ The intersectionality between gender, class and ethnicity is a complex and rich theme in *L'arte della gioia* which would deserve specific attention. For the purpose of this thesis I limit my analysis to gender constructs. For an analysis of *L'arte della gioia* as a 'postcolonial' novel, see Goffredo Polizzi, 'The Art of Change. Race and the Body in Goliarda Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia*', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*.

⁸² AG, p. 509.

‘La sua [Carlo’s] voce elegante, il contrasto fra la mia lingua cupa di passione e la sua – chiara elegante – che tanto amavo, ma che non riuscivo ad amalgamare con la mia fantasia’ (AG, p. 228). The contrast between passion and rationality, body and mind, is displaced from the stereotypical distribution of traits between men and women and interacts with the geographical and ethnic axis.

L’arte della gioia thus makes space for different positions, attitudes and identities to exist; it represents women who are more ‘masculine’, like Gaia, more ‘feminine’, like Beatrice and Stella, or a varied combination of both, like Modesta and Nina; the same is valid for men, who range from Prando’s stereotypical masculinity to different degrees of reconfiguration of masculinity itself, as concerns for example Mattia, Carlo and Jacopo (even though overall more variation is afforded to women). Interestingly, the only figure entirely missing in *L’arte della gioia* is that of the effeminate and/or the homosexual man, which conversely is well present in the narrative from other women writers of the time, as for example Morante and Ginzburg.⁸³

A great openness of possibilities beyond constrictive categories is afforded in the novel to – female – sexual orientation, for Sapienza does not question only patriarchal power, but heteronormativity as well. Even though, as Ross has cogently argued, the representation of homosexual desire in Sapienza’s narrative overall presents many self-contradictory aspects, and Modesta expresses even ‘rather homophobic views, dismissing her relationship with Beatrice as mere “carezze di femmine” once she has slept with Carmine and experienced “real” sexual intimacy with a man’, the

⁸³ We can think for example of Wilhelm Gerace (Arturo’s father) in Morante’s *L’isola di Arturo* (1957), and Manuele, the protagonist of *Aracoeli* (1982); As far as Natalia Ginzburg is concerned, see Valentino and Kit from the short story *Valentino* (1951) and Gigi from *Le voci della sera* (1961); for a comprehensive list and discussion, see James Michael Fortney, ‘Con quel tipo lì: homosexual characters in Natalia Ginzburg’s narrative families’, *Italica*, 86 (Dec 2009).

representation of homosexual desire is immune from any charge of deviance.⁸⁴ Through the multiple homosexual and heterosexual relationships represented in the novel, Sapienza questions the alleged naturalness of the link between sex, gender and sexual orientation, as well as the exclusivity and stability of a person's sexual orientation.

In the first part of the novel female homosexuality, in the relationship between Modesta and Beatrice, is described as a preparatory stage for heterosexuality, as Carmine tells Modesta:

Che credi che sei la prima a passare all'inizio per mani di femmine? Niente c'è di male, figlia. [...] Quello che imparavo da Carmine cercavo di comunicarlo a Beatrice. [...] E poi, come Carmine diceva, la preparavo a quando avrebbe incontrato l'uomo giusto.⁸⁵

However, Modesta's relationship with Beatrice has much in common with the representation of homosexual desire in *Lettera aperta* and *Io, Jean Gabin*. Goliarda's relationships with Nica in *Lettera aperta* and with Jean in *Io, Jean Gabin* are characterised as bonds that allow the protagonist to experience reciprocity and communication beyond distorting effects of power unbalances. These equal and 'resonant' relationships, in the sense of a communication founded on mutual recognition of unique subjectivities proposed by Cavarero, enable the protagonist to access and strengthen a more authentic sense of the self. Homosexuality is then preparatory in the sense that it is represented as a fundamental step in the formation of the self and in establishing bonds with others. The relationship between Modesta and Beatrice is represented in very similar terms, which stress reciprocity, self-recognition and confidence:

⁸⁴ *Eccentric Interruptions*, p. 16. The argument recalls the discussion developed in the chapter on *Lettera aperta*.

⁸⁵ AG, p. 111.

Così, per la prima volta in vita mia, fui amata amando, come dice la romanza. [...] Abbandonandomi a lei, uscivo da quell'inferno di dubbi e bende e muri di lava. [...] Una tenerezza mai conosciuta mi faceva essere tranquilla fra quegli alberi che giravano intorno al sole, sicura di non sprofondare. Se mi spogliava sapevo da lei che colore aveva la mia pelle, quanti nei la mia schiena.⁸⁶

Contradicting the dialogue between Carmine and Modesta cited above, the development of the characters' sexuality does not follow the idea, there formulated, that mature sexuality corresponds to heterosexuality. Homosexual relationships are a maturational stage for the construction of identity, but they do not dictate that future orientation shall be heterosexual, nor that it shall be fixed. Indeed, in Modesta's relationship with Joyce this 'preparatory' aspect of homosexuality, which would confine it in an underdeveloped stage of sexuality, disappears. In long – didascallic and melodramatic – dialogues between the two women, Joyce voices a Freudian interpretation that pathologises non-hetero sexualities – 'Ogni rapporto omosessuale è senza futuro. [...] sei malata' (AG, p. 352). On the contrary, Modesta claims the right for herself and for others to have a fluid sexuality beyond any definition of hetero/homosexuality: 'sono donna, Joyce, e per me la normalità è amare l'uomo e la donna' (p. 409).

Fluid sexuality is not Modesta's exclusive prerogative, but rather a widespread phenomenon in the novel: 'E Beatrice? Per anni ci siamo amate e poi lei ha amato Carlo. E chissà quante altre donne e uomini' (p. 352). Likewise, Mela and Bambù have a homosexual relationship, after which Bambù falls in love with Mattia, while Mela appears to settle into a lesbian relationship, which is not problematized either: 'Chi ci capisce con la natura! Credo che lei amerà sempre solo le donne' (p. 436). Nina moves from lover to lover, from both genders, often having more than one relationship at the same time. Even more freely than as concerns gender identities, *L'arte della gioia*

⁸⁶ AG, pp. 79-80.

makes space for a multiplicity of possibilities for female sexuality, strenuously refusing to fix and close reality into a single, stable category.

What is particularly surprising in the text is that sexual fluidity is presented as perfectly natural and unproblematic not only for Modesta but also for her surrounding environment. Apart from Joyce, who struggles with her own identity, no other character questions or stigmatizes the sexual conduct of anyone else. The heteronormativity that Sapienza is questioning then pertains to the author's socio-historical context rather than to the fictional world, where sexual fluidity is represented as largely accepted. Modesta mentions social discrimination against homosexuality,⁸⁷ but, outside the character of Joyce, this does not play any significant role in the novel.

2.2.3 The Primacy of Rebellious Desire

Modesta's drive towards freedom has in patriarchal power and women's submission its primary obstacle, as it takes place largely in the terrain of gender identity and fluid sexuality. Although material conditions of oppression (i.e. patriarchal structures, as well as class conditions) are clearly identified and acknowledged in the text, Sapienza's main focus is on cultural oppression deriving from the social construction of the role of women. This consideration may explain why, within the overall structure of the novel, the representation of patriarchal power takes so little space compared to the narration and the discussion of forms and strategies of rebellion. With the exception of the initial rape, for Modesta, male characters are never really an obstacle; they do not actively dominate or control her (even though they do so with other women, such as Carmine and Prando with their respective wives). Quite the opposite, after initial attempts to

⁸⁷ 'Il rapporto omosessuale non ha futuro perché non lo si può proclamare a tutti, vale a dire in chiesa col matrimonio', AG, p. 352.

impose themselves, they invariably surrender to her will and are all willing to learn from her. Similarly, once escaped from the convent walls, sexual fluidity – whether in the form of homosexual desire or multiplicity of lovers – is not really questioned by anyone.

Laura Fortini points out such absence of a foregrounded clash between Modesta and patriarchal power, and discusses specifically the quick disappearance and ultimately the irrelevance of the figure of the father after the rape in *L'arte della gioia*.⁸⁸ She interprets this absence as related to the extreme originality of the novel with respect to patriarchal traditions, 'qualcosa di talmente nuovo da rappresentarsi senza radici, senza precedenti'.⁸⁹ Fortini's argument recalls Irigaray's understanding of the relationship between women and patriarchal power put forward in *Speculum of the other woman* and *This sex which is not one*. For Irigaray, the female sex is not opposed to the male sex, but outside the binary logic of masculine thought. The opposition between 'One' and 'Other' is all internal to the masculine signifying economy, while the female sex is neither 'One' nor 'Other', it is many, or an absence. In *L'arte della gioia* this would reflect in the absence of frontal opposition between women and men, or between victims and perpetrators, because the point of view privileged is external to the logic of opposition itself. We will see how this extraneousness to the binary logic of masculine thought has a political counterpart in Sapienza's anti-ideological and anarchic commitment, although within the precise limits I pointed out, consisting in the initial, primary necessity for subaltern subjects to access a locus of agency.

The focus on the agency of the oppressed rather than the structures of oppression could potentially be interpreted as a sort of nonchalance towards material conditions.

⁸⁸ Fortini, 'L'arte della gioia e il genio dell'omicidio mancato', in *Appassionata Sapienza*, pp. 101-26.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 110. Specifically on the basis of such an 'absence of the fathers' and this unclassifiable originality of women's writing Fortini suggests a connection between Sapienza, Morante and Ortese.

The parable of Modesta is in no way a realistic representation of women's actual opportunities, and *L'arte della gioia* at times displays a superomistic liberation, as though freedom could depend only on the individual's determination to be free. Destiny is dismissed as 'tutte chiacchiere di donnette' (AG, p. 61); 'parola per acquietare i miserabili è! Il destino te lo puoi maneggiare come vuoi, se valente sei' (p. 216). Indeed, Modesta accomplishes a complete liberation from any internal and external cultural conditioning within the space of a lifespan, without paying the price of insanity, social marginalisation and loss of identity usually falling on those who transgress well-established traditions and social roles.⁹⁰ After all, as a reviewer observed,

Modesta wins the benefits of marriage – money, a title, and a cover for her indecencies – and avoids any of the burden. Just eighteen, she has engineered for herself a handful of rare freedoms: liberty without loneliness, money without work, and sex with whomever she wants.⁹¹

Nonetheless, once acknowledged the superomistic and symbolic feature of the character of Modesta, defining *L'arte della gioia* as indifferent towards material conditions would not be accurate and would be a misunderstanding of the type of relationship between body, identity and power represented in the novel, thus not doing justice to Sapienza's political and philosophical substance. First, Sapienza appears to be fully aware of the role of economic privilege and how women's emancipation is largely dependent on it. In *L'arte della gioia* the accumulation of wealth is not held as a value, but a certain degree of economic independence is recognised as necessary. Obviously, the stress on economic independence is of particular importance with regards to women's struggle for freedom and equality, considering their historical seclusion from access to money

⁹⁰ As we have seen in the chapter on *Lettera aperta*, this was conversely the fate of Maria Giudice and, partially, of Sapienza herself.

⁹¹ Cooke, cit.

and the administration of their own patrimony. Modesta's rapid rise to power is the most evident manifestation of the primary importance of material independence for freedom and joy to be pursued, and throughout the text Modesta never forgets to acknowledge how her freedom rests upon her economic privilege: '-Mi piaci, Mody, mi piace come riconosci il tuo privilegio. -E' il primo dovere, mi sembra, per quelli che la pensano come noi' (AG, p. 435).

Secondly, the symbolic layer to which the character of Modesta belongs is counterbalanced by the overall structure of the novel, and specifically by the secondary characters, who are much more closely affected by historical and socioeconomic conditions. If in the character of Modesta the liberation from oppression and traditions is symbolically possible to be achieved in the arc of a single lifetime, for the other characters it is not possible to ignore historical conditions not changeable by individual will and from which individual will is itself conditioned.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, *L'arte della gioia* is concerned with a transformation that needs to take place first and foremost in the cultural and psychological structures of the subaltern subjects. This is why the present analysis started from the very foundation of the individual subject, the desiring matter of the body, and this is why *L'arte della gioia* begins and finishes with an orgasm, for it expresses the centrality of desire in constituting a subject who can recognise and oppose structures of oppression.

In *L'arte della gioia*, the primary subjects who need to retrieve this desiring dimension are women, but the liberation entailed in the deconstruction of patriarchy concerns both women and men. Women, in order to become subjects, need to retrieve that primary desire that constitutes the foundation of agency and nourishes strength,

independence and ‘positive’ pride. Surely, without material liberation, little change is possible. But if there is not a primary desire to want to modify those material conditions, the struggle does not even begin. As Martha Nussbaum explains with great clarity:

When society has put some things out of reach for some people, they typically learn not to want those things; [...] sometimes adaptation happens after the person wanted the thing initially [...]. Sometimes, however, people learn not to want goods in the first place, because these goods are put off-limits for people of their gender, or race, or class.⁹²

Psychological liberation, in the form of nourishing desire, that process of ‘becoming a subject’, is not a sufficient condition, but is a necessary one. Here lies the sense of Modesta challenging a destiny of oppression and encouraging others to do the same: ‘In un lampo capii che cosa era quello che chiamano destino: una volontà inconsapevole di continuare quella che per anni ci hanno insinuato, imposto, ripetuto essere la sola strada giusta da seguire’ (AG, pp. 122-3); ‘– Lei dice, principessa, ca un destino si può cangiare? – Tutto si può cangiare, Stella’ (p. 235). Sapienza realises what Manuela Vigorita cogently defined ‘un libro che insegna a desiderare’,⁹³ seeking to inspire other women to rebel, instilling in them the primary desire to fight oppression, to stop thinking of themselves as inescapably victims.

The focus on the agency of the oppressed helps us understand why Sapienza addresses particularly women and often puts responsibility primarily on them for their own oppression, to the point, at times, of verging on blaming the victims themselves. In *L’arte della gioia* Modesta voices a bitter condemnation not only of women who join

⁹² Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 54.

⁹³ Manuela Vigorita, ‘Omaggio a Goliarda Sapienza: se l’arte della gioia diventa libertà’, *Buddismo e società*, 93 (July/August 2002).

men in positions of power, like Joyce, but also of those who, fully accepting a submissive role for themselves, force other women to do so:

Come in convento, leggi, prigionia, storia edificata dagli uomini. Ma è la donna che ha accettato di tenere le chiavi, guardiana inflessibile del verbo dell'uomo. In convento Modesta odiò le sue carceriere con odio di schiava, odio umiliante ma necessario. Oggi è con distacco e sicurezza che difende Bambolina dai maschi e dalle femmine, in lei difende se stessa, il suo passato, una figlia che col tempo potrebbe nascerle... Ti ricordi, Carlo, quando ti dissi che solo la donna può aiutare la donna, e tu nel tuo orgoglio di uomo non capivi?⁹⁴

If patriarchal structures are dominated by men, Modesta says, women too have a role in guaranteeing their continuity, by accepting their own submission and perpetrating the oppression of other women. Through Modesta's voice, Sapienza declares her hostility towards women implicated in the perpetration of oppression and clearly argues that a struggle against patriarchal structures can only be initiated by women themselves. Sapienza's hostile attitude towards other women has been defined by Monica Farnetti as 'misoginia amorosa',⁹⁵ in Ross's words 'a sentiment experienced by women who, while holding their sex in great esteem, feel a disdain for other women who, in their view, taint the *image* of woman in some way'.⁹⁶ Similarly, for Providenti the homicides committed by Modesta are directed against the 'simboli di un femminile' that those women – the mother, Tina, Leonora and Gaia – represent.⁹⁷ Likewise, Ross comments:

Here it is evident how Sapienza's writing and politics can cause discomfort, since she seems to judge and blame other women, rather than considering the conditions that might have resulted in their having a different view or situation to her ideal of womanhood.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ AG, p. 265.

⁹⁵ Monica Farnetti, "L'arte della gioia" e il genio dell'omicidio', in *Appassionata Sapienza*, pp. 89-100 (p. 92).

⁹⁶ *Eccentric Interruptions*, p. 15. My emphasis.

⁹⁷ *La porta è aperta*, p. 43.

⁹⁸ *Eccentric Interruptions*, p. 15.

While Sapienza's writings are crossed by contradictions, such as the one pointed out by Farnetti, Ross and Providenti between solidarity and hostility towards women, an insight into her world of contradiction can be favoured by the insertion of single statements into Sapienza's overall literary endeavour. Within the narrative economy of the story, Leonora and Gaia are not killed for the model of femininity they embody, but – no less disconcertingly – for their perpetration of oppression onto other women – onto Modesta herself.⁹⁹ In other words, they are not only *symbols* of femininity or *images* of woman, but also and mainly Modesta's 'carceriere'.

Whereas Modesta fiercely – and violently – opposes the oppression exerted by women onto other women, like any other form of oppression, *L'arte della gioia* actually makes space for different ways to be a woman. For example, Beatrice, Stella and Bambù have very little in common with Modesta's rebellious and proud attitude, but surely she does not kill nor condemn them. Instead, because they do not constitute a direct threat to her independence, she actively tries to educate them to freedom. Sapienza's 'misoginia amorosa' then becomes more legible when we take into account the rebellious, anarchic spirit of the book. As Bakunin writes:

Nessun uomo può emanciparsi altrimenti che emancipando con lui tutti gli uomini che lo circondano. [...] io sono incessantemente il prodotto di ciò che sono gli ultimi tra loro: se essi sono ignoranti, miserabili, schiavi, la mia esistenza è determinata dalla loro schiavitù. [...] Io che voglio esser libero, non lo posso, perché intorno a me tutti gli uomini non vogliono ancora esser liberi, e non volendolo, divengono contro di me degli strumenti di oppressione.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ The discourse is different for the homicide of Modesta's mother, which I discussed in the first part of this chapter. Nevertheless, none of the existing interpretations, including mine, can convincingly account for the killing of Modesta's mentally ill sister, Tina. Such an act remains brutally inexplicable within the economy of the text, and psychoanalytical hypotheses on what Tina might symbolize to Sapienza herself appear to be the only practicable direction for interpretation, although I am not endeavouring to do so.

¹⁰⁰ Michail Bakunin, cited in Errico Malatesta, *L'anarchia. Il nostro programma* (Rome: Datanews, 2001), pp. 28-9.

The main focus in *L'arte della gioia* is indeed the oppression exerted by patriarchal structures on women and men and the protagonist's trajectory of rejection of imposed identities and social roles. Change, for Sapienza, has to start from within the group of the oppressed, possibly from someone who, like Modesta, is in the position of helping others, and needs to sediment within the conscience of the oppressed subjects. Sapienza's point is not judgement of the victims, but rather the defence of one's independence and rebellion against oppression, including that perpetrated by other women, and the invite to boycott prescribed roles and aspire to individual and social transformation.

2.2.4 Anarchism as a Historico-Political Perspective

The inequality between men and women is doubtless the most prominent context in which power takes place and is contested in *L'arte della gioia*, but the rebellious spirit of the novel is much wider, embracing any form of internal and external oppression. Through Modesta's behaviour as well as through explicit remarks, Sapienza attacks a series of centres or structures, at the same time originating multiple and creative responses to them. For example, she subverts the structure of the family, 'quella fortezza di prima linea che, fascismo o no, è sempre la famiglia' (AG, p. 481); she contests marriage, defined as 'un contratto assurdo che umilia l'uomo e la donna insieme' (p. 399), and the idea that love is singular and lasts for the whole life.¹⁰¹ In line with Epicurean ethics, according to which 'mai si è troppo giovani o troppo vecchi per la

¹⁰¹ On Sapienza's subversion of the family structure, see Aureliana Di Rollo, 'Reforging the Maternal Bond: Motherhood, Mother-Daughter Relationships and Female Relationality in Goliarda Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia*', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*; 'Mothers, Daughters and Family in Goliarda Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia*', *The Italianist*, 35, I (2015), pp. 91-106.

conoscenza della felicità',¹⁰² Sapienza questions the exclusion of the elderly from active life and the representation of old age as negative: 'Anche la parola vecchiaia mente, Modesta, è stata rimpinzata di fantasmi paurosi come la parola morte per farti stare calma, ossequiosa di tutte le leggi costituite (AG, p. 481).

Similarly, Modesta refuses any activity or ideal that demand absolute dedication and subordinate enjoyment of life, including the goal to improve one's wealth and power beyond the need. In this rejection of the capitalistic spiral of economic growth, Sapienza distances herself from the Sicilian tradition of Verga, De Roberto, Pirandello and Tomasi di Lampedusa, which conversely presents the thirst for richness and power as the principal human drive. Modesta achieves the status of princess, only to sell most of her properties, ultimately sustaining herself by working in a bookshop. Modesta's trajectory reverses the path of Mazzarò in *La roba* (1983), of Mastro-don Gesualdo (1888), of Consalvo Uzeda in *I Vicerè* (1894), of Flaminio Salvo in *I vecchi e i giovani* (1913), of Tancredi and don Calogero Sedàra in *Il Gattopardo* (1957). By posing enjoyment of life beyond any constraining form or structure and by rejecting the ideal of power, prestige and wealth as fundamental drives and ultimate goods, Sapienza consciously and explicitly presents her novel as eversive with respect to Sicilian literary tradition, to which nonetheless she clearly alludes.¹⁰³ Modesta thus challenges the core principle of capitalism, defined as 'l'atroce notte insonne dell'efficienza a tutti i costi' (AG, p. 471), and in a dialogue with Carmine, she overtly deserts her class – dismissing with it the patriarchal Sicilian tradition of the Traos, the Uzedas, the Laurentanos and the Leopards.

¹⁰² Epicuro, p. 5.

¹⁰³ For a more detailed discussion of Sapienza's relationship with Sicilian literary tradition, see A. Bazzoni, 'Gli anni e le stagioni: prospettive su femminismo, politica e storia ne *L'arte della gioia*', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 33-52, and Polizzi, cit.

– Non sono come te, Carmine! I tempi stanno cambiando, e spero che i tuoi figli, i tuoi nipoti e tutti gli altri giovani vi facciano saltare teste e poderi!
 – Sentitela! E chi ti ha messo queste idee in testa, tuo cognato? O l’hai letto nei libri? E che interesse ci avresti tu, eh? Principessa Brandiforti?
 L’interesse di farmi una bella risata.¹⁰⁴

From marriage to capitalism, from love to literary tradition, Sapienza questions any centre or structure of power that can limit individual freedom. Scarpa notes the rebellious anarchism that characterises *L’arte della gioia*:

L’ideologia che conta davvero in questo libro, e che scavalca la sua intenzione pedagogica, è un’ideologia del comportamento anarchico. [...] L’ideologia del romanzo è, più correttamente, un’etica: è un’energia, schierata a difesa della propria libertà fisica e mentale, che propelle il libro all’impazzata e lo soffia in avanti.¹⁰⁵

Scarpa is right in pointing out the general anarchic ethics and energy which constitute the strong overall drive of *L’arte della gioia*; by limiting the anarchic perspective of the text to Modesta’s individual behaviour, he is however again fairly dismissive with respect to the political and historical dimension of Sapienza’s work. Sapienza, who comes from a politically committed family and fought as a partisan, dialogues with her own political tradition with full awareness of its social context. Anarchism is indeed also present in the text as a specific political subject with a specific historical consistency, and the complex relationship between anarchic ethics and the political arena is an important dimension of *L’arte della gioia*. Sapienza mentions the founding thinkers of anarchism – Michail Bakunin and, in the Italian context, Errico Malatesta (AG, p. 180), the movement’s cultural tradition, like the lyrics of the song ‘Son nostre

¹⁰⁴ AG, p. 207. Carmine’s statement ‘mai niente di buono fuori dall’isola è venuto’ directly recalls don Fabrizio Salina’s position in the famous dialogue with Chevalley in Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *Il Gattopardo*.

¹⁰⁵ Scarpa, pp. 521-2.

figlie le prostitute, son...’ (p. 425),¹⁰⁶ its historical memory and militants, described as ‘persone dolci, morali e sventate’ (p. 154). Through Nina, the principal referent for the representation of anarchy in the novel, Sapienza voices the conflict between anarchism and socialism (and, later, communism) that so deeply marks Sapienza’s narrative. Such a conflict is represented in its historical happening, for example in the anarchists’ refusal to support Italy’s participation in World War I, unlike some socialist ‘traditori’ (AG, p. 424),¹⁰⁷ and the infamous episode of the massacre of anarchists by the communist militias during the Spanish civil war, in 1937.

Yet, this is also a conflict that concerns Sapienza’s relationship with her own historico-political context. Through her anarchism Sapienza shows a polemical attitude towards the PCI, the dominant intellectual referent until the late 70s and specifically in her circle of friends. On many occasions Sapienza manifests discomfort towards the rigidity, pervasiveness and strength of the communist agenda among the Roman left-wing intellectuals in the years when she carried out the composition of her work, and in turn she was not taken seriously by the same circle because of her anti-conventional, heretic views. The polemic against the PCI, already raised in *Lettera aperta*, is explicitly declared in *L’arte della gioia*. The communist party is represented as reluctant, if not overtly hostile, towards gender equality, and at the same time as subservient to the Catholic electorate. In a bitter argument with Joyce, who has become a party executive, Modesta accuses the PCI of having betrayed Marxism and of being a compromised, ultimately conservative force: ‘siete una massa di traditori, Joyce. [...] era sempre quel potere a tutto tondo nella sua divisa elegante di altero guerriero’ (AG, p. 472-3).

¹⁰⁶ Lines from *Inno dei pezzenti: Marsigliese del lavoro* (1895).

¹⁰⁷ Maria Giudice herself was arrested, together with Terracini, for her anti-interventionist position. See Santino, cit.

2.2.5 Against Ideology

The conflict is political as well as more broadly philosophical. Sapienza indeed articulates the relationship between anarchism and the PCI as a conflict between individual freedom, connected to the fluidity of a materialist approach to reality, on the one hand, and an abstract, dogmatic and intransigent attitude on the other. Overall, communist commitment and ideology are charged for relying on a restrictive notion of the individual, reason and history that prevents real freedom and replicates the mistakes of the enemies it fights. Modesta explains clearly her position to Carlo:

Io non nego nessuna lotta! Critico l'atteggiamento del pensiero che è troppo poco differente da quello del vecchio mondo che voi volete combattere. Pensando come pensate voi, nella migliore delle ipotesi, si costruirà una società che sarà una copia, per giunta scadente, della vecchia società cristiana e borghese.¹⁰⁸

In the socialist and then communist militants Modesta does not find 'la libertà del materialismo', but only 'la ferocia del dogma per nascondere la paura della ricerca, della sperimentazione, della scoperta, della fluidità della vita' (AG, p. 168). And indeed, Nina tells Modesta, 'In Russia hanno accantonato tutto quello che contava per la nostra libertà individuale. Dopo solo pochi anni si sono scordati del libero amore e sono tornati diritti al matrimonio' (p. 437).

While Sapienza does not disavow class emancipatory struggle, she nonetheless associates communism – in the way it is represented by its political referent, the PCI – to a logocentric and patriarchal perspective that reduces the fluidity of reality to abstract categories and thereby oppresses individual freedom. Anarchy is then, in Sapienza's view and in line with Bakunin's and Malatesta's political tradition, the truest realisation

¹⁰⁸ AG, p. 168.

of socialism, which socialist and communist parties keep betraying.¹⁰⁹ What is to be overcome is the reification of a single perspective and the systematisation of a fluid reality into definitive categories. On this ground Modesta confronts the defintory and categorising applications of Freudian psychoanalysis, compared to religion (‘proprio non potete vivere senza una religione’, AG, p. 350), like socialism was compared to the Church. If, in Vattimo’s words, ‘anti-foundationalism itself is at risk of hardening into metaphysics’,¹¹⁰ Modesta affirms: ‘mentono le parole, appena hai detto la parola questa ti ricade addosso come il coperchio di una bara. [...] una negazione assoluta non è esattamente uguale a un’affermazione assoluta?’ (p. 397).

In *L’arte della gioia* political, ethical and philosophical perspectives are closely interconnected, having in the notion of freedom and in Epicurean ethics their common founding ground. There is a continuity between the auscultation of the bodily dimension of existence, the liberation of desire and the realisation of political freedom.

Such a perspective brings *L’arte della gioia* close to the epistemological and political project of Braidotti’s feminist nomadism, with its ‘rifiuto delle differenze ordinate per via gerarchica e la negazione del potere egemonico della ragione’.¹¹¹ Since there is an ‘unavoidable connection between metaphysics and domination’,¹¹² opposing power is linked to questioning abstract and universal notions of reason, making space for other dimensions of existence that are neglected, oppressed or expelled by metaphysics – body, desire, imagination and ethics. The material ground of existence must be kept present, frequented and acknowledged, in order not to get lost ‘nelle ali

¹⁰⁹ ‘L’anarchia, al pari del socialismo, ha per base, per punto di partenza, per ambiente necessario l’eguaglianza di condizioni; ha per faro la solidarietà; e per metodo la libertà.’, Malatesta, p. 57.

¹¹⁰ Gianni Vattimo, ‘Nihilism and Emancipation’, cited in Giuseppe Stellardi, ‘*Pensiero debole*, Nihilism and Ethics, or How Strong is Weakness?’, in Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (eds.), *Postmodern Impegno* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 83-98 (p.87).

¹¹¹ Braidotti, p. 151.

¹¹² Stellardi, p. 87.

menzognere della ragione per la ragione, nelle teorie, le utopie a tutto tondo, perfette delle più crudeli delle perfezioni: quelle che la mente disegna astrattamente, senza tenere conto del pane, la cacca, il desiderio carnale'.¹¹³ Whereas 'il leninista non legge per autocensura' (AG, p. 480), Sapienza's anarchic thought maintains that 'per prepararsi alla rivoluzione si deve bere tanta e tanta fantasia' (p. 438). In addition to vindicating the freedom of imagination from ideology within the artistic field, as Vittorini did in his famous quarrel with Palmiro Togliatti on *Il Politecnico*,¹¹⁴ Sapienza also aspires to contaminate politics with imagination, voicing a perspective very much in tune with the students' slogan *l'immaginazione al potere* in the late 60s and 70s.

In *L'arte della gioia* thus anarchism goes together with the criticism of logocentrism and the oppression it perpetrates by expelling body and imagination from abstract rationality and by reducing the multiplicity of reality to one, absolute and dominant structure. Anarchism is at the same time a political perspective and a philosophical approach, connecting Sapienza to the fundamental inspiration of weak thought, post-structuralism and feminist nomadism.¹¹⁵ As Braidotti argues,

il nomadismo a cui mi riferisco ha a che fare con quel tipo di coscienza critica che si sottrae, non aderisce a formule del pensiero e del comportamento socialmente codificate. [...] Lo stato nomade, più che dall'atto del viaggiare, è definito da una presa di coscienza che sostiene il desiderio del ribaltamento delle convenzioni date: è una passione politica per la trasformazione o il cambiamento radicale.¹¹⁶

Significantly, this 'passione politica che esprime un fortissimo desiderio di resistenza e di trasformazione' is described by Braidotti as a '*gioiosa forza nomade*'.¹¹⁷ Sapienza

¹¹³ G. Sapienza, Unpublished diaries, cit. in *La porta è aperta*, p. 76.

¹¹⁴ Elio Vittorini, 'Politica e cultura. Lettera a Togliatti', *Il Politecnico*, January-March 1947.

¹¹⁵ For a joint consideration of anarchism, post-structuralism and nomadism, see Jamie Heckert and Richard Cleminson, 'Ethics, Relationships and Power', in *Anarchism and Sexuality: Ethics, Relationships and Power*, ed. by J. Heckert and R. Cleminson (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1-22.

¹¹⁶ Braidotti, p. 14.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 10; p. 21. My emphasis.

voices a pluralistic and anti-metaphysical perspective and applies it from the constitution of identity to the ethics of materialism and Epicureanism to the anarchist political perspective, composing a libertarian picture unique in the Italian literary context of the 70s for its breadth and radicalism.

In order for freedom, multiplicity and fluidity to take place, as we have seen, Modesta needs first to build a confident sense of the self and to reject oppression, adopting a strongly oppositional attitude that has little to do with the anarchic and post-structuralist view just described. In order to access a right to weakness, a subject needs firstly to develop a positive confidence, stemming from the desire to reject oppression. As Giuseppe Stellardi points out, freedom is the necessary condition for an epistemological and political paradigm based on weakness to work: ‘freedom must at some point become something more than a consensually agreed and negotiated “good”, since it is at the same time a necessary condition for the negotiation of identities, positions and interests to take place.’¹¹⁸ Similarly, in Gianni Vattimo’s words, ‘there are no ultimate *foundations* before which our freedom should stop, which is instead what authorities of every kind [...] have always sought to make us believe.’ However, we must pursue the ‘ideal of *founding* every law and social behaviour on the respect of everyone’s freedom’.¹¹⁹

The parable of Modesta in *L'arte della gioia* then shows the margins of post-structuralist thought itself, insofar as it rests upon a condition of freedom that is not granted within the social system itself, but must be achieved through a struggle. Overall, the novel features two perspectives, which can be read as in contradiction with one another, or as two different ‘moments’, ‘strategies’ or ‘positions.’ On the one hand,

¹¹⁸ Stellardi, pp. 91-2.

¹¹⁹ G. Vattimo, ‘Nihilism as Emancipation’, in *Cosmos and History*, 5, I (2009), pp. 20-3 (p. 21; p. 22). My emphasis.

Modesta resorts to direct opposition to power, in order to establish the conditions for exerting her freedom; whenever this attitude prevails, life is represented as a struggle, a contrast of opposite and irreducible positions. It is the strategy of the oppressed, the moment of rebellion and violence. On the other hand, *L'arte della gioia* endeavours to resist the replication of a system of oppression, a binary logic, the opposition of an ideology with another ideology, and makes space for plurality and change. The revolutionary is replaced by the nomad, the 'preghiera dell'odio' gives way to the 'arte del dubbio'. As Ross remarks, Sapienza's texts, 'like many autobiographical writings by women, seek not to install a sovereign subject, but to push to the margins of the rational subject'.¹²⁰ In Sapienza's words, 'rivoluzione significa legittima difesa contro chi ti aggredisce con l'arma della fame e dell'ignoranza' (AG, p. 380), but 'anche la parola rivoluzione mente, come tutte le altre, e bisognerebbe trovarne un'altra' (p. 482).

In its questioning of power structures *L'arte della gioia* is explicitly conceived as a committed novel. From its very title it presents itself as a pedagogical narrative, with Modesta as an emancipatory model or exemplum of an anarchist and Epicurean ethic. While within the fictional world of the novel Modesta achieves agency and freedom through violence, Sapienza entrusts to literary communication a liberating message, creating a narrative that seeks to inspire a desire and passion for freedom in the reader. The pedagogical relationship between the narrative discourse and the reader is exemplified in the text by Modesta's attitude towards other characters – like Beatrice, Carlo, Stella, Joyce, and all the children living in Villa Suvarita – whom she tries to educate to freedom. For her anarchic inspiration, thus, *L'arte della gioia* is suitably

¹²⁰ *Eccentric Interruptions*, p. 2.

ascribable to the category of ‘Italian postmodern *impegno*’ and ‘progressive art’ discussed by Mussgnug and Antonello:

Progressive art, in this context, is not defined as a struggle for a new hegemonic affirmation – the transformation of plurality into a *habitus* – but a challenge of any form of hegemony. The alternative to rigid ideological definitions, in other words, is an ‘emancipatory’ or ‘reformistic’ *impegno*, a shift from macropolitics to micropolitics, or perhaps – in Simon Critchley’s terms – an ‘ethical anarchy’.¹²¹

The post-modern aspect of *L’arte della gioia*, its ‘systematic distrust of historically grounded power, combined with a de-naturalizing critique of ideology,’¹²² combines and collides with Modesta’s own trajectory of violence and frontal opposition to power, grounded in her strong and subversive bodily desire. Where a ‘sovereign subject’ is with no doubt what Sapienza questions and deconstructs in this novel, nomadism cannot take place without the subject’s achievement of a preliminary condition of agency. *L’arte della gioia* thus exposes the margins, if not the potential limits, of post-structuralist and post-modernist discourses with respect to the position of oppressed subjects, and places body and desire as an important locus of resistance.

In conclusion, from the construction of the self to the ethical and political level, Sapienza applies a deconstructive gaze on reality that invests any social, political and cultural structure, aiming at rethinking the very foundation of society. Anarchy is the aspiration of individual and social freedom, founded on the restless movement of the material and bodily domain of existence, which defies any systematic ideology and institutional power. Modesta is a subject who claims the right to self-determination, thus rejecting oppression in any form, but does not use this determination to establish any new stable identity or to dominate others, turning emancipation into a new system. She

¹²¹ Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug, ‘Introduction’ in P. Antonello and F. Mussgnug, *Postmodern Impegno*, pp. 1-22 (p. 11).

¹²² *Ibid.* p. 8.

keeps mobilizing her identity and position as well as her intellectual categories, never fully embracing any final interpretation of reality and strenuously refusing to settle. We can think of it as a commitment in two movements, that of strength and that of weakness, with the freedom of the body at the beginning and at the end of this troubled but also joyful emancipatory journey.

CHAPTER 3. *IO, JEAN GABIN*: STAGED IDENTITIES AND ANARCHIC LOVE

Introduction

After *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, Sapienza wrote a third text dedicated to the recollection of her childhood in Catania, *Io, Jean Gabin*, interrupted before being finished and published posthumously by Einaudi in 2010.

There is some uncertainty over when the text was written. One hypothesis, maintained by Pellegrino, locates its writing in 1979-1980, after Sapienza finished *L'arte della gioia* and before her incarceration in the prison of Rebibbia.¹ In her investigation of the evolution of Sapienza's autobiographical narrative, Andriago accepts Pellegrino's temporal frame. Relying on the analysis of textual structures, she places *Io Jean Gabin* in a transitional phase immediately preceding the prison works, that is, midway between the effort of self-reconstruction sustained in the previous texts and the focus on outer reality in *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*. The abrupt interruption, Andriago suggests, might have been due to the author's own incarceration. Conversely, Providenti suggests that *Io, Jean Gabin* was written before *L'arte della gioia*, in 1968-9, and then interrupted under the urge to work on this major project, a view endorsed also by Ross.² Yet, Providenti does not exclude that Sapienza might have worked on *Io, Jean Gabin* in two different times, before and after *L'arte della gioia*. As

¹ See Pellegrino, 'Postfazione', in JG, pp. 113-24 (p. 117).

² See Providenti, 'Introduzione', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 13-30 (pp. 23-4). Providenti does not bring evidence in support of her argument, which rests upon the mentioning of not specified 'alcune fonti'. Ross, *Identità di genere e sessualità*, p. 226.

the critic herself remarks, only a more detailed research in Sapienza's archive might provide resolving elements. Awaiting for the archive to be made available to the public, Pellegrino's hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the reference, in the incipit of the text, to Margaret Thatcher, who was elected prime minister in the UK precisely in 1979. As Pellegrino recounts, another version of the text featured Nilde Iotti in place of Thatcher, and indeed 1979 is also the year in which Iotti became president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Although *Io, Jean Gabin* was published posthumously and with no editorial note, thus leaving open the hypothesis of interpolation, the reference to Thatcher is present in one version of the original typescript.³

Io, Jean Gabin is a short novel written in the first narrating person. Here Sapienza combines fiction and autobiography, focusing again on the recollection of her childhood in Catania in the 20s and early 30s. As in *Lettera aperta*, we have a young female protagonist, Goliarda, in search for her positioning in the world. The character's formative experience is represented through her physical wandering around the neighbourhood of San Berillo ('Civita' in the author's words) and her meetings with various characters.

At the beginning of the story, Goliarda pushes and hurts her friend Concetta, who during the screening of the film *Pépé le Moko* made trivial comments about the female character.⁴ Identifying herself with Jean Gabin, the protagonist hero of the film, Goliarda acts to protect the insulted female character from her detractor, Concetta.

³ The typescript, comprising only the first part of the novel, was given by Sapienza to the journalist Adele Cambria, who kindly allowed me to see it (Rome, September 2013).

⁴ *Pépé le Moko (Il bandito della Casbah)*, France, 1937. At the time of its release in France Sapienza was actually thirteen or even fourteen years old, while in the text she is still a small child. Moreover, Laura Ferro indicates that the film was released in Italy only in 1946 (see Ferro, 'Changing Recollections. Goliarda Sapienza and Fabrizia Ramondino Writing and Re-Writing Childhood', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*). On other occasions too Sapienza's autobiographical accuracy proves faltering. This approximate attitude towards temporal and geographical references suggests that the author's imagination intervenes to deeply alter the strictly faithful recollection of her past, making space for fictional creativity.

Learning about the episode, Goliarda's mother, Maria, reprimands her and suggests she atone her misbehaviour by giving some money to Concetta to pay for the medical care she needs following the incident. The little girl finds out that her sister Musetta has stolen her savings and wanders through the neighbourhood looking for small jobs in order to earn some money. Such a task is perceived by the child as a heroic adventure as she looks at the events through the identification with Jean Gabin. She visits a number of people – uncle Giovanni, 'il gelsominaro', the Brunos and 'il commendatore Insanguine'. After a series of encounters and vicissitudes, partially through her work in Insanguine's shop and thanks to a donation by her uncle Nunzio, she is able to pay Concetta back and also to buy the ticket for the new film starring Jean Gabin, *Il porto delle nebbie*, to which she was ardently looking forward. Overall, the story happens in approximately three days, which offer the narrator the time to include portrayals of the protagonist's family and everyday life.

Io, Jean Gabin touches upon many of the core issues explored in *Lettera aperta*, such as the complex coexistence of different models of gender identities and social roles, the possibility of an experimental attitude towards sexual orientation and the search for personal agency, all combined with lively family portraits and extra-diegetic remarks about political events and cultural reflections. In addition, particular attention is devoted to the tension between artistic work, perceived by the protagonist as problematically individualistic, and social moral duty, aiming at equality at the expense of personal freedom and authenticity. Unlike *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, in *Io, Jean Gabin* the representation of the narrator's own present situation is virtually absent, while a central plot can be identified, revolving around the child's endeavour to

find some money. Although the centrifugal tension is still predominant, some minimal cohesiveness and coherence make their appearance.

The different narrative structure of *Io, Jean Gabin*, with a recognisable organisation of foreground and background narrative materials, is the manifestation of a considerably different relationship between the text and the protagonist's formation of identity. Indeed, *Io, Jean Gabin* marks an evolution towards a detachment from the past, favoured by the narrator's achievement of a minimal definition of her own identity, consisting in the creative activity and the marginal social position of a rebellious artist. The changed formative tension in the protagonist's identity affects tone and style of narration. In *Lettera aperta* we have seen a protagonist struggling to make sense of her position in the world as a girl taught to be different from the dominant gender model but not provided with a successful alternative, educated and wealthy but called to egalitarian commitment, forced to please her family to obtain love but also fighting for personal independence. While in *Lettera aperta* the narrator is in the middle of the process of becoming a subject through the very act of remembering and narrating, in *Io, Jean Gabin* she knows the outcome of the little girl's formative experience and is able to structure her story accordingly. Such strengthened position of the narrator allows her to recollect memories from her childhood without re-experiencing the feelings and the openness connected to life 'as you are living it', leading to a much more ironic, light and linear narrative.

Although the adult narrator is almost absent in *Io, Jean Gabin*, here too the narrating voice represents a multiple gaze, comprising the child protagonist's perspective and her identification with the male characters played by the French actor Jean Gabin. Moreover, Gabin is connected to a multiplicity of referents, for he

represents not only a man – as different from a woman –, but also the power of dream and imagination – as opposed to the limits of reality – and the outcast hero – as opposed to conformist society. This multiplicity of semantic functions of Jean Gabin further enriches (and adds complexity to) the protagonist's self-identification with him. In other words, to the little girl Jean Gabin means much more than the model of a male identity. When analysing the protagonist's identification with him it is therefore important to distinguish among its different aspects and their consequences on the protagonist's formation of identity and search for freedom.

Io, Jean Gabin is thus in a relationship of continuity with previous autobiographical texts but also presents noticeable differences; in my analysis I attempt to point out both aspects – of similarities and novelties. In the first section of this chapter I analyse the complex process of the protagonist's formation of identity from the perspective of gender and sexual orientation, which play a crucial role in the character's search for personal freedom and authenticity. The role of the body in the construction of identity is the object of discussion in the second section, while the final part of the chapter investigates the semantic functions of the identification with Jean Gabin related to imagination and marginality, focusing on alternative modalities of identity and communication and their political implications.

3.1 Gender Identity: A Staged Freedom

In the incipit of *Io, Jean Gabin*, the narrator, confronted with a picture of Margaret Thatcher on the newspaper, deploras a state of things in which women assume male features – power and strength in particular: ‘lady di ferro, donne poliziotte, soldate e

culturiste.’⁵ As Pellegrino notes in the afterword to *Io, Jean Gabin*, Sapienza was worried by an evolution of the relationship between the sexes which seemed to her to erase the difference between men and women simply by assimilating the female to the male. She felt deeply sorry for women ‘quando le vedeva possedute dal desiderio di omologazione al maschile, di cui aveva una specie di terrore’,⁶ and we have also seen the elaboration of this theme in Sapienza’s previous works.

Io, Jean Gabin seems to start as an endeavour to understand why ‘qualcosa non è andato per il verso giusto in questi ultimi trent’anni di democrazia’ (JG, p. 3) and to re-establish a more traditional articulation of the difference between men and women. Nonetheless, from the very beginning something disturbs the linearity of this operation, as the narrator places herself alongside men by identifying herself with the French actor Jean Gabin. While the narrator criticises women who replicate male attitudes, the protagonist identifies herself with a man and looks at women from a male viewpoint. As in *Lettera aperta*, Sapienza goes back to her childhood memories, but differently from her previous autobiographical novels she does not look for the model of woman she wants to become, but for the type of woman she *as a man* would love. This double gaze, of a young girl and a man, complicates and destabilises the representation of gender identities in *Io, Jean Gabin* and therefore the protagonist’s formation of identity and search for freedom.

3.1.1 The Absent Mother

In the narrative recollections from her childhood, Sapienza presents different models of what women are and what they should be, through the characters’ opinions and

⁵ JG, p. 3. Further references to this work in short quotations are given in the text.

⁶ Pellegrino, ‘Postfazione’, in JG, p. 122.

examples and through the narrator's own extra-diegetic comments. A striking novelty in this respect is the very marginal space allowed to the parental figures and the protagonist's detached attitude towards them: 'Di Maria non mi soffermo a parlare perché anche lei, esattamente come mio padre, è conosciutissima qui nella Civita e io non ho tempo da perdere' (JG, p. 11). Both the painful sense of a task to accomplish related to the mother and the fear of sexual violence associated to the father are gone, replaced by the protagonist's bold and perky adoption of a male role and a male perspective on women.

The first and most important model of gender identity in *Lettera aperta* was Goliarda's mother Maria. In *Io, Jean Gabin* we see confirmed her attributes of nonconformist woman, clever, devoted to study, committed to the socialist cause and morally intransigent. Yet the painful conflict between the model of woman represented by Maria and the social condition of women that lacerated Goliarda in *Lettera aperta* does not bother the protagonist of *Io, Jean Gabin* as her mother is here important mainly for her absence and emotional distance. Maria retains the role of undisputed authority as regards moral issues, but is represented as too busy with her own work and too focused on intellectual and political concerns to take care of the little girl's practical and emotional needs: 'mia madre Maria voleva conferire con me. [...] deve essere importante se così di buon'ora ha deciso di sacrificare il suo tempo con me. Studia sempre' (JG, p. 11). When Goliarda interrogates her about the issue of love, Maria's response is totally inadequate for the girl's expectations, confined within an intellectual and abstract perspective, the only sphere which seems to provide a channel of communication between mother and daughter:

L'unica che ammetteva che l'amore era qualcosa degno di essere preso in considerazione era mia madre, ma la faceva così complicata: doveva essere un amore libero da convenzioni, da ricatti psicologici o finanziari eccetera. Insomma la faceva così ufficiale che era meglio stornare il discorso sulla Grecia antica, la politica o la filosofia che, anche se difficili, applicandosi almeno si potevano capire...⁷

Neglected by her mother, the little child is raised by men, and in particular by her brother Ivanoe, who guaranteed her survival as a newborn by feeding her with artificial milk when she rejected breast milk: 'Già, io sono stata allattata da un uomo – il mio primo ricordo sono due braccia forti e pelose che mi sollevano' (JG, p. 60).⁸ From the very early stages of her life then the little child feels a closer connection with men, attributed to the mother's absence. As she grows up, this connection with men turns into identification, seconded by other members of her family. For example her brother Carlo teaches her to box,⁹ she wears a boy's jacket and for a party her sister Licia gives her a flower to put in the eyelet as a – typically male – ornament. While in *Lettera aperta* the conflictual relationship with a female identity never led the protagonist to identify herself with a man, in *Io, Jean Gabin* such an identification is well-established and sustained throughout the whole text. The identification with the model of woman represented by the mother is no longer at the centre of Goliarda's personal research, while rage and pain are turned into irony.

Together with the marking of a distance from Maria, the disappearance of the character of Nica is also remarkable, compared to the central position occupied by her in *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*. In these texts, Nica represented the source of narrative imagination and allowed the protagonist to access the authenticity of her inner instincts; she was both the positive model of a girl to imitate and the object of

⁷ JG, pp. 52-3.

⁸ The episode is narrated also in FM, pp. 67-8.

⁹ As we have seen, the girl's training to be like a boy is represented also in LA, p. 110, and FM, p. 108.

Goliarda's love. However, Nica's marriage and premature death in childbirth narrated in *Lettera aperta* sanctioned the impracticality of a free and joyful way to be a girl. Thus in *Io, Jean Gabin* Nica makes just a fleeting appearance, when Goliarda meets her in a street and, albeit tempted, declines her invitation to play together and runs away. In this sense, *Io, Jean Gabin* is not just a different exploration of the author's childhood, but represents a subsequent stage in its interpretation, as the narrator now knows that Nica is not a viable model of woman and that a true communication with her will be impeded – hence she lets her protagonist run away. The distance from Maria and the absence of Nica mark a clear difference from the formation of gender identity in the previous autobiographical texts. In *Io, Jean Gabin* reconciliation with female identity is given up from the beginning, thus opening the space for the protagonist to identify herself with a male domain.

3.1.2 *Pazze e assassine*

Another element in this transition is the removal of men's violence, the displacement of mental illness from Maria to other female characters and its conjugation with women's violence. Male-exerted domestic and sexual violence, which obsessed the narrator of *Lettera aperta*, no longer play a significant role. The only kind of violence exerted by men is political – uncle Alessandro who beats up a group of fascists or the fascists who beat up Goliarda's brothers.

While no reference is made to Maria's own insanity, the narrator recounts three stories of mad women, two of which are also associated with murder. There is for example the maid Tina, 'con gli occhioni nero seppia sempre terrorizzati – la sua pazzia era causata, sembra, dall'aver ucciso la sorella e il suo fidanzato che se la faceva con la

sorella' (JG, p. 10); and there is Zoe, the other maid who occasionally replaces Tina. Zoe killed her mother and hurt her lover with a knife, for which she spent eight years in prison. 'Per difendere il suo onore di fanciulla pura' she always carries a knife, the 'misericordia', hidden close to her breast, terrorizing Goliarda and her siblings (JG, p. 99). For this reason, Goliarda's sister Musetta considers Zoe a heroic feminist:

Musetta asseriva che Zoe era la punta estrema del movimento per la causa della donna. Altro che suffragette o quelle sciocche delle Balabanoff, Kuliscioff, Zetkin, eccetera, che speravano di abbattere la tirannide sanguinosa dell'uomo combattendo coi fiori....
 – [...] io ti porterò ad agire per la nostra causa.
 – La nostra causa signorina? E in cosa consiste?
 – Spazzare via l'uomo e il mondo cattivo che ha costruito!
 – E con chi ci sposiamo, chi ci mantiene?¹⁰

There is here obviously on the narrator's side an ironic and light tone. Nonetheless, a suggestion is made which connects an extreme form of feminism to women's violence, with an explicit polemic against such feminism. Compared to *Lettera aperta*, the problem of women's mental insanity and male violence undergoes a spectacular twisting and is reformulated as a problem of mad women committing violent crimes of passion. The adoption of a patriarchal viewpoint seems here to belong to the narrator herself, as she moves the blame from men's violent power (central in *Lettera aperta*) to women's own violence, associated with subversive feminism. Sapienza even recuperates the image of the blade, used in all previous works in connection with male violence and abusive power, here re-deployed to describe Musetta and Zoe's 'unghiacce e strilli acuti come lamine' (JG, p. 104).

A single reference is made to male sexual violence, and specifically to the men's act of showing their genitals and staring menacingly at women, narrated also in *Lettera aperta*. In this way, *Io, Jean Gabin* reconnects to the discourse on men's constant threat

¹⁰ JG, p. 102.

against women there addressed, but the child's narrating voice, after a moment of fear, suddenly disregards the problem to focus on something else:

Il culo mi fa ridere, non è come quei grossi così che hanno davanti, flaccidi topi violacei sembrano, che continuamente ti mostrano a scuola, nei parchi o nel buio fondo dei numerosi cantoni del nostro quartiere tutto giri e giravolte nere di lava. Loro hanno l'aria di fare un gesto necessario e consueto: quello di fare la pipì, ma si vede che lo fanno apposta, altrimenti perché ti fisserebbero con quello sguardo ironico e duro che pare un colpo di stocco o di pugnale? Ma lasciamo le manie che tutti i cittadini di una città hanno [...].¹¹

Sapienza goes back to this core issues, but displays a deeply changed attitude, as she does not engage with these memories, circumnavigating the pain attached to them. In other words, she looks at this troubled issue from a distant, safe position. The act of recollecting is no longer 'active' on the author's present. Nonetheless the paragraph, although circumscribed, when read together with *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* represents the protagonist's suggestion of another way to look at the relationship between the sexes and her deliberate will to ignore the issue at the same time.

3.1.3 Stereotypes, Sexism and Misogyny

In *Io, Jean Gabin* Goliarda is represented as neglected by her mother, raised by her brothers and considered one of them, looked after by maids who are mad murderers. On top of this, she is surrounded by a sexist and even misogynist culture. The little girl absorbs the gender difference in the way it is offered to her by her social context and develops quite a strongly sexist perspective on women. In this respect, *Io, Jean Gabin* offers an extensive list of patriarchal stereotypes, from the sexist characterisation of women as sentimental, malicious and deceitful to the specular exaltation of the figure of

¹¹ JG, p. 78.

the angelic woman. In particular, the teacher Jsaya manifests an overtly misogynist view which sees women from an extremely negative perspective: ‘ecco tutto il veleno di tutte le femminacce castigo di Dio. Vomitavano invidie, e quello che era peggio piccoli pettegolezzi, per spargere zizzania nella nostra comunità’ (JG, p. 16).

Few references are made to the connection between such a perspective on female gender identity and patriarchy. For example, we know from Ivanoë that a woman has a “basso intuito femminile” [...] non connaturato ma sviluppato nei secoli per imbrogliare il padrone maschio che l’ha sempre tenuta in prigionia...’ (JG, p. 15); from Musetta we also learn that love is ‘l’arma che usavano gli uomini non solo per ridurre in schiavitù le donne ma per annientarle completamente’ (p. 53). Nonetheless, even these aetiological excursus simply reinforce, in the protagonist’s eyes, the idea that being a woman is after all an undesirable condition.

In all environments surrounding Sapienza’s family the rules are the same. We are confronted with middle class women, ‘madri spaurite, schiave’ who live closed in their home, where ‘o friggevano o pregavano’ (JG, p. 18; p. 19), and with Southern women who, in Licia’s words, ‘hanno una vocazione al lutto’ (p. 64). Goliarda’s uncle Giovanni refuses to teach her the artisan job of manufacturing shoes because ‘le donne sanno solo indossarle, queste scarpine’ and to fascism ‘le donne non contano, non sono degne d’essere arrestate’ (p. 27; p. 32).

Not surprisingly, Goliarda herself looks at gender roles through a deeply patriarchal conceptual frame. In Ross’s words, ‘she distances herself from the category of women, through disrespectful, frankly misogynistic remarks’.¹² We encounter expressions such as ‘femminucce’ (JG, p. 11), ‘ragazzette pigre e melense’ (p. 10),

¹² *Eccentric Interruptions*, p. 9.

‘sentimentalismi da donnette’ (p. 15), ‘smancerie di una pupa qualsiasi’ (p. 18), ‘una donna fragile indifesa’ (p. 74) and ‘lacrime femminili’ (p. 76). In the incipit of the novel, Sapienza’s statement against women who efface their femininity in order to imitate men is followed by the representation of ‘la donna’ as a territory for men’s action, ‘spazio immenso in cui misurare il nostro coraggio di individualisti incalliti’ (p. 3). The narrator identifies herself as a male active subject who exerts his agency on women, deemed to be passive complement of his action.

The articulation of sexual difference as a polarity of agency and passivity, weakness and strength, closely reflects what Cavarero defined the ‘arroganza androcentrica che riserva all’Uomo il ruolo del soggetto’, proper to a patriarchal symbolic system in which ‘la donna sta notoriamente nella posizione dell’oggetto, ossia è pensata, rappresentata, definita dal punto di vista dell’Uomo’.¹³

There are few exceptions to the negativity of women’s condition, for instance the figures of Angelica, the epic woman-warrior, and Marie Curie (JG, p. 43; p. 41), who originate in the protagonist a different attitude towards her gender. The main example is the scene set in Insanguine’s workshop, where Goliarda is looking for a way to earn some money. She is given a small job to do, consisting in repairing the puppet’s clothes, a type of work carried out by women. On this occasion, Goliarda appears unproblematically integrated into the female gender: ‘*noi donne* eravamo intente all’ago e al filo’ (p. 46. My emphasis). Similarly to the representation of manufacturing chairs described in *Lettera aperta*, here the carrying out of an artisan job provides the girl with a space for reconciliation with herself. In this context, the scene suggests that, where allowed to have an active role, she could reconcile with her gender identity, otherwise

¹³ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 69.

the transgression of its limitations in order to access the same freedom and agency becomes a preferred strategy.

3.1.4 Loving Other Women

The exceptions to the negativity of women's condition do not suffice to provide an alternative model of gender and rather reconfirm the importance of the role played by women's submission in the child's formation of gender identity. If the protagonist does not look at women, and her mother in particular, as examples of gender models, how does she relate to them? Through the identification with Jean Gabin, women are characterised as object of love and territory for men's action, as made explicit in the incipit of the text cited above. Maria in particular is emphatically described by the little girl as the object of her love; similarly, her sister Licia, who could have provided a valuable female example by virtue of her positive characterisation as an intelligent and independent woman, is rather looked at by the protagonist as an object of love and conquest, as she even engages in a competition for Licia's attention with the unsuccessful admirer Cesare.

In the relationship with Maria and Licia, Goliarda gives voice to a twofold need for love and care. On the one hand she expresses the need for love of a neglected child, to whom women represent potential carers. On the other, through the identification with a male viewpoint, she confines women into the passive role of complement to men's desire and space for men's action. The two gazes on women, of the needy child and the self-referential man, converge on the figure of the idealised angelic woman, suggested to Goliarda by an imaginary dialogue with Jean Gabin:

Finché vi saranno delle Tine grassottelle e generose siamo in salvo, Goliarda, da tutte le guerre possibili, da tutti gli astii e le intolleranze... Mi ricordo, alla fine della guerra, sperduto e affamato, fu proprio una donna come questa che mi salvò la vita con un pezzo di pane e il sogno – cosa importante come il pane – e con un sorriso. Sapessi com'era bella! Portava una treccia bionda intorno alla testa a mo' di corona e ogni volta che sorrideva era come se un faro le si accendesse davanti e la illuminasse tutta. Guardarla dava l'illusione che una grande pace fosse scesa sulla terra.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that this passage closely follows the scene of Musetta and Zoe conspiring against men, so that the image of the angelic woman works as an anti-feminist model as proposed by a male perspective, which considers the female subject 'in quanto donna *dell'Uomo e per l'Uomo*'.¹⁵ Through the adoption of a male perspective, the narrator aspires to reinstate a traditional role of care for women, while at the same time she does not include herself in the category. Considering that, as we have seen, the text is constructed on the absence of the figure of the mother, the protagonist's stated nostalgia for a role of care for women can be interpreted as the expression of a child's longing for love and care rather than the definition of a model of gender for herself.

From Jean Gabin – or rather from a combination of the French actor and the models of masculinity absorbed by her social context – the little girl learns 'come ci si comporta con le donne, come le si fa innamorare e come le si protegge' (JG, p. 109). Here, the protagonist's self-representation as a man borders on homosexuality. Indeed, if her mother is interdicted to her as object of love, as declared at the beginning of the novel, the same is not true for the other women. The novel makes a few references to the protagonist's homosexual desire for other girls;¹⁶ moreover, in the same chapter

¹⁴ JG, p. 105.

¹⁵ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 67.

¹⁶ 'Perché diavolo seguo così intensamente questa bella ragazzina dai capelli biondi mai vista prima in giro?', JG, p. 43; 'A ogni cantone tremavo (o lo desideravo?) pel timore di vedere spuntare una soave donzella col suo paniere tutto panni e mani bianche così pure da lasciare basiti. La saetta poteva

where she describes her upbringing amidst men, while talking about her dream to be a storyteller Goliarda declares that she wants to become like Saffo, which is at least an ambiguous statement considering that Saffo is not only a woman poet but also the author of poems voicing female homosexual desire.

The most explicit and at the same time ambiguous reference to homosexual desire, however, belongs to a separate section of the novel, set in a different time and space, that is, the story of the friendship with the American girl Jean, under the Nazi occupation of Rome, when Goliarda is around twenty years old. The terms used to describe the relationship with Jean have little in common with the tangle of sexism and child's need for love associated to the identification with Jean Gabin in the rest of the novel. Conversely, an idea of communication, reciprocity and respect for the other's independent will makes its appearance, marking a different way to conceive human relationships.

The representation of reciprocity and accordance in the relationship with Jean closely recalls the scene of Goliarda playing with Nica in *Lettera aperta*, for which I used the category of 'resonance' as a modality of communication theorised by Cavarero. In *Io, Jean Gabin* too Sapienza opens a little space for a modality of communication founded not on power unbalances – and its correlatives: need, dependence, distribution of active and passive roles – but on the dialogue between two subjectivities that become such precisely thanks to their mutual recognition. It is particularly interesting and significant that Sapienza links such a reciprocity to the context of the two girls telling each other the story of their lives. Indeed, through this very narration the protagonist becomes aware of having a past, that is, of being the subject of a personal story:

afferrarmi in ogni momento e dopo sarei stata schiava di quel fulmine che inchioda e rivela una vita al suo destino', pp. 50-1.

Jean sa tutto di me, forse per questo l'amo tanto? È la prima persona alla quale ho raccontato il mio passato, o meglio la prima con la quale ho scoperto di avere un passato. [...].

Avevo la giornata per poi la sera, quando tutti dormivano, raccontarla a lei fissandola negli occhi. Avevano la capacità di spalancarsi immensi e raccogliere le mie esperienze, le mie fatiche, i miei sogni, la mia vita stessa e ridarmela attraverso un sorriso quieto più ricca e viva.

Pensare le stesse cose. Non mi era mai accaduto con una carusa e per questo l'amavo.¹⁷

The brief passage about the relationship with Jean links two macro concepts elaborated by Cavarero, the notion of 'resonance' and the notion of 'narration', the latter explored by the philosopher in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*. We have seen that resonance is the accordance of voices which produces communication before and beyond the exchange of a semantic content. Resonance allows communication of the interlocutors' 'chi' (unique identity, embodied in the uniqueness of each individual's voice) and not of their 'che cosa' (their attributes, their belonging to categories). Remaining in a similar conceptual frame but with a shift of focus, narrative is what turns life into a story through – and only through – the intervention of an external gaze on a person's life. In her rich approach to the exploration of the narrative discourse, Cavarero draws particular attention – and it is a pretty innovative point, which has nonetheless its roots in Hannah Arendt's thought – to the intrinsically relational constitution of a personal story, not much or not only because personal identity is embedded in social relationships, but because personal identity depends on someone else's recognition: 'Chi cammina sul terreno non può vedere la figura che i suoi passi si lasciano dietro, gli è necessaria un'altra prospettiva'; 'La categoria di identità personale postula sempre come necessario l'altro.'¹⁸

¹⁷ JG, p. 98.

¹⁸ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 10; p. 31.

In the scene with Jean, Sapienza intercepts the core of Cavarero's argument and combines it with a 'resonant' communication. Identity cannot be known through the categories to which it belongs, but can be narrated as the unique story of a unique human being: 'l'identità di un essere unico ha la sua sola unità tangibile – l'*unità* che in quanto *unico* egli va cercando – nel racconto della sua storia.'¹⁹ In Sapienza's representation, the locus of such founding narration is precisely a scene of resonant communication, in which each person is at the same time unique and able to put such uniqueness in relationship with the other. This exchange of personal stories between the two girls allows Goliarda to acquire a sense of herself, outside any identification with external models (either her mother or Jean Gabin) and irrespective of any *dover essere*.

It is significant that both in *Lettera aperta* and in *Io, Jean Gabin* Sapienza carves out the space for minor scenes where she gives voice to the representation of a conception of identity and human relationships alternative to the one dominant in the rest of the texts. Even more interesting is that these 'islands of communication' take place with other female characters, for which the protagonist develops feelings which border on homosexual desire. In *Io, Jean Gabin*, differently from the rest of the novel, the love for Jean does not pass by the identification with Jean Gabin but conversely, as we have seen, sanctions the protagonist's access to her own story and sense of the self.

Thus, two different representations of homosexuality are present in the novel, one deriving from the protagonist's application of a male perspective on women, which indirectly replicates a heterosexual dynamic, and the other one which appears to have its roots in the character's unmediated desires, free from what Ross defined 'her self-conscious construction of gender identity based on imitating the performances of

¹⁹ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 56.

others'.²⁰ While the first modality is exalted by the protagonist in her bold identification with Jean Gabin, the second possibility is denied to her, in *Lettera aperta* by Maria's slaps, in *Io, Jean Gabin* by the character's anticipation of Jean's refusal: 'Potrei prenderla fra le braccia ma sarebbe un atto troppo carnale, lei non si aspetta questo, Gabin non l'avrebbe fatto. Da qualsiasi amore sei posseduto devi scrutare l'altro, sapere quello che la sua natura vuole, rispettarlo' (JG, p. 68). In this passage, Goliarda's reasoning expressed in the second person suggests the idea of an internalised ban rather than the actual protagonist's will, so that her physical desire for Jean is at the same time uttered and blocked. The character of Jean is present also in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, under a slightly different name, Jane. Whereas in *Io, Jean Gabin* the name 'Jean' overlaps with Gabin's name, in *Il filo di mezzogiorno* Sapienza plays on the correlation between 'Jane' and 'Giovanna', the nurse who was assisting her during her recovery, and associates the two figures as they both take care of her: 'è giusto così, Giovanna Jane... E quegli occhi che mi guardavano, come Jane mi aveva guardata erano occhi di madre, di sorella, di amica' (FM, p. 183). In *Il filo di mezzogiorno* there is also a scene in which the relationship with Jane appears to be charged with a sexual connotation:

...gli alleati bombardavano Anzio... nella notte lei passava nel mio letto, chiudevamo i lenzuoli neri di polvere e ragnatele che separavano letto per letto... [...] studiavamo...
 'What is this?'
 'This is a flower'
 'Do you know the name of this flower?'
 'Yes, its name is geranium'
 'Come si sente forte il rumore delle bombe questa notte... presto saranno qui... And, do you like this flower?'
 'Yes, I like it very much, but I prefer...' ²¹

²⁰ *Eccentric interruptions*, p. 12.

²¹ FM, pp. 132-3.

The therapist does indeed read the relationship in this direction, defining Jane ‘morbosa’, but the narrator denies that there was a sexual dimension and adds (in contradiction with *Io, Jean Gabin*), that she enjoyed Jane’s physical detachment. (FM, p. 138). The relationship with Jane / Jean, then, confirms the narrative of an ‘interruption’ of homosexual desire pointed out by Ross. While the text boldly exhibits a form of external homosexuality, connected to the protagonist’s instrumental adoption of a male identity, Sapienza includes a little episode that appears to be more problematic for a binary and heteronormative system, but again this possibility is only suggested and not further explored.

3.1.5 In Male Shoes: Freedom and Constraints

Goliarda’s identification with the male gender, as we have seen, originates as a response to the limits imposed on women and the widespread misogyny in her social context. With her uncle Giovanni she puts aside conversations about family anecdotes, deemed to be feminine, and just entertains ‘rapporti da uomo a uomo, che è come dire d’affari’ (JG, p. 26), thus stating the pertinence of money to a male domain and her access to it. She happily accepts the definition of ‘maschiaccio’ and enjoys the sense of freedom coming with the performance of a male role:

- È vero, Nino, che non s’addice a una signorina quel galoppo continuo con tutte le gambe di fuori?
- [...]
- Ti pare una signorina? Un maschiaccio!
- E io, sbrigativa per tagliare quel ritornello che a loro sembra intensamente offensivo ma che a me fa ridere, semplicemente ridere:
- Signorine siete voi due! Dove andate a mostrare le vostre grazie verginali?²²

²² JG, pp. 19-20.

The little girl's self-representation as a boy even shapes the perception of her own body, of which she 'emphasizes the "masculinity"',²³ characterising it as strong, with big shoulders, long and firm arms, fit muscles and rapid pace (JG, p. 17; p. 63).

Although presented as a liberating and joyful strategy, the adoption of a male identity is actually more troubled than the protagonist wants to believe. For example, the rejection of female identity is represented through Goliarda's physically cold and scared response to the prospect of becoming an adult woman and fulfilling the procreative role, for which she feels that her body is inadequate:

Davanti a un mare bianco d'inverno che torceva il suo corpo fra gli artigli di lava seppi la storia più incredibile della mia biologia di bambina... un sangue a volte doloroso ma necessario per la perpetuazione della specie striava le nuvole al limite estremo del mare, dove il mio corpo del futuro – chi poteva immaginarlo? – possente e delicato, così diceva Ivanoe, sarebbe divenuto, come quello di nostra madre, la fonte, culla, matrice di tante vite belle e forti se avessi voluto.

– Sì, sì, – ripetevo presa dal freddo del vento che s'era alzato potente e gelido intorno a noi alla notizia di questo nuovo compito che attendeva il mio corpo. – Sì, certo, ma a parte che non so come sia possibile, sono così magra!²⁴

The setting of this dialogue with Ivanoe by the sea, which throughout the whole novel is assumed overtly as an image representing women, offers the narrator the possibility to express the protagonist's uneasiness through a highly metaphoric density. It is important to note that, unlike *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, which make wide use of metaphors, this is one of the few occasions in *Io, Jean Gabin* where the narrator distorts the linearity of sentence referentiality, thus reconnecting this passage to the knots of anxiety dominating previous works.

We have seen how men's violence is only superficially exorcised and a small but significant reference to its constant threat surfaces anyway. Similarly, as in *Lettera*

²³ *Eccentric interruptions*, p. 9.

²⁴ JG, p. 34.

aperta menstruation appears here to be at the core of the little girl's troubled relationship with her own body. Menstruation indeed marks the passage from childhood, a stage of life when she is left free to interpret her gender as she likes, to being a woman, strictly constrained in her social role. The passage cited above suggests that the protagonist's rejection of the role of woman is not as plain as she describes it and indeed turns into refusal to grow up, in the impossible hope to dominate biological development to escape an imposed destiny of submission: 'Ma io ormai ho deciso [...]: farò in modo di non diventare mai grande, così non avrò bisogno dei loro consigli e non mi sposerò mai!' (JG, p. 24). Although the child claims a joyful assumption of a male role, the narrator disseminates the text with clues hinting at a much more troubled context regarding the connection between biological sex, gender identity and gender role.

Having analysed the main elements that delineate the formation of gender identity in *Io, Jean Gabin*, I can proceed to its definition, in dialogue with Ross's interpretation of Goliarda's adoption of a male identity:

Here masculinity is seen as a powerful and liberating identity that she can assume independently of her sex, and redefine, thereby reshaping her body in her desired image. Ultimately, Sapienza's is a masculinity without maleness that denaturalises and reveals masculinity as a construction, challenging the assumption that biological sex inevitably leads to a predestined gender identity (Halberstam 1998). Gendered behaviour and biology are linked, but queerly.²⁵

While I overall agree with Ross's considerations on Sapienza's deconstruction of gender essentialism, the liberating feature attached to the protagonist's masculinity is quite nuanced and complex and is therefore worth further qualification. First, the little girl's freedom to adopt a male behaviour does in fact disconnect biological sex and gender

²⁵ *Eccentric interruptions*, p. 10.

identity, showing such a connection as a social construct. Yet, albeit dismantled on a theoretical level, this construct exists in practice, as a result of social imposition, and *Io, Jean Gabin*, in continuity with Sapienza's previous works, provides an articulated representation of the relationship between social norms and personal freedom. Indeed, the protagonist's transgression of gender identity is allowed in childhood but not outside its boundaries, so that Goliarda has to reject adulthood in order to refuse to play the gender role superimposed on her biological sex by social norms. The sense of freedom deriving from the adoption of a male identity can be enjoyed only by isolating it from its future development.

The second point concerns the protagonist's freedom to choose her gender identity 'independently of her sex'. This is a highly problematic issue, since not only is the adoption of a male identity limited to childhood, it is also, and perhaps more importantly, embedded in a hierarchical organisation of the sexes. The little girl assumes a male identity precisely because this allows her to escape the constraints of being a woman, not independently from it. Even in the rejection of female identity, the choice is not 'independent' from the biological sex but originates as a strategic response to it. In other words, rather than the whole construct of identity of a man the protagonist aspires to the benefits associated to belonging to the category, as made evident in the representation of the patriarchal and misogynist confinement of women into a passive role.

Finally, the definition of 'maleness without male', which points at the 'queer' link between sex and gender, are again theoretically appropriate but, in my view, fail to capture an important aspect of the protagonist's position with respect to the performance of gender. In fact, Goliarda's interpretation of a male role is not the expression of her

personal identity but rather a straightforward replication of male gender stereotypes. She is not creatively interpreting a personal identity that disrupts binary categories with its transgressive hybridism and fluidity, but is playing a pre-existing role, the very traditional role of a man in a patriarchal society. By incorporating the male construct, the protagonist, rather than constructing the freedom to be herself, ultimately achieves a staged freedom. Let us consider this last point further.

3.1.6 Weakness and Strength in the Canon of Virility

In the polar distribution of features between the genders articulated by Sapienza, the male role comprises the notions of freedom, strength and independence, set against constrictions, weakness and dependence associated with the female sphere. Thanks to the imitation of a male stereotype the little girl accesses a position from which she is allowed to be active, to express herself freely, but at the same time such a freedom to be herself is built upon the negation of what she is, i.e. female, with far reaching consequences for the articulation of her own identity.

We have seen an example of this active vitality in the protagonist's run downstairs in her building, which earns her the label of 'maschiaccio' by the Brunos; similarly, in the first part of the novel there recur terms referring to action and energy: 'Sola, bilanciandomi su passi brevi ed energici sprizzanti coraggio altezzoso, adattavo i miei piccoli piedi alla camminata piena d'autosufficienza virile di Jean Gabin'; 'Con mossa energica m'infilai un maglione [...] mi precipitai fuori dal mio covo per agire' (JG, p. 3; p. 10). However, the expression of vitality is built upon the character's explicit intention to mark a distance from weakness, described as pertaining to female behaviour. The insertion of sentences about female weakness and emotionality as the counterpart of

male strength causes the expression of vitality to undergo a subtle but crucial shift in meaning. Vital action appears to be the result of an effort, on the protagonist's side, to discard her own emotions, needs and weaknesses and play the role of the 'tough guy', rather than giving vent to uncontrollable vital energy.

Per poco non mi prendo a schiaffi, nello specchio, nel vedere lagrime che a mia insaputa se ne vanno in giro per le mie gote rivelando a tutti la mia impotenza [...] reazione questa da signorinella scema, e con uno scatto riassetto il mio equilibrio, per un attimo perduto, sul cardine sicuro dell'orgoglio sprezzante.²⁶

Here, what is uncontrollable is not a vitality that would require the freedom of a male role, but the tears 'da signorinella scema'. In this respect, the protagonist of *Io, Jean Gabin* is amazingly ambiguous, as she constantly oscillates between the bold and joyful attitude of the tough *carusa*, overall active and energetic, able to overcome her own momentary weaknesses, and a fragile little girl who struggles to hide her own vulnerability, because 'boys don't cry'. In one scene in particular the self-imposition of a strong attitude emerges as belonging to a male construct, in sharp contrast with the character's own instincts.

Maledetto sia il momento che crescendo (dolore dell'uomo crescere) fui scaraventata giù nel pavimento a guadagnarli il pane col sudore della mia fronte... Non avevo ancora realizzato quanto grande era la sventura di reggersi sulle proprie gambe che una marea di voci dure, dinieghi, occhiatacce e chi più ne ha più ne metta m'impalarono col culo al pavimento, decisa nel mio piccolo intimo (non credete che anche i piccoli hanno un intimo?) a non muovermi più per l'eternità. [...]

Il pavimento come una voragine precipita sotto i miei piedi [...]. Io fatico come un mulo e loro ridono... maschiacci, si sa. Ma questa è acqua passata, non è da 'ommini' sguazzare nelle sofferenze e ormai sono in grado, appena aperti gli occhi, di balzare dal letto e sussurrando a me stessa: 'Piccole insulse traversie di picciriddi', accantonare i pensieri fastidiosi, con gambe salde andare su e giù per la mia soffitta e fronteggiare il presente.²⁷

²⁶ JG, p. 17.

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 61-2.

I quote the passage almost in its full length because it comprises the core elements involved in the connection between the character's instincts, her relationship with the others and normative gender constructs. Contrarily to other parts of the text, this primary scene of the experience of walking is marked by the protagonist's lack of vital drive, as she is forced and directed in her movements by her brothers rather than seconded in her wishes. From the outset, action is not the expression of the character's impulse but the result of an external demand, which originates what Winnicott defined 'False Self', set against the 'True Self' rooted in the desiring matter of the body: 'The True Self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues and the working of body functions, including the heart's action and breathing [...] and is, at the beginning, essentially not reactive to external stimuli, but primary.'²⁸

The external imposition of action takes place in the context of the brother's attitude perceived by the child as hostile and normative. In understanding the conditioning exerted by Goliarda's brothers and her reaction I can turn again to Miller's description of the child's adaptation to adults' norms, originated by his/her need for love and care and resulting in the repression of the child's own emotions and desires. Exposed to the power exerted on him/her by adults, the child attempts to disregard his/her own weakness and endeavours to comply with the self-control required of him/her:

Contempt is the weapon of the weak and a defense against one's own despised and unwanted feelings. And the fountainhead of all contempt, all discrimination, is the more or less conscious, uncontrolled and secret exercise of power over the child by the adult.²⁹

²⁸ *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, p. 148.

²⁹ Miller, p. 90.

According to Miller, the repression and contempt for emotions and weakness affects girls more severely than boys, a view endorsed by Gianini Belotti in her analysis of the social construction of gender identities in the upbringing of children, carried out in Italy in the late 60s – early 70s.³⁰ Gianini Belotti characterises the formative process of young girls as the inculcation of a sense of inferiority with respect to the male population, coupled with a re-channelling of vitality from self-expression to performance of a duty of self-sacrifice and care, which culminates into repression of vitality when a girl displays stronger resistance.

Boys' adaptation to their gender role would be less problematic as they are expected and therefore encouraged to express themselves freely: 'È più semplice spingere un individuo verso il proprio sviluppo che reprimere l'impulso all'autorealizzazione presente in tutti gli individui a prescindere dal sesso.'³¹ However, this applies only partially to the relationship between gender and vitality represented by Sapienza in the scene of the little girl learning to walk. There is indeed contempt for weakness and emotions, deemed to be feminine, but Goliarda reacts to it by forcing herself into a strong and active position, the one belonging to the *ommini* and *maschiacci*, which remains nonetheless the result of a process of discipline instead of self-expression.

This scene therefore questions the naturalness of *any* behavioural model that conditions action and represses emotions and weakness, including the male model. As Gianini Belotti herself concedes, boys' upbringing too is conditioned and constrained by its insertion in the binary gender system: 'Nessuno può dire quante energie, quante qualità vadano distrutte nel processo di immissione forzata dei bambini d'ambo i sessi

³⁰ Elena Gianini Belotti, *Dalla parte delle bambine* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1973).

³¹ Gianini Belotti, p. 24.

negli schemi maschile-femminile così come sono concepiti dalla nostra cultura.’³² Reflecting on the formation of the male gender role, Ciccone posits that the upbringing of boys entails a type of repression at least equally damaging to the one undergone by girls, inasmuch as it is founded on the detachment from emotions and weakness. The canon of virility, in other words, is constructed on the negation of parts of the self and therefore results in a subject split between his/her body and his/her rationality, between instincts and control. Borrowing Ciccone’s words, the ‘canone della virilità’ prescribes ‘un’identità maschile fondata *contro la corporeità*: sulla capacità di dominare il proprio corpo, i suoi istinti, le sue emozioni’.³³ What male and female constructs have in common, in a society where genders are hierarchically organised, is the contempt for weakness and emotions, which results for women in self-contempt and for men in separation from components of their own self and in contempt for femininity.

In *Io, Jean Gabin* Goliarda, by attempting to overcome her own weakness, resorts to a virility attitude which is ultimately equally constructed on repression. However, while stressing the elements of constraints and power, at the same time it is not productive to force the interpretation of the text rigidly separating a true from a false self, as both coexist in the child protagonist, in an alternation and blend of weakness and strength that constitutes one of the dominant traits of Sapienza’s narrative. Indeed, at the end of the scene cited above, Goliarda has learnt to walk and enjoys the freedom of action achieved thanks to it. This being said, overall the character’s weak side and the instrumentality of the male role seem to prevail, even though they are possibly not the most evident. The text devotes great attention to the character’s emotional domain, which from all directions reveals the adoption of strength and active action as

³² Gianini Belotti, p. 9.

³³ Ciccone, p. 61; p. 99.

constraining rather than expressing the little girl's desires. Only on one occasion is the expression of vital action associated with free enjoyment and not to an effort: 'Io volo per le strade felice, certo non sono le cinque lire che avevo, ma è qualcosa. La strada! La strada apre tutte le occasioni e le avventure!' (JG, p. 21). Significantly, this energetic happiness does not pass through the mediation of the virile role.

In conclusion, the little protagonist's adoption of a male role, with its emphatic masculinity, confirms rather than challenges the attribution of independence and agency to the male gender. Hence, it constitutes a transgression that does not affect the patriarchal structure of gender dualism, but represents an indication of its constraints. Not only is that transgression dictated by the need to access agency and independence in a patriarchal system and is temporally limited to childhood, as we have seen; it also remains confined within the binary and heteronormative structure of the patriarchal symbolic system. In other words, the little girl who identifies herself as a boy does undoubtedly break the alleged naturalness of the connection between biological sex and gender identity, but by simply incorporating a standardized male identity she does not threaten the overall system.³⁴

Seen from this perspective, then, the contradiction between the condemnation of women's adoption of male features pointed out in the incipit of the novel, and Goliarda's own behaviour, appears to be all internal to the patriarchal perspective. Arguably both options – to stick to women's traditional roles or to impersonate a male role – fall within a traditional binary system of gender; in both cases, women are not allowed a space of autonomous expression. If they adopt a male role, they efface

³⁴ On the concept of different types of transgression – transgression of role and transgression of symbolic structure – in female homosexuality, see Nerina Milletti, 'Donne "fuori della norma"', in Milletti and Passerini (eds.), *Fuori della norma. Storie lesbiche nell'Italia della prima metà del Novecento* (Turin: Rosenberg&Seller, 2011), pp. 21-41.

themselves as women; if they do not replicate male constructs, they are confined in a role characterised by complementarity and passivity towards men's actions. The dilemma which tormented the protagonist of *Lettera aperta* is not solved in *Io, Jean Gabin*, as no real alternative of independence is envisaged for women, but set aside in order to enjoy the provisional and precarious freedom deriving from the adoption of a male role. The problem of women's autonomy does not find in *Io, Jean Gabin* a solution, but is uttered in its contradictions and impasses, although with parody and irony. The only truly transgressive experience on a structural level is the relationship with Jean, and it is extremely significant that this is attached to the protagonist's discovery of her own personal identity, but as we have seen it is blocked by Goliarda before it develops.

3.2. Body and *dover essere*

3.2.1 The body as Limit and Source of Identity

The notions of staged freedom, constrained identity and imitation of a heteronomous model indirectly point at their opposite, namely the existence of agency and personal expression. What is at work in *Io, Jean Gabin* is the exposition of the conflict between different layers or instances of the character's identity, some of which are represented as belonging to a sphere closer to the character's inner instincts. More specifically, bodily impulses, emotions and need for love occupy the centre of the character's self, which is constantly mobilised by its own fluidity and instability on a first level and, on a second level, by its constitutive interaction with others, in a representation of identity which

recalls the ‘concezione materialistica, dinamica, vitalistica e postumanistica del soggetto’ theorised by Braidotti.³⁵

The body performs a twofold function: first, it undermines the achievement of a crystallised identity deriving from the adherence to heteronomous constructs (to which playing the role of the tough male belongs). While the dimension of rational will seeks to establish a fixed and stable identity, the corporeal dimension, with its drives and desires, constantly mobilizes identity. At the same time, the body is also an irreducible material ground, which works as a limit to the deconstruction of identity and a source of vital impulses. The ontology of the body prevents identity from utterly dissolving by anchoring it to its driving centre and situated locus of primary interaction with the world. Sapienza uses narrative as a means to achieve a renewed contact with that foundation, traversing and deconstructing oppressive layers of identity. Differently from a phenomenological reduction or *epoché*, however, this operation is never fully achievable, and the tension towards the reconstruction of a bodily and instinctual dimension runs in parallel with the story of its obfuscation and modification through time.

As we have seen, in *Io, Jean Gabin* gender constructs constitute one fundamental way of determining identity. For the protagonist, the incorporation of a heteronomous model within the context of power unbalance between men and women cannot be considered fully autonomous. To say this does not invalidate the outcome of a liberating effect for the protagonist, but defines its limits exposed in the text itself. In other words, I am not arguing theoretically against the possibilities of liberation incidental to the access to a male role, but rather pointing out the limits of this operation as specifically

³⁵ Alessia Ronchetti, ‘Postmodernismo e pensiero italiano della differenza sessuale’, in Antonello and Mussgnug, pp. 99-119 (p. 112).

represented in Sapienza's work. A close textual analysis indeed evidenced the permanence, in the adoption of a male role, of the character's subjection to a normative stereotype, which does not only shape but also constraints her own identity. The adhesion to the male stereotype – chosen as a response to the restrictions of the female model, carried out without a creative reinterpretation and limited to childhood – constitutes what I called a 'staged freedom' at times in overt disconnection from the protagonist's own desires.

While in order to be free to be herself the protagonist needs to be something she is not, she is constantly attracted to the opposite operation, consisting in indulging in passivity towards her own emotions and abandonment to free enjoyment of the present. Similarly to what *L'arte della gioia* realises on a wider scale, *Io, Jean Gabin* displays a conflictual succession of vitalistic impulses and voluntaristic actions, uncontrolled emotions and detached rationality. The bodily foundation of identity is alternately uttered and repressed, searched for and silenced. In parallel, her relationship with the other characters is deeply conflicting, crossed by a struggle for autonomy on the one hand and emotional dependence on the other.

We have seen these conflicts at work in *Lettera aperta*, describing the multiple feature of the protagonist's self and its character of 'child entertainer', which constrains her freedom to construct her own identity and limits the possibility of an authentic relationship with others and society. It is in the difficult dialogue between personal instincts and the others, marked by power unbalances and normative identity constructs, that the protagonist's split and alienation originate. In *Io, Jean Gabin* too the exposition of the constrictions undergone by the protagonist goes along with the opening of spaces of access to her own instinctual domain. The text gives voice to a search for rooting the

self in a corporeal dimension that constitutes the fundamental horizon of construction of freedom in Sapienza's narrative.

3.2.2 Food, Sleep and Love

Through the articulation of the character's perceptive and emotional world, the narrator approaches the expression of that bodily foundation of the self which is to be reconstructed beyond staged identities. Where do these constrained identities originate from and how are they represented? What kind of relationship exists between the character's emotional world and the other characters? As I have anticipated, there is in the text a continuous alternation of emotions and control, which destabilises the connection between strength, action and self-expression. Indeed, strength and action are often represented as the result of an effort rather than a primary impulse, to the point that action can be described as functional to dominate deeper fragilities: 'L'azione calma l'ansia e la paura, si sa' (JG, p. 32). Moreover, the narrator connects the need for action to a family pressure, thus marking its heteronomous feature. Even playing and daydreaming, which the child should be able to enjoy outside any concern for purposes, are connected to a duty: 'A casa mia avevano sempre tutti tanto da fare. Così tanto che *eri costretta* anche tu a inventarti cento cose da trafficare, sbrigare, leggere, giocare, perché anche giocare e fantasticare a casa mia era considerato un "fare"' (p. 13. My emphasis).

The duty of action can be set against a series of images of passivity, where the narrator, remembering her early childhood, conceptualises her body as an object lifted and carried by other people who take care of her. The memory is pleasant and associated with a sense of strength and protection: 'ero così piccola che mi ricordo del mio corpo

come di un pacco trasportato da grandi braccia nell'aria e posato in posti precisi dove restava passivo in attesa che altre braccia venissero a rimuoverlo' (JG, p. 36); 'Le sue braccia erano così sicure nel trasportarmi da una stanza all'altra che mi ci sentivo come in una culla e così dall'alto tutto mi sembrava possibile e non avevo più paura di nulla, nemmeno del mare, anche se era un po' mosso' (p. 60). These passages point at a dimension of the self that resists the accomplishment of a task and the exertion of imposed control.

Likewise, syntactical constructions where emotions and physical instincts occupy the position of agents affecting the character abound throughout the text: 'Il silenzio complice si fa così intenso che mi spuntano le lacrime dalla gioia' (JG, p. 31); 'La storia rifluì nella mia mente per poi diramarsi in cento brividi di terrore lungo i torrenti vorticosi delle vene' (p. 39); 'Un'eco di allegrezza mi scorre nelle giunture' (p. 30); 'Il desiderio di burro e marmellata conditi dalle ciance del mio fratellone mi vince completamente' (p. 37). As can be noted from these examples, the biological functions of eating and sleeping, with their correlate references to hunger and tiredness, stand in a prominent position. Food and sleep indeed partition the narration and weave a complex relationship with the character's self-imposed discipline.

Significantly, food and sleep are often present in scenes which see the little girl in a state of harmony with members of her family, her siblings in particular. As concerns sleep, for example, she suddenly falls asleep after her brothers Carlo and Arminio come back from the police station where they had been brought and beaten up by fascists. She also completely relaxes and almost falls asleep when her sister Licia chooses her company and cuddles her at a house party: 'Una vampa d'orgoglio mi stravolge talmente che tutta la fatica del giorno mi cade addosso e quasi ho voglia di dormire lì

abbracciata a lei' (JG, p. 55). Food too is linked to harmony and love with her siblings in a number of scenes. For instance, Sapienza describes a moment of perfect happiness when cooking fried polenta in the kitchen with Ivanoe, and an equally joyful breakfast with Carlo after he trains her to box.³⁶ On this occasion, though, Sapienza also voices a conflict between will and desires, between duty of action and enjoyment of pleasures:

Ma non ce la faccio a dire di no a Carlo quando ride sotto i baffetti neri e mi solleva da terra facendomi volare. Non ce la faccio a 'volere proprio'. Dev'essere questa la mia contraddizione intima.

– Pensa, carusa, come sarà dolce la colazione dopo questo po' po' di fatica.

Il desiderio di burro e marmellata conditi dalle ciance del mio fratellone mi vince completamente.³⁷

In the context of Goliarda's highly split self, the impulses of hunger and sleep are represented as pertaining to a sphere of the protagonist's self characterised by naturalness, enjoyment and truthfulness. Conversely, the insertion of the expression *volere proprio* between quote commas suggests its feature of acquired ethical norm. Indeed, Sapienza's narrative knows only few moments of rest and adherence to a simple present, as the enjoyment is constantly troubled by the character's will to accomplish a task, consisting here in the endeavour to find money and to be socially useful. *Io, Jean Gabin* displays a proper war between will and temptations to abandonment to pleasures, alternating enjoyment of the present and projection towards the accomplishment of a *dover essere*.

Io non sono carusa che quando s'è messa uno scopo in testa ceda alla fame o al sonno prima di averlo raggiunto, questo scopo, per dio Ulisse! Io sono così, decisa e senza mollezze, ma nondimeno spero proprio che ci sia qualcosa da mettere sotto i denti.

³⁶ A similar description of happiness involves Tina: 'Ragazzi, fu magnifico! Da Tina si dormiva su materassi di crine fresco in un silenzio così completo che solo la sazietà era capace di svegliarci. In quel piccolo dado bianco di calce sperduto nel verde degli aranci si mangiava all'ombra della pergola fichi freschi, ulive e miele', JG, p. 105.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 37.

Quanto tempo si spreca a sfamarsi! Non c'è volta che, intenta a qualcosa di superiore, questa maledetta necessità non venga a distrarti.³⁸

We will see later how the satisfaction of pleasures and desires is also represented as an individualistic drive set against the duty of altruistic egalitarian struggle. For now, it is important to stress the characterisation of inner instincts as physical drives and their conflictual relationship with will and self-determination. In this respect, *Io, Jean Gabin* provides an effective representation of a live debate between will and desires, a struggle which is at the same time *for* and *against* instincts. While the character attempts to limit her instincts in order to accomplish a *dover essere*, through writing the narrator reconstructs a space for the expression of those instincts behind the layers of falsifying identities consolidated in time. The contrast could not be any clearer, and much of the dynamism, contradictions and instability of Sapienza's narrative is rooted in it:

Era questa forse la mia contraddizione? Sapere perfettamente quello che mi abbisognava, avere deciso una linea d'azione e nello stesso tempo lasciare che tutto andasse in malora per qualche morso della fame o per una visita dei fascisti?

Decisamente non solo sono piena di contraddizioni ma non ho un briciolo di volontà, se soltanto l'idea di passare una mattinata a leggere o canticchiare con Arminio mi sembra qualcosa di paradisiaco.

Ecco un altro difetto imperdonabile per un condottiero, un uomo di scienza, un ricercatore: perdere tempo a ciondolarsi senza meta.³⁹

3.2.3 Emotional Dependence and Misunderstandings

I discussed the protagonist's adoption of a male role with respect to its features of strength and activity; I then moved on to identify the elements of the representation of the little girl that appear to be rooted in her primary instinctual and bodily domain. I can

³⁸ JG, p. 29; p. 71.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 35; pp. 37-8; p. 43.

now put these elements together in order to answer the question of where the duty to accomplish a task, the need for a self-imposed discipline and the contrast between instincts and will originate.

Similarly to *Lettera aperta*, also in *Io, Jean Gabin* Sapienza represents a protagonist painfully seeking love and attention from her family and from her mother in particular. In *Lettera aperta* the initiation to a *dover essere* is carried out in relation to Maria and takes the shape of Goliarda's endeavour to become her mother's mother. At the beginning of *Io, Jean Gabin* a dialogue between the little girl and Maria sets up the protagonist's task to find some money and repair the aggression to Concetta.

Within the analogy in the structure, an important evolution takes place from the first autobiographical works to *Io, Jean Gabin*. In *Lettera aperta*, the tasks to which the protagonist felt called were in mutual conflict and overall too demanding with respect to her resources as a little girl. This resulted in her utter inadequacy to cope even with the simplest aspects of life and was expressed through a narrative deeply crossed by pain. Conversely, in *Io, Jean Gabin* the duty to find some money is much more specific and achievable for the little girl. Rather than paralysing her with its overwhelming difficulty, the task to find some money triggers her vital and happy wandering through the *casbah* (even though this vitality must be interpreted within the limits outlined above). From *Lettera aperta* to *Io, Jean Gabin* there is thus a significant evolution, noted also by Andriago, according to whom the protagonist 'appare qui molto più forte e consapevole di sé rispetto alle prime autobiografie'.⁴⁰

In the context of an improved balance of resources available to the protagonist to master her own identity, she is however still represented in a position of severe

⁴⁰ Andriago, p. 126.

emotional dependence on her family. Starting from her relationship with Maria, distant and cold, the little girl fights against her own need for affection, which is felt as a major threat to her will and action:

Una furia infernale contro il mio lato amorevole ‘troppo dipendente’, come diceva Arminio, aggiungendo – che vergogna! – ‘morbosamente dipendente!’, mi prese a tal punto da costringermi a dare calci e pugni nell’aria contro non so chi. [...]
 – Non sarò mai un guerriero, zio!
 – e com’è ‘sto fatto?
 – troppo dipendente affettivamente.⁴¹

There is a real tension between Goliarda’s own self-expression and her relationship with the others, whenever this is not available in the form of shared happiness, like in the cases analysed above, but rather marked by need and asymmetry. Behind the little girl’s emphasis on her will to be independent, she suffers from feeling neglected by her family and from the constrictions brought about by such a state of emotional dependence.

Discussing the protagonist’s accomplishment of a task in *Lettera aperta*, we have seen how Miller and Winnicott describe the formation of a False Self through the process of adjustment to parental expectations. In *Io, Jean Gabin* the task is established and achievable, yet the fundamental dynamic shaping the relationship between the protagonist and her family members is the same. Miller’s illustration of different strategies of coping with the need for love and its potential distorting effects on the self also provides useful insights to analyse the entangle of emotional dependence and quest for freedom in *Io, Jean Gabin*. In particular, the character’s attitude finds some direct correspondences in Miller’s description of the ‘reversal’ strategy: ‘I am breaking down under the constant responsibility because the others need me ceaselessly.’⁴² Through the reversal strategy, the suffering deriving from dependence on others’ love is turned into

⁴¹ JG, pp. 41-2.

⁴² Miller, p. 27.

impatience towards their request for attention. In *Io, Jean Gabin* this mechanism is present in different nuances. For example, the protagonist consciously experiences her own need for love as limiting her independence, as in the excerpt cited above. However, in the same dialogue with uncle Nunzio she also pictures a reversed situation in which she must escape from her family's need for her. Significantly, the effort to be independent is described in terms recalling the strong male construct, while the heroic projection is so grandiose that it creates an ironic rather than painful contrast.

Lui [Ulysses] aveva la volontà di non curarsi della moglie, dei figli e solo al suo scopo pensava, ai suoi viaggi, la sua conoscenza... Io basta che Carlo o Arminio o Licia mi facciano un cenno, corro appresso a loro come una mentecatta qualsiasi. [...] Tutti contro di me. Tutti a chiamarmi, a volermi... Ma anche Ulisse era voluto da tutti eppure ce la faceva sempre a ripartire. Ecco qual era il punto! Era il destino greco che ti sottoponeva a quelle prove mandandoti tante richieste d'affetto e questo proprio per metterti alla prova, insomma per vedere se eri valente o solo una mezza tacca tutta intenzioni e parole ma senza sostanza.⁴³

In another scene Goliarda, after learning that Tina is about to leave, goes through a rapid succession of feelings and degrees of self-consciousness, alternating need and impatience, ultimately uncovering the fictional feature of the others' pressuring need, constructed through the reversal strategy. Indeed, she wriggles away from Tina's hug, who is subsequently revealed as actually ('in verità') not holding her back and absorbed in thought.

– Eh, Tina, sono proprio disperata!

– Perché me ne vado, picciridda?!

Lo dice con tanta ansia d'una conferma che non mi sento di deluderla. Jean non lo farebbe mai, di deludere una donna fragile indifesa. [...]

– Eh sì, mi spiace che parti.

Avevo intenzione di dire una *bugia* ma, complessità della natura umana!, nel dirla capisco che è *vero*, mi dispiace e in un batter d'occhio, proprio come al cinema, mi trovo abbracciata alle sue spalle immense – sembrano cuscini, oh! – a singhiozzare e, cosa veramente vergognosa, a implorarla di non partire. [...]

⁴³ JG, pp. 42-3.

Meglio prenderla a ridere, eh Jean!, allontanando le braccia di tutte queste donne – una folla, Jean – che ti braccano, ti vogliono, ti allacciano con mille carezze e graffi. Allontanando le braccia paffute di Tina che *in verità* in quel momento se ne stava quieta a fissare la finestra [...].⁴⁴

Emotional dependence causes the protagonist to experience the relationship with members of her family as deeply conflicting with her inner instincts. Self-repression and inauthentic communication are the price for obtaining love, a relational trouble which marks many of Sapienza's pages, as I discussed with respect to the 'child entertainer' in *Lettera aperta*. Compared to the previous autobiographical texts, the narrator represents a character much more aware of her own feelings and emotions, which are nonetheless put aside or misunderstood by her family.

In the dialogue between Goliarda and Maria which opens *Io, Jean Gabin*, we have an explicit account of this combination of need for love and impossible communication. While Maria is reproaching Goliarda, the little girl wants to manifest her mother the love she feels for her, but she perceives that this contact is forbidden to her and avoids expressing it 'serrando le braccia al torace per non fare gesti incauti' (JG, p. 12). Maria, who notices Goliarda's gesture, misinterprets its meaning: 'Perché taci, cara? [...] Non rispondi? O forse stai male con lo stomaco che ti stringi così le mani al pancino?' (p. 12). This is the first of many occasions in which Goliarda is not understood by her family members. For example, when she weeps out of joy for the 'silenzio complice' in the kitchen with Ivanoe, he takes it for a worried cry (p. 31). More dramatically, when she bursts into tears during the house party because she is thinking about the inequality between wealthy and poor people, everybody congratulates her for being such an impressive actress: '– una vera attrice, un tempo incredibile... il volto ispirato, le mani che continuano ad applaudire mentre lacrime e singhiozzi... – Ma io soffrivo veramente!

⁴⁴ JG, pp. 74-5. My emphasis.

– osai scioccamente replicare.’ (p. 59). This scene closely recalls the episode of the bulletin of Goliarda’s cries in *Lettera aperta*, where her repeated weeping, faked in order to attract attention and recorded by her family, was set against her real crying out of fear of losing her family’s attention, which conversely went unnoticed.

In general, even though in *Io, Jean Gabin* the narrative tone is much more joyful and light than in the previous autobiographical works, references to self-repression and interrupted communication are overt.⁴⁵ The problem of being misunderstood affects not only the protagonist but also explicitly the adult narrating voice, in one of its very few appearances in the text: ‘La consapevolezza di non essere capiti è un tranello mortale per sé e per gli altri. Anch’io forse caddi in quel tranello... Fermati Goliarda, non ascoltare il tuo futuro che s’apre come una fossa di fangose bugie tue e degli altri’ (JG, p. 81).

3.3 Goliarda’s Positioning in Society

Goliarda’s troubled relationship with her family has a parallel in her attitude towards society, characterised by a proud statement of personal difference. I come here to the second pole of the protagonist’s identification with Jean Gabin, the solitary hero. On top of signifying a male identity, the French actor represents an individualistic and anarchist perspective, set against egalitarian commitment, as well as romantic imagination, opposed to mass conformism.

⁴⁵ See also: ‘Ricacciando tutti i rimorsi per la mia causa lasciata in sospeso in un saccone buio dentro di me, dove puoi fare finta di non averli, i rimorsi, passo vertiginosamente, proprio come al cinema da una scena all’altra, nella stanza magnifica di Arminio’, JG, p. 38; ‘Come sempre quando a casa mia si faceva baldoria, qualsiasi cruccio mi potesse tormentare svaniva talmente al vociare gioioso accompagnato spesso da qualche strumento – come ora – che quasi mi faceva rabbia’, p. 53.

The explicitly political problem of the protagonist's collocation in society from a class point of view, already relevant in *Lettera aperta*, comes to the foreground in *Io, Jean Gabin*, coupled with the economic dimension of life. Here Sapienza discusses a matter which closely concerns her as a writer, namely the particular position of the artist in society. Compared to previous texts the narrator speaks here from a more defined position, as she shows to have assumed the identity of artist and the political and economic conflicts inherent to that profession, first and foremost as concerns political commitment.

3.3.1 The Culpable Love: Shortcomings of Left-Wing Political Commitment

We have noted Goliarda's unsatisfied need for love in her relationship with her family. In particular with respect to Maria, the protagonist perceives love as an egoistic and culpable drive, 'l'amore colpevole che poteva offenderla' (JG, p. 14), in contrast with self-sacrifice for the cause of socialist struggle. Love is inextricably linked to guilt: 'È questo il guaio, io amo quella donna che con dolcezza certo, ma con una fermezza terrorizzante, mi sta dicendo che sono colpevole [...] verso tutta l'umanità povera, ignorante e umiliata' (p. 11). Indeed, the episode that triggers the plot of *Io, Jean Gabin* consists precisely in Goliarda's aggression of Concetta, who belongs to the lower class.

While Maria is described as capable of altruism and generosity, Goliarda rather positions herself as closer to Sapienza's lineage, characterised as radically individualistic and dominated by animal instinct: 'In poche parole sprofondavo muta nell'ignominioso cinismo e spocchia, passionalità bestiale e indifferenza al grande dolore del mondo, dei Sapienza. Questo era il male di noi Sapienza, levantini libidinosi, protesi solo alla ricerca del nostro io, incalliti individualisti' (JG, pp. 12-3).

The opposition belongs to the same conceptual frame shaping a virile construct, which radically splits rationality from the body and will from instincts, where rationality and will allegedly would allow to overcome the exclusively egoistic nature of bodily instincts and emotions. Yet, in *Io, Jean Gabin* Sapienza overturns this paradigm and overtly charges it of failing to account for personal needs, feelings and emotions. Maria is represented as detached from reality, unable to take care of her daughter and to communicate on an emotional level. Maria's language is that of a moral duty founded on abstract rationality, ultimately inapt to achieve real care for the others.

At the opposite pole of Maria's we find Carlo, who, despite being considered not particularly smart by his family, is nonetheless able to take care of the little girl.

Di Carlo in casa si diceva che non era intelligente, ma io non condividevo quella loro convinzione. Forse non parlava un italiano perfetto, non sapeva polemizzare, non leggeva abbastanza, ma nei fatti della vita era imbattibile, sapeva tutto. Che anche questa non era intelligenza? A volte li odiavo, come adesso che lui mi aveva preso in braccio [...].⁴⁶

The disparity of behaviours existing between the clever but cold Maria and Carlo's loving attitude leads Goliarda to feel increasing resentment towards her parents' socialist commitment, as she feels neglected 'perché "loro" avevano cose ben più importanti e vitali: "Il bene del popolo", "Il progresso", "Il dolore del mondo"' (JG, p. 108). The polemic is thus personal and intense, addressing directly the price she and her siblings are paying for their parents' political activity. Following the story of her siblings' suffering as children while their parents were in prison, the narrator's expression of anger and resentment reaches its apex in an extremely provocative criticism of the emotional consequences of political commitment:

⁴⁶ JG, pp. 82-3.

Marx aveva cominciato a sacrificare i figli, non so se tre o quattro gliene erano morti di fame per scrivere *Il capitale* e dare pane all'operaio... l'operaio dalla grande bocca spalancata stava lì a ricevere in pasto figli di marxisti e mai si saziava...⁴⁷

The statement links directly to the dialogue between Goliarda and her uncle Giovanni in the first part of the text, from which it marks a significant change of perspective:

– È tuo padre che affama i suoi figli con quelle balle del socialismo.
 – Noi non siamo affamati! E se qualche volta ci mancano i soldi è perché non sfruttiamo nessuno, caro zio. E poi anche Marx soffriva la fame per scrivere *Il capitale*.⁴⁸

The criticism contained in the first passage clearly belongs to the narrow perspective of the neglected child. However, Sapienza's conflictual relationship with left-wing commitment in *Io, Jean Gabin* is not limited to personal resentment, but also assumes a properly political dimension. Sapienza speaks from a peculiar position, as she shares with her family the opposition to all forms of oppressive power, from fascism to the Catholic Church, but she is also very critical with respect to the left-wing intellectuals' commitment, including her family's. She uses other characters, such as uncle Giovanni, Jsaya and Carlo, to carry out a criticism of her parents. Jsaya, for example, represents a radically pessimistic view, close to the Sicilian literary tradition of Verga, De Roberto, Pirandello and Tomasi di Lampedusa. He does not believe in any emancipatory struggle and shakes the little girl with a criticism of her parents which points out the discrepancy between their class condition and their egalitarian belief:

‘La miseria è una dannazione senza riscatto!’ urla la voce del professor Jsaya all'orecchio della mente: ‘Non credere alle balle liberali di tuo padre e di tua madre! Balle! Utopie di intellettuali viziati! Dalla miseria alla gloria... Nessuno esce dalla miseria, sinonimo di ignoranza, e diventa un genio. Se non ci credi, va' a guardare da dove vengono tutti i loro scrittori, pittori, musicisti... Da famiglie agiate, se non ricche, agiate! Hai capito?!’⁴⁹

⁴⁷ JG, p. 98.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 27.

⁴⁹ JG, p. 56.

Similarly, Carlo detects in left-wing intellectuals, and in Maria in particular, a naïve attitude which, by attempting to improve society, turns into ideology and oppression.

Maria in fatto di vita è un'ingenua, Iuzzetta mia, un'ingenua. Ne ho conosciuti a bizzeffe di questi ricchi che per svagarsi si fanno il passatempo di cambiare la società, servire il popolo, e giù a tagliare teste e opprimere. [...] io intelligente fino a fissarmi in un'idea tanto da diventare ingiusto non ci voglio arrivare.⁵⁰

While on several occasions the protagonist states her solidarity with her parents and their ideal of a more equal and just organisation of society, she also marks a distance from them and especially from Maria, based on a deep difference in their respective understanding of human needs and the role of individual emancipation. By interpreting Sapienza's criticism of left-wing struggle as aimed mainly against its ideological intransigence rather than against its egalitarian objectives, there is here of course the risk to domesticate her subversive charge. However, Sapienza never really questions the rightness of aspiring to a more equal and just society. Rather, she closely scrutinises the strategies that are believed to lead to those objectives, noting limits and mistakes, at times, as we have seen, to the point of embracing a very argumentative and provocative attitude against left-wing political struggle.

In *Io, Jean Gabin* Sapienza's main polemical objective is the idea, represented in particular by Maria, that collective good is a moral duty necessarily founded on the detachment from personal emotional needs. To borrow Miller's words:

The usually accepted judgemental contrast between self-love and object-love, and their portrayal as opposites, springs from naïve and uncritical usage in our everyday language. Yet, a little reflection soon shows how inconceivable it is really to love others (not merely to need them) if one cannot love oneself as one really is. And how could a person do that if, from the very beginning, he has had no chance to experience his true feelings and to learn how to know himself?⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 83.

⁵¹ Miller, p. 14.

A similar perspective is expressed by Husserl, who, as we see below, employs a system of thought offering important insights to understand Sapienza's connection between selfhood and political emancipation in *Io, Jean Gabin*. According to Rocco Donnicci, who carried out a vast analysis of the relationship between body, ethics and politics in Husserl's philosophy:

Un valore non sarebbe di alcun valore se non lo amassi e se nel coglierlo non provassi soddisfazione anche per me che lo realizzo. L'amore per il proprio universo di valori, in definitiva l' 'amor proprio', è una condizione indispensabile della vita etica.⁵²

In this split reside the shortcomings of the rational language spoken by Maria, which fails to grasp a fundamental dimension of existence that resists the detached and abstract feature of ideology, as clarified in a dialogue between Goliarda and her anarchic uncle Nunzio:

– Oh, tu non sei nemico dell'amore?
 – E perché dovrei essere nemico dell'amore?
 – Non lo so, tutti sono nemici di questa parola. Dicono ca il Novecento è un secolo scientifico e l'amore, dicono, non c'entra niente con la scienza. Ivanoe sostiene che l'amore è l'esatto contrario e perciò ha una sola prerogativa: far perdere tempo.⁵³

Sapienza expresses a very similar criticism in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*: 'in questo secolo di religiosità scientifico-tecnica, l'emozione, l'amore, la scelta morale, la fedeltà e finanche la memoria cadono in sospetto di malattia' (FM, p. 60). In the separation operated by ideology between individual and collective good, emotions and rationality, Sapienza identifies a dead end of the left-wing struggle as she sees it conceived by her parents.

⁵² Donnicci, p. 261.

⁵³ JG, p. 90.

3.3.2 Anarchic Empathy

To her family's socialism, Goliarda prefers uncle Nunzio's anarchic perspective, reflecting Stalin's radical distinction between socialism as founded on class and anarchism as founded on the individual:

The cornerstone of anarchism is the *individual*, whose emancipation, according to its tenets, is the principal condition for the emancipation of the masses. [...] The cornerstone of Marxism, however, is the masses, whose emancipation, according to its tenets, is the principal condition for the emancipation of the individual. [...] Clearly, we have here two principles, one negating the other.⁵⁴

However, anarchy, in Sapienza's narrative, is represented as having the potential to overcome the dichotomous opposition between individual and collective interest proper to Stalinist ideological thought. In the protagonist's perspective, anarchy does not require to split the individual between egoistic instincts and altruistic moral duty, because it is precisely in individual instincts, and specifically in the feeling of love, that is to be found a potential common ground on the basis of which to overcome social hierarchies and ultimately power. Love is, indeed, the 'umanissimo bisogno che tutti ci accomuna, poveri, ricchi, fascisti e antifascisti e forse anche i reali' (JG, p. 80).

Whereas rationality is intrinsically separative – in categories, classes, parts of the self – bodily instincts, emotions and feelings offer resources to construct different, more authentic and therefore subversive relationships. The anarchist uncle Nunzio, who is not 'nemico dell'amore', represents a different political ideal, materialist and anti-ideological, which does not repudiate the embodied singularity of individual existence and its fundamental needs.

⁵⁴ Joseph Stalin, 'Anarchism or Socialism?' in *Works, Vol. 1, December, 1906 — January, 1907* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954). Marxist Internet Archive (2008) <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1906/12/x01.htm>> [Last accessed 22 August 2014].

In this stress placed upon the bonding potential of parts of the self and modalities of communication excluded by scientific rationality is located the constructive nucleus of Sapienza's narrative. This perspective places Sapienza at the intersection of different strands of thought which share an interest in overcoming ideology, metaphysics and abstract rationality by rooting identity and communication in a bodily ontology. Sapienza's resistance against ideology can be productively read for example through Arendt's argument for the irreducible plurality of political subjects, whose individual uniqueness cannot be subsumed by universalising ideologies. A suggestion in the direction of a joint reading of Sapienza and Arendt through the mediation of Cavarero has been firstly advanced by Anna Carta with respect to the relationship between life and narrative.⁵⁵ However, the points of contact between these authors from a political point of view still stand unaddressed.

As we have seen, Sapienza's anarchical subject derives its rebellious strength and its communicative openness not from scientific rationality but rather from the re-integration of emotional components of the self into the subject. I read Sapienza's representation of identity through Miller and Winnicott's psychoanalytic perspective, but parallels can be drawn also with the research carried out by Damasio from a neurological point of view and by Lakoff, Johnson and Turner in the field of cognitive studies. While Damasio questions the Cartesian split between rationality and emotions, phenomenological cognitivism looks at the rooting of thought and language in the material and dynamic dimension of the body. What these researches have in common is the attempt to recompose identity by reintegrating those elements of existence neglected or negated by abstract rationality.

⁵⁵ Anna Carta, 'Finestre, porte, luoghi reali e spazi immaginari nell'opera di Goliarda Sapienza', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 261-76.

A theoretical elaboration transversal to these studies and particularly consonant with Sapienza's narrative is Husserl's formulation of anarchy, inasmuch as it endeavours to place a theory of the subject at the foundation of his political perspective. Donnicci carried out a complex analysis of Husserl's political thought, evidencing the fundamental connection sought for by the German philosopher between individual cognitive structures and collective political structures. Three points in particular place Sapienza within a conceptual frame close to the one employed by Husserl. First, the attempt to enlarge the notion of rationality to include bodily impulses and desire in the cognitive and ethical individual structures. While Husserl's initial project was aimed at grounding ethic values in the same scientific laws which were supposed to govern rationality, he ended up reshaping his notion of rationality according to the functioning of ethic values, which call vital impulses, emotions and positions into question. Instead of making ethics rational, he made rationality ethical.

Secondly, equipped with such an enlarged understanding of rationality, Husserl redefines intersubjective communication by founding it on empathy, which bonds together subjects who are at the same time irreducibly unique. What allows communication is not a shared and universal rational structure but a shared and universal condition of irreducible and corporeal individuality, known through the legality of analogy:

L'appercezione dell'altro *come corpo animato (Leib) analogo al mio* avviene quindi con un trasferimento all'altro (corpo fisico) del senso che io attribuisco al mio mediante *un'associazione per somiglianza*.

Il riconoscimento dell'altro nella sua radicale differenza dalla cosa naturale e nell'*analogia* con ciò che mi è 'proprio' è infine *coscienza dell'altro come fine in sé* [...].⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Donnicci, p. 292; p. 302. My emphasis.

The possibility of authentic human relationships is thus rooted in empathy, which poses the centrality of each subject. Husserl ultimately endorses an ideal of anarchic-communism, but this has to emerge as the result of an autonomous ethical transformation of all subjects. Communism cannot be imposed by institutional power and is rather to be achieved through the progressive decline of any state authority, because it reflects the structure of the type of empathic relationships established by the transformed subject: ‘Al progresso dello sviluppo etico si deve accompagnare un graduale declino dell’organizzazione statale del potere.’⁵⁷ Where political and social transformation is not founded on a transformed notion of the subject and human relationships, it necessarily replicates the system it is attempting to change. Specifically, power will change place and actors, but not structure. This happened, in Husserl’s view, with Marxism and the Russian revolution, to which he addresses a criticism very much in tune with Sapienza’s own approach to her parents’ and her friends’ ideological attitude.

3.3.3 The Outcast Hero

We analysed how Sapienza, in a way ascribable to Husserl’s phenomenological perspective, connects an enlarged conception of identity and communication with an anarchical political aspiration, and I defined it as the constructive nucleus of her narrative. Nevertheless, while in *Io, Jean Gabin* the criticism and deconstructive attitude endorsed by the protagonist against socialism is properly political, the same is not true as concerns the constructive pole of anarchy. While for Husserl the ultimate horizon of individual emancipation is intrinsically collective, in *Io, Jean Gabin* Sapienza does not

⁵⁷ Husserl, *Hua XXVII*, p. 58, cit. in Donnicci, p. 335.

exploit but marginally the potentials of the empathic subject to move beyond individualism and construct different types of connections. In other words, in *Io, Jean Gabin* there is no positive investigation of the nexus between what she calls ‘love’ and social transformation. Here, Sapienza’s anarchy is rather connoted by individual resistance and does not seek to represent a re-founding of social structures on a different basis, which is conversely crucial for Husserl’s political perspective. The articulation of a constructive link between individual and collective emancipation remains an unexplored potential, while the stress on individual difference occupies the foreground.

The protagonist of *Io, Jean Gabin* is in a polemical position not only against socialist ideology but also against the ‘bruttezza e crudeltà meschina della massa’ (JG, p. 4). The despised mass includes at the same time unsophisticated lower class and conformist middle class, both object of a sour expressionistic deformation which resembles Gadda’s satirical and contentious vein.⁵⁸ As far as the representation of sub-proletarian and working classes is concerned, Goliarda’s friend Concetta is ‘piccola deforme beghina’ and ‘occhialuta’; Concetta’s mother, ‘detta la Cagna’, is ‘scema’, and mother and daughter are both ‘scimunita’ (pp. 4-5). Peppino’s study room is crowded with ‘clienti cenciosi ma parati dignitosamente come per apparire a un funerale’ (p. 6), and the indigent people sitting in the cinema stalls are ‘veri e propri animali che sputano in terra e in aria’ (p. 76). The same grotesque tone characterises the portraits of ‘quei dolcissimi delinquenti falliti che mio padre ha sistemato’: Zoe, Tina ‘la pazza’ and ‘il commesso’, who eats raw onions and makes the house smell (p. 77).

Even though the protagonist shares her parents’ conviction that these classes should change, she is less certain that this can actually happen: ‘è possibile che

⁵⁸ I think in particular of *L’Adalgisa. Disegni milanesi* (1944) and *La cognizione del dolore* (1963).

cambieranno? Non mi sembra possibile ma ognuno ha il suo sogno e io rispetto il sogno di mio padre' (JG, p. 76). Moreover, when discussing Maria's hopes in the educative and emancipatory potential of cinema (something which we can assume to be a sensitive topic for Sapienza, considering her own involvement in Neo-realist film making),⁵⁹ the protagonist insinuates a criticism of the idea of progress as 'imborghesimento' very much in tune with Pasolini's critique of progress:⁶⁰

'Il cinema col tempo diventerà un mezzo formidabile per diffondere cultura e progresso, Goliarda...' – queste, oramai l'avete capito, sono frasi di mia madre – 'cultura e progresso non ai soliti, pochi privilegiati, ma a masse intere di popolo'. In America sembra ci siano già sale da diecimila persone, incredibile! [...] diecimila persone che godono e si nutrono di cultura per uscire dallo stato di semibestie come queste qui sotto e mutarsi in cittadini modello con giacca stirata, camicia pulita e cravatta di seta!⁶¹

The reference to the US in relation to consumerism is not unique in the text. In the short chapter dedicated to the friend Jean, in a dialogue between the two women set after the second world war, the narrator exposes the failure of 'il grande sogno americano', which has turned into consumerism: 'Al posto di rari gruppi d'ufficiali tedeschi compassati nelle loro divise, folle osannanti una libertà magnereccia ora sguazzavano nell'oro calante del tramonto romano' (JG, p. 69).⁶² Sapienza's polemical attitude is then directed also against middle class and raises the problem of what kind of progress should be pursued. Yet, well before the economic boom and the advent of mass consumerism, the little protagonist rejects any complicity with the middle class,

⁵⁹ For an account of Sapienza's work in cinema, see Emma Gobbato, 'Un primo piano di profilo', in *Quel sogno d'essere*, pp. 277-84, and Palieri, cit.

⁶⁰ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (1975) and *Lettere luterane* (1976).

⁶¹ JG, p. 77.

⁶² The economic boom that followed World War II inspires a similar expressionist passage in FM: 'Sì, fuggivamo insieme dalla realtà di visi, di visi distorti, tatuati dal ricordo atroce di una guerra inutile, protesi a depredate quella pace fittizia di abbondanza... palazzi sconnessi deliranti di miseria secolare che le unghie dei bombardamenti avevano liberato della vernice appariscente e labile dell'ordine del ventennio... bocche spalancate in risa stridenti... bocche ruminanti il falso nutrimento del ciuingum... grappoli di mani avidi ammucciate spasmodicamente a graffiarsi l'una sull'altra', pp. 18-9.

described as conformist, bigot and fascist, in this case perfectly in line with her family's anti-institutional example. As in *Lettera aperta*, the privileged polemical objective is the state school, where fascist false rhetoric fosters the mentality of conformist middle class and serves to maintain institutional power.

‘Lascia i pallidi rampolli della borghesia come i Bruno e compagni baloccarsi e venire a patti con false idee, false parole, storia e avvenimenti storici travisati a comodo dal potere... solo le date sono giuste... e forse neanche quelle... lascia ai Bruno quella brodaglia di cultura’.

Che altro potevano fare così sdilinquiti da madri spaurite, schiave e per conseguenza privati di qualsiasi talento che ogni individuo ha in sé, fosse solo saper costruire delle belle sedie, toh! Andate, andate a scuola, voi! Che altro potete fare se non trovarvi un piccolo o grande impiego statale dove ingrassare oscenamente in mezzo a tutti i parassiti, ladri legalizzati, dello stato fascista!⁶³

To middle class rhetoric and conformist power, the protagonist opposes Jean Gabin's romantic heroism, using the identification with the French character to perform the role of a proud solitary rebel. The isolation resulting from her conflictual relationship with society is endured thanks to the exaltation of a radically individualistic position: ‘tutti d'accordo su una precisa breve frase: “sempre fuori da tutti i poteri costituiti”, soli, ma con l'orgoglio di sapere la rettitudine che soltanto nell'outsider alligna’ (JG, p. 3).

Interestingly, in the incipit of the text the narrator uses the first plural person (‘noi ribelli’, p. 3), thus suggesting that, while positioning herself as an individualistic outsider, she is at the same time attempting to insert herself in a community of people who understand and share her values, namely the readers. A similar collaborative attitude towards the readers is also present in the episode in which the protagonist learns to walk, precisely the occasion that introduces her to the power inequality, the falsification of the self and the duty to be strong. It is important to note then the continuity between the adoption of a virile, active and self-sufficient attitude, the

⁶³ JG, pp. 18-9.

troubles in establishing a communication with her context and the displacement of this communication towards the reader. The protagonist's disdainful and contemptuous individualism actually coexists with the research of other, different bonds, entrusted to the readers' solidarity. While the relationship between the protagonist and society is connoted by frontal opposition, a cooperative attitude is reserved to the readers, with whom the narrator constructs the communication that her protagonist finds impeded.

3.3.4 Art, Work and Money

This leads us to the final point of Goliarda's identification with Jean Gabin, the element of creativity and dream in relation to the protagonist's self positioning as an artist. Indeed, on top of being male and rebellious, Jean Gabin is also an actor, who represents the power of imagination against the constraints of reality. These constraints, as we have seen, consist on the one hand in the moral duty of a political engagement ideologically conceived as conflicting with individual needs, and, on the other, in mass conformism. The element of imagination allows Sapienza to add a last perspective on the character's construction of identity and search for freedom, centred on the role of the artist. This aspect also marks an important novelty compared to previous texts, which did not achieve any positive assertion of identity but rather aimed at liberating vital energies hidden beyond layers of falsifying identity constructs.

The role of the artist is explored in *Io, Jean Gabin* as a position that allows the protagonist to confront the duty to carry out a useful job and the mediation with social conformism represented by money. In this path, Goliarda is urged by her mother's teachings of the moral duty of social usefulness: 'Un individuo deve guadagnarsi da sé i soldi che gli abbisognano, altrimenti si diventa parassiti della società, che è come dire

più vigliacchi dei vigliacchi' (JG, p. 90). Indeed, the plot of *Io, Jean Gabin* is constructed around the protagonist's endeavour to earn some money, and such a task is originated by her offence against members of the lower class, as Maria stresses. In her wandering through the neighbourhood of the Civita and her meetings with various characters, she thus reflects on the means appropriate for earning money and the relationship between her 'profession', its social legitimacy and its acknowledgement in the form of money. It is not difficult to read here the expression of Sapienza's own concerns, for she had descended into poverty during the long time she spent writing *L'arte della gioia*, and her ex-centric novel was then rejected by all publishers. In *Io, Jean Gabin* Sapienza voices the question of the tense relationship between artistic work and its economic dimension, which preoccupied her in that period – and which ultimately resulted in her theft and incarceration in Rebibbia.

While the child protagonist has clearly no problem with earning money through her artisan work in Insanguine's workshop, she is uncertain whether this is acceptable for her acting performance. After an initial agreement, she returns the money given to her by the Brunos in order to avoid compromising her artistic independence. The artist that the protagonist chooses to be is therefore in an antagonistic position towards the average and the common, because 'solo l'eccezione entusiasma' (JG, p. 80), and she lays claim to independence from the fulfilment of a duty. In other words, the protagonist interprets her creative activity as the expression of a personal authenticity in opposition to any mystification and distortion induced by compliance with social expectations. The protagonist's choice in favour of an antagonistic position is resolute and radical, expressed in a programmatic declaration of poetics:

Quel sogno d' 'essere' era così coraggioso e libero che l'idea di andare a raccontare anche solo qualche pezzetto di quelle meraviglie a quei borghesucci del primo piano mi disgustò in tal modo da farmi fare quella che forse mi appariva come la prima vera presa di posizione verso la volgarità, la norma: non guadagnare riducendo il sogno a raccontino commerciabile, non accettare compromessi.⁶⁴

It is important to point out that there are two different artistic professions pursued by the protagonist, acting and writing. Acting, as we have seen, is represented as the locus of an impossible negotiation between personal expression and communication with the others. Differently from acting, the activity of writing gives free course to the protagonist's imagination and suspends the sense of time and the moral duty of work and social usefulness. When she writes in her notebook, 'il tempo si sfalda' (JG, p. 72). The same happens in Insanguine's workshop, reinforcing the similarity suggested already in *Lettera aperta* between writing and artisan work, both rooted in the *poiesis* which momentarily reunifies all the conflictual tensions concerning identity and position: 'non si sentiva più né la fame né la sete, tutti i pensieri venivano afferrati in un'unica direzione, i sentimenti stralunati dai cento ritmi e voci e lamenti dei pupi immobili. Tutto si dimenticava... anche Jean, e non dico poco' (p. 48).

The narrator explicitly poses the problem of a conflictual relationship between art and work, creative independence and material need for subsistence: 'Lascia perdere le parole, Goliarda, anche le più preziose non si possono mettere sotto i denti' (JG, p. 30).⁶⁵ Yet, imagination is decidedly preferred, for it is the carrier of that strength, autonomy and authenticity at the core of the protagonist's construction of identity and search for freedom. Albeit risky, 'non bisogna lasciare che la vita distrugga il sogno';

⁶⁴ JG, pp. 93-4.

⁶⁵ See also: 'devo aver perso tutta la spinta su quel quaderno [...] di botto ti accorgi che sono passate ore e non hai fatto niente per la tua sussistenza', JG, p. 72.

‘tenersi stretti al sogno sempre, e sfidare anche la morte per non perderlo mai’ (p. 30; p. 75).

3.3.5 Other Laws: Imagination and Gifts

Reversing usual meaning, creative writing and imagination are qualified as able to produce a discourse more true than those supposedly founded on truth, namely ideology and conformist social norms. While the middle class is permeated with ‘false idee, false parole, storia e avvenimenti storici travisati a comodo dal potere...’ (JG, p. 18), creative writing is characterised as the production of ‘bugie’ which turn into ‘verità’ as they give voice to other aspects of reality, neglected or compressed in everyday life, governed by pragmatism, and in ideology, expression of universal and abstract rationality. A dialogue between Goliarda and Jsaya clarifies the relationship between truth and lies, where imagination really constitutes what Franzini defines ‘altra ragione’:

– Non sei che una bugiarda, così bugiarda che forse sarai poeta.

[...]

– Ma io, professore, non dicevo bugie. Lei mi ha chiesto di raccontare e io ho cercato...

– Nel raccontare bisogna attenersi alla realtà! Che minchia mi frega a me del colore che aveva il sole al tramonto o il vento che spirava... cose oscure e inutili che insozzano il mondo... paesaggismo da quattro soldi! Va’, almeno scrivile queste porcherie, che divengano bugie vere sulla carta...⁶⁶

Sapienza’s overturning of the relationship between truth and lies is very important to all her narrative.⁶⁷ While the autobiographical texts claim the right to lie, the overtly fictional novel *L’arte della gioia* is inaugurated by the narrator’s declaration of strict adherence to reality. As concerns *Io, Jean Gabin* the elements analysed so far support the interpretation of the opposition between lies and truth as a matter of representational

⁶⁶ JG, p. 64.

⁶⁷ Bond analysed extensively the twist of values between truth and lies in *Il filo di mezzogiorno* from a psychoanalytic perspective.

relationship between discourse and reality, or, in other words, as a problem of laws governing the construction of identities and communication, which qualify differently from abstract rationality, social norms and ideologies.

The suggestion of imagination as entailing a different relationship with reality is also expressed in the text in Maria's words. In patent contradiction with the position held by Maria in the rest of the text, on a single occasion she criticises the limits of socialist revolution and confers a special status to the role of the artist. Even more interestingly, Maria establishes a connection between art and women, and charges the Russian revolution for having failed to make space for such *different discourses*: 'negano la causa della donna e dell'arte e in questa negazione strangolano la rivoluzione' (JG, p. 39). The criticism expressed by Maria resonates with the criticism of Bolshevism carried out by Husserl, inasmuch as the Russian revolution is said to rest on the same conceptual structures it questions. Conversely, art and women would represent two elements of deep discontinuity with the social order to be dismantled. If social change is not grounded on a transformation of the relationship between the sexes and a transformation of human relationships on the basis of a different understanding of the components of the self, it is doomed to fail – and create oppression on its way to failure.

A final consideration concerns the role of dependence on others in relation to the need for money. The search for money carried out by the protagonist concludes with her acceptance of a donation from the anarchist uncle Nunzio, which she had conversely rejected from the 'capitalist' uncle Giovanni and from the 'bourgeois' Brunos. Similarly, in the analectic chapter dedicated to her friendship with Jean, the adult Goliarda allows

Jean to pay for her in a café. In this episode, the narrator comments on the legitimacy to depend on others:

Jean paga per me la consumazione da Doney. Come allora non ho il becco di un quattrino e lei ha sempre un pezzo di pane o una manciata di zucchero da mettermi in bocca... l'amore è anche questo, saper accettare di essere nutriti senza sentirsi umiliati.⁶⁸

While with her family she had to modify herself in order to obtain care ('fui scaraventata giù nel pavimento a guadagnarli il pane col sudore della mia fronte...', JG, p. 61), her relationship with Jean comprises in itself an element of love and care, of which money represents the material expression. Once again, Sapienza destabilises images and meanings, so that money is here not the unacceptable measure of distorting social conformism, but rather the manifestation of love, in a logic of gift that replaces the one of exchange. Unlike her dependence on her family, her dependence on Jean is not perceived as falsifying. What has changed in the meantime is Goliarda's fierce rejection of any sort of compromise, so that she is open to accept what comes from the others without falling into subservience to their expectations, a similar approach to that achieved by Modesta in *L'arte della gioia* in her relationship with Nina, characterised by Modesta's entrustment to Nina's caring attitude.

In conclusion, the protagonist's choice to be a writer appears to be her strongest answer to the problem of constructing personal identity and positioning herself in society. Freedom is characterised as the possibility to be loved independently from the accomplishment of a task and the adjustment of personal identity to obtain love or money, as happens in the friendship with Jean. The *dover essere* established by Maria is turned by Goliarda into the active 'sogno d'essere' (JG, p. 93), pursued through artistic creation. Whereas in the imitation of a male role she came across a falsifying stereotype,

⁶⁸ JG, p. 70.

in the role of the artist she meets a freedom, although contradictory and conflictual: ‘è stato faticoso ma ora è bello saper usare le proprie gambe e andare dove si vuole’ (p. 62).

The possibility of communication, which the protagonist finds impeded, is searched for by the narrator through the literary text. For the protagonist of *Io, Jean Gabin* artistic creation implies the rejection of a communication played on a level perceived to be distorting, and opens up the possibility of experiencing personal authenticity and momentary reconciliation of inner conflicts, even though for the real author such an identity remains unavoidably suspended between reality and fiction, rooted in a *mise en abyme* of the artistic creation.

CHAPTER 4. THE PERFORMATIVE POWER OF NARRATIVE IN *LETTERA APERTA*, *L'ARTE DELLA GIOIA* AND *IO*, JEAN GABIN

Introduction

In this chapter I develop a comparative analysis of *Lettera aperta*, *Io Jean Gabin* and *L'arte della gioia*, focused on the qualification of the narrating voice and the narrative structure of these texts. The discussion approaches the question of the interaction between body, identity and power by looking at the role played by narration in the narrator's re-construction of her identity, her rejection of external impositions and her attempt to bring into the text the present and presence of the body, as an active force. The act of narrating is entrusted with a fundamental function, consisting in the possibility for the narrator to create her own story and transform a concluded, suffered past into a chosen, active, and joyful space for action.

I take into account in particular the configuration of the act of narrating as a performative speech, addressed to an audience, and the position of the narrator with respect to the story narrated. In Sapienza's works narration is always irresistibly speech – pronounced, vocalised words. In analysing the pivotal role played by the voice, with its distinctive characteristics of relationality and corporeality, I refer to the theory of voice elaborated by Adriana Cavarero in *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* and her philosophy of narration developed in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*. I also draw from the interpretation of the relationship between body and language

provided by the French linguist Jean-Claude Coquet in *Le istanze enuncianti. Fenomenologia e semiotica*.

I propose to interpret Sapienza's use of narrative as 'performative' in two senses. First, the text features theatrical modes that represent the physical presence of the narrator as an actor on stage and mime the expression of life as it happens. In other words, the narrative discourse is presented as producing, rather than reproducing, actions and events. In a second sense, linked to the first one, narration is performative as the act of narrating plays a productive role in shaping the narrator's own identity.

Overall, my analysis postulates an evolution, from a performative and deeply unstable narrating 'I', prevailing in *Lettera aperta*, to a reinforced narrating voice, which achieves a certain degree of detachment from her past, in *Io, Jean Gabin*. The structure of the texts changes accordingly, from the loose assemblage of episodes and thoughts characterising *Lettera aperta*, to the – minimal – plot developed in *Io, Jean Gabin*, passing through the fictional representation of a present *in fieri* and the plot without teleology of *L'arte della goia*.

In *Lettera aperta*, I analyse the presence of a twofold narrating voice, the adult's and the child's one, employing Mark Turner's notion of 'blended space' to describe their often inextricable interaction. The adult's perspective is itself in formation and throughout the text changes its relationship with the story narrated, for the act of narrating allows the narrator to disrupt and reject normative identities and retrieve a space of instinctual vitality. As concerns the qualification of the narrating voice, the narrator introduces herself as speaking to an audience present in the same space as hers and brings about a corporeal presence, realised through the characterisation of writing as oral speech.

In *L'arte della gioia*, the narrating voice simulates the same temporal relationship of contemporaneity with the story being narrated featured in *Lettera aperta*, although she avails herself of a filter in the fictional character of Modesta. The narrating voice is again qualified as oral speech and the protagonist is represented as a storyteller reciting her life as she lives it. In describing the peculiar narrative structure resulting from the positioning of the narrator in the present of the events happening I employ the analysis of plot and teleology developed by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*, problematizing it.¹ Compared to *Lettera aperta*, the narrative discourse is conferred an additional role than the construction of the narrator's self, consisting in a pedagogical message to the readers, who are invited to project Modesta's story onto their own and appropriate an anarchic and Epicurean ethics.

L'arte della gioia also appears to perform an important change within Sapienza's artistic path, since it contributes to establish her identity as an artist, while previously she was mainly absorbed by the endeavour to revisit her past and position herself in society. The result of this change is apparent in *Io, Jean Gabin*, where the narrator is no longer involved in the process of constructing her identity but speaks for a position situated *after* the story narrated. Accordingly, the text is more coherently structured and a central plot makes its appearance – even though manipulation of time, syncretism of styles and wandering thoughts still occupy the foreground.

Through the evolution from *Lettera aperta* to *Io, Jean Gabin*, the narrator achieves a position detached from her past and assumes the identity of an anarchist artist, an identity which allows her to benefit from the openness, fluidity and mutability sought for through the previous texts. Sapienza's literary search for freedom thus

¹ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992).

coincides with an operation of recovery and appreciation of an embodied domain of existence, grounded on the uniqueness of each individual, where empathy and analogy provide the general mechanism of communication.

4.1 *Lettera aperta*: Staging the Past, Voicing the Present

4.1.1 Disrupted Memories

Lettera aperta, published in 1967, inaugurates Sapienza's literary endeavour. Having survived two suicide attempts and partially lost her memory due to electroshock therapy, Sapienza embarks herself on a journey of self-reconstruction, revisiting her childhood in the attempt to recompose her disrupted identity.

The text is narrated in the first person and the coincidence of the protagonist's name with that of the narrator and the author ascribes the work to the autobiographical genre.² The central theme of a young girl's formation also recalls the structure of the *Bildungsroman* – or, more specifically, the 'romanzo del divenire', the definition used by Laura Fortini and Paola Bono to refer to the approach to this genre characterising several works by women writers.³ Fortini and Bono's critical category emphasises, within the structure of the *Bildungsroman*, the openness of the formative process, as opposed to the achievement of a definitive, crystallized identity and the adjustment to social norms which define maturation in the traditional, male version of the genre.

Such a critical category is more suitable to describe the type of formative path followed by *Lettera aperta*, open and rebellious, compared to that of traditional

² See Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

³ Paola Bono and Laura Fortini, 'Introduzione', in Bono and Fortini (eds.), *Il romanzo del divenire. Un Bildungsroman delle donne?* (Rome: Iacobelli, 2007), pp. 7-13.

Bildungsroman. Within the literary genres of autobiography and ‘romanzo del divenire’, however, *Lettera aperta* presents a number of features that complicate and destabilise the genre structure, realising, in Anna Langiano’s words, ‘una forma-romanzo aperta e contaminata’.⁴

The first and most evident element of contamination is the hybridism of themes and styles, which include, beside the recollection of childhood and the family saga, extra-diegetic political, social and artistic considerations, as well as anecdotes and portraits independent from the author’s childhood. Similarly, the narrator alternates a rationalistic and essayistic prose with a densely metaphorical, analogical and fragmented use of language. It is important here to underline that the first version of the work, prior to Enzo Siciliano’s editing, featured a much more extensive presence of extra-diegetic remarks concerned with the narrator’s present and her socio-historical context, to the point that the form of pamphlet or critical essay competed with the autobiographical genre as overall structure of the work.⁵

Lettera aperta occupies a peculiar position with respect to the autobiographical genre also for another aspect, which closely interests the present analysis. Traditionally, for example in the works by Augustine, Rousseau, Goethe and Alfieri, autobiographies set a stable relationship between present and past. The narrator recounts episodes from his or her past – a past time that is presented as concluded, definitive, detached from the present and exalted in its exemplarity. A unitary and substantial self, the protagonist, is evoked by another equally unitary and substantial subject, the narrator. To borrow Cavarero’s words, in traditional autobiographies ‘il teorema sotteso è che esista in primo

⁴ Anna Langiano, ‘*Lettera aperta*: il dovere di tornare’, in *Quel sogno d’essere*, pp. 131-47 (p. 143).

⁵ For more on the editing carried out by Siciliano see Langiano, cit. I am grateful to Providenti and Ross for providing me with a copy of the original typescript.

luogo un soggetto autocosciente il quale, mettendosi a scrivere la sua vita, traduce in parole la realtà sostanziale, precedente e indipendente dal testo, del proprio io'.⁶

Conversely, Sapienza manipulates the genre to serve a rather different purpose, inasmuch as the act of narrating closely interacts with the present of the narrator herself. Writing is asked to perform an active and productive role, consisting in the reconstruction of the disrupted memory and a sense of the self. By retrieving and freely recomposing episodes from the past, the act of narrating is entrusted with the task of helping the narrator liberate herself from oppressive constraints. In turn, the act of remembering and narrating affects the past, as this is dismantled and explored repeatedly, according to the evolving meaning it assumes for the present. The past is not concluded, but active on the present and actively interpreted by the present narrator who interacts with it.

At the opposite side of a detached and structured narrative, in *Lettera aperta* the narrative discourse is subject to an intense fragmentation. Events are linked through analogical rather than chronological associations, and characters, voices and episodes are often confused or even obscure, as the narrator is the middle of the process of recomposing her memory. The process of remembering, with its incoherencies, gaps and analogical associations, is reproduced through the narrative discourse and itself thematised. The text indeed teems with a number of *mise en abyme* of the process of narrating as coinciding with that of remembering, staging the contemporaneity and therefore the isomorphism of the two. The fragmented and analogical narrative connections at play in *Lettera aperta* have been explored by Andriago, Ortu and Langiano. According to the latter,

⁶ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 91.

la scrittura di Goliarda Sapienza punta alla sistematica frantumazione dei livelli di senso: le gerarchie temporali vengono destabilizzate, la coerenza del rapporto tra causa ed effetto vanificato in nome della compresenza di tempi diversi e eventi apparentemente indipendenti l'uno dall'altro, compresenza che si attua attraverso la precisa ripresa di particolari, quasi un rituale ritorno di parole.⁷

4.1.2 A Twofold Narrating Voice

In addition to the fragmentation of the narrative discourse, due to the isomorphism between disrupted memory and narration, *Lettera aperta* features a doubling of the narrating voice. An adult narrator, a woman in her forties in Rome, alternates with a child's voice, that of the young Goliarda in the late 20s and early 30s in Catania. As Ortu points out,

La voce recitante si alterna: è ovviamente sempre la Goliarda adulta che scrive, ma spesso è come se emergesse la bambina, delineata apparentemente senza mediazioni né analisi, con la *registrazione in presa diretta* di luci, suoni, luoghi e parole di allora.⁸

Similarly, both Carta and Andrigo describe the narrator's participation to the episodes from her childhood as a 'rievoazione', thus stressing the element of re-presentation of the child's perspective.⁹ Not only the perspective is twofold, but also the focus, since the present of the narrator alternates with recollections from childhood as the foreground topic of narration. The narrator of the story, with her own present troubles, her struggle to remember and survive, effectively constitutes the co-protagonist of the book. By telling the story of the progressive oppression she underwent as a child, the adult narrator seeks to undo it, retrieving an instinctive vitality and becoming the active subject of her own narrative.

⁷ Langiano, p. 138.

⁸ Ortu, p. 151. My emphasis.

⁹ Andrigo, p. 124; Carta, p. 267.

According to Cavarero, the traditional, rational subject uses narration to detach the present from the past:

Egli mette in atto ‘il freddo distacco della narrazione’ che trasforma ‘i fatti naturali in qualcosa di trascorso da lunghissimo tempo’. Attraverso l’uso della memoria, distanzia le storie consegnandole alla dimensione del tempo che separa gli accadimenti passati dal presente del narratore.¹⁰

Through her writing, Sapienza pursues a rather opposite strategy, aimed at a mutual contamination of past and present. The text bears explicit trace of the different stages of such process of liberation through narration: the narrator comments on the effects of re-evoking certain episodes, is affected by them and interacts with figures from her past as if they were present in the same spatial-temporal domain as hers, thus causing a short-circuit between different spatial-temporal dimensions. There is a close connection between the past recollected, the process of recollecting and the present of the narrator, so close indeed that Sapienza manipulates time and space to create vertiginous interactions between the different layers and perspectives. Such interactions, which cross spatial and temporal boundaries, establish an active, pulsating connection between the process of recollecting and the narrator’s search for identity.

Sapienza achieves such a contamination between present and past through various narrative techniques. For example, she constantly manipulates tenses and temporal and spatial deictics so as to blur the distinction between the adult’s and the child’s perspective: ‘*dovevo* aver dormito molto [...] era domenica e *avevo* ancora il malditesta. Sicuramente *ho* anche i capelli bianchi. *Devo* andare a controllare’; ‘*La sera prima*, finalmente, avevo visto “La Regina Cristina”. [...] *Ieri sera* pioveva quando siamo usciti dal cinema’ (LA, p. 57. My emphasis); ‘E certo *doveva* essere così, perché *anche*

¹⁰ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 129.

ora che Musetta mi spinge in questo negozio, io non posso entrare’ (p. 44. My emphasis). The changes in tenses and deictics destroy the cohesion and linearity of the events, blurring the line between the space-time of the narrator and that of the child, between present and past.

A striking example of the interaction between present and past, narration and story narrated, is represented by the episode of Anna ‘la sediarà’, when Goliarda is abandoned by the artisan and waits for her sitting outside the shut door of her house.¹¹ Anna’s desertion deprives Goliarda of the training in manufacturing chairs that had given her a sense of fulfilment and, with it, a positive and active sense of the self. Anna’s departure means to the little girl the loss of ‘un modo di essere utile all’umanità’ (p. 91), and causes her deep feelings of pain and distress. The loss of Anna, associated with a loss of identity, has its repercussions on the narrator as well, since she – the adult woman – is still in search for a sense of the self she lost in front of Anna’s shut door. Re-experiencing the child’s own trouble (Sapienza uses the verb ‘risillabare’), the narrator waits like the child and, like the child, seeks to find her place in society, her ‘utilità’, her sense of identity. The child’s act of waiting on Anna’s threshold, then, is paralleled by the narrator’s own suspension of narration, which results in a blank space on the page.

Ma Anna era andata via e non mi aveva neanche guardata. [...] Mi sedetti sulla soglia, sotto quella porta sbarrata, e aspettai fino a notte. Aspettai, ma sapevo che non sarebbe tornata. Quando i grandi partivano non tornavano più. [...] Perché non tornavano più? [...]

Non dovevo parlarvi di Anna, lo sapevo, non dovevo risillabare quella domanda che mi feci: Perché non tornano i grandi? Non dovevo. Questa domanda mi costringe a sedere su quella soglia in attesa. [...] Scusatemi, ma visto che aspetto debbo lasciarvi per un po’. Non posso costringervi ad aspettare con me. Quando uno aspetta e piange, non è divertente né utile per gli altri e così, abbiate pazienza, se resto su questo gradino muta per qualche tempo, debbo aspettare, ma da sola.

[Blank space on the page]

¹¹ LA, pp. 85-93.

...Devo tornare a quel gradino: solo tornando a quella soglia oggi, forse, potrò capire il senso di questa attesa, che, come tante altre cose, ci fanno subire i grandi.

[Blank space on the page]

Anche oggi, come ieri ho aspettato piangendo, seduta sulla soglia: stasera, ieri sera, tre sere fa, un anno?

È per questo che ancora adesso aspetto piangendo Anna la sediarà sulla sua soglia. La sua assenza mi strappò dalle mani un modo di “essere utile all’umanità”: mi ricacciò in quel secondo piano a vagare per le stanze con le mani in mano. E se sono ancora accasciata su quella soglia, non è per la stessa ragione? Non è Anna che piango e aspetto, ma la Rivelazione. Di essere ‘utile’.¹²

The child’s wait becomes a pause in the process of recollection, which in turn becomes a blank space on the page and involves the reader in the time of the story narrated as well as in that of narration. Through writing, the time of the pause becomes the material space on the page, generating a short-circuit between space of the story narrated, narrative discourse and material, extra-textual reality.

Mark Turner’s concept of ‘blended space’ can provide a useful tool to understand Sapienza’s manipulation of narrative in the passage above. While narratological models, such as Wayne Booth’s *Rhetoric of Fiction*, describe the interaction between story narrated and narration as ‘intrusion’ of the narrator into the story narrated (typically in the case of a *myse en abyme* of the narrative discourse), Turner proposes to situate such interaction in a third space, separated both from that of the narrator and that of the characters. In this third space, elements from the two domains are blended, realising a contact and interaction that would be impossible in each domain. In Turner’s words, ‘we keep the space of what is narrated and the space of narration separate, while blending them in a distinct blended space. [...] In the blend, the narrator, the readers, and the characters can inhabit one world’.¹³

¹² LA, pp. 87-8; p. 91.

¹³ Turner, pp. 75-6.

While the practice of blending story narrated and narration is widespread in literary texts, usually it is used in the direction of the narrator's interference with the story narrated, so that he or she acquires 'special powers' onto the story narrated: the narrator can move freely in time and space, read the characters' minds, etc.¹⁴ Sapienza realises a conflation between narration and story narrated also in a different, unexpected manner. In *Lettera aperta*, indeed, not only the narrator affects the story narrated with her 'special powers', but also and more importantly the story narrated affects the narrator. As we have seen, it is the child's wait that causes the narrator to pause, and asks the reader to wait with them, lingering on the blank space on the page.

Similarly, the narrator's remembrance of the poor women by which the little girl felt oppressed surfaces despite, not thanks to, the narrator's will. Although she tries to resist – 'non vi voglio parlare di loro' (LA, p. 66) – these women invade the narrator's room and, at the same time, the page:

Mi ributtai sul letto e queste donne – se vi devo dire la verità, ancora adesso, anzi proprio adesso che le ho accusate – sono entrate e si sono sedute sulle sedie, sul divano, in piedi contro il muro e mi guardano senza dire niente. Ma io so cosa pensano. 'Lo sapevamo che ci avresti tradite. Tu parli di te, del tuo disordine di piccola borghese, delle tue camicette marcite: – e non vedi come siamo vestite di stracci?'. Come faccio a liberarmi di loro? Io voglio parlare di figli di avvocato, voglio parlare d'amore, lasciatemi in pace.¹⁵

Although painful, talking about those women has a positive effect on the narrator – 'Ho fatto bene a parlare con voi di queste donne [...] non vedete che sono sparite' (p. 69) – thus confirming the active role narration of the past has on the narrator's own present.

¹⁴ Turner, p. 76.

¹⁵ LA, p. 67.

4.1.3 The Readers as an Audience, the Text as an Oral Performance

Another ‘blended space’ is the one shared by the narrator with the readers, who are repeatedly evoked as an interlocutor present in the same space as the narrator’s. The readers are called to perform an active role in the discourse, since the narrator relies on their reaction to orient her act of remembering and narrating.

In the incipit of the text, Dina, the narrator’s housekeeper, comments negatively on a decorative object on a shelf. Her comment, ‘Quanto è brutto!’ (LA, p. 16) triggers the narrator’s journey into her past, configured as an act of ‘tidying up’ her memories paralleled to the physical act of tidying up the room – getting rid of ugly objects, keeping good memories. Dina represents the textual figure of the reader, whose judgment orients the narrator in her selecting and sorting endeavour. It is important here to note also that the act of tidying up the room is not a metaphor for putting order in memories, since memories are actually, physically attached to the objects in the room. Again, narration and the space of the narrator conflate.

While in the incipit Dina provides a textual figure for the reader, inhabiting the same space as the narrator’s, straight after the episode of the ugly object Sapienza leaves behind any textual mediation and addresses directly the readers, who are invited to participate actively in the process of tidying up:

Scusate ancora, ma ho bisogno di voi per essere in grado di sbarazzarmi di tutte le cose brutte che ci sono qui dentro. Parlando, dalla reazione di chi ascolta, puoi capire cosa va tenuto e cosa buttato. Ho bisogno di voi per liberarmi di tutte le cose brutte che affollano questa stanza.¹⁶

In the text, the readers are represented as actually performing this role, since the narrator is able to perceive their reactions to the text as she narrates: ‘Vedo dai vostri visi che

¹⁶ LA, p. 16.

questa morte vi ha affaticati' (LA, p. 36). Clearly, the space where such a communication between readers and narrator can take place, overcoming temporal and spatial impossibility, is properly a blended space.

What type of space is, then, the blended space created by Sapienza, where story narrated, narration and readers can communicate and influence each other? As the whole setting of the text indicates, such blended space is configured as a theatrical space. Narration is an oral performance, which memory after memory and through the dialogue with the readers (re)creates the narrator's own identity. The act of narrating is indeed qualified throughout the text as oral speech, pronounced in front of an audience. As Castagné wrote, 'qui lo scritto è specificamente parola'.¹⁷ Narration is a 'sproloquio' (LA, p. 31), to think and remember is 'parlare, comunicare', to read is 'ascoltare' (p. 53) and to end narration is 'tacere' (p.159). Sapienza's writing in *Lettera aperta* – but also, as we will see, in *L'arte della gioia* – is always, irresistibly speech, voice.

Through her voice, the narrator imitates a physical presence on a stage, shared with the audience. In doing so, she brings her physical existence into the text, refusing to dissociate language from body and thought from communication. Sapienza's literary operation recalls Cavarero's argument in favour of the voice – physical and uniquely personal voice – as opposed to abstract, universal and ultimately disembodied representations of thought and language. As the philosopher puts it, 'al contrario del pensiero che tende ad abitare nel mondo immateriale delle idee, il discorso è sempre una questione di corpi, necessariamente sanguigni e pulsanti, desideranti e scatenati'.¹⁸ To qualify narration as irreducibly vocal entails to attribute to intersubjective communication a crucial role, as we have seen in the narrator's repeated appeals to the

¹⁷ Castagné, p. 82.

¹⁸ *A più voci*, p. 149.

readers. Cavarero notes: ‘Nell’ambito etimologico della *vox latina*, il primo significato di *vocare* è chiamare, invocare. Prima ancora di farsi parola, la voce è un’invocazione rivolta all’altro e fiduciosa in un orecchio che l’accoglie.’¹⁹ As Langiano points out, in the original version of *Lettera aperta* the appeals to the ‘lettorespettatore’ were even more frequent, accomplishing the re-presentation of a physical presence into language.²⁰

Jean-Claude Coquet, a French linguist of phenomenological orientation, reflects on the role of the voice in bringing about a corporeal presence in language. To Coquet, the linguistic ‘I’, (‘istanza giudicante’ in his words), is always, and primarily, a person, a body, an ‘istanza corporea’. Language is, first and foremost, a discourse pronounced by a person, and written language necessarily bears traces of the corporeal dimension of oral speech: ‘Il corpo partecipa tanto alla lettura quanto alla scrittura. [...] Dunque la scrittura non è dissociabile dalla voce. [...] L’atto di enunciarsi congiunge l’istanza corporea e l’istanza giudicante’.²¹

4.1.4 The Enunciation of the Self in the Present

Sapienza’s writing is performative in the sense that it affects the present of the narrator, but also in the sense that it is staged as a performance, in which the narrator, in place of remembering a concluded and detached past, through her speech enunciates herself in the present, miming her physical presence. As Cavarero notes, ‘il tempo e il luogo della narrazione *non* sono sempre e necessariamente postumi. Imitando il discorso diretto, la *mimesis* colloca infatti il racconto dell’eroe nel tempo e nel luogo del suo accadere’.²²

¹⁹ *A più voci*, p. 185.

²⁰ Langiano, p. 133.

²¹ Coquet, p. 68.

²² *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 163.

In *Lettera aperta*, the text performs the present and presence of the body. As I have illustrated in the previous chapters, Sapienza's work is deeply concerned with corporeal and material domains of existence, and she exhibits a tension towards the body not only on a thematic level but also in the very structures of the texts, and in particular in the characterisation of narrative as a performance. Her literary operation puts at the centre that primary relationship between thought, language and body evidenced by phenomenology. As Paolo Fabbri writes in his introduction to Coquet's work,

non è la lingua a enunciare lo stato esterno delle cose, è questo che si enuncia nel linguaggio, attraverso modalità proiettive che mantengono, con diversi gradi di plasticità, il rapporto dell'esperienza somatica col reale. [...] L'enunciazione è una escrizione del corpo.²³

If traditional autobiography separates the past from the present, Sapienza conversely creates a space, a performative space, where the different temporal layers constituting the self can interact, with each other and with the readers, because 'tra l'evento, l'esperienza dell'evento [...] e l'espressione dell'evento, o discorso, non c'è soluzione di continuità. L'uno integra l'altro'.²⁴

By subtracting her biography from the concluded and detached dimension of the past, 'ciò che è già stato fatto e non può essere disfatto',²⁵ and re-presenting it into her discourse, Sapienza can thus exert her agency on her own story, appropriating it. The re-presentation of her past and the enunciation of herself in the present of the narration, in other words, has the performative power of forging her identity, which comes to coincide with that of the narrator. As Arena points out, 'la sua memoria si ricompone e

²³ Paolo Fabbri, 'Tra *Physis* e *Logos*', in Coquet, pp. vii-xx (pp. xi-xii).

²⁴ Coquet, p. 40.

²⁵ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 24.

diviene organica coinvolgendo tutti i sensi, come a ripercorrere un incontro col mondo tipico dell'infanzia. Goliarda rivive, attraverso l'analisi, la sua biografia fino a coniugarsi al presente come scrittrice'.²⁶

Narrative enables the narrator to undo the oppressive path she underwent as a child and liberate herself, marking her own biography as a chosen space and not an imposed destiny. She becomes, in other words, the actor of her own story. Theatre, 'quest'estratto di vita', was indeed created by humans 'per tenerla in pugno almeno per un paio d'ore' (LA, p. 31). Writing is thus, for Sapienza, a way to exert her own agency on her oppressive past, to turn passivity into active construction and control of her life. Through narrative, she accomplishes an autogenesis and creates herself as a narrator. Significantly, the appropriation of life through a performance of the self is thematized in the text with a specific reference to acting:

Oggi, 10 maggio 1965, compio 41 anni ed ho quasi finito questo mio libro che se riuscirò ad impararlo a memoria – io non so improvvisare: ho fatto l'attrice e devo, per parlare, avere un copione – sarà il mio parlare a voi. Oggi rinasco o forse nasco per la prima volta. Ho un anno, solo un anno.²⁷

Clearly, there lies a contradiction here, for the operation of appropriating and re-presenting the past as a chosen story performed by the actor-narrator is and remains, after all, fictional: 'la messa-in-scena è ovviamente una finzione, una rappresentazione: un racconto, in altre parole.'²⁸

However, the fictional performance of the self participates in a deeper, non-fictional reality, since it expresses the very real constitution of identity through narration. In *Lettera aperta*, Sapienza exhibits the process through which the self

²⁶ Arena, p. 151.

²⁷ LA, p. 146.

²⁸ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 163.

constructs its own story, a process that, in Cavarero's perspective, is intrinsically narrative, for 'nella memoria narrante il sé ha la propria casa'.²⁹ Anna Carta, pointing out the affinity between the use of narration in *Lettera aperta* and Cavarero's philosophy of narrative, notes that 'l'autobiografismo della Sapienza contiene una riflessione sulla natura, sulle motivazioni profonde, sullo statuto originario della narrazione'.³⁰ Similarly, Turner attributes a primary and fundamental cognitive role to the human faculty of organising reality into stories, for narration is understood as the founding structure of thought and language.³¹ From a sociological perspective, Margaret Somers finds in 'conceptual narrativity' and the 'ontological dimension of narrative' the key notions to understand the processes of identity formation.³² Where the characterisation of the text as oral performance and the mimesis of a present *in fieri* have a component of fiction, the use of narration to recompose memories and reconstruct the self are an extremely powerful tool whose very real effects on the narrator herself are represented in *Lettera aperta*.

The notion of performative narrative, read with the support of Cavarero's reflections on the voice and narration, and Coquet's notion of the permanence of the body into language, helps us make sense of the apparent contradiction, in Sapienza's narrative, between a tension towards a bodily foundation of identity, as opposed to a self that is always the result of a linguistic, textual operation. Sapienza wrote: 'Per me quella che chiamiamo vita, prende consistenza solo se riesco a tradurla in scrittura';³³ Ross points out this twofold motor in Sapienza's writing:

²⁹ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 49.

³⁰ Carta, p. 275.

³¹ See Turner, p. 15.

³² Margaret Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity. A Relational and Network Approach', in *Theory and Society*, 5, 23 (October 1994) 605-49 (pp. 606-7).

³³ *Le certezze del dubbio*, p. 139.

Sapienza spiega che il suo senso di sé è costruito in modo discorsivo e mediato [...]. Per poter assumere consistenza, le sue esperienze devono essere paradossalmente incanalate attraverso il testo, anche se Sapienza insiste più volte anche sul carattere corporeo della nostra condizione ontologica.³⁴

The contradiction between textual and bodily foundation of identity is overcome by the characterisation of text as itself constituted and inhabited by the body. Configured as a performative speech in which the narrator, like an actor, performs her own story, the text coincides with the physical act of narrating, which has a very real, material effect on the narrator herself. Autobiographical narration in *Lettera aperta* then retains a relationship with extra-textual reality, inasmuch as it enables the narrator to survive, to appropriate her own past. As Maria Arena puts it, 'la scrittura diviene la sua cura, il luogo dove rinasce il suo desiderio'.³⁵ To use Sapienza's own words in *L'arte della gioia*, 'chi nasce con il talento di raccontare è anche uno che guarisce' (p. 489). In the conclusive chapter, *Lettera aperta* ends on the narrator's demand for the freedom to play with her own body, that source of vitality with which, thanks to the narration of her own story, she has regained contact. Narration does not only represent the formation of the self, but realises it.

4.2 *L'arte della gioia*: Living and Narrating, Living as Narrating

4.2.1 Mimesis of the Present in Action

In *Lettera aperta* the narrator, by narrating her own story, performs a process of self formation. The operation, which simulates the co-presence of narrator and readers and the production in the present of a past story that is, in fact, concluded, retains an element

³⁴ *Identità di genere e sessualità*, p. 224.

³⁵ Arena, p. 151.

of fiction, although a fiction with very real and material effects. In the passage to *L'arte della gioia*, Sapienza gives up the illusion of autobiography to embrace declared fiction, in which the narrator can actually be the creator, rather than the actor, of a story. While in *Lettera aperta* Sapienza stated the impossibility of truth in autobiography – ‘credo proprio che questo mio sforzo per non morire soffocata nel disordine, sarà una bella sfilza di bugie’ (LA, p. 16) –, in the incipit of *L'arte della gioia* Modesta affirms: ‘Lasciamo questo mio primo ricordo così com’è: non mi va di fare supposizioni o d’inventare. Voglio dirvi quello che è stato senza alterare niente’ (AG, p. 5). Once the element of fiction is assumed as the explicit frame of the text, within the fictional world the narrator can, indeed, tell the truth, for she is the actual author of it.

We can note how Sapienza follows a path that is symmetrically the opposite of Natalia Ginzburg’s, who gradually approached autobiography as a liberating possibility to talk about her own reality, after an intense literary production all centred on fictional stories. In the ‘Avvertenza’ that precedes *Lessico familiare* (1963), Ginzburg states a complete adherence to reality: ‘Luoghi, fatti, persone sono, in questo libro, reali. Non ho inventato niente.’³⁶At the same time, she warns the reader on the faltering and selective feature of memory, and suggests that the work should be read like a novel. From different perspectives – Sapienza embraces exhibited fiction, while Ginzburg moves from fiction to autobiography – both writers express the limits of the possibility for autobiography to tell the truth. As Farnetti writes,

Rendere narrabile la vita così com’è e come la si è vissuta non è possibile. [...] Non si discute più, dunque, in termini di sovrapposizione fra vissuto e scrittura, ma piuttosto di

³⁶ Natalia Ginzburg, ‘Avvertenza’, in *Lessico familiare*.

trasposizione dal vissuto all'inventato, si tiene conto dello scarto d'invenzione che ogni scrittura produce, e su quello scarto si lavora.³⁷

Having acknowledged the passage from autobiographical reconstruction in *Lettera aperta* to overt fiction in *L'arte della gioia*, we notice nonetheless a substantial continuity between the two works as concerns the configuration of the narrating voice and her position with respect to the story narrated. Let us proceed to analyse these elements in *L'arte della gioia*.

Who narrates Modesta's story? *L'arte della gioia* is a fictional autobiography that adopts an internal focalisation, as the narrating voice belongs to the protagonist herself. The point of view is strictly limited to her experience, and she has no access to the other characters' thoughts nor to events beyond her personal knowledge. The story is told mainly in the past tense, thus suggesting a traditional narrative structure in which a character recollects his/her life and composes it into a meaningful story. The narrator is supposed to speak from a position located at the end of the story, from which she would look back at past events. However, the location of the narrating voice is not entirely stable, as there is a constant fluctuation between present and past tense, which, as in *Lettera aperta*, influences the structure of the plot and the relationship between story narrated and narrative discourse. Indeed, from the very beginning the present tense alternates with the past: 'Ed eccovi me a quattro, cinque anni in uno spazio fangoso che trascino un pezzo di legno immenso. [...] Voglio dirvi quello che è stato senza alterare niente' (AG, p. 5. My emphasis). The combination of present and past tenses, even within the same sentence, characterises the whole work.

³⁷ Monica Farnetti, *Il centro della cattedrale. I ricordi d'infanzia nella scrittura femminile* (Mantova: Tre Lune Edizioni, 2002). For a comprehensive perspective on recent criticism and theory on autobiography, see Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001).

In addition to the pervasive use of the present in place of the past tense, in the first part of the novel the metaphorical references are limited to the world known by Modesta as a child and adolescent. The mountains are ‘nere come i capelli della mamma’ and ‘azzurre come il vestito della domenica’ (AG, p. 6). Not only the metaphors but the whole system of perceptions is that of the child, who narrates from her limited and naive perspective. Modesta’s adult narrating voice presents herself as strongly sympathetic with the character who is living and not recollecting her experiences, situating herself in the middle of, and not after, the events.

In the last part of the novel there is an overt reference to the act of writing memories, accompanied by a reference to notes Modesta would have written down in the past, which suggest the form of re-elaboration of diaries. The statement is followed by a sudden return to the present tense, which marks a time where the character, not the narrator, resides:

E come in quel lontano 1945 il silenzio calò sui brevi appunti della mia vita, ammutolisco di nuovo ora che scrivo, e tremo cercando il nome di Jacopo fra le carte. Temo d’aver perduto la data del suo ritorno. L’attesa rende sordi, distratti... Ecco, 6 agosto 1945. Hiroshima. Jacopo tornò proprio in quei giorni, si vede che fu per questo che non appuntai la data, l’Atomica ebbe la capacità di distrarre anche me. [...] Chiudo gli occhi e ascolto soltanto il ricordo di quell’attesa che dilata i secondi, i minuti in un solo suono buio. E non mi accorgo di Ntoni che mi viene incontro sulla spiaggia di villa Suvarita.³⁸

In the passage above, the narrating voice shifts from Modesta as the narrator of her past to Modesta as the actor of her present, for the two subjects come to coincide in the subject of the expression ‘non mi accorgo’. The almost total absence of prolepses further reduces the distance between the narrator and the character as the former does not tell more than what the latter is able to know.

³⁸ AG, p. 453. My emphasis.

Another narrative device that renders the position of the narrator ambiguous is the insertion of the narrator's thoughts into the time of the story. Although the narrating voice belongs to Modesta at the end of her story, the thoughts reported are often shown to belong to the character, since they interact with the character's context. Indeed, the expression of the narrator's thoughts is often followed by other characters who ask Modesta what she is thinking about, thus attributing the thoughts not to the narrator, but to the character.

The mimesis of the present in action is overtly stated by the narrator in one of her frequent appeals to the readers:

Sicuramente voi che leggete state pensando che la mia conquista comportava di necessità qualcosa di molto sgradevole: dormire con un essere menomato, se non mostruoso molto brutto. Il fatto è che voi la leggete questa storia, e mi anticipate, mentre io la vivo, la vivo ancora.³⁹

The very moment of the end is not pronounced, as the novel finishes on a scene in which Modesta's lover, Marco, asks her to carry on telling her story as she continues to live: '– Dormi, Modesta? – No. – Pensi? – Sì. – Racconta, Modesta, racconta' (AG, p. 511). The narrator reconstructs her story on the basis of notes taken throughout her life, but she utterly empathizes with the character, thus creating the illusion of a present *in fieri*. To use Sapienza's own words, her narrative reproduces life in the moment of its happening, 'la nitidezza del momento stesso in cui la vita-azione sboccia, fiorisce, cresce, cresce ancora, muore' (JG, p. 9).

By voicing the present in action, the narrator of *L'arte della gioia* seeks to express in the text the primary experience of the body, in a coincidence between 'presa' and 'ripresa', where "presa" è una nozione che traduce efficacemente la relazione di

³⁹ AG, p. 99.

contatto che il linguaggio intrattiene con il reale, con la *physis*'.⁴⁰ Turning again to Coquet's reflections, by reproducing on the page the ongoing, continuously renovated present of Modesta, Sapienza gives voice to the body's 'attività significante': 'Il corpo [...] rivela il suo statuto d'esistenza percependo, parlando, operando, tracciando abbozzi di sapere ecc. Il suo privilegio, e anche la sua funzione, è di enunciare per primo il suo rapporto col mondo.'⁴¹ In other words, Sapienza in *L'arte della gioia* creates a performative narrative that, conjugated in the present, seeks to express the body in its primary instincts, before the organisation of experience through memory and reflection. She tries to enunciate the primary, constantly renovated encounter between body and world. Hence, the constant oscillation between activity and passivity, instinctuality and rational control, description and imagination, which I have pointed out in Chapter 2, as the narrator reproduces the unstable moment of the present. Through her performative narrative, Sapienza aims at neutralising what Cavarero identifies as 'la differenza essenziale fra azione e narrazione':

Ambedue appartengono al significarsi dell'identità: ma, mentre sul piano dell'azione questo significarsi è radicato nella fragilità e nell'impadroneggiabilità del contesto, sul piano della narrazione il significato pertiene invece a una storia che è immutabile come il passato. Al presente fuggevole e discontinuo si contrappone l'immobilità e la durata del passato.⁴²

4.2.2 A Non-Teleological, Open Narrative

While telling a story that has already happened belongs to the domain of memory, to narrate a story as it happens belongs to the field of production, in a continuous

⁴⁰ Coquet, p. 41.

⁴¹ Ibid. pp. 24-5.

⁴² *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 39.

oscillation between ‘return to’ and ‘return of’ the past,⁴³ diegesis and mimesis. In *L’arte della gioia*, the twofold origin of the discourse deeply affects the structure of the novel, since positioning the narrative voice at the end or in the middle of the story entails a different organising principle of the plot. On the one hand, the narrative voice looks back at the past from a mature point of view, to which the significance and consequences of the events are already known. Memory re-presents the past by selecting and organising events into teleologically constructed meaning. It is the traditional structure of the plot, in which events are held together by their overall meaning in a concluded system.

The beginning presupposes the end, since the concept of an ending is necessary to that of a beginning. The idea of ‘adventure’ has to do with what is to come, the ad-venire, so that an adventure is a piece of action in which beginnings are chosen by and for ends. The very possibility of meaning plotted through sequence and through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be meaningless. [...] We read the incidents of narration as ‘promises and annunciations’ of final coherence.⁴⁴

On the other hand, the production of experience as it happens does not suffer teleology but only provisional interpretation of ongoing events. Unlike the sense of time developed through memory, the present does not contain in itself the idea of the end and is therefore the bearer of an open structure. The character who is still living is not able to select and organise her present on the basis of its following consequences. Hence, many details are provided which do not have any actual influence on the plot, and others are conversely omitted and then instrumentally retrieved following the character’s realisation of their initially underestimated importance. The positioning of the narrator

⁴³ Brooks, p. 98.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 93. On the function of the end in the structuring of narratives, see also Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction: with a New Epilogue*, new edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

in the middle of the story thus accounts for the non-cohesive, wandering narrative structure of *L'arte della gioia*.

In his analysis of the mechanism of plot, Brooks describes narrative as a repetition of the past aimed at retrospectively organising events whose original production was beyond a subject's control. In this respect, narrative would establish mastery over the past by composing it through memory.

If repetition is mastery, movement from the passive to the active, and if mastery is an assertion of control over what men must in fact submit to – choice, we might say, of an imposed end – we have already a suggestive comment on the grammar of plot, where repetition, taking us back again over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends.⁴⁵

In *L'arte della gioia*, Sapienza challenges this model by miming the present in action. Where narrative in the past has to do with the acceptance of a destiny and the assumption of a story that has already happened, Sapienza as we have seen engages with the freedom of the present moment, full of potential and constantly renovated. Instead of achieving mastery and control through repetition of the past, that is, through memory, in *L'arte della gioia* Sapienza looks for the agency contained in the moment of production. Modesta's movement towards mastery is thus constructed as a movement towards the freedom to experience the present and the presence of the body in action.

4.2.3 The Involvement of the Reader: Empathic Narrative Tension

If the narrator does not organise the narrative material from a space after the events narrated, how does the plot proceed? How is the narrative tension produced? Indeed, the focus on the present does not allow the reader to activate a system of expectations. With no guarantee of closure, the elements put in place are unreliable to the reader and thus

⁴⁵ Brooks, p. 98.

cannot be read in a chain of memory and anticipation, which following Wolfgang Iser and Brooks normally constitutes the fundamental mechanism of plot.⁴⁶ And yet, the novel succeeds in engaging the readers in Modesta's story, throughout over five hundred pages. It does so by establishing a close connection between them and the character, as the adoption of the character's point of view creates an emotive and empathic rather than properly narrative tension. The reader is captured by the hectic sequence of Modesta's feelings, perceptions, reflections and metaphorical descriptions. In Hernández's words, 'la protagonista se transforma ante los ojos del lector – se va forjando a sí misma –, en una continua metamorfosis que produce cierto vértigo definido como narración febril, desenfrenada o angustiosa'.⁴⁷ Instead of developing a deterministic system, the reader follows Modesta's free movements, participating to her vitality and self-regeneration, the expansion of her experience and her achievement of the freedom to constantly evolve and change.

Similarly to *Lettera aperta*, character, narrator and readers are represented as sharing the same theatrical space. Modesta is repeatedly defined a 'cantastorie' (AG, p. 8; p. 243) and narration is configured as Modesta's voice reciting her life. The presence of these theatrical modes reinforces the sense of Modesta telling her story as she lives it rather than recollecting events from the past, and involves the reader in a dialogical and empathic structure.

Narration overcomes spatial-temporal limits and allows different spaces to interact in a blended theatrical space, where characters, narrator and reader can inhabit the same space. Appeals to the readers mark the whole work, beginning from the opening scene in which, as we have seen, the narrator presents the character (Modesta as a child) in

⁴⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

⁴⁷ *La fortuna literaria de Goliarda Sapienza*, p. 8.

front of an audience: ‘Ed eccovi me’ (AG, p. 5).⁴⁸ On many occasions the narrator involves the readers in the story narrated by introducing to them the voices of other characters: ‘Questa voce dolce, non sentite quanto è dolce? È la voce di madre Leonora’ (p. 16); ‘Questa voce – la sentite?’ (p. 420); ‘Avete sentito la voce di Beatrice?’ (p. 134); ‘Ascoltate, anche se non ne avete più voglia’ (p. 43). Here Modesta directly addresses the reader as a collective audience present in the same space as hers.

In addition to the appeals to the readers, Sapienza also blends the space of narration and that of the story narrated by virtue of another narrative technique, possibly unique in its kind. Let us consider for example these dialogues between Modesta and Tuzzu and between Modesta and Carmine, where the characters are represented as able to listen to the narrator’s thoughts:

Non dovevo lasciarlo andare via, dovevo chiedergli perché – quando lo guardavo prima, e ora che tenevo il suo braccio – mi nasceva dentro quel desiderio di accarezzarmi là dove... – Ma guarda se sono domande da fare!

Quando è l’alba Carmine se ne va... Nel sonno lo vedo allontanarsi come un’ombra. Come faceva ad apparire e sparire ed essere sempre presente?
– È che mi hai nel cuore, Modesta.⁴⁹

What at first sight appears to be a silent thought belonging to the narrative voice often turns out to be words actually spoken aloud by Modesta, with intensely disorientating effects. These episodes, frequent throughout the novel, break the boundaries between different temporal and spatial domains. This narrative technique also expresses the powerful tension of language towards oral speech, which characterises Sapienza’s works. The dimension of the voice, of pronounced words, exerts an irresistible

⁴⁸ Unfortunately, in the English translation – ‘I’m four or five years old’ – the theatrical exposition of the character to the readers is lost.

⁴⁹ AG, p. 9; p. 205.

attraction on language, to the point that the characters are able to ‘hear’ the narrator’s thoughts.

The text is, indeed, populated by voices. As we have seen, drama deeply influences the narrative structure, especially if we consider that more than half of the novel consists of pure dialogues. Dialogues take more and more space as the narration proceeds, and in the third and fourth parts they come to occupy almost the totality of narration. The other characters are mainly present on the scene through their voices, of which Sapienza carefully notes the defining qualities. As far as the dialogic and vocal structure of the novel is concerned, particularly noticeable is Modesta’s habit of dialoguing with the voices of characters who are absent or dead. In these cases, the characters’ voices are represented as physical, vibrant voices with which Modesta can dialogue.

4.2.4 The Political Dimension of the Voice

In the realisation of a present *in fieri*, as we have seen, the performative, oral dimension of narration plays a crucial role. The voice constitutes the embodied and relational dimension of language, for it is always someone’s voice, it links together speaker and listener and roots language into a material exchange. The voice is also, in Cavarero’s philosophy, the marker of a person’s uniqueness, which resists the universalising feature of disembodied rationality:

Nell’unicità che si fa sentire come voce è un esistente incarnato o, se si vuole, un ‘esserci’ nella sua radicale finitezza, qui e ora, a farsi sentire. La sfera del vocalico chiama in causa il piano dell’ontologia e lo àncora all’esistenza di esseri singolari che si invocano l’un l’altro, contestualmente. [...] In questo senso, l’orizzonte ontologico dischiuso dalla voce, ovvero quella che vogliamo chiamare *l’ontologia vocalica dell’unicità*, si oppone in modo perentorio alle varie ontologie degli enti fittizi che la tradizione filosofica, nel corso

del suo sviluppo storico, nomina via via come ‘uomo’, ‘soggetto’, ‘individuo’. Ciò che li accomuna è sintomaticamente il progetto di prescindere dall’unicità.⁵⁰

In *L’arte della gioia*, Sapienza states the contemporaneity of action and narration, in the presence of an audience. Through the qualification of narration as oral speech, she seeks to create with the readers an inter-corporeal community, rooted in the vocal dimension of communication. Cavarero uses the notion of ‘risonanza’ to define this type of communication, and Coquet provides a definition that resonates with Cavarero’s: ‘L’intesa intersoggettiva [...] implica l’intercorporeità, un fondamento per così dire musicale: accordarsi alla nota dell’altro che ci sta di fronte e che partecipa alla medesima tonalità fondamentale.’⁵¹

Differently from the dimension of the voice, abstract and universal rationality ties together individuals by virtue of its laws and erases the bodily and unique existence of each individual. Cavarero writes: ‘Gli individui liberi ed eguali, che non hanno niente in comune, trovano finalmente la loro comunità nella razionalità comunicativa di un linguaggio che li lega perché li vincola alle sue norme procedurali. Il linguaggio diventa il legame degli slegati.’⁵²

Of course, a completely different way to look at the voice is possible, for example and most notably in Derrida’s theory, according to whom the voice, with its illusion of presence, does not represent a resistance against metaphysics but rather its ally, against the *différant* feature of writing and the ‘trace’.⁵³ However, in Cavarero’s theory, the voice is not the expression of an abstract *logos* that prescinds from the material, iterated

⁵⁰ *A più voci*, p. 189.

⁵¹ Coquet, p. 68.

⁵² *A più voci*, p. 205.

⁵³ See Jaques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. by David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

acts of the constitution of knowledge, as in Derrida, but is considered in its relationship with the body, as the rooting of language in the ephemeral, embodied, situated and relational position of the speakers. As such, it is not opposed primarily to writing, but to the a-temporal and video-centric feature of metaphysics, which realises a disembodied and universalising *presence*:

Nella transizione dalla centralità dell'orecchio a quella dell'occhio, nasce un pensiero capace di catturare gli eventi sonori e di congelarli in immagini astratte e universali, dotate di oggettività, stabilità e presenza, nonché organizzabili in un sistema coerente.

È proprio la caratteristica per cui i suoni si percepiscono in successione, piuttosto che simultaneamente, a impedire al senso dell'udito di fungere da fondamento per un'improbabile metafisica acustica.⁵⁴

Against abstract thought and its illusion of eternalised time, the voice allows to rethink the category of *presence*, defined by the co-presence of the interlocutors in a shared, contingent and unstable present:

La presenza di coloro che si guardano 'faccia a faccia', lungi dal funzionare come una qualità eternizzante dell'*essere*, è garante della contingenza empirica del contesto. [...] Il 'faccia a faccia' evoca un divenire discontinuo, caratterizzato dal presente sempre nuovo degli 'adesso' che incrociano gli sguardi, piuttosto che la dimensione atemporale di un'immobile permanenza.⁵⁵

Cavarero's and Derrida's perspectives do not seem to be in a relationship of symmetrical opposition, but rather express incommensurable positions, for they attach very different roles to the voice within their overall systems, which are nonetheless equally opposed to metaphysics and logocentrism. The relationship between the two different approaches to the voice would deserve a specific investigation, but for purposes of the present discourse what matters is that in Sapienza's works the voice

⁵⁴ *A più voci*, p. 94; p. 49.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 193.

plays an anti-metaphysical and anti-logocentric role, reinstating the body and its contingent and relational presence.

The centrality of the voice has, thus, a political dimension, for it grounds communication in the embodied dimension of language, in the mutual recognition of singular and unique subjects. Coquet writes: ‘La comunità linguistica, quella degli uomini, il “contatto con l’altro”, presuppone l’intesa [...], un’intesa inscritta sull’asse della *physis*, e dunque fondata sull’esperienza di una relazione carnale con l’altro, l’empatia.’⁵⁶ The centrality of the voice, embodied and relational, as opposed to disembodied and universal rationality, gives priority to empathy over laws. A perspective that could not express any more cogently the anti-metaphysical and anti-ideological stance represented by Sapienza in *L’arte della gioia*. In all her works, indeed, Sapienza seeks to establish an intense empathic relationship with the reader. *L’arte della gioia* is a novel with a strong performative and transformative power, an aspect that has been widely pointed out in literary reviews, especially by so-called common readers. Its pedagogical stance – anti-ideological, rebellious and liberating – involves the readers not only, and possibly not mainly, through its explicit content, but also through its language and narrative structure, engaged in the communication of a live body.

⁵⁶ Coquet, p. 70.

4.3 *Io, Jean Gabin: Wandering Away from the Past*

4.3.1 Central Plot and Wandering Thoughts

After the fictional journey of *L'arte della gioia*, in *Io, Jean Gabin* Sapienza goes back to the autobiographical genre, although in a form strongly contaminated by fiction. This work, set in the same years as *Lettera aperta*, presents a distinct evolution from Sapienza's previous writings, in terms of narrative structure and relationship between past and present. Compared to the fragmented and centrifugal structure of *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, in *Io, Jean Gabin* a central plot with a chronological development makes its appearance. The child's task to find some money, concentrated in a compact and intelligible unity of space and time, provides the *fil rouge* of the narration. The central story covers a period of a few days, marked by the succession of meals and sleep.

The very existence of a central plot marks a significant distance from *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*; however, in quantitative terms the central and chronological story covers only a limited portion of the text. Several episodes, belonging to other periods (some preceding the events of the story, others following it, others situated in a non-specified temporal location), interfere with the linearity and cohesiveness of the central plot.

Moreover, the narrator repeatedly interrupts the story with extra-diegetic remarks, usually originated by elements of the plot but neither functional to its development nor strictly constrained by relevance criteria. Sapienza often uses the text as a space to freely develop and link her wandering thoughts, not really a stream of consciousness but rather the expression of juxtaposed ideas and episodes. Between stream of consciousness and this other discursive structure, which I define 'wandering thinking',

there is not a qualitative difference – both actually follow a free association of ideas and images – but rather a difference in intensity, as Sapienza’s wandering thinking lacks aim and organisation, but not intelligibility, and therefore is suitably used for extra-diegetic remarks about politics, arts, society etc. It is a technique that allows the narrator to talk about topics she cares about, without the constraint of relevance for the plot, that is, without the organisation of such topics into narrative. An analogous narrative mechanism governs many of the dialogues in *L’arte della gioia* and, as we have seen, *Lettera aperta* too features a similar use of wandering thoughts, in particular in the essayistic reflections partially excluded from the edited work, even though the majority of the text is subject to a much more radical and intense fragmentation.

Whereas in quantitative terms the central plot takes less narrative space than that dedicated to digressions, the very presence of a distinction between foreground and background distinguishes *Io, Jean Gabin* from the radically disrupted narrative of *Lettera aperta*. Overall, *Io, Jean Gabin* presents similar structural features to those of previous texts, but manipulation of the narrative discourse is realised on a much less intense scale, so that the disorienting effects produced by *Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* and *L’arte della gioia* are here mitigated.

What surely remains unaltered throughout all works, and characterises the later diptych of the prison as well, is the attention paid by Sapienza to the sensorial dimension of the voice, expression of an embodied and relational approach to language. We hear for example Licia’s ‘voce delicata’ (JG, p. 7), Ivanoe’s ‘voce cullante’, (p. 8), but also his ‘dura voce lombarda’ (p. 43); the ‘curva armoniosa’ of Maria’s voice (p. 12); Peppino’s ‘bella voce fonda’ (p. 58); Carlo’s ‘canti ora lenti ora cullanti, ora alti e argentini come il rincorrersi dei ciottoli smossi dalla risacca’ (p. 36) and, when Nica

speaks, we hear ‘la dolcezza di quelle sillabe scivolanti nel sangue’ (p. 44). As in *L’arte della gioia*, the characters are mainly present on the scene through their voices, and the memory of their opinions and teachings is never disjointed from their actual words. For Sapienza, to remember figures from her past always coincides with listening to their voices: “‘La miseria è una dannazione senza riscatto!’ urla la voce del professor Jsaya *all’orecchio della mente*. [...] Sento ancora la mia vocina di un tempo belante come una pecora’ (JG, p. 56. My emphasis).

The theatrical setting, connected to the prevalence of voices and oral speech, is confirmed in the characterisation of the readers as a collective audience, to which the narrator addresses her speech. The narrator refers directly to them and to her own act of narrating: ‘Avete sentito che voce decisa’ (JG, p. 45); ‘Già, non ve l’avevo detto’ (p. 89); “‘Il cinema col tempo diventerà un mezzo formidabile per diffondere cultura e progresso, Goliarda...’ – queste, oramai l’avete capito, sono frasi di mia madre’ (p. 77); “‘Allora, carusa, oramai p’aviri l’unuri d’avirti tocca aspettare c’hai la febbre?’” [...] È Nunzio, oramai lo conoscete, questo è il bello di parlare a vecchi amici, non c’è bisogno di spiegare troppo, di raccontare tutto da capo’ (p. 89).

The configuration of narrative as oral speech is analogous to that of previous writings, with the readers present in the same space of the narrator’s, thus confirming the tension towards theatrical and vocal discourse prevalent in Sapienza’s works. However, differently from previous texts, in *Io, Jean Gabin* the readers are not invited to play any active role in the narrative discourse. Here, narrator and readers do not actually interact beyond the appeals mentioned above, which then appear more like residual markers of a performance, ultimately inessential to the development of narration. Nonetheless, the readers have become, in *Io, Jean Gabin*, the narrator’s

elective company, a sympathetic circle of friends, distinguished from the rest of conformist society which the rebellious protagonist fiercely opposes and despises.

4.3.2 Goodbye Childhood

The deepest difference between *Io*, *Jean Gabin* and Sapienza's previous works, however, concerns the narrator's relationship with her past. Indeed, here adult's and child's points of view remain clearly distinct, and so do the different temporal-spatial domains where narrator and protagonist reside. Unlike in *Lettera aperta*, the protagonist's formative process is represented as already happened and does not involve the narrator any longer. We have seen that *Lettera aperta* is structured as a twofold discourse, with one focus on the recollected past and the other on the narrator's present. *Lettera aperta* is an active, performative text inasmuch as it stages a dialogue and a relationship of mutual influence between the two narrative spaces. The adult narrator intensely identifies with the protagonist, and even blends her point of view with the child's, and the same happens in *L'arte della gioia*, where the narrator places herself in the middle of the developing present.

In *Io*, *Jean Gabin*, conversely, the space to which the narrator belongs plays a marginal role, and the narrative discourse stays almost constantly focused on the recollection of the past. In terms of linguistic markers of time, past and present tenses alternate, but the alternation happens with much less frequency and overall the past is by far the prevalent tense. The narrator does not dialogue with her past, for the act of recollecting and narrating does not affect her present any longer. The evolution of Sapienza's works recalls Virginia Woolf's considerations on the role that writing *To the*

Lighthouse (1927) had in her relationship with her own past – and with her mother in particular:

When it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then it laid to rest.⁵⁷

The only occasion in the text where narrator's and characters' voices are actually blended, thus recalling the performative structure and present *in fieri* of *Lettera aperta*, concerns, quite paradoxically, a passage that states the utter separation of the present from a concluded, already determined and consumed past:

Rassicurandomi con la mano della presenza delle due lire dimenticate nel fondo della tasca, filo via in cerca della mia vita. Ma io l'ho vissuta già la mia vita, penso, almeno tre quattro volte! E per quanto faccia, per quanta volontà, intelligenza, fantasia sprigiono intorno a me per incanalarla e sottometerla al mio volere, mi si delinea davanti quell'unico teorema possibile che è il risultato di mia madre, mio padre, mio zio, i miei fratelli eccetera. Risultato matematico o destino, essa è lì e io ci giro intorno come un asino bendato intorno alla macina. Asino o non asino, con scatto agile salto sul tram che mi porterà lontano.⁵⁸

The passage above is strikingly ambiguous. Not only child's and adult's perspectives conflate and merge in the subject of the expression 'l'ho già vissuta la mia vita'. Its definitive stance is also immediately contradicted by the plurality expressed by the clause 'almeno tre quattro volte'. Moreover, whilst the narrator would be doomed to keep re-enacting the same destiny, 'come un asino bendato intorno alla macina', the child protagonist contradicts the circular repetition by affirming her vital action, marked by a linear movement – 'con scatto agile salto sul tram che mi porterà lontano'.

⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Chatto & Windus for Sussex University Press, 1986), p. 81. Hernández develops a parallel between Sapienza and Woolf in 'Orlando and Modesta: Two Voices for the Freedom of Women', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*.

⁵⁸ JG, p. 104.

Despite the complex relationship between present and past featured in this passage, in the rest of the work such relationship is actually quite straightforward. Even though the present is acknowledged as the product of the past, the narrator looks at her past as a closed and stable set of memories. Past and present are finally separated. Narration does not have the creative, assertive and performative power it was bestowed with in *Lettera aperta*, but functions as a means of recollection of a concluded past. In other words *Io, Jean Gabin* departs from the formative tension of previous works, for the narrator is not asking the act of remembering and narrating to impact on her present life.

Strengthened by her conquered identity of an anarchic artist, the narrator stands at a safe distance from her past. Such achieved identity, originated by the crossing of textual and experiential layers of reality, is precisely the one created by Sapienza through her previous ‘performances’, namely the identity of the artist, the storyteller, at the margin of society (in Sapienza’s self representation) and determined to use such a position as a space enabling personal freedom. It is from this conquered space that the narrator of *Io, Jean Gabin* tells the story of her own evolution towards it. Therefore the character’s formative experience does not proceed in parallel with the narrator’s own path of personal reconstruction, like it did in *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, but rather is recollected from a concluded, resolved point of observation. Pellegrino rightly writes:

Io, Jean Gabin integra *Lettera aperta*. [...] Ma chiude il cerchio autobiografico di Goliarda Sapienza. La bambina che qui cammina mano nella mano assieme al suo bandito della casbah per i vicoli tra la gente dell’amato e terribile quartiere non è più la stessa di *Lettera aperta*, ora è la ‘carusa tosta’ dell’*Arte della gioia*.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Pellegrino, ‘Postfazione’, in JG, p. 123.

What distinguishes *Io, Jean Gabin* from Sapienza's previous works is connected to her achieved self-positioning in society as an artist, a writer, a storyteller – an identity she was looking for while and through writing. With all the problems annexed to the coincidence of the outcome of the protagonist's formative process with her assumption of the identity of storyteller, such a 'conclusion' is achieved and can provide the starting point of *Io, Jean Gabin*, this time in concordance with Brook's reflections on the necessity of the end for narration to begin. Since she already knows the outcome of her search for identity, narration can depart from the concern with the formative process itself. Indeed, after *Io, Jean Gabin* Sapienza moves away from the recollection of her childhood to delve into the exploration of her present, and from an endeavour of self-reflection and self-reconstruction to a gaze entirely focused on outer reality.

Liberated from the effort to master the present by re-traversing the past, the narrator of *Io, Jean Gabin* constructs a text that constitutes a direct and ironic response to her own search for identity in *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno*. The parents are mostly ignored, sexuality and male violence largely removed, the oppressive features of the construction of the female role in a patriarchal society are neutralised through the assumption of a male identity, and the duty of social usefulness is discarded in favour of a proudly oppositional anarchism. Nonetheless, beyond the joyful and ironic tone, the fascination and depth of the text – and of Sapienza's literary production more broadly – resides in its ambiguity between achieved evolution and permanence of knots of anxiety, between having put the past 'to rest', and having put it 'between brackets'. At the same time, the narrator appears to be able to detach herself from her past, without re-experiencing its painful and upsetting features. The decision to ignore the troubles involved in the construction of identity (and its future descent into

depression and loss of the self) is exhibited as a deliberate act. She cannot change the conditions that constituted her upbringing and led to mental illness, for these belong to a concluded past. She then moves away from that reality and delves into autofiction, at the same time pointing at the limits of fiction itself by letting the reality of material oppression and childhood troubles surface. Although closely interconnected with the other works, *Io, Jean Gabin* also constitutes an *unicum*, as the text is no longer used as a space where to interact with the past, but a possibility of playful experimentation, as Sapienza creates here a child that she never was. And yet, the apparent fiction of *Io, Jean Gabin* has behind it, and beneath it, the journey into the past carried out in *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* and the desire to self-creation voiced in *L'arte della gioia*. On this fragile line, *Io, Jean Gabin* constructs its narrative of play of staged identities and bodily desires, recounted by a narrator whose achieved identity coincides with that of an anarchist artist, with its marks of precariousness and marginality.

Both souls, regressive and evolutive, are present in Sapienza's works, and this is one of the many aspects of her narrative that requires the critic to make a choice of stress. I focused extensively on the elements of discontinuity, showing how Sapienza's works bear the trace of the healing process she performed through writing, especially as concerns narrative structures. Clearly, another approach, which stresses the persistence of knots of anxiety, repressed rather than resolved issues and return of the same obsessions, is certainly legitimate. For example, Emma Bond's analysis of *Il filo di mezzogiorno* pursues this direction. Discussing the fictional feature of the relationship between narrator and therapist staged in this work, and drawing parallels with *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923) by Svevo and *Il male oscuro* (1964) by Bertolucci, Bond describes these authors' use of 'curative narrative' as an improper substitute for analytic therapy.

Since the relationship with the therapist is, ultimately, fictional, narration, instead of curing, would actually provide the writer with the possibility of re-enacting defence mechanisms.

Where Bond's analysis is very productive and insightful into the complex relationship between narrative, fiction and cure in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, overall Sapienza's writings maintain a performative power that exceeds fiction and escapes the re-enactment of the same dynamics. It takes *L'arte della gioia*, with its exhibited fiction, to make the decisive step. Afterwards, the emergence in *Io, Jean Gabin* of a – limited and fragile – central narrative, the detachment of the present from the past, the replacement of a generic and overwhelming task (understand who she is) with a specific and achievable task (find some money), the sidelining of the parental figures are all elements suitable to be interpreted as markers of the narrator's achieved maturation. Her subsequent production, focused on the narrator's present and mainly concerned with other characters, rather than with processes of identity formation, confirms such a shift in her narrative.

A conclusive, essential consideration must be made, concerning the qualification of the type of identity and maturation at play in Sapienza's works. To say that through writing Sapienza constructs her own identity and can therefore relent the investigation of her past does not imply that her formative process as an adult comes to an end. As we have exhaustively explored with reference to *L'arte della gioia*, identity, in the context of Sapienza's work, should not be equated with a fixed and stable set of characteristics and a fixed and stable way to inhabit the world. Quite the opposite, the type of identity Sapienza looks for throughout her narrative is rather configured as an open self, sustained by its constantly renovated contact with the vitality of an alive body and

therefore in continuous evolution and change. Cavarero's words can once again provide useful insights into the type of identity represented by Sapienza:

Da un'identità relazionale ed espositiva, immersa nel flusso dell'esistenza e impadroneggiabile per definizione, non può certo risultare la storia di vita di un sé la cui identità si dia come *semplice*, come lo sviluppo coerente di un'immutevole sostanza. Tale unità è piuttosto il succedersi nel tempo di una esistenza irripetibile che continuando ad apparire si è fatta storia, ossia è il configurarsi nella temporalità di un *ipse*.⁶⁰

The identity of the anarchist artist, whose cardinal orientating value resides in the auscultation of bodily instincts and the rejection of any form of imposition, allows her to make space for continuous self-renovation. The titles of Sapienza's last published works, with their reference to a formative experience – *L'università di Rebibbia* – and to the impossibility of a perspective that is rigid and definitive – *Le certezze del dubbio* – well express the openness of the type of identity proposed by Sapienza.

Sapienza's narrative of self-construction, rich in counter-movements and contradictory undercurrents, overall follows a path that takes it from a painful exploration of the past in order to make life possible in the present, to a liberation of desires and imagination in fictional stories. The subject emerging from Sapienza's literary production reflects the relationship that, to quote the beautiful description written by Dacia Maraini, she always entertained with the world, a relationship 'da zingara e girovaga'⁶¹ – a joyful, wandering nomad.

⁶⁰ *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, p. 96.

⁶¹ Dacia Maraini, 'Ricordo di Goliarda Sapienza', in LA, pp. 9-11 (p. 11).

CONCLUSION

This thesis, the first monographic study of Sapienza's writings, aimed at highlighting those elements that, for their originality, depth and richness, deserve critical attention and earn this author a prominent place in 20th-century Italian literature. I identified the overarching inspiration of her narrative in the notion of freedom, which orients her representation of the construction of identity in the negotiation between body and power. Keeping together the analysis of the self and its social, political and historical context, I focused specifically on the major factors informing Sapienza's representation of a struggle for freedom, namely gender, sexuality and political ideology. On these grounds, patriarchal and heteronormative structures of society occupy a central position, jointly with a left-wing political commitment perceived as reductively ideological and the power implicated in interpersonal relationships. Overall, for the prominence of the bodily dimension and the radical opposition to normative structures, I propose to define Sapienza's works as Epicurean and anarchic, accounting for their peculiar position at the crossing of a number of discourses shaping contemporary critical debate, such as psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and Marxist-feminism.

Sapienza's literary activity begins as an effort to reconstruct her disrupted memory and identity, which dovetails with a criticism of social norms and oppressive power relationships. In Chapter 1 I have analysed how the adult narrator of *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* engages with the recollection of her childhood, her relationship with her extra-ordinary family and her troubled social integration, in order to retrieve a sense of the self and vitality with which she had progressively lost contact. Faced with

the challenge of making sense of a series of contradictory models of class, gender, sexuality and political ideology, Goliarda, the child protagonist, struggles to orient herself and master the position of radical diversity that is imposed upon her. In the midst of a whirl of contradictory messages, she becomes acutely aware of the power underlying human relationships, where the need for love, also expressed as the need to please others, begins an excruciating conflict with her search for autonomy. In *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, the narrator recounts her psychoanalytic therapy, internalising but also negotiating the therapist's interpretations of her past, especially as concerns gender identity and sexuality. Through this double exploration of her childhood, characterised by fragmentation, ellipses and analogical connections, the narrator seeks to retrieve a contact with her own live body as a source of identity and agency.

Chapter 2 followed Modesta's long journey towards the realisation of a radical freedom, from the initial experience of sexual pleasure to the exercise of violence and, finally, the abandonment to relationships of dependence and care and the acceptance of the impossibility of full control. The first part of the chapter explored the type of subject that, in *L'arte della gioia*, takes on a struggle for freedom, pointing out the centrality of the body within the construction of the protagonist's self and the instrumental use of rationality, ascribable to Epicurean ethics. The novel is characterised by the coexistence of different configurations of the self, which I put in relation to different positionalities with respect to power. Specifically, the adoption of a strong and oppositional attitude is rendered necessary in order for a subaltern subject to reject oppression, but the protagonist's ultimate objective consists in escaping the replication of a binary logic of domination and accessing the enjoyment of a weak and fluid identity, centred on the pleasure of the senses and empathic relationships of care. From a political perspective,

L'arte della gioia continues and expands the deconstructive stance put forward in the autobiographical works. It addresses several centres of power and domination, among which Sapienza includes the PCI agenda and its militants' attitudes, and realises a form of properly anarchist commitment, entrusting to the relationship with the readers the task of inspiring a yearning for freedom.

Io, Jean Gabin, analysed in Chapter 3, reconnects to *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* as it focuses again on Sapienza's autobiographical recollection of her childhood, although this is intensely contaminated with fiction. This work, characterised by an ironic and light tone, plays with the protagonists' identification with the French actor Jean Gabin, assumed as a model of a male identity, opposed to women's submission, an anarchist hero, distinguished from mass conformism, and the example of dream and imagination against the constraints of reality and ideology. The child protagonist's and adult narrator's search for identity finds here an accomplishment, consisting in the position of an anarchist artist. The shortest and most linear narrative amongst Sapienza's works here considered, *Io, Jean Gabin* is possibly also the most ambiguous, for it plays with the protagonist's staged identities, at the same time pointing at the existence of a more authentic dimension of the self and interpersonal relationships, rooted in the body and empathic communication. Similarly, it exhibits a detachment from the core troubles of the narrator's past, whilst the protagonist's blithe and joyful attitude is openly fictional. The ambiguity of the text reflects the double position of the narrator, who thanks to her endeavour of self-reconstruction has liberated herself from an oppressive past, but whose narrative nonetheless does not have the power to change the reality of that past, like she cannot change the material conditions

that led the child protagonist of *Io, Jean Gabin* to adopt a male identity in order to escape women's submission.

The final Chapter considered the evolution of Sapienza's writings by looking at the narrative structures and the characterisation of the narrating voice. I defined her works as performative, in two correlated senses: they are represented as theatrical texts, with the narrator as an actor addressing her speech to an audience, and they perform the narrator's process of becoming a subject, since by narrating her own story she reconstructs a sense of agency. In *Lettera aperta* and *L'arte della gioia* the narrator simulates the contemporaneity of narrated story and narration, speaking from a position in the middle of the events rather than looking back at a concluded past. The narrating voice, with her mimesis of a present in action and her appeals to the reader as a physically present interlocutor, tends towards the reinstatement of a corporeal dimension into language, which is represented as irreducibly embodied and relational. *Io, Jean Gabin* is in a relationship of continuity with previous works but also departs from them as it features a more detached relationship with the past and a more linear narrative structure. The central plot, revolving around Goliarda's search for money, alternates with what I defined 'wandering thoughts', a free association of episodes and extra-diegetic remarks that still maintain a degree of intelligibility. The reader, who no longer participates in the narrator's reconstructive effort, is addressed as a friend and ally of the anarchist protagonist against mass conformism. Ultimately, Sapienza's self-reconstructive journey is configured as a reconnection with a powerfully desiring body and the assumption of the rebellious identity of an anarchist artist. The recuperation of the body – in the construction of identity, in interpersonal relationships and in

ideological interpretations of reality – is at the centre of Sapienza’s personal and political struggle for freedom.

Sapienza’s narrative can be situated in a position of continuity with the investigation of identity carried out by Pirandello and Svevo, their focus on a split self and the ultimately unresolved relationship between truth and lies, reality and conscience. Similarly, Sapienza shares with post-modernist authors such as Calvino and Eco a suspicion of any absolute truth and the renunciation of a comprehensive and organic representation of reality. However, her works do not pursue the direction of intellectual play, lucid dissection of rationality and dissolution of reality into ‘un mondo di segni autonomo’,¹ characterising Italian literary modernism and post-modernism. Sapienza’s tension towards the reinstatement of a bodily dimension establishes a different relationship with rationality, which is exalted in the very moment it is denied an abstract and universal role and pushed back into the context of a fleshy body, desiring and situated. And it is perhaps significant to note that even a philosopher such as Derrida and a writer such as Calvino, after following the investigation of reality as a textual relationship between signs, re-direct their attention towards the physical dimension of a perceptive body – Calvino with his project of *I cinque sensi* and subsequently *Palomar* (1983), and Derrida with his reflections on touch.²

Through her writing, Sapienza gives voice to a primary and founding desire to become a subject and access a locus of agency, whilst modern and postmodern discourses on the falling apart of identity remain all internal to the history of a dominating, universalised male subject. This tight relationship between agency and bodily desire, in the context of an emancipatory aspiration of freedom, radically departs

¹ *Stile Calvino*, p. 138.

² *Ibid.* p. 140; J. Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005).

from the crisis of the subject represented by Pirandello and Svevo and escapes the post-modern labyrinths where a dethroned but still disembodied reason is confined. Freedom is thus exposed, in Sapienza's narrative, as the unrecognized margin or condition of possibility of postmodernism, for which subjects in a subaltern position have to fight, hence bringing about a strong desiring tension that is extraneous to the novels of the crisis and postmodern intellectualism. In my analysis, I accounted for the double feature of Sapienza's narrative, which looks in two directions – on the one hand, it resorts to strength in order to oppose domination and oppression, while on the other it appropriates the disruption of identity and metaphysics to produce a subject characterised by positive weakness and fluidity.

The theoretical apparatus employed in this thesis, and in particular the notion of a weak-strong subject, can be productively used in the interpretation of other authors who, like Sapienza, embrace an anti-metaphysical perspective, at the same time expressing a personal and passionate struggle to become subjects. Dacia Maraini's works appear to be particularly consonant with this approach,³ and so do Fabrizia Ramondino's works, which have been analysed from a very similar perspective by Jennifer Burns in *Fragments of Impegno*,⁴ and have started being associated with Sapienza's writings.⁵ More in general, the combination of post-structuralism and Marxist-feminist approaches provides insightful tools to analyse literary works that engage with the disruption of identity brought about by modernity, but which do so from a position that cannot be assimilated to the narrative of the crisis of dominant subjects, and therefore look at the process of implosion of abstract rationality from an

³ On a parallel between Maraini and Sapienza's works, focused on the theme of prison, see Maria Morelli, 'L'acqua in gabbia': the Heterotopic Space of the (Female) Prison in Goliarda Sapienza and Dacia Maraini's Narratives', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context*.

⁴ Burns, 'Fabrizia Ramondino; the Politics of Identity', in *Fragments of Impegno*, pp. 81-98.

⁵ See Ferro; Trevisan.

alternative perspective. In this respect, Elsa Morante's works, with their extraneousness to History as well as to any literary trend of her time, are suitable to be read in this perspective, as I suggest in a comparative analysis of *L'arte della gioia* and *La storia*.⁶ The repositioning of the 20th-century 'narrative of the crisis' as *one* version of the story, to which other narratives can be opposed, brings together not only works by women writers such as Sapienza, Maraini, Ramondino and Morante, but more broadly those authors who engage with the problem of the relationship between subaltern subjects, identity formation and political arena – and I think here in particular of migrant writers and LGBT writers (with Tondelli in a prominent position).⁷ In all these alternative figurations of subjectivity and politics, a central role is played by the reinstatement of the dimension of a desiring and situated body.

In their deconstructive and constructive effort, as I demonstrated in my analysis, Sapienza's works do not trace a direct and univocal line that connects the body to the realisation of freedom, but are rather characterised by multifarious, complex and at times contradictory tensions, proper to a writing that is itself in search of something, not in possession of an answer or a definitive perspective. Her writing is indeed defined by the same discordances it represents, alternating passionate and rationalistic attitudes, uncertainty and strong determination. It is discontinuous and syncretic, crossed by the effort to represent and elaborate a new subjectivity, ahead of its time in many respects and thus moving, tentatively, in a plurality of directions. As Scarpa notes, through her representation of a radical yearning for freedom Sapienza 'evoca valori futuri', meeting Braidotti's aspiration of new ways of thinking identity and politics:

⁶ *Agency and History*, cit.

⁷ See Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Altri libertini* (1987) and *Camere separate* (1989).

La ricerca di nuove forme di utilità politica [è] indissolubilmente legata alla creatività. Dobbiamo imparare a pensare alla nostra soggettività in modi radicalmente diversi da quelli a cui siamo abituati. Ci occorre un supplemento di energia creativa per compiere questo salto di qualità.⁸

Projected towards the future and yet rooted in the desiring matter of the body, Sapienza's narrative responds to the political and artistic challenge posed by post-structuralism by creating new ways of thinking the relationship between the self and the world that do not replicate essentialistic and logocentric understanding of the subject, but that are still able to produce agency and emancipation.

⁸ Braidotti, p. 20.

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