CASUS BELLI: GIUSEPPE GIOACHINO WAGING WAR BETWEEN TRADITION AND EXPERIMENTATION

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This thesis explores the notion of opposition in the *Sonetti romaneschi* by the Roman poet Giuseppe Gioachino Belli (1791-1863). It sees the poet as a warring rebel on the literary scene and examines his poetics and rhetoric of war through his choice of form (the hallowed sonnet structure), language (the 'rotten' vernacular) and subject (the downtrodden, previously voiceless underclass); it shows that these cornerstones of Belli's opus are in polemical response to literary stimuli and intimately connected to the political, religious and sociological upheavals in and beyond Rome in the troubled run-up to Unification. Chapter one, entitled 'Breaking the mould', draws on Belli's explicit declaration of war on his literary predecessors, and considers the influence of the Milanese writer Carlo Porta, arguing that Belli is more inimical than amicable, and not the simple imitator as thought to date. Chapter two, 'A passage of arms: possessing the dialogue sonnet', maintains that the fulcrum of Belli's antagonistic poetics and his realist enterprise lies in his unprecedented use of the dialogue sonnet form and the staging of direct debate. Chapter three, entitled 'The Battle of the Sexes', treats opposition at a thematic level, applying gender studies and related theory to Belli for the first time. Chapter four, 'War and peace: the silent revolution', examines Belli's creation of a totally new literary language, fulfilling the criteria for what Deleuze and Guattari, within broadly Marxist parameters, would identify as a 'minor literature' in the work of Kafka, in which a major language is somehow wrested from its anchors of power, or 'deterritorialized', to subvert the literary world from within. The thesis shows that Belli is more revolutionary than previously thought as a literary innovator, and an understudied giant of modern European literature as opposed to the marginal figure the historiography is wont to maintain.

LONG ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the notion of opposition in the *Sonetti romaneschi* by the Roman poet Giuseppe Gioachino Belli (1791-1863). Although Belli's profile has increased steadily thanks to a handful of serious scholars in Italy, he is still seen merely as a dialect writer and thus considered marginal, despite being labelled 'il più grande artefice del sonetto della nostra letteratura' by such leading voices as D'Annunzio. This thesis ultimately aims to redress the current blanket silence in the Anglophone critical world on a figure whose stature in nineteenth century literature deserves and demands to be elevated to that of Hugo and Dickens: only two UK doctoral theses exist, on purely linguistic aspects, there are very few critical articles in English, and there has been no dedicated monograph study as yet.

Belli effectively states his premise in a single word: 'nnoantri'. The compound noun succeeds in uniting a sense of defiance through the collective 'noi', with a notion of illegitimacy and futility in the reference to otherness and the hint at negativity in 'nno'. What's more, it is of course all bound up in the immediately evident opposition of the dialect. This thesis argues that the *Sonetti romaneschi* are built around a series of fundamental tensions and dissenting voices. With the world revolving around partitions, made explicit in such poems as 'Li du' ggener'umani', and the Roman populace on the

wrong side of the dividing line, the thesis views Belli as a warring rebel on the literary scene and seeks to demonstrate his poetics and rhetoric of war through his choice of form (the hallowed sonnet structure), language (the 'rotten' vernacular) and subject (the downtrodden, previously voiceless underclass); it shows that these cornerstones of Belli's opus are in polemical response to literary stimuli and intimately connected to the political, religious and sociological upheavals in and beyond Rome in the troubled run-up to Unification. This thesis thus aims to expose and explore the bellicose strategies of an understudied giant of the European Ottocento as he targets and defines his own literary territory. Methodologically, the thesis is informed and guided by overarching literary and cultural theory, a novelty in itself within scholarship on Belli, but is constantly anchored in detailed close readings, frequently linguistic in nature, and often relying on comparative analysis through the juxtaposition of Belli's *Sonetti romaneschi* with the works of others.

Chapter one, entitled 'Breaking the mould', draws on Belli's explicit declaration of war on his literary predecessors, and examines the influence of the Milanese poet Carlo Porta (1775-1821) on Belli's poetic production. Its basic premise is that the historiography has been, and continues to be, wrong to consider the two authors as champions of the same cause, despite the unanimous assertion that the former exerts an influence on the latter. Contrary to the claims of some critics (e.g. Rinaldi), the two poets never met, with Porta dying before Belli ever set foot outside the Papal States. The chapter analyzes Belli's first production in Romanesco, suggesting there is textual evidence to predate the traditional view (e.g. Teodonio) that Belli is first exposed to Porta on his travels to Milan in 1827, and traces Belli's concrete references to Porta in the

travelogues and correspondence. It then considers the nature of Porta's early direct influence on Belli, as made clear in his domesticating translations of some of the Milanese sonnets into Romanesco. It concludes that Porta is undoubtedly Belli's inspiration to use the dialect, but shows equally that Belli soon begins to signal both a thematic and technical departure from Porta's vernacular model.

The chapter then moves on to demonstrate that Belli explicitly defines his whole project (poetic form, medium and subject) in relation to, and in contrast to, Porta's Milanese poetry, gradually asserting his own independence. It shows that Belli differs massively in his use of the vernacular, as has not been fully appreciated by linguists (e.g. De Mauro); whilst Porta's is a municipal dialect, Belli's is a restricted sociolect. The chapter claims that this is the reason for the mistaken, indiscrimate coupling of the two authors, concluding that Belli is the first and only Italian poet to portray the lowest class of society in such a consistent and extensive poetic voice. Whilst the thesis charts Belli's departure from Porta, it maintains nevertheless that Belli's *Sonetti romaneschi* cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of Porta and the way in which Belli asserts his independence from him.

Chapter two, entitled 'A passage of arms: possessing the dialogue sonnet', maintains that the fulcrum of Belli's antagonistic poetics and his realist enterprise lies in his unprecedented use of the dialogue sonnet form and the staging of direct debate. Taking Clemente's widely held definition of the *Sonetti* as 'un grande dialogo', it sees Belli as the master of the *dramatic sonnet* or *sonetto dialogato*, producing over 200 examples, which have received little attention to date. Having charted for the first time the extensive use of this particularly skilful sonnet form in the Italian vernacular, the

chapter argues that the dialogue sonnet should be considered a particularly intensive distillation of Belli's poetics, as a forum for his pursuit of realism and anti-classical language. Bolstered theoretically by the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, the dialogue sonnet is examined as the stage for the most intimate forms of opposing voices, the perfect battleground for scathing flyting and the sustainable poetic framework for episodic series.

Chapter three, entitled 'The Battle of the Sexes', treats opposition from a thematic point of view, considering the sonnets in terms of gender. No sustained reading of Belli exists from the gender perspective, and this chapter aims to show that the application of existing theory offers rich pickings. It draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular, and the thought of the French feminists, for their attention to the gender divide as played out particularly through language. It argues that Belli does create strong female voices (beyond the 'credula femminetta' promised in the poet's introduction) within a dominant patriarchal and phallic economy. It also makes sense of the proliferation of the so-called obscene element of the *Sonetti*, which would result in Morandi's creation of the infamous sixth volume of improper poems, known as *Il Sesto*. Before now, only Guido Almansi had attempted to read the widely condemned profanity from a serious critical stance. This chapter offers a reading of the obscene as part of the binary construction of gender.

Chapter four, entitled 'War and peace: the silent revolution', also tackles the question of profanity from a related, yet slightly different angle. The most recent work on Belli (e.g. Di Nino) has focused on the *Sonetti romaneschi* from a linguistic viewpoint. This chapter considers litero-linguistic opposition and attempts to quantify the degree of revolutionary experimentation in Belli's chosen literary language. It argues that Belli

creates a totally new literary language, foreshadowing literary experimentalists such as Joyce, Kafka and Beckett. It shows how Belli's *Sonetti* fulfil all the criteria for what Deleuze and Guattari, within broadly Marxist parameters, would identify as a 'minor literature' in the work of Kafka, in which a major language is somehow wrested from its anchors of power, or 'deterritorialized', to subvert the literary world from within. It thus demonstrates that Belli is revolutionary, not principally from a thematic point of view, as Muscetta had maintained, but from the perspective of literary language. In this sense Belli is much more revolutionary than previously thought as a literary innovator.

Overall, the thesis shows that Belli should be seen as an understudied giant of modern European literature, as opposed to the marginal figure that the historiography still continues to maintain. Against any measure of modernity, Belli's poetry withstands close scrutiny and rewards the application of modern methods of criticism. The thesis suggests that this approach should be the framework for further study, which should take into account a greater selection of the 2279 *Sonetti romaneschi*, and the totally unexplored poetic production in standard Italian.

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CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

Deleuze-Guattari	Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
DBI	*Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1960-).
GDLI	*Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, 21 vols (Turin: UTET, 1967-2002)
Lanza, *Sonetti*	Belli, Giuseppe Gioachino, *I sonetti*, ed. by Maria Teresa Lanza, 4 vols (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965).
Lettere	Belli, Giuseppe Gioachino, *Le lettere*, ed. by Giacinto Spagnoletti, 2 vols (Milan: Cino del Duca, 1961).
LGZ	*Lettere, Giornali, Zibaldone*, ed. by Giovanni Orioli (Turin: Einaudi, 1962)
PR	Belli, Giuseppe Gioachino, *Poesie romanesche*, ed. by Roberto Vighi, 10 vols (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1988-1993).
Teodonio, *TSR*	Belli, Giuseppe Gioachino, *Tutti i sonetti romaneschi*, ed. by Marcello Teodonio, 2 vols (Milan: Newton & Compton, 1998).
Vigolo-Gibellini, *Sonetti*	Belli, Giuseppe Gioachino, *Sonetti*, ed. by Giorgio Vigolo and Pietro Gibellini (Milan: Mondadori Oscar Classici, 1990).
Vigolo, *Sonetti*	Belli, Giuseppe Gioachino, *I sonetti*, ed. by Giorgio Vigolo, 3 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1952).
VRB	Vaccaro, Gennaro, *Vocabolario romanesco belliano e italiano-romanesco: Etimologico, lessicale, grammaticale, fraseologico, dei proverbi e modi proverbiali, dei sinonimi e degli opposti* (Rome: Romana Libri Alfabeto, 1969).

INTRODUCTION: CASUS BELLI

"Tu sei nimmico / der tale o dder tar re: ffàjje la guerra"
(1268. 'Li sordati bboni')

I

αἰαῖ, ay, ay! … stutterer Demosthenes
gob full of pebbles outshouting seas –

4 words only of *mi 'art aches* and … 'Mine's broken,
you barbarian, T.W.!' *He* was nicely spoken.
'Can't have our glorious heritage done to death!'

I played the Drunken Porter in *Macbeth*.

'Poetry's the speech of kings. You're one of those
Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose!
All poetry (even Cockney Keats?) you see
's been dubbed by [ʌs] into RP,
Received Pronunciation, please believe [ʌs]
your speech is in the hands of the Receivers.'

'We say [ʌs] not [uz], T.W.!' That shut my trap.
I doffed my flat a's (as in 'flat cap')
my mouth all stuffed with glottals, great
lumps to hawk up and spit out … *E-nun-ci-ate*!

II

So right, yer buggers, then! We'll occupy
your lousy leasehold Poetry.

I chewed up Littererchewer and spat the bones
into the lap of dozing Daniel Jones,
dropped the initials I'd been harried as
and used my *name* and own voice: [uz] [uz] [uz],
ended sentences with by, with, from,
and spoke the language that I spoke at home.
RIP RP, RIP T.W.
I'm *Tony* Harrison no longer you!

You can tell the Receivers where to go
(and not aspirate it) once you know
Wordsworth's *matter/water* are full rhymes,
[uz] can be loving as well as funny.

My first mention in the *Times*
automatically made Tony Anthony!

('Them & [uz]' by Tony Harrison[1])

Good literature often stems from tensions. Tensions of various kinds, of course, be they poetic, stylistic, or linguistic. This doctoral thesis explores the notion of opposition in the *Sonetti romaneschi* by the Roman poet Giuseppe Gioachino Belli (1791-1863). His poetics of war consists of a three-pronged attack, uniting his unique choice of form, the hallowed Petrarchan sonnet structure; language, the 'rotten' vernacular; and subject, the downtrodden, previously voiceless underclass, whom he elevates to the unprecedented position of worthy protagonists in a highly literate form of poetry. By way of initial introduction, Tony Harrison's poem quoted above encapsulates what I consider to be the main creative tensions in Belli's oeuvre, which form the background to discussion in the chapters and pages that follow. 'Them & [uz]' conveniently poses many of the same

[1] *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 122-123.

problems within and without the work – in the internal dynamics of the sonnets and in their continued critical reception – and fights many of the same battles of Belli's literary enterprise, with an unflinching vigour characteristic of both poets. A brief look at its tensions will get us started.

As the title promises, the poem is about conflict and subversion at a number of levels, beginning with the pronominal. 'Them & [uz]' instantly reverses the usual word order of the tribal phrase 'us and them', which evokes social divide in the British context, and the phonetic rendition of 'us' signals apartheid of a linguistic kind, hinting that separation is based not only on the North-South division, but predominantly on one of class. By inverting the pronoun order then, Harrison announces that the poem will be an emphatic apology for otherness, reappropriating the pronoun of inclusion, '[ʌs]', and excluding the establishment as an alienated 'them'. Caught in the crossfire between the opposing plural camps, however, is a fledgling first-person singular, struggling to stake its ground. The Greek exclamation of pain and suffering in the opening line, echoed by the polysemous English, at once equivalent in sense to the Greek, but also a Northern dialectal greeting and an expression of obedience to superiority, are both nevertheless playing on the phonic sound [ʌɪ]. The faltering 'I' faces a battle to forge an identity, socially and linguistically yes, but even more so poetically and literarily, especially as the authority figure of the teacher is determined to classify him as 'one of those', one of them, one of the others. Harrison's ironic classroom, where class division is supposedly eradicated, the grammar school where the bright boy from a poor background wins a prized place to escape his unfortunate roots, is merely the arena for the reinforcement of

class warfare, where literature is taught as a privileged realm, exercized by the few for the benefit of the few.

But the intimidated pupil will get his revenge in his poetic rewriting, ridiculing the righteous teacher from the start. Interrupted in his boyhood reading for adulterating the opening words of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'My heart aches' naturally becoming '*mi 'art aches*' in his Yorkshire speech, the lad from Leeds literarily interrupts the teacher's diatribe with an understated yet devastating parenthesis '(even Cockney Keats?)', questioning the teacher's statement that poetry is the province of 'kings', knowing full well that Keats's 'Cockney School' received criticism in his day for so-called low diction.[2] With the teacher's defence of literature's 'glorious heritage' stinking of colonialism, hegemony and empire, the humiliated schoolboy is silenced: 'That shut my trap'. The silence is only confined to the classroom, however, as the boy goes on to become a successful poet, trampling on the delicate sensibilities of high literature, 'Littererchewer' as Harrison calls it in part two with its heady mix of ironic respect in the capital 'L' and the class-driven disdain expected of his sort in the demotic pronunciation and semantic distortion.

Despite the inauspicious initiation to literature by its traditional guardians, the would-be writer is determined to trespass at least temporarily into the 'lousy leasehold' of poetry, suggestive of a Dickensian London (again the North-South divide) where the poor can only ever be the bankrollers of the rich property barons. The politically engaged wordsmith has already undermined the imagery of ownership, however, by having the

[2] Anthony Burgess is aware of the anti-establishment irony in the reception of the figure that would become England's finest Romantic poet, an argument he implicitly restates, moreover, by juxtaposing Keats with Belli, whom D'Annunzio considered Italy's greatest sonneteer, in staging a series of imaginary Roman encounters between the two contemporaries in the novel *ABBA ABBA*.

teacher describe his rare breed of RP practitioners through the sobriquet ‘Receivers’, where receivership of course suggests bankruptcy, of the moral sort no doubt, but the accusation is that Received Pronunciation is hollow and empty, a mere affectation, with the collective ‘[ʌs]’ consequently lacking in any real identity. Real identity, the poem argues, only comes as a consequence of battle, something found in the face of constant hostility. The battle is both social and literary, victory in which Harrison triumphantly declares with the conviction to assert his own ‘*name*’ and ‘own voice’, announced in the emphatic ‘[uz] [uz] [uz]’, creating the deliberate dissonance with the end-rhyme in the previous line: the ear, like social convention, expects the phonically closer ‘[ʌs]’ as uttered by the likes of ‘them’.

The force of the whole counterargument is its delivery in knowingly good poetry. The poem is thus a cautious celebration of literature first and foremost, and of its democratic domain, even if it still has some distance to go to that end. Whilst the poem itself is testament to a successful pursuit of identity to some degree, its dynamics of rebellion only work since the battle rages on. The ironic ending destroys everything he has worked towards: having fought to make it legitimate to ‘drop […] the initials’, a reference to what he considers a middle-class naming tendency typical of his dehumanizing education, as well as the linguistic phenomenon of dropping one’s aitches associated with Northern speakers of English, the breakthrough recognition of his success in the symbolic organ of the establishment ‘automatically’ lends him a more respectable identity. Harrison does a good job of ‘occupy[ing] … Poetry’, and has made polemical verse his forte ever since (most famously in his poem ‘V’), but his type and his message remain imposters to a certain extent, though many are satisfied to be bracketed this way.

The ultimate conclusion, then, is a political one: only poetry can even hope to have the magical powers to enact change and to succeed where governments fail. At the very least, it needs to chart the battles.

So what does Harrison's poem have to do with Belli's *Sonetti romaneschi*, separated as they are by a century and more of poetic practice, not to mention the divergent cultures from which they emerge and in turn represent? The tensions are much the same. Like Harrison, Belli effectively states his premise in a single word, 'nnoantri', forging an identity of otherness in opposition to 'sti *lòro*', as many of the sonnets' speakers have it, by constructing what Henri Tajfel and social identity theory would call an 'ingroup' from the vestiges of an 'outgroup', performing the same sleight of hand as Harrison in reversing the roles of 'us and them'. 'Nnoantri', the pronominal identity of 'nnoi ggentaccia bbassa' (1807. 'Er bene der Monno'), succeeds in uniting a sense of defiance through the collective 'noi', along with a notion of illegitimacy and futility in the reference to otherness and the hint at negativity in 'nno'. What's more, it is of course all bound up in the immediately evident opposition of the Roman dialect, just like Harrison's IPA [uz], the resources of which Belli would surely have drawn on, had the system of phonetic notation been available to him, in order to 'esporre le frasi del romano quali dalla bocca del romano escono tuttora', as he puts it in the introduction.[3] The same inadequacy faces him of using the orthographical conventions associated with the standard to record distinctly different sounds, however, and he will begin his project by creating his own system of phonic representation, marshalling the 'segni cogniti' of the standard into the service of capturing the 'incogniti suoni', much like Harrison does with

[3] *PR*, I, p. 15.

'*mi 'art*' for example, but on a much wider scale.[4] Remarkably for his time, though, Belli also celebrates otherness, taking upon himself the task of expressing the 'differenze essenzialmente organiche e fondamentali' of his subjects through their speech, rejoicing, like Harrison, at the failure of education in the broad sense to hammer diversity out of the system:

> Vero però sempre mi par rimanere che la educazione che accompagna la parte dell'incivilimento, fa ogni sforzo per ridurre gli uomini alla uniformità: e se non vi riesce quanto vorrebbe, è forse questo uno de' beneficii della creazione.[5]

Identity and otherness, therefore, depend on the crucial expression of the authentic 'own voice', as Harrison puts it. This is maintained predominantly through language. Overhanging the Harrison poem is the ironic awareness that Received Pronunciation is an arbitrary linguistic system, 'in no sense linguistically superior or inferior to other accents', and thus as arbitrary as Harrison's own Yorkshire, Keats's Cockney or Wordsworth's Westmorland (as borne out in the 'full rhyme' pronunciation of '*matter/water*').[6] The same applies, of course, to Belli's Romanesco in relation to the socially prestigious Tuscan, although Belli professes not to realize as much, repeatedly referring to the idiom of the poor as a linguistic corruption, 'una favella tutta guasta e corrotta' as he calls it in the introduction.[7] And yet the poet's celebration of the language across the two thousand sonnets would seem to belie such a statement and proclaim unequivocally its poetic legitimacy.[8]

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[4] Ibid., p. 25.
[5] Ibid., p. 15.
[6] 'Received Pronunciation' in David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics & Phonetics*, 5th edn. (London: Blackwell, 2003), p. 388.
[7] *PR*, I, p. 21.
[8] Ibid., p. 21.

Intimately connected to the social profile of language are the issues of hierarchy clearly raised in 'Them & [uz]', including the master/servant dichotomy. Harrison and Belli's literary worlds are both plurilingual in that at least two languages are spoken in the immediate socio-cultural setting, locked in a perpetual, though one-sided, battle for social prestige. The speakers of each language thus present and reinforce the battle lines in their own speech. As a result, speakers of the minority language frequently reflect their relative social positions, hinted at for example by Harrison's 'ay, ay!', as in the expression of servitude 'ay, ay, Sir!', and made explicit in 'I doffed my flat a's (as in "flat cap")', where the action of raising one's hat in deference is initially mirrored through the schoolboy's linguistic obedience to authority and convention. Many of Belli's characters spontaneously do the same, particularly in scenarios where they are seen in dialogue with members who are socially superior. As in the Harrison poem, direct and reported speech is often employed by Belli to stage direct opposition, with the poet recognizing the importance of dialogue to resolve conflict, or at least to provide dramatic tension which can be exploited literarily. Such dialogic dynamics often include an appeal to the reader as judge, throwing up the issue of the reader's role, for instance. The importance of dialectics in Belli's poetic enterprise forms the focus of chapter two.

The relative social imbalance of linguistic prestige is perpetuated through a number of strategies. To maintain social superiority, the ruling classes may resort to the denigration of non-standard speech as an affliction or disease, as in 'Them & [uz]'. The speaker's Northern sounds are rubbished as 'great lumps to hawk up and spit out'. In Belli too, the imagery of illness runs throughout the depiction of the poor, often in conjunction with the reduction to animality. Women, in particular, are imagined as

diseased, especially in reference to their sexual presentation, according to the same masculinist tactics used to perpetuate male domination and phallocracy which scholars have identified across cultures and timeframes in the wider struggle for sexual supremacy. The gender battle in the *Sonetti* is discussed in chapter three.

Besides the social prestige of the language, or what might be called its external aspects, the language itself is marked by a number of internal features, which run far deeper than the problem of notation. A further tension, but part of the authentic voice, is the expression of demotic speech, its literary legitimacy and the boundaries of acceptability. The pejorative, distasteful, obscene, for example, can all form part of a subcultural identity in general. More often than not, however, they are employed as strategies in a deliberate rebellion. In the sonnets, as in Harrison, inequality may be blatant, but this does not lead to a position of resignation on the part of the underdogs, which manifests itself in a number of ways, principally linguistic. Harrison's invective force, for instance, is strong in the poem but tightly controlled, with his restraining himself to 'yer buggers', though he stops only slightly short of using the strongest of all taboo terms in the elliptical 'You can tell the Receivers where to go / (and not aspirate it)'. The 'it' in question is the euphemistic periphrasis 'eff off', the metaphorical two fingers Harrison is sticking up to the blinkered purveyors of literature past and present, in order to avoid the uncouth 'F-word'. The ironic instruction not to 'aspirate it' is both a further reference to Northern aitch-droppers but also the widespread tendency towards the hypercorrection of 'H' as 'haitch', an error not exclusive to the so-called lower classes, through analogy with other letters of the alphabet, which mostly reflect the sound they represent. Compared with Harrison, Belli will go much further in his presentation of

demotic speech, saturating his sonnets with profanity and scurrility, malapropisms, hypercorrections and speech defects of all sorts, conscious nevertheless of the literary transgressions he is thereby committing by containing them in what John Donne called the 'pretty rooms' of the 'well wrought urn'.[9] Linguistic violence of this kind is confronted throughout the thesis, with Belli initially borrowing the idea from Carlo Porta, the focus of the opening chapter, but is discussed in particular detail in chapter three, where highly sexualized language is considered as part of the gender division, and in chapter four, where demotic speech is analysed theoretically according to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'tensored language', which forms part of the linguistic fight back against oppression.

Language aside, however, Harrison's poem also addresses various tensions of literary proportions, such as the dichotomy between poet and persona, or between literary tradition and improper subject matter of various sorts. Acutely aware of such figures as Demosthenes, Shakespeare, Keats and Wordsworth, as well as the poetic tradition generally, Harrison's poem is at once highly literate yet grounded in quotidian reality through the colloquial speech. It is a poetic rebellion waged within the game rules of literature. Form is adhered to in metre, for instance, with the preponderance of iambic pentameters, and the overriding structure of tight rhyming couplets, a traditional form of satiric verse, but order is equally broken at times to stage a protest, as in the emphatic example at the phonic level with the dissonance of '[ʌs]'. Like Harrison, Belli will tread the fine line between rejecting and maintaining the literary tradition. The sonnet's scanty ground, as Wordsworth had it, for centuries the sole province of distilled lyricism, with

[9] The description of the sonnet is from 'The Canonization'. See *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by A.J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 47-48.

notable exceptions particularly in the Italian tradition, seems an unlikely place for a manifesto of socio-political change, even more so under the imposing shadow of St Peter's and the watchful eyes of its thought police. And yet it will be commandeered as a container of bubbling Otherness, often exceedingly unpleasant within, but always poetically elegant on the outside, maintaining formal decorum. Whilst Belli emphatically rejects his literary predecessors in dialect, as we will see in the opening chapter, he is constantly conscious of his poetic position within wider traditions, including those of the sonnet and satire.

The final reason for choosing 'Them & [uz]' as a way into Belli is both social and literary, and is contained in Harrison's conclusion that '[uz] can be loving *as well as* funny' (my Italics). Like Harrison, Belli never denies the comic value of accent, dialect and otherness, in stark juxtaposition to various standards. On the contrary, he exploits it for everything it is worth. But as the *Sonetti romaneschi* amply demonstrate, the language is not merely confined to comedy. Too often Belli is forced into the straightjacket of comedy, when his Romanesco idiom is fully capable of expressing the full range of emotions associated with the human comedy. Laughter is by no means the only string to his bow.

This leads us on to Belli's critical standing in general. This thesis is unashamedly the case for Belli. In an era of scholarly openness and equality, when writers of modest talent are frequently admitted to the bar of greatness, it is a minor scandal that the work of Giuseppe Gioachino Belli, lauded by a roll-call of literary heavyweights including the likes of Sainte-Beuve, Gogol, Pascoli, Gadda, Pasolini, Levi, Zanzotto and Burgess, should still be unknown generally and the author unrecognized beyond the city of his

birth. In a foreword to the first edition of the *Sonetti romaneschi* in 1865, his son Ciro stated that whilst Belli's name was not unheard of in the newly united Italy (in fact well-known amongst Romans), his literary significance was not fully realized. The same could be said today, as he is left to haunt the margins of literary histories.[10] The reasons are twofold: dialect and scurrility. In that sense, this is also the case for war on the narrow-mindedness of cultural appreciation and a plea to dispense with hero-worshipping the merely accomplished, in order to return to an overlooked giant of the fairly recent past. As I hope to demonstrate, Belli's poetry measures up against any yardstick of literary excellence, and his work sits firmly within the literary trends of modern European literature.

In 1962, when reviewing Carlo Muscetta's then recent monograph on Belli, in the rather aptly named *Books from Abroad*, a title that seemed to treat the exotic with equal measures of caution and anticipation, Rudolf Sturm of Skidmore College wrote the following:

> This book on Belli cannot be considered definitive, since much of his correspondence is still unexplored. But it is a valuable addition to the Bellian writings. In the bibliography Muscetta lists over three hundred books and articles concerning Belli, most of them written in Italian, a few in German and French, and only one article in English (in The Kenyon Review, 1952). The English-speaking world owes Belli more than that.[11]

Not only is Belli's correspondence still unexplored more than half a century on, despite most of it now at least being edited, what is more damning is Belli's treatment in English.

[10] Cf. *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* in which Belli features only in a single sentence as an afterthought in the section on 'Popular poetry' within the already secondary chapter on 'Other novelists and poets of the Risorgimento'. Despite being a literary history, and thus selective, Belli's marginalized position is typical of his place on the literary Parnassus.

[11] Review of *Cultura e poesia di G. G. Belli* by Carlo Muscetta in *Books from Abroad*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Autumn, 1962), 418.

Next to nothing has come since, with the exception of translations into English, some of a high quality indeed, such as those by Burgess and Stocks.[12] There is no monograph study of Belli in English, and only two doctoral theses prior to the present have ever been written in the UK, both produced over twenty years ago on purely linguistic aspects of the sonnets. Whilst this thesis touches on linguistic elements where relevant, it attempts to state the literary worth of the poet, by assessing it according to the tools of modern criticism. Scholarly attention in twentieth-century Italy gravitated around the Roman conferences of 1963 and 1984, riding on the wave of interest aroused by the philological work of the Italian scholars Segre, Isella and Corti in Pavia and their students in turn, notably Gibellini, but this has since waned dramatically. Given these scholars' theoretical interests, however, it is surprising that little literary theory has yet been applied to Belli. This is undoubtedly symptomatic of the fact that his poetry has always been studied in isolation, with his literary language defining his literary status in a sort of infinite regress. Dialect alone, however, cannot sustain or account for what is likely the largest corpus of homogenous, and technically brilliant, sonnets ever produced. This thesis thus attempts to start righting the wrong that Sturm so justly highlighted some sixty years ago. Casus Belli: the case for war, the case for Belli.

[12] In addition to the Burgess versions contained in *ABBA ABBA*, see the lively recent translations by Mike Stocks in *Sonnets* (London: Oneworld Classics, 2007). Only a fraction of the sonnets have appeared in English, however, with Burgess's seventy-odd remaining the largest selection available.

CHAPTER ONE

BREAKING THE MOULD:
CHE ME NE PREME UN CAZZO DE L'ISTORIA

1.1 Milan, Porta and the early imitations
1.2 Rome, Belli and the act of de-portation

Introduction

> Ma la sua vera passione, da buon milanese, era il Porta: un poeta al quale io, prima d'allora, avevo sempre anteposto il Belli, e invece non era giusto – sosteneva Malnate –, volevo confrontare la funebre, controriformistica monotonia del Belli con la varia e calda umanità del Porta?[1]

It is indeed a compelling comparison, even if here its terms may be somewhat skewed. Giampi Malnate, intellectual sparring partner and victor of Bassani's narrator-protagonist in pursuing the affections of Micòl Finzi-Contini, is as steadfast, ideological, and biased as his assessment of Belli. Whilst death and gloom are recurrent themes of the 'poeta morto', and a certain *controriformismo* may be displayed in such sonnets as 2170. 'La morte co la coda', to characterise Belli's Romanesco monument as monotonous is to do him an unjust disservice: after all, the numerous sonnets are designed as 'distinti quadretti', as Belli explains in the introduction, with the express purpose of relieving the reader 'dal tedio di una lettura troppo unita e monotona'.[2] Moreover, the qualities Malnate identifies in Porta apply equally to Belli's human comedy. Even if the adjective 'calda' may not always sit comfortably with the judgement he casts upon some of his

[1] Bassani, Giorgio, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962), p. 256.
[2] *PR*, I, p. 23. 'Poeta morto' is Belli's own self-directed epithet in a letter of 6 August 1842 to Angelo Balestra. *Lettere*, II, p. 177.

subjects, the sense of humanity shown by his poetic persona toward the plight of his fellow Roman plebeians, 'nnoantri', is frequently warm and compassionate. But Belli has something to say about the whole of humanity to boot. In fact, as Gadda points out, Belli's extensive reading has instilled deep within him an understanding and appreciation of the 'umano e casalingo preesistere della varia umanità'.[3] Whatever the opinions of history's various judges, then, (though Gadda for one goes so far as to add that 'il Belli aveva in sé forze originali da eguagliare o superare il milanese') the juxtaposition of Porta and Belli has often been cited, is cemented by the historiography, and may very well shed light on both authors; the parameters of the comparison, however, as with Malnate, are usually dismissively over-simplified.[4] There can be no doubt that Porta is the main source of Belli's initial conversion to dialect writing, as will be made clear, and echoes of the Milanese writer do resound in the vast sonnet production, but Malnate is ultimately right to point to differences of massive proportions in the poetics of the two.

Distinguishing himself as the first to caution against speaking of Belli and Porta in the same breath in his introductory essay to Sciascia's *Il fiore della poesia romanesca*, Pasolini makes a brief yet tantalizing case for Belli's revolutionary originality:

> la violenza con cui la Roma popolare si esprime nel Belli è tale da allontanare naturalmente il ricordo della vita milanese del Porta: e se segnare il punto di sutura tra le due poesie rimane un lavoro interessante, non ci pare però avere molta importanza; il 'regresso' del Belli dentro l'esistenza linguistica di un uomo del popolo, non ha riscontro nè nel Porta nè in alcun altro poeta anteriore, in lingua o in dialetto.[5]

[3] Gadda, Carlo Emilio, 'L'Arte del Belli', in *I viaggi la morte* (Milan: Garzanti, 1958), 161-174 , p. 165.
[4] Ibid., p. 166.
[5] Sciascia, Leonardo, (ed.), *Il fiore della poesia romanesca (Belli, Pascarella, Trilussa, Dell'Arco)* (Caltanisetta: Salvatore Sciascia, 1952), x.

Whilst readers would do well to heed some of Pasolini's advice in retaining a certain amount of scepticism towards indiscriminating histories of Italian literature, to suggest a single point of interaction between Porta and Belli is equally misleading. The Milanese author is responsible for weaving a continuous thread of influence which works its way throughout Belli's poetry. Regardless of any inherent interest, then, the relationship between Porta and Belli is not only important, but the only lens through which Belli's poetic production in Romanesco may be fully understood. Belli's subsequent divergence from Carlo Porta is an explicit one, his project deliberately defined and refined in a constant dialectic with Porta, without whose model 'il più grande poeta italiano', as Pasolini acclaims the Romanesco sonneteer, would not have come to find his poetic voice and would not have bequeathed to us his great monument to the 'plebe di Roma'.[6]

1.1 Milan, Porta, and the early imitations

> *Mercredi 22 [août] – A 8 heures levée, tœlette, lecture de poesies milanaises de feu Charles Porta.*[7]

The *Journal de voyage de 1827* thus records Belli's first explicit reference to the dialect poetry of Carlo Porta. Taking advantage of the leisure afforded him by his convenient marriage to the wealthy widow Maria Conti in 1816, the biographical detail that might well be considered as important for the production of the *Sonetti romaneschi* as the poetic model offered by Porta, Belli makes his first visit to Milan in 1827, following earlier travels to Venice, Ferrara and Naples. The main impetus for going to Milan in the first

[6] Quoted in Tabacchi, Alessandro, *Er Viceddìo: Il Papa e i sonetti del Belli* (Valentano: Scipioni, 2005), p. 109. See also Pasolini's conversation with Achille Millo in which he states: 'Dio sa [...] quanto ami il Leopardi. Eppure devo dire che, secondo me, il Belli è più grande anche di Leopardi'. Millo, Achille, *Conversazioni con Montale e Pasolini* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Oleandro, 1996), p. 37.
[7] *LGZ*, p. 61. Note Belli's imperfect knowledge of French.

instance is his host and tour guide, the architect Giacomo Moraglia, a native speaker of Milanese whom Belli had befriended years earlier in the literary circles of Rome, whither Moraglia had moved to perfect his studies. Belli's early acquaintances included several other Milanese figures such as the art-historian, writer and artist Luigi Gerolamo Calvi and the painter Francesco Hayez, but it was Moraglia who had secured the publication, in Milan in 1825, of Belli's epistle 'in terzine' entitled 'A Messer Francesco Spada'.[8] A dialect enthusiast himself, whose correspondence with Belli includes passages in both Milanese and Romanesco, Moraglia would serve as Belli's personal interpreter of Porta. Indeed, the 'lecture de poesies' of 22 August 1827 would be performed by Moraglia, and Belli's first stay in Milan, from 12 August to 30 September, would be punctuated by evening readings of Porta at the house of Moraglia's sister-in-law, Teresa Turpini, for whom the first fully-fledged 'sonetto romanesco' would be written shortly after his return to Rome. Two further entries in the same travelogue attest specifically to Belli's own reading of Porta: after studying a letter from a relative on Monday 3 September, Belli records 'cela fait, j'appliquai à la lecture de Porta'; similarly, on the following evening, he writes 'à 9 heures chez moi ecc. ecc. à l'ordinaire: à minuit au lit avec les poésies de Porta à la main: environs à 2 heures je m'endormis ecc.'[9] Having borrowed a book of Porta until this point, Belli is taken with the Milanese poet to such an extent that he buys himself two expensive 1826 editions.[10]

[8] For a reconstruction of Belli in Milan, see Janni, Guglielmo, *Belli e la sua epoca* (Milan: Cino Del Duca, 1967), I, pp. 208-228.
[9] *LGZ*, p. 69.
[10] The detail of the high price (96 baiocchi), first noted by Domenico Gnoli, is explained by Livio Jannattoni. The two editions, 'proibite per ovvie ragioni dal governo Lombaro-Veneto, epperciò divenute rarissime', were clearly bought on the black market. See Jannattoni, Livio, 'Il Belli e le poesie milanesi del "defunto" Carlo Porta', in *La Fiera letteraria*, 20 May 1951, p. 4.

Illustrating both Belli's comfort with Milanese, and the degree to which Porta had become a familiar touchstone, Moraglia's letter of 5 December, following Belli's return to Rome at the end of September, concludes by switching to dialect and making reference to Porta's famous prostitute character, Ninetta del Verzee:

> Viva sano, tanti complimenti alla sig.ra Mariuccia tua consorte, un bacio al tuo Ciro; recordet de mantegnì la toa promessa sta primavera. Ho scritto on po' de dannà, ma già te cappisset istess. Addio el me car Peppe minga quel della Nina del Verzee. – El to svisceraa amis.[11]

Shortly after receiving this letter, Belli sends two Romanesco sonnets to Moraglia for him to read 'per ischerzo' at the wedding of his new-found friend Teresa Turpini to a certain 'signor G. Longhi'. The two sonnets, 3. 'A la sora Teta che pijja marito' and 4. 'Ar sor Longhi che pijja mojje', are early examples of Belli's characteristic wit, the first counselling the wife on how to twist her husband around her little finger[12], the second warning the husband not to let himself be bossed around by his wife, with a few scurrilous references thrown in for good measure. [13] Although critics dub these the first of the 'sonetti romaneschi', and see them as evidence of Belli's initial awareness and general adoption of the dialect sonnet in the wake of his exposure to Porta, the precise inspiration for the two lightly mocking sonnets may well be Porta's comical 'Per el matrimoni del sur Pepp Vandell'. Just as Porta's sonnet turns around a gibing critique of marriage as 'el sepolcher d'amor per cert carogn / De miee, de marì senza cervell', only to conclude that it can instead be 'el trionf pù bell', so too does Belli continue the Hamletish portrait of dirge in marriage as part of his humorous celebration of the

[11] Quoted in *LGZ*, p. 45.
[12] 'dateje una zeccata e un zuccherino; / e dorce dorce, e ber bello ber bello, / lo farete ballà sopra un cudrino', *PR*, I, p. 59.
[13] 'Armanco nun la fà tamanto granne; / e si nun vòi aridurte omo a posticcio, / tiè pe' tte li carzoni e le mutanne', *PR*, I, p. 61.

occasion. He cautions the bride against the physical dangers of wedlock, that rotten state of disease:

> Nun ve fate pijjà la malatia
> come sarebbe a dí d'esse gelosa,
> pe' nun fà come Checca la tignosa
> che li pormoni s'è sputata via.

The bridegroom is warned in turn that insanity awaits him through the toponymic reference to 'la strada de li pazzarelli', before being told bluntly that the errors of his ways will only be made clear when the death-bell tolls:

> Sí, pijja mojje, levete er crapiccio;
> ma te n'accorgerai pe ddio sagranne
> quanno che sarà cotto er pajjariccio.

Whilst Belli would maintain the promise referred to in Moraglia's letter to return to Milan the following year, making visits in both 1828 and 1829, and would go on to imitate Porta beyond any degree of doubt, there are also three broadly dialectal compositions prior to the start of his travels in 1827, which have been dismissed by critics as unrelated juvenilia. The first dates from 1817 and is 'una epistola scherzosa in ottave a Caterina Biagioni, madre di Francesco Spada', beginning 'Sora Ninetta mia sora Ninetta'.[14] If the allusion to Ninetta were not already enough to signal some familiarity with Porta, the final four lines of the first stanza apparently hint at a parallel between Belli's poetic persona after his 'febbre' and the impotent Baldissar as he is first portrayed by Ninetta del Verzee:

> Sora Ninetta mia sora Ninetta
> ve scrivo questa lettera ve scrivo;
> perdonerete se la fo in cassetta,
> perché m'hanno appoggiato un lavativo:
> ve dirò du' parole in furia e 'n fretta

[14] See Teodonio, Marcello, *Introduzione a Belli* (Rome: Laterza, 1992), p. 35.

sor pe favve capace che so vivo,
ma tanto moscio, per quer bio segreto,
che paro un peperone sotto aceto.[15]

The image of the 'peperone sotto aceto' seems at least to have comic sexual undertones, and if this is admitted, the setting, with the reference to the 'cassetta', along with the coincidental name of the addressee, may be read as a reworking of Porta's 'Sura Caterinin', which Belli would later imitate directly in 'A Nina'. Teodonio's assertion that at the time of writing Belli is 'ben dieci anni prima dell'incontro con i testi di Porta' already seems questionable, then, but any remaining doubts must surely be swept away by highlighting further references to Porta's work in both of the other early dialect experiments.[16]

In 'Lustrissimi: co' questo mormoriale', a sonnet from 1818-19 and recited at a literary lunch presided over by Belli, there is an unmistakable reference to the 'lustrissem scior', the silent interlocutor of Giovannin Bongee in both of Porta's poems dedicated to the cowardly, working-class Milanese cuckold. Belli is playfully asserting his humility before other learned literary figures by using the same immediate statement of hierarchy. The fact that these literati included people who would have been familiar with Porta and Milanese literature, such as Giulio Perticari, son-in-law of Vincenzo Monti, and Bartolomeo Borghesi[17], only lends the thesis extra weight, as does the sonnet's context: a parody of popular literature, including such elements as the *stornello*. Although the clear 'attacco portiano' is identified by Muscetta, it is curtly dismissed by Teodonio, who again

[15] Ibid., p. 35.
[16] Ibid., p. 35.
[17] Borghesi had served as podestà, completing a mission in Milan, and was also interested in regional literature, being a member of a 'gruppo romagnolo-marchigiano [with a] deciso orientamento letterario-linguistico', *DBI*, 12, p. 628. Belli's annotations to the sonnet include a partial list of those present at the luncheon, *PR*, I, p. 53.

adds that 'si ricordi che Belli conobbe le poesie di Porta nel 1827'.[18] And yet a similar 'attacco portiano' may be identified in 2. 'A Pippo De R...', written in 1820 and addressed to Belli's close associate Filippo De Romanis, author, publisher and bookseller, as well as fellow co-founder of the Accademia Tiberina, who as such must have been aware of Porta and the politico-literary events in Milan following the publication of the 'Biblioteca Italiana' some five years previously. The sonnet begins 'Sentissi, Pippo', immediately recalling Porta's 'Senti, el mè Boss' as well as 'Sent Teresin', another sonnet Belli tellingly later translates in full. What is more, whereas the first of the two poetasters targeted in the sonnet is transformed into a jocular 'zor abbate Urtica' on account of his 'fisionomia spinosetta', the second becomes 'cquell'antro freghino de Marchiònne', an apparent allusion to Porta's Marchionn de gamb avert.[19] Taken as a whole, then, these seemingly innocuous textual allusions amount to a refutation of Teodonio's position regarding Belli's initial exposure to Porta, and instead confirm Vigolo's cautious suggestion that 'forse fu lui [Moraglia] che sin dai lontani tempi della dimora romana fece conoscere al nostro le poesie del Porta'.[20]

Whatever the exact nature of the process by which he first became aware of the Milanese dialect poet, by 1831 Belli is sufficiently struck by Porta to attempt his own full Romanesco imitations of four of Porta's sonnets: 'Sura Caterinin'; 'Sent Teresin'; 'Richezza del vocabolari milanes'; 'Gh'è al mond di cristian tant ostinaa'. Significantly, the sonnets inspired directly by Porta come to fruition at the start of Belli's most fertile

[18] Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 9.
[19] The historical figure is a certain D. Melchior Missirini. Linguistically, one would expect the preservation of the post-tonic [e] in Romanesco, as in the sonnet 1612. 'L'accimature de la padrona', where the priestly Latin formula 'secundum ordinem Melchisedec' is rendered as 'secunnum òrdine Merchisedecche'. *PR*, VII, p. 79.
[20] Vigolo, II, p. 22.

period of Romanesco production, spanning the years 1830-37, in which the bulk of his sonnets are produced (some 1950 of an eventual 2279). Besides the versions of Porta, the year 1831 also sees him produce some 216 sonnets in Romanesco, including some of his most memorable ones such as 276. 'Er giorno der giudizzio', 275. 'La fin der monno' and 288. 'La bbona famijja'. It is clear, then, that Porta and Belli's imitations of the Milanese poet form an intrinsic part of the entire Roman project.

The first of the imitations, 97. 'A Nina', is the most faithful and perhaps the most illustrative of all, especially when seen in parallel:

Sura Caterinin, tra i bej cossett Che la gh'ha intorna e che ghe fan onor, Gh'è quell para de ciapp e quij dò tett Ch'hin degn de guarnì on lett de imperator.	Tra ll'antre tu' cosette che un cristiano ce se farebbe scribba e ffariseo, tienghi, Nina, du' bbocce e un culiseo, propio da guarní er letto ar gran Zurtano.
Oh che tett! Oh che ciapp plusquam perfett! Collogaa a voeuna a voeuna de per lor, Sald al post senza zent, senza farsett, Comor, che paren faa da on tornidor.	A cchiappe e zzinne, manco in ner moseo sc'è robba che tte po arrubbà la mano; ché ttu, ssenz'agguantajje er palandrano, sce fascevi appizzà Ggiuseppebbreo.
Per mì sont chì a giugagh el mè salari Che la moeuv pussee usij lee col vardà l'occhietto, Che i olter donn cont el voltalla in ari.	Io sce vorrebbe franca 'na scinquina che nn'addrizzi ppiú ttu ccor fà l'occhietto, che ll'antre cor mostrà la passerina.
Basta dì che mì istess di voeult arrivi A cercall di mezz'or s'hoo de pissà, E ghe l'hoo drizz e dur adess che scrivi.	Lo so ppe mmé, cche ppe ttrovà l'uscello, s'ho da pisscià, cciaccènno er moccoletto: e lo vedessi mó, ppare un pistello!

Belli's Romanesco is close enough to the original Milanese to be labelled a version in the true sense of the word. Indeed, some of the woman's 'cossett/cosette', namely her 'ciapp/cchiappe', are eulogized in identical terms, with Belli lifting certain phrases directly from the Milanese (e.g. 'guarnì on lett/guarní er letto'), as well as grammatical constructions: both male personae, for example, are willing to bet that this lady's looks have a more powerful effect on men than the more direct methods used by other women, 'che i olter donn cont el voltalla in ari/che ll'antre cor mostrà la passerina'. That Belli should retain the eleventh line exactly, then, points to a preservation of both poetic

sentiment and structure; the first tercet performs precisely the same function in each of the sonnets, with only minor differences of detail. And yet those subtle changes, the switching of the personal pronoun to the more informal second-person 'ttu', the explicit use of 'passerina', and the more active 'occhietto' set a different scene altogether. Whilst Porta twice restrains himself to euphemistic use of the definite article (lines 11 and 14), even though he does mention 'usij' and the rest of his corpus shows he has no qualms about employing explicit taboo language (he uses the term 'passarina' elsewhere, for example), Belli opts for popular vulgar terms on both occasions, insisting on them moreover by locating them in end-position rhymes.[21] Indeed, the second of the two provides the sonnet's final resolution with the equally vulgar 'pistello', an image Belli may very well have gleaned from Ninetta's description of the 'gioven d'offelle', the medina's lover, about whom it is rumoured 'ch'el gh'avess de sott/on peston de pirotta masiacch'.[22] Porta seems to maintain some probity, despite the nature of the sonnet, by lending Caterinin the title 'Sura', addressing her in the third person, and mixing linguistic registers: take the first quatrain for instance, which juxtaposes lofty regal terms such as 'onor' and 'imperator', along with the delicate diminutive 'cossett', with the punching plebeian coarseness of 'quell para de ciapp e quij dò tett'. Apart from an obvious source of comic effect, the Latinism of line 5 even seems to dignify Porta's obscenities. Belli's, on the other hand, are unashamedly undignified. What is more, by having the poetic persona referring to Nnina as 'ttu', he makes her complicit in her own sexual objectification (a piece fit for the 'moseo'), comfortable with the interlocutor's

[21] Porta's poem 95, featuring the 'dò tosann', the two adolescent girls who having reached 'quella etaa / che comenza a spiurigh la passarina', innocently discuss the male member before being put in their place by their eavesdropping mother. *Poesie*, p. 587.
[22] 'La Ninetta del Verzee', lines 44 / 45. *Poesie*, p. 121.

obscenities, even when bordering on the derogatory ('culiseo'). This, along with the fact that she solicits male attention through the seductive 'occhietto', and has an implied capability of fulfilling what the nineteenth-century European reader is meant to interpret as the salacious and libidinous desires of the 'Gran Zurtano', makes her sound something of the whore.[23] Whereas Porta's muse seems beyond reach, merely part of the author's imaginary poetic discourse ('adess che scrivi'), Nnina is more a silenced version of Porta's Ninetta, a prostitute who seems potentially available to all.

Belli's removal of the persona's bibliographical association with the poet is indicative of his greater project. None of the sonnets will be delivered from the poet's standpoint, but rather from that of the uncouth plebeian character, with Belli nothing more than the silent intermediary relating 'le frasi del romano quali dalla bocca del romano escono tuttora', as he puts it in the introduction.[24] Other constant elements of Belli's broader monument may also be glimpsed from the subtle changes he makes to Porta's model in this very sonnet. The Milanese setting of artisans ('on tornidor') and secure employment ('el mè salari'), undergoes what Gibellini calls 'una riambientazione geografico-lessicale', transposed as it is to the pre-unification Rome ('culiseo') of false religion ('un cristiano [...] scribba e ffariseo'; 'Ggiuseppebbreo') and abject poverty, the latter stressed through the sense of both meagreness and appreciation contained within the diminutive suffix of 'er moccoletto'.[25] In comparison with the early compositions there is a more consistent attempt at representing dialect usage and orality through

[23] The point is only strengthened by Gibellini's identifying (1979, p. 112) the echo of 'Oh! Che pezzo da Sultano!' (Act I, Scene XI, see Fabbri, p. 393), exclaimed by Mustafà in Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri*. Indeed, Mustafa's assessment of the 'franca e scaltra' Isabella whose 'far sì disinvolto / gabba i cucchi ed ei no'l sa' (Act II, Scene I, see Fabbri, p. 397), might apply equally to Nnina.
[24] *PR*, I, p. 15.
[25] Gibellini, Pietro, *Il coltello e la corona* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979), p. 112.

distinctly central-southern lexical terms such as ‘mó’ and ‘appizzà’, and a whole range of phono-morphological features that will come to mark Belli’s plebeian Romanesco: the prothetic *a* in ‘arrubbà’; apocope of the final syllable in infinitives such as ‘guarní’ (also in Porta’s Milanese, e.g. ‘andà a ballà’ in ‘La Ninetta del Verzee’); consonantal cluster assimilation, such as ‘cciaccenno’; the passage from *s* to affricate *z* in the phonosyntactic ‘er Zurtano’; the passage from preconsonantal *l* to *r*, also in ‘Zurtano’; and reduction of the lateral palatal in ‘agguantajje’. In this sonnet and the other versions of Porta, Belli may therefore be said to be employing what is referred to in translation studies as a domesticating approach, based on both language and setting. So when for example in Porta’s ‘Sent Teresin’, the candid sonnet addressing the proverbially loose Milanese lady, the male poetic persona claims that Teresin’s sexual partner would need to possess ‘minga on usell, ma el campanin del Domm’, Belli’s amplified rendition sees Tteta’s man requiring ‘mmica un cannone, / ma la gujja der Popolo addrittura!’ Whilst the Belli version revolves around precisely the same sentiment, even preserving the syntactical construction, it uses the same principle of the immediately recognizable topographical element upon which Porta’s exaggerated visual metaphor depends. The cathedral in central Milan, however, is substituted with the Egyptian obelisk in Rome’s Piazza del Popolo, firmly locating the poem in the heart of the Roman microcosm. This is mirrored at the level of the language too, with the sonnets to Tteta featuring such exclusively Romanesco terms as the persona’s blasphemous imprecation ‘peddío-de-leggno’ in line 7 of the second sonnet.

Besides a useful way into his own poetry, a sort of professional apprenticeship, the process of domestication in the Belli translations even becomes politico-satirical, with

the Roman sonneteer using a Milanese model as an opportunity to domesticate one of Porta's polemics. Porta had outlined his anti-classical stance in his poem 'Sul Romanticismo', addressed to his archetypal Milanese woman character 'madamm Bibin' for whom he sarcastically likens classicizing poetry to hollow Rome, 'Romma de palpee', surviving only on its past glories, 'i sbuseccament di temp indree'.[26] Immediately attacked by Carlo Gherardini's 'Risposta di Madama Bibin alle sestine del signor Carlo Porta', published by Giuseppe Borsani, Porta retaliates in his 'Ricchezza del vocabolari milanes' by appropriating both surnames as part of his glossary of slang terms for testicles.[27] The opening expression of surprise at the plethora of different names available to the Milanese speaker, 'oh quanti parentell han tiraa in pee / per nominà i cojon', is immediately followed by a roll-call of some thirty-one different names before the volta of the final tercet reveals his revenge against his adversaries:

> E adess, in grazia de Madamm Bibin,
> Gh'è paricc che i domanden i Borsan,
> E la massima part i Gherardin.

Belli's own annotation accounts for his choice of 'Li penzieri libberi' as the title for his imitation of the Porta sonnet, explaining that 'l'avvocato Luigi Cecconi ha pubblicato un libercolettaccio sotto il titolo di *Pensieri liberi*'. According to Teodonio, Cecconi's *Pensieri* refute the growing current of liberalism, but it seems the reason for Belli's ad hominem attack is his apparent bigotry. Teodonio outlines the orthodox subjects of Cecconi's *Pensieri*, but highlights the seventh 'pensiero' in which it is claimed that

[26] According to Isella the character is a female stereotype of 'bellezza, ignoranza e improntitudine' based on a similar image presented by Berchet in an article in the short-lived, pro-romanticism periodical *Il conciliatore*, entitled 'Del criterio ne' discorsi'. *Poesie*, p. 962.
[27] He also attacks Gherardini at the end of 'La nomina del cappellan', where it is revealed that Lillin, the Marchesa's dog, has elected Don Ventura for no other reason than 'l'avegh avuu adoss trè o quatter fett / de salamm de basletta involtaa dent / in la *Risposta de Madamm Bibin* / de quell'olter salamm d'on Gherardin', *Poesie*, p. 574.

liberalism is born 'nei ventri vuoti', so that such people 'curati dalla fame, sarian subito curati dal liberalismo'. Yet Cecconi then goes on to laud the state of bliss enjoyed by the Roman populace under the Papal Government in those hunger and disease stricken years between the Restoration and revolution.[28] Having paraded some thirty-three terms equivalent to those of Porta, thereby asserting a greater richness of Romanesco over both Milanese and by implication 'la lingua tajjana', with the octet itself composed entirely of synonyms stripped of any framing narration, Belli also bestows Cecconi's name with a new meaning and removes any doubt over his identity by referring explicitly to the *Pensieri*:

> Ma dd'oggi avanti, spesso e vvolentieri
> li sentirete a dí ppuro *Cecconi*,
> pe vvia de scerta mmerda de *Penzieri*.[29]

Porta's 'Ricchezza del vocabolari milanes' must also be considered the ultimate inspiration for Belli's further two sonnets which go to complete his lexicon of the human genitalia with 'Er padre de li santi' for the male organ, and 'La madre de li santi' for the female counterpart.[30] Common to all of the imitations of Porta therefore is Belli's penchant for the obscene. Indeed, not only does Belli specifically choose Porta's most blatantly sexual sonnets, but he seems to pride himself on outbrazening his Milanese

[28] Belli gives a less sycophantic assessment of Leo XII's pontificate in his sonnet entitled 1229. 'Er linnesto', in which he sardonically laments the prohibition of vaccination as initiated by Leo XII, leading to the widespread outbreaks of small-pox across the Papal States: 'Sia bbenedetto li Papa Leoni, / e ssin che cce ne sò, Ddio li conzoli; / c'ha llibberato li nostri fijjoli / da st'innoccolerie de vormijjoni', *PR*, V, p. 531.

[29] A sentiment later similarly expressed in terms of synonymic fecundity in the sestet of 615. 'Le lingue der Monno': 'Ma nnun c'è llingua come la romana / pe ddí una cosa co ttanto divario, / che ppare un magazzino de dogana. / Per essempio noi dimo ar cacatore, / commido, stanziolino, nescessario, / logo, ggesso, ladrina e mmonziggnore'. *PR*, III, p. 439. Interestingly, Anthony Burgess continues the politico-literary polemics of his predecessors when translating this Belli sonnet into English, by targeting his own contemporary adversary, the poet and critic Geoffrey Grigson. For more on Burgess and Belli, see Howard, Paul, '"All right, that's not a literal translation": Cribs, Licence, and Embellishment in the Burgess Versions of Belli's *Sonetti romaneschi*' in *Modern Language Review*, 108.3 (July, 2013), 700-720.

[30] Belli's two poems are analysed comprehensively in Chapter 3. Porta's literary precedent is almost certainly the anonymous Milanese sonnet included in Cherubini's *Collezione delle migliori opere scritte in dialetto milanese*, 12 vols (Milan: Pirotta, 1816), entitled *Sonett dove se dà del mincion in tanci moeud*.

forerunner, as is pointed out by the earliest observer of the two poets, Domenico Gnoli: 'tutto quel che v'era di lubrico e sconcio nel Porta, il Belli lo portò nel romanesco, aggiungendovi molto sale e pepe del proprio'.[31] Significantly, however, the final sonnet to be imitated directly by Belli in that same three-week period of September 1831 introduces the other branch of what would come to be known as Belli's lasting legacy: religion, its hypocrisy and the short-sightedness of its followers. Porta's poem beginning 'Gh'è al mond di cristian tant ostinaa' does rely on the obscene for some of its message, with the persona using his own sexual promiscuity to dispel the Christian's scepticism regarding the logistics of the valley of Josaphat in the book of Joel by stating that 'in la piccola vall di mee culatt / ghe foo stà tutt el mond comodament'. [32] As usual, Belli exaggerates in his imitation, entitled 'Un mistero spiegato'. Yet although he retains the same image of 'cuer buscetto tonno', and paints a more ridiculous persona by employing stark language ('io che ho ffede e cche nun zò ccojjone'), it is not the obscene that Belli chooses to highlight. He is rather more concerned with attacking Christianity and the Bible by presenting a seemingly authoritative yet preposterous persona, turning the tame indignation of Porta's persona towards the 'cristian tant ostinaa' into the aggression of the blind Roman ignoramus who refers to those who are sceptical among his fellow Christians as 'teste matte / de cristianacci'. Besides his need to resort to insult, his spurious teleological arguments and muddled thinking are clear for all to see and are betrayed by the troubled and inverted syntax running throughout the sonnet, but which is best exemplified in the second quatrain:

> Ste testacce che ar muro le pòi sbatte
> prima peccristo che le vedi scède,

[31] Gnoli, p. 83.
[32] 'I will gather together all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Josaphat'. Joel 3, 2.

c'averemo da entrà nun zanno créde
tutti drento a la Val-de-Ggiosaffatte.[33]

Belli is therefore clearly engaged by the element of religious satire in Porta's poetry, especially his criticism of the clergy as embodied in such figures as the greedy Fraa Condutt, and recognizes the fertile ground that such a theme would present were he to develop Porta's treatment of the 'catolegh, apostolegh e Roman / gent che cred in del pappa e in di convent'.[34]' By switching the scene to the Papal States, Belli would fully explore the ideas expressed by Porta, dealing with the lives, beliefs and contradictions of all the Pope's subjects and the ruling Popes themselves in an environment where religion is inevitably even more dominant than in Porta's Milan.

Of all that Belli gleans from Porta through the direct versions, perhaps most significant is his modus operandi, the sonnet form itself. It is no coincidence that Belli chooses solely to imitate a selection of Porta's sonnets, representing only one form among several in the Milanese poet's oeuvre, with his reputation based primarily on his characters presented in the lengthier narrative poems written in 'ottava rima'. The appeal of the sonnet form is clear and can be seen in each of his versions of Porta. The sonnet offers Belli a self-contained structure that is sufficiently lengthy to develop a scene or character, and yet sufficiently brief to provide a neat, punchy argument. More specifically, the sonnet's rhyming metre and the propensity to surprise contained within the sonnet's volta both lend themselves to comic effect. As Vighi and Gibellini have shown, Belli makes a number of metrical alterations to the rhyme schemes of Porta's

[33] Belli returns to the unlikely scale of Josaphat in 829. La risurrezzion de la carne': 'Smorzato er Zole e sfracassato er Monno, / tutte le ggente che la terra ha ffatte / anneranno a la val de Ggiosaffatte, / dove sce ponno entrà cquanti che vvonno', *PR*, IV, p. 289.
[34] First line of poem 133, in which the invading Austrians, 'i Todisch', are hailed as saviours compared to the French occupiers, *Poesie*, p. 717.

originals, none of which is preserved in its entirety. Whilst Porta's octet consistently follows the uniform scheme ABAB ABAB, Belli twice favours ABBA ABBA in the first of the sonnets 98-99. 'A Teta' and 107. 'Li penzieri libberi', but otherwise exhibits complete variation that will mark his production as a whole, although Gibellini does emphasize that the most faithful rendition, 'A Nina', employs the scheme ABBA BAAB, both 'carissimo al Belli' and 'così raro nella tradizione da legittimare il crisma di una reinvenzione belliana'.[35] Belli also presents variation from Porta's model in the sestet, but clearly prefers the scheme CDC DCD, employed as it is in all of the versions except *A Nina*. Since much of Belli's comedy is delivered precisely through the volta, with its main clout coming in the final tercet, it would seem that a greater coherence of only two sestet rhymes offers more support for the final resolve of the humorous twist, without detracting from the comedy by introducing a diluting third rhyme. As Contini has pointed out, the sonnet's closing is instrumental in sounding the final echoes of its message, 'la chiusura del sonetto [conferisce] al discorso una rapida eternità', and this seems especially true of a sestet bearing a single pair of rhymes.[36] In the sestet of 'Li penzieri libberi', for example, the rhymes of 'l'urioni', 'Cojjoni', 'Cecconi' not only allow for poetic emphasis of Belli's main tenet, namely that Cecconi's surname is synonymous with all the terms of the word list, but by resolving first in line 13, they anticipate the final resolution of the poem through the desecration of Cecconi's book as provided by their alternately rhyming counterparts, thereby creating a crescendo before the climax. Gibellini, however, also finds it significant that the scheme of Porta's 'Sura Caterinin',

[35] Gibellini, *Il coltello* cit., p. 108.
[36] Contini, p. 570.

CDC EDE, preserved intact in 'A Nina', is rare in Italian literature before Porta and yet accounts for the sestet adopted in over 900 of Belli's sonnets.[37]

Perhaps even more important than the sonnet form, as far as debts owed by Belli to Porta are concerned, is the initial demonstration of what the use of dialect can achieve in literary terms. Whether or not Belli had spontaneously tried his hand at dialect composition prior to reading Porta, the first glimpses of its literary mastery, as well as an emerging poetic voice, can readily be seen in his direct versions if compared to his early attempts in dialect. Belli's new commitment to dialect poetry is undoubtedly inspired by Porta and remains the backbone of his entire project. Although difficult to quantify the importance of Belli's discovery of the dialect, what is certain is that its adoption allowed him to develop poetically in a way that most probably would not have been possible in the standard, as a retrospective look at his poetry 'in lingua' and his poetry 'in dialetto' makes clear. The following sonnets both deal with the theme of social inequality:

'Le classi sociali'
È un albergo la umana società
In tre piani distinto e forse più,
Dove gli uomini stan chi su e chi giù,
E chi, fra questi e quelli, a la metà.

Ma nessuno è contento dove sta,
E tutti anelan di salir più su;
E ciascun dice all'altro: scendi tu;
E quel vorria salire anche di là.

Meno i più alti che poi restan lì
Gridando che salir più non si può,
Tutti gli altri rispondono di sì.

Intanto, fra quei sì e fra quei no,
Quando il su non discese e il giù salì,
Chi al pianterren più rimarrà non so.[38]

1170. 'Li du' ggener'umani'
Noi, se sa, ar Monno semo ussciti fori
impastati de mmerda e dde monnezza.
Er merito, er decoro e la grannezza
sò ttutta marcanzia de li Siggnori.

A su' Eccellenza, a ssu' Maestà, a ssu' Artezza
fumi, patacche, titoli e sprennori;
e a nnoantri artiggiani e sservitori
er bastone, l'imbasto e la capezza.

Cristo creò le case e li palazzi
p'er prencipe, er marchese e 'r cavajjere,
e la terra pe nnoi facce de cazzi.

E cquanno morze in crosce, ebbe er penziere
de sparge, bbontà ssua, fra ttanti strazzi,
pe cquelli er zangue e ppe nnoantri er ziere.[39]

[37] Gibellini, *Il coltello* cit., p. 10.
[38] *Belli italiano*, ed. by Roberto Vighi, 3 vols (Rome: Editore Carlo Colombo, 1975), III, p. 622.
[39] *PR*, V, p. 405.

Whilst Belli's voice can still be recognized in the standard sonnet, the poem pales into insignificance beside its dialect counterpart and does so precisely because of the language of delivery. The effect of the standard, that is the language of the learned or upper classes, is to betray the professed neutrality of the presentation. The portrait of the social ladder is thus painted from an implied position of bias, from the luxury of indifferent detachment. The force of the Romanesco vision on the other hand comes from the expert delineation of the poetic voice: the persona's plight and that of his fellow caste is harmoniously presented, with the wholly biased yet totally authentic position being expressed through their own identifiable and impassioned language.

Porta's exemplum therefore provides Belli with the means to begin finding his own poetic voice even within the constraints of the early imitations, and the voice will continue to grow in clarity once the poet hones the form and language, and turns away from domesticating translation to develop his own perspective. Although the versions are close adaptations of Porta, Belli already shows thematic and metrical independence and offers glimpses of a confident ability in manipulating his variables. Take the second quatrain of the sonnet addressed *A Tteta* by way of example:

> Ma cquanno me sò vvisto in ne l'impeggno
> Drento a cquer tu' fienile senza tetto,
> M'è pparzo aritornà, peddío-de-leggno,
> Un ciuco cor pipino a ppiggnoletto!

Although not in Porta, Belli's added candid element goes beyond a simple coarse realism and the poetic structure succeeds in setting up a fine sense of balance. The last of the quartet's lines is expertly poised between the musicality of the mirrored consonantal and vocalic alliteration and the repeated use of diminutive suffixes on the one hand, and the delicate hilarity of the image on the other, bringing the octet to a close and the haughty

persona down a peg or two. The juxtaposition of the brash Romanesco imprecation and the sideswiping 'ciuco' (a diminutive of 'fanciullo' but with echoes of the Tuscan term meaning 'asino') adds a layer of complexity to Porta's model by questioning the authority and integrity of the persona. His language, orthographically represented in all its glorious quotidian corruption (e.g. the metathesis of 'drento'), is wholly congruous with the lowly setting, as captured in such basic tactile terms as 'fienile' and 'ppiggnoletto'. So too do the euphemistic yet coarse elements form an integral part of that identity, and the so-called models of obscenity taken from Porta should not therefore be considered offensive in Belli's new setting. Porta's initial influence is abundantly clear: he loans Belli all the ingredients of his creation. Both the sonnet and the idea of the dialect are inspired by Porta, as are the thematics of sexuality and religion, but Belli begins to show his own originality right from the very beginning of the enterprise, as Gibellini succinctly sums up:

> Porta dovette «salare il sangue» al Romano, il quale volle cimentarsi col suo magistero con un atteggiamento fatto insieme di apprendistato e di competizione, di omaggio e di ricercata autonomia.[40]

1.2 Rome, Belli and the act of de-portation

> E a cche tte serve poi sto scrive e llegge?
> Làsselo fà a li preti, a li dottori,
> a li frati, a li Re, all'Imperatori,
> e a cquelli che jje l'obbriga la Lègge.[41]

Whilst it is no coincidence that Belli's project begins in earnest around the time of his Porta imitations, it is no less a coincidence that the same period sees the articulation of Belli's clearest vision of his entire project. Exactly a week after completing his version of

[40] Gibellini, *Il coltello* cit., p. 110.
[41] 1598. 'Er legge e scrive', *PR*, VII, p. 49.

Porta's 'Gh'è al mond di cristian tant ostinaa', Belli writes in a letter to his closest friend Francesco Spada that he is now 'carico di nuovi versi da plebe', adding 'ne ho sino ad oggi in 153 sonetti, sessantasei de' quali scritti dopo la metà di settembre (crescono)'.[42] In the same letter of 5 October 1831 Belli first recognizes that his dialect sonnets are beginning to form a greater whole, to the point of employing an early outline of the famous epithet he would bestow upon his overall opus:

> a guardarli tutti insieme, e unendovi col pensiere quel di più che potrà uscire dai materiali già raccolti, mi pare di vedere che questa serie di poesie vada a prendere un aspetto di qualchedosa, da poter forse davvero restare per un monumento di quello che è oggi la plebe di Roma.

Indeed, the rest of the letter is effectively the first of many drafts of what he would later call his 'introduzione' and what subsequent editors from Morandi to Vigolo would use to preface their editions of varying completeness. The letter is also the first place where Belli formally signals his departure from Porta's Milanese paradigm. Having established his subject as 'la plebe di Roma' and signalled its 'originalità', Belli lists his subject's component parts. Top of that list, unsurprisingly, is 'la sua lingua'. By capturing the language of the 'popolaccio' exactly as they utter it, 'senza ornamento, senza alterazione, senza pure inversioni di sintassi o troncamenti di licenza', Belli becomes the first to grant society's lowest class a sustained, harmonious voice, openly asserting the novelty of his project: 'un disegno così colorito non troverà lavoro da confronto che lo precedesse'.[43] Porta had made some of society's slaves, weaklings, and failures speak, but their voice had been all but indistinguishable from that of the Milanese high society; Giovannin and Barborin Bongee, 'come duu re', gather of an evening at La Scala with the rest of Milan.

[42] Letter 130 in *Lettere*, I, p. 239.
[43] Ibid., p. 240.

If Belli's declaration of originality had only implicitly hinted at the precedent of Porta in the letter to Spada, revised and enlarged later versions of his introduction explicitly differentiate his own Roman project from that of Porta's Milanese:

> 'Molti altri scrittori ne' dialetti o ne' patrii vernacoli abbiam noi veduti sorgere in Italia, e vari di questi meritar laude anche fra i posteri. Però un più assai vasto campo che a me non si presenta era loro aperto da parlari non esclusivamente appartenenti a tale o tal plebe o frazione di popolo, ma usate da tutte insieme le classi di una peculiare popolazione: donde nascono le lingue municipali.'

As Belli's most cherished vernacular model, Porta cannot but figure amongst the dialect writers referred to in his introduction, and any reading of Porta's work confirms that his Milanese is effectively a municipal language. As Bonora points out, 'il milanese era un dialetto parlato da un'intera città nei suoi diversi strati sociali', and it is thus portrayed as the comprehensive language of the down-and-outs, the clergy and the nobility.[44] Although the 'scoeura de lingua del Verzee' would seem the organic heartland of the language, with the desperate Ninetta its chief spokeswoman along with such characters as the embattled Giovannin Bongee and the downtrodden Marchionn, it is not the sole property of the lower classes. Returning to his monastery years after levitating and disappearing through the roof, the miraculous Fraa Diodatt bumbles his identity to his unwitting brothers in the same Milanese: 'sont el guardian, / ma mì no soo...me senti tant balord.../che se nol fuss che seva chì inscì arent, / credarev squas d'avè fallaa el convent'. Fraa Zenever similarly explains he has butchered the pig to feed Fraa Sist's deathbed craving 'perchè el Signor me l'ha ispiraa', and is admonished by a Milanese Saint Francis, who tells him that 'sti reson [...] hin bonn [...] ma [...] in terra no paghen i porscej'. It might be objected that the figures of Porta's nobility are a case apart, given

[44] In Chiesa and Tesio, p. 29.

that their speech is markedly more standardized. Indeed, this is true of such aristocratic ladies as Marchesa Paola Cangiasa and Donna Fabia Fabron de Fabrian. The Marchesa, 'vuna di primm damazz de Lombardia', is slighted by two of the prospective candidates hoping to replace the recently deceased Don Gliceri in the office of 'pret de casa' when she inadvertently sits on her beloved Lillin, prompting her to plunge into a haughty statement of class:

> Però poi che l'Altissim el ci ha post
> In questo grado, e siamm ciò che siamm,
> Certississimament è dover nost
> Il farci rispettar come dobbiamm.

The Marchesa attempts to assert her moral superiority over the imprudent priests by elevating her language to a Tuscanized form of Milanese. The substrate language is fully recognisable, however, in such features as the final dental consonants following the tonic vowels of the third person plural verb forms. Donna Fabia Fabron de Fabrian, proud of belonging to that 'ceto / distinto della prima nobiltà', seems to go a step further by beginning the rendition of the previous day's 'giaculatoria' in perfect Tuscan: 'Mio caro buon Gesù, che per decreto / dell'infallibil vostra volontà'. And yet the Tuscan begins to disintegrate in the following stanza, peppered as it is with Milanese apocopated endings, 'grad' and 'riflession', as well as poorly disguised Milanese verb forms, 'abbiev' for 'abbiate', glossed by Isella as 'pretto milanese'.[45] The linguistic picture of Milan as presented by these two noblewomen may therefore be termed a diglossic situation at best, with it more likely fitting into the category of what Italian linguists call 'dilalia' or 'diglossia contaminata'. But even this definition is cast into doubt by Porta himself through the way in which he structures both poems. The isolating effect of the framing

[45] *Poesie*, p. 620.

Milanese narrative in 'La nomina del cappellan' implies that the Marchesa's seemingly standardized language is feigned, and this is indeed confirmed in 'Offerta a Dio', where the initial Milanese dialogue between Don Sigismond and Donna Fabia Fabron de Fabrian proves that both priest and noblewoman speak precisely the same language as the 'verme vile' she so despises.

In his letter to Prince Placido Gabrielli in which he declines the invitation to translate the Gospel of Matthew into Romanesco and thus be part of Luigi-Luciano Bonaparte's unprecedented comparative study of the dialects of Ottocento Italy, Belli grapples with the very term 'dialect' in yet another implied reference to the work of Carlo Porta:

> un dialetto, ed anche un vernacolo, è indistintamente parlato da tutte le classi del popolo a cui appartiene [...].[46]

The same term is never employed to describe his own medium, however, since Romanesco, in stark contrast to the relationship between Milan and Milanese, is not the language of Rome. Dialect is a geographical label for Belli, hence his explaining to Gabrielli that 'il parlar romanesco non è un dialetto e neppure un vernacolo'. Although lacking the terminological framework of sociopragmatics, and discernibly struggling to find an appropriate means of expression, Belli demonstrates that Romanesco is clearly a sociolect, more or less reiterating Dante's assessment of Roman speech as a 'tristiloquium', rather than a fully-fledged dialect or vernacular: 'favella non di Roma ma del rozzo e spropositato suo volgo'.[47] His concept is best summed up in his introduction

[46] *LGZ*, p. 377. Bonaparte's efforts predate Zuccagni-Orlandini's equivalent *Raccolta di dialetti italiani* by some twenty years. Despite Belli's affirmation that Bonaparte 'non avrà una versione romanesca' since it would amount to sacrilege, the task is performed by a certain Giuseppe Caterbi.

[47] 'Dicimus igitur Romanorum non vulgare, sed potius tristiloquium, ytalorum vulgarium omnium esse turpissimum', *DVE*, I, xi, 2, p. 26.

where Romanesco is termed 'una lingua infine non italiana e neppur romana, ma *romanesca*', the italics adding to the force of the pejorative suffix. For modern readers to claim retrospectively that Belli is taken in by what De Mauro calls that 'mito populistico' and 'il mito della "malerba dialettale"' as propagated by Giordani and Gorelli in Milan, is to miss the point entirely when Belli expressly rejects the dialect label.[48] Unlike Porta and his own native Milanese[49], Belli is not personally concerned with the outside view of Romanesco in relation to literary Tuscan; on the contrary, he defines it as one of unquestionable inferiority but makes no political claims for elevating its status, as he makes plain in the letter to Gabrielli:

> persone di sufficiente levatura d'ingegno da innalzare a suggetto sì grave [il vangelo di S. Matteo] la lingua abietta e buffona de' romaneschi, io non ne conosco, e credo anzi fermamente che qui non ne abbiamo.

He may well be linguistically misguided in considering Romanesco 'non un idioma storicamente autonomo, ma una "corruzione", una "storpiatura" dell'italiano', but Belli is merely reacting to what he perceives as a tangible realism, and his poems must, therefore, be judged on his own terms.[50]

The 'nuda, gretta ed anche sconcia favella' is thus exclusively reserved for the previously voiceless underclass: beggars, thieves and whores; struggling mothers, jobless fathers and their starving, disease-afflicted offspring.[51] That is not to say, however, that

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[48] De Mauro, Tullio, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* (Bari: Laterza, 1970), pp. 307-309.

[49] As Monga points out, Porta includes the following quotation from Maggi in the introduction to his first almanac: 'Sta nostra lengua buseccona / se la sostentarem, la po anca lee / trattà coss de sustanzia, e fass onor'. Monga, Luigi, *In the very heart of man: the Life and Poetry of Carlo Porta* (Gainsville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1986), p. 21. See also the 'sonetti giavanri' and Porta's dedication to his son in which he explains that he uses the dialect in his erotic poetry out of 'curiosità e brama soltanto di provare se il dialetto nostro poteva esso pure far mostra di alcune di quelle veneri, che furono fin or credute intangibile patrimonio di linguaggi più generali ed accetti', *Poesie,* pp. 3-4.

[50] Ibid., p. 312.

[51] Letter 660 in *Lettere,* II, p. 441.

the sonnets do not extend to the whole human spectrum; they most certainly do, but *romanesco* is off limits for 'li preti, [..] li dottori, [...] li frati, [...] li Re, [...] l'Imperatori, e [...] cquelli che jje l'obbriga la Lègge', as the persona of 'Er legge e scrive' sees the rest of society. So whereas Porta's Donna Fabia Fabron de Fabrian and Don Sigismond speak the language of Ninetta, Belli's priests speak a decidedly different language from that of the questionable faithful, as 'Er confessore' shows:

> «Padre...». «Dite il confiteor». «L'ho ddetto».
> «L'atto di contrizione?» «Ggià l'ho ffatto».
> «Avanti dunque». «Ho ddetto cazzo-matto
> a mmi' marito, e jj'ho arzato un grossetto».
>
> «Poi?» «Pe una pila che mme róppe er gatto
> je disse for de mé: "Ssi' mmaledetto";
> e è ccratura de Ddio!». «C'è altro?» «Tratto
> un giuvenotto e cce sò ita a lletto.
>
> «E llí ccosa è ssucesso?» «Un po' de tutto.
> «Cioè? Sempre, m'immagino, pel dritto».
> «Puro a rriverzo...». «Oh che peccato brutto!
>
> Dunque, in causa di questo giovanotto,
> tornate, figlia, cor cuore trafitto,
> domani, a casa mia, verso le otto».

The sonnet's success lies in the juxtaposition of the two classes as established through their language, along with the fact that the direction of the conversation, as led by the hierarchical superior, is completely at odds with the formality of the situation. It might be objected that the priest does seem to exhibit similar linguistic traits to those of his interlocutor, and it is true that his language in lines 6 and 9 appears to echo that of the female. In reality, though, any dialectal traces are restricted to mere consonantal doubling that might be explained away as an unsuccessful attempt on the part of the priest to brush aside those marked social differences, and thus win his penitent's favour by imitating her

diction. It might equally be accounted for as a slight loss of control on the part of the priest at his most titillated moment, the return to some possible native speech all but eradicated by education, before regaining his false probity and delivering his verdict in the Tuscan of the final tercet. Whatever the explanation, the priest cannot be said to speak the language of the popolaccio, even though their languages are clearly mutually intelligible, and there is obviously some form of interaction between the two.

Belli's Popes are yet another case in point, and bear out Benedict XVI's recent declaration of linguistic detachment when on a visit to the church of Santa Maria Liberatrice a Testaccio he stated 'purtroppo non parlo romanesco'[52]. The Pope, ultimate figurehead of social injustice as seen by his scathing subjects, is attacked in the sonnet 1708. 'Cosa fa er papa?', in which his superior language becomes part of his unjust possession of what theoretically belongs to the popolaccio:

> Cosa fa er Papa? Eh ttrinca, fa la nanna,
> taffia, pijja er caffè, sta a la finestra,
> se svaria, se scrapiccia, se scapestra,
> e ttiè Rroma pe ccammera-locanna.
>
> Lui, nun avenno fijji, nun z'affanna
> a ddirigge e accordà bbene l'orchestra;
> perché, a la peggio, l'úrtima minestra
> sarà ssempre de quello che ccommanna.
>
> Lui l'aria, l'acqua, er zole, er vino, er pane,
> li crede robba sua: *È tutto mio*;
> come a sto monno nun ce fussi un cane.[53]
>
> E cquasi quasi godería sto tomo

[52]http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080224_sm-liberatrice_it.html [accessed on 2 January 2013].

[53] *PR*, VII, p. 291. Cf. the opening two lines of Berni's sonnet 'Di papa Clemente VII malato', which begins: 'Il papa non fa altro che mangiare, / il Papa non fa altro che dormire'. See Berni, Francesco, *Rime*, ed. by Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1991), p. 136. Belli thus puts a further satirical twist on things by having a perfectly healthy Pope doing nothing more than eating and drinking, and he describes this, moreover, in baby talk ('fa la nanna' etc.).

de restà ssolo, come stava Iddio
avanti de creà ll'angeli e ll'omo.

The lonely second hemistich of line 10, the demonstration of what for the masses is the unreachable goal of the lofty standard, is seemingly enough to secure the Pope the whole of Rome, for it is the only way in which he is marked out from the popolo ('ttrinca' and 'fa la nanna' much like the rest of his lowly subjects). The Pope's difference is repeatedly emphasized through the language he uses. His luxuries are criticized even more vehemently in the ironically-entitled *L'avocato de le cause sperze,* where one of his voiceless subjects takes it upon himself to defend the Pope against the accusations of his own people, only to achieve the opposite cumulative effect through his discourse. Having conceded the Pope is responsible for all the ills of Rome, 'tutti li guai, tutti li scarti/sò ppe ccausa der Papa a sto paese', the self-appointed 'avocato' dismisses the Pope's charges by using the tercet to attack the prosecution's (i.e. his own) language:

è er Papa. Tutto er Papa, sciorcinato!
Lui cressce le gabbelle, cala er pane,
frega er zuddito, bbuggera lo Stato!...

Come! cuesto è er linguaggio che ss'addopra
cor Crist'-in-terra, eh fijji de puttane?
Zitti: e ar Papa, per Dio, 'na pietra sopra.

Precisely the same statement of linguistic difference may be made regarding the nobility, whom Belli presents through the looking glass of their servants, the selfsame popolo. The language of the nobles is as equally removed, a foreign language in fact: 'sto latino er Marchese mi' padrone/l'aripete oggni ggiorno a la Marchesa'[54]. They are despized by the underclass just as much for 'li su' termini truschi e ariscercati'[55] as they are for all their wealth and stability. Belli's is therefore a bipartite world, as black and

[54] 1158. 'La lezzione de lo scortico', *PR*, V, p. 381.
[55] 1552. 'Una dimanna d'un Ziggnore', *PR*, VI, p. 427.

white as the picture presented in *Er giorno der giudizzio*, with two distinct 'ggeneri umani'. Whereas God separates the angelic from the human, 'creà ll'angeli e ll'omo', the omniscient Belli recognizes that mankind is equally bluntly divided: the subhuman, suffering plebeians belong to one subset, and every other rank of society to the other, with language the demarcation line between the two. Unlike Porta's Milanese, Romanesco is a private language for its speakers, and any attempt to escape its shackles results in disastrous consequences, as is evident in the garbled first quatrain of 'Er servitor-de-piazza-ciovile', where the lowly Roman attempts to promote himself to a sort of tour guide merely by talking posh, that is by employing 'er parlà ciovìle':

> Lei sappi, si vvò véderle, che cquelle
> indove el vostro Cane-colso abbaglia,
> tutte cuperte di stole de paglia,
> suono le stufe delle Capandelle.

Civility, or a lack of civility, is precisely what sets the worlds of Belli and Porta apart. Even to the well-to-do Belli himself, Milan had appeared a sort of civilized paradise; 'quella città benedetta', he writes on his return to Rome in 1828, 'pare sia stata fondata per lusingare tutti i miei gusti'. Amongst his list of the various qualities Milan has to offer, Belli signals out its 'lustro di arti e di mestieri, [...], abbondanza di agi, rispetto nel volgo, civiltà generale'.[56] Whilst early Ottocento Milan offered its citizens prospects, with Porta's Ninetta even exhibiting a determined optimism, Rome on the other hand had been ruined by the first Restoration, which only succeeded in reinforcing the class system. As has been documented, 'unemployment and begging were widespread and endemic, with great numbers of people wholly dependent upon the charitable institutions of the Church', whose limited generosity proved 'no substitute for employment and

[56] Letter 94 in *Lettere*, I, p. 194.

plentiful food'[57]. What is more, Rome had been left bereft of any artistry because of the wider events in Europe, with the 'artisans who had previously been independent [...] ruined by the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in England, the Low Countries and France and the overwhelming competition which this represented'.[58] The result of decades of suffering was a huge swathe of 'ggentaccia bassa', and Belli is the first to offer them a platform. [59] Porta's model of the dialect of Milan, however, the city showing 'rispetto nel volgo', is totally inappropriate for Rome's underclass and such characters as 'Er povero ladro'. Instead, Belli forges a literary and linguistic equivalent of what Bassani's Malnate calls that 'funebre' voice; one which is monotonous only in the sense that it is consistently monophonic.

Conclusion

Enlightened as to the possibility of dialect as a literary medium, and prompted by the Milanese poetry to begin his own exploration of the Roman masses and their language, Belli owes the conception of his oeuvre to his first encounters with the poetry of Carlo Porta. Porta exerts the greatest direct literary influence on Belli by far in his formative years as a writer, with Belli beginning his project in Porta's footsteps by imitating the four sonnets directly. Moreover, Porta would continue to exert an influence on his Roman disciple throughout his project, with Belli imitating such precise characters as the Marchesa in 1201. 'La caggnola de Lei' (Belli's persona is the servant to a Marchesa and

[57] Haller, p. 103.
[58] Ibid., p. 103.
[59] 1807. 'Er bene der Monno', *PR*, VII, p. 509.

'la su' caggnola de razza martes'[60]), and the lover and his girlfriend Ghittin in the two sonnets 'A Ghita', as well as more general vignettes as in 118. 'La carestia', his version of Porta's 'Per le gabelle e dazi esorbitanti imposti dal ministro Prina non si pensa più a fottere'.[61] Indeed, even as late as 1847, Belli produces a thinly disguised Roman version of Giovannin Bongee in 2245. 'Er guardaportone', which relies upon the same use of macaronic French. The haughty Roman is minding his own business when 'sarta fora er munzú gguardaportone', in the same manner as Porta's patrolling troops. Just as Bongee ridicules the soldier whom he finds upstairs with his wife, one of 'quij prepotentoni de Frances', reproducing his heavily French pidgin-Italian, so too does the Roman respond to the guard's insistent questioning by throwing the Frenchman's insult back at him, 'sete un gianfutre vói'. Belli's character ultimately proves as cowardly as Porta's model when he declares at the end of the sonnet 'usai prudenza'.

Beyond inspiration for certain characters, however, and similar general slices of life, Belli's project and all the ideological shifts which that entails could not be any more different from that of Porta and his influence on the Roman writer should not be seen as that of a forerunner, but rather as that of an opponent in a debate. Belli sculpts his monument with constant reference to Porta, but what starts out as something analogous ends up looking something totally new. Belli is drawn to Porta only to assert his independence from him as soon as he finds his own voice. That independence is borne out at all levels of his poetic endeavour. Having identified the sonnet in Porta as the most

[60] The parallels are beyond any doubt, as the second quatrain shows: 'Lei? la caggnola? ce va a la toletta, / se la tiè a lletto, se la porta in chiesa... / inzomma, via, chi incontra la Marchesa / è ccerto d'incontrà la caggnoletta', *PR*, V, p. 471.

[61] Compare the second quatrains of the two poems: 'Col granee voeuj, con succia la cantina, / col boja che ne tira in coo la pell, / vorrav vedè quell muso, giuradina! / che fuss in cas de fà stà in pee l'usell', *Poesie*, p. 702; 'Oggiggiorno sti poveri paini / tiengheno le saccocce accusí assciutte, / che chi aggratis nun pijja er gammautte, / la pò ddà ppe ttrippetta a li gattini', *PR*, II, p. 59.

appropriate form for his own 'distinti quadretti', Belli transcends his literary apprenticeship, becoming what D'Annunzio considers 'il più grande artefice del sonetto della nostra letteratura'[62] to leave behind a composite whole, what Sainte-Beuve sees as 'des sonnets faisant suite, formant poème'[63]. The notion of the epic is not exaggerated, for Belli's output is undoubtedly unrivalled in its degree of unified expression in a voice which is utterly authentic. Whereas Porta may display a more varied palette of poetic forms and metrics, he does not achieve the same continuity of voice, and although suggested by Porta, Belli explicitly moves away from the municipal dialect model, defining the Roman sociolect against the Milanese. Malnate and Pasolini are ultimately right to ridicule whoever seeks to see the two authors side by side, yet it is only in relation to Porta, and the gulf that Belli forges between their respective works, that the seemingly contradictory figure of Belli and his 'sonetti romaneschi' can even begin to be set into context.

[62] Quoted in Gibellini, *Il coltello* cit., p. 110.
[63] Quoted in Sciascia, *Il fiore* cit., p. 9.

CHAPTER TWO

A PASSAGE TO ARMS: POSSESSING THE DIALOGUE SONNET

Introduction

The *Sonetti romaneschi* have often been read as elements in a sort of dialogue. Indeed, the reader is confronted with the notion of dialogue from the outset, since Belli himself strikes upon the term in the 'Introduzione', the closest thing we have to an explicit statement of his poetics.[1] The various members of the Roman populace, he explains, spontaneously express themselves not 'a lungo in discorso regolare', but through recourse to 'un dialogo inciso, pronto ed energico'.[2] Thus with the choice of subject bearing heavily on the poet's choice of expression and form, and the 2279 sonnets embodying the life of 'ogni quartiere di Roma, ogni individuo', critics have rightly considered the work as a whole in terms of 'un grande dialogo', a plurality of previously unheard voices.[3]

Similarly, within this global definition, individual sonnets have also been seen to coexist in dialogue with others. For instance, many of the sonnets within the corpus treat

[1] Routinely used by way of an introduction from the Morandi edition (1886-89) onwards, the text stems from a letter sent to Giacomo Ferretti on 4 January 1832, in which Belli first hints at the possibility of publishing the sonnets: 'queste cose restano (almeno per ora) nelle menti de' soli amici', see letter 132 in *Lettere*, I, p. 243. The 'introduzione', as Belli terms it in the letter to Ferretti, is an extended reworking of a series of reflections on his 'quadretti poetici' set out in a letter to Francesco Spada on 5 October 1831, see letter 130 in *Lettere*, I, pp. 239-241. For a parallel comparison of all three versions of the introduction, see *PR*, I, pp. 11-39.
[2] *PR*, I, p. 23.
[3] Clemente, Vittorio, 'Forma, contenuto e stile nella poesia belliana', in *Studi belliani nel centenario di Giuseppe Gioachino Belli: atti del primo Convegno di studi belliani e contributi vari pubblicati con la collaborazione dell'Istituto di studi romani a cura del Comune di Roma* (Rome: C. Colombo, 1965), p. 213.

the same theme but from differing viewpoints: the picture of the poverty-stricken family, for example, is depicted not solely through the lens of the mother as in 1679. 'La famijja poverella', but also from the standpoint of the father as in 1003. 'Er zervitore liscenziato', and even from the child's perspective as in 288. 'La bbona famijja'. Equally, though, these perspectives are not necessarily presented as uniform and concordant; rather they may differ immensely as part of that greater multiplicity of voices. Thus the mother's attitude in the face of poverty ranges from the thoroughly optimistic in 'La famijja poverella', where she assures her children 'e ppijjeremo er pane, e mmaggnerete'; through the defiant but devious mother in 2276. 'L'arte der campà auffa', who effectively teaches her children to swindle money 'pe ffacce le lasaggne'; right to the other end of the spectrum in the sonnet pair entitled 2272-3. 'La povera sciorcinata', where the mother is beyond desperation, completely resigned to suffering and unable to envisage any hope whatsoever, 'nemmanco un po' de pane e un po' de schiuma'.[4]

On other occasions, poems provoke immediate responses to particular stimuli, which are in turn provided by further sonnets. Each of the four sonnets in the series 'Er carzolaro ar caffè', for example, are spurred on by a series of tone changes, with the cobbler's initial ire at the waiter's slowness changing first to sarcasm in the second sonnet, then to amicability in the third, before he becomes downright friendly and affable in the fourth.[5] The sonnets in this sequence therefore exist in relation to one another, but function together as an extended monologue. Within the wider profusion of voices, however, a more concentrated form of dialogue may be instigated by deliberately antithetical stock characters, such as the contiguous 1484. 'La mojje marcontenta' and

[4] *PR*, VII, p. 227; IX, p. 613; IX, pp. 604-607.
[5] *PR*, IV, 88-95.

1485. ‘Er marito stufo’, obviously conceived simultaneously in the mind of the poet.[6] Yet whereas these characters are merely engaged in a sort of ideological meta-dialogue, other sonnet pairs stage direct debate, with one sonnet answering another. Such is explicitly the case with 122-123. ‘La guittarìa’, divided into ‘Cacaritto a Cacastuppini’ (1) and the ensuing ‘Risposta de Cacastuppini a Cacaritto’ (2), which is nothing more than a perfectly bipartite slanging match. As the names suggest, the exchange occurs between two tramps who hurl a flurry of abuse at one another, with Cacaritto’s accusations of ‘Guitto scannato’ in the first sonnet forming the starting point of Cacastuppini’s reply, which opens with ‘Sò un pò spiantato: ebbe?’, before going on to point out in equally colourful invective that Cacaritto finds himself in exactly the same state of misery.[7] Likewise, dialogue takes place between the brace of sonnets entitled 1649-1650. ‘La primaròla’¸ the first of which offers uninterrupted airtime to the midwife who guides and reassures the pregnant woman, who in turn retorts her own worries in the second. And whilst the discourse of the comare and sora Susanna are essentially juxtaposed monologues, the reader is nevertheless aware that further interaction is taking place off-stage.[8]

In this vein, critics have also realized that many, if not most, of Belli’s poems may be described as dialogical monologues, in that there is usually an implied interlocutor or listener, separate from the concept of the reader, in the form of a friend or confidant, family member, colleague in the broadest sense, adversary, or merely anyone

[6] Sonnet pairs of this kind are more often than not composed on the very same day, as is the case here (12 February 1835).
[7] *PR*, II, pp. 74-77.
[8] The ‘comare’ peppers her monologue with a series of questions, for example, to which she appears to receive immediate responses that are then built into her own discourse. Thus in the second quatrain she asks how far Susanna has progressed into her pregnancy, and is soon aware of the answer: ‘E in che lluna mó state? Ah, in de la nona.’ See *PR*, VII, p. 161.

encountered in the course of everyday Roman life.[9] Thus in all three of the sonnets mentioned featuring incarnations of the poor mother figure, the personae directly address their discourse at their children; so too do we understand that the cobbler of 737-740. 'Er carzolaro ar caffè' is firing the verbal manifestations of his changeable attitude at the waiter. Although usually disguised as a silent other, the listener's presence is constantly felt: this may occur either through a conscious nod by the protagonist in their direction, courtesy of a vocative expression for instance; or through Belli's expert skill in detailing a protagonist's reaction in such a way as to allow the reader to infer the broad outline of the interlocutor's input.[10]

To date, however, scholarly attention has been lacking towards the very many instances in Belli where that implied and passive other breaks his silence in order to assume an active role in the dialogue.[11] In other words, the parameters of the sonnet form may be given over either in part or in full to showcasing the collision of two or more differentiated voices in the unadulterated actuality of their direct discourse. In these 'dialogue sonnets', dialogue itself takes centre stage and becomes the subject of the

[9] Gibellini states that 'quella dialogica, in atto o potenziale, è la situazione universalmente data nel sonetto belliano'. Gibellini, Pietro, 'Microfono in versi: le voci parlanti nei Sonetti Romaneschi del Belli', in *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, 45, 2, (2006), 155-172, (160).

[10] Compare, for example, the 30+ sonnets in which the protagonist addresses a certain Nina (diminutive of Caterina), a stock name for any female character, with the exception of 97. 'A Nina' where the reader is expected to recognize the prostitute identity modelled on Porta's 'La Ninetta del Verzee', see *PR*, II, p. 11. On the question of inferring the sentiment of an interlocutor's implicit utterance, it is clear for instance that in the interval between the two tercets of 1649. 'La Primaròla' (1) Susanna has disclosed one of her fears, prompting the comare to dismiss her concerns as exaggerated rumours: 'Ve la sentite in corpo la cratura? / Dunque bboni bbocconi, e ccamminate; / e llassate fà er resto a la natura. / Ggnente: tutte ssciocchezze. Voi penzate, / pe llevàvve da torno la pavura / quante prima de voi sce sò ppassate'. See *PR*, VII, p. 161.

[11] The phenomenon has not gone entirely unnoticed; the keen eye of Giorgio Vigolo is the first to draw attention to it in *Il genio del Belli*, 2 vols (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1963), I, pp. 133-134; the most concentrated study is by Emero Giachery, who considers the dialogue as part of his inquiry into spoken language and voice in 'Parlato, dialogo e "concertato"', in *Letture belliane*, VI (Rome: Bulzoni, 1985), later appearing in his monologue *Belli e Roma: Tra Carnevale e Quaresima* (Rome: Edizioni Studium, 2007); Gibellini also briefly mentions dialogue in his study on Belli's orality, referenced above in previous footnote.

poem, just as much as the speaking subjects doing the talking.[12] With Belli first hitting on the idea of structuring sonnets around the direct speech meetings of multiple interlocutors from as early as 1830, and the last one stemming from his final bout of dialect writing in the spring of 1847, the dialogue sonnet is a permanent fixture of Belli's Romanesco output.[13] What's more, by my reckoning the *Sonetti romaneschi* include more than 200 poems in which at least some explicit direct debate takes place, with the vast majority being fourteen lines of pure discourse, revealing that over 10% of Belli's monument is devoted to dialogue sonnets proper. Not only does this understated fact establish G.G. Belli as one of the chief practitioners in the long tradition of what are known in Italy as *sonetti dialogati* or *sonetti a dialogo*, it also unmasks his participation in yet another instance of literary dialoguing. Coupled with the countless implied and intertextual dialogues of one kind or another, then, the notion of dialogue and the dialogue sonnet in particular form a fundamental part of the author's project, an aspect that is begging for further investigation.

2.2 The dialogue sonnet

With the sonnet claiming the crown as the most enduring of all poetic forms, the paradox of its many internal structural divisions and yet overall contained formal unity has given rise to myriad uses, interpretations and experimentations in the course of its long history.[14] Not surprisingly, Belli is by no means the first to recognize the potential of its fourteen lines to house the direct speech debates of multiple characters. What is

[12] The term is from Spiller, Michael R. G., *The development of the sonnet: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 25. He uses the definition in reference to Cecco Angiolieri.
[13] The period 1830-1847 should be considered the real duration of Belli's sonnet production; almost all of the dialect poems preceding 1830 are marginal 'versi d'occasione', as borne out by the title of the very last sonnet, '«Sora Crestina mia, pe un caso raro»', which would come later in 1849.
[14] 'The sonnet is probably the longest-lived of all poetic forms, and certainly the longest-lived of all *prescribed forms*'. Spiller, *The development of the sonnet* cit., p. 2. See also Oppenheimer.

surprising, however, is that no account of the extensive use of the dialogue sonnet in the Italian vernacular tradition yet exists. [15] And whilst a definitive survey of the ever-present sub-genre would require at least a thesis in its own right and as such is necessarily far beyond the scope of this chapter, the broad outlines of a potted history must be sketched for Belli's use of the dialogue to be fully appreciated along with his place in the meta-literary discourse in which his tenscore dialogue sonnets actively situate him.

In order to avoid any ambiguity from the outset, the discussion should perhaps begin with an illustration of what is intended for the purposes of this chapter by the label of dialogue sonnet. The most famous early example to spring to mind is without doubt Cecco Angiolieri's masterly exposition of verbal duelling between his scheming persona Cecco and his equally-matched lover, the extremely physical anti-Beatrice whom he calls Becchina:

– Becchin'amor! – Che vuo', falso tradito?
– Che mi perdoni. – Tu non ne se' degno.
– Merzé, per Deo! – Tu vien' molto gecchito.
– E verrò sempre. – Che sarammi pegno?
– La buona fé. – Tu ne se' mal fornito.
– No inver' di te. – Non calmar, ch'i' ne vegno.
– In che fallai? – Tu sa' ch'i' l'abbo udito.
– Dimmel', amor. – Va', che ti vegn'un segno!
– Vuo' pur ch'i' muoia? – Anzi mi par mill'anni.
– Tu non di' ben. – Tu m'insegnerai.
– Ed i' morrò. – Omè, che tu m'inganni!
– Die tel perdoni. – E che, non te ne vai?
– Or potess'io! – Tègnoti per li panni?

[15] Whilst critical attention to the dialogue sonnet is all but non-existent in general, two brief studies on the phenomenon have appeared for the Italian Duecento and the Trecento. The most comprehensive and convincing of the two is by Suitner: Suitner, Franco, 'Sul sonetto dialogato nella poesia italiana delle origini', in *Dal Medioevo a Petrarca. Miscellanea di studi in onore di Vittore Branca* (Florence: L.S. Olschki 1983), 93-109. Still useful, though covering much of the same ground, is Paola Allegretti's 'Il sonetto dialogato due-trecentesco. L'interciso e le sue origini gallo-romanze', in Pedroni, Matteo, and Antonio Stäuble, (eds.), *Il Genere "tenzone" nelle letterature romanze delle origini: atti del Convegno internazionale, Losanna, 13-15 novembre 1997* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1999).

– Tu tieni ’l cuore. – E terrò co’ tuo’ guai.[16]

No fewer than seven of Cecco’s poems are complete dialogue sonnets. Indeed Cecco is often erroneously credited with the form’s invention.[17] In reality, however, the phenomenon is much more complex and literary traditions much more interwoven. Even in terms of the broadly Italian dialogue sonnet, Cecco cannot be defined as its earliest exponent, who instead seems to be Rustico Filippi. Evident in the sonnets of Rustico Filippi is the early schism occurring in the dialogue sonnet between the lofty, aulic setting of the lyric tradition, as evidenced by the full dialogue celebrating the reciprocal love between the poet and his donna, ‘–Poi che voi piace ch’io mostri allegranza’, and the more realistic everyday setting (such as that of Cecco in the sonnet above), examples of which can also be found in partial dialogue in Rustico Filippi.[18] As Suitner points out, this division is also to be seen in Iacopo da Leona, three of whose eight surviving sonnets are presented in full dialogue form, with others including parts in dialogue. What’s more, the creative ingenuity of dividing the sonnet’s structure in various ways, usually accredited to Cecco, is already at play in Iacopo.[19] All three of Iacopo’s dialogues are formally inventive in their own right: inspired by the aulic tradition, ‘– Amor m’auzide. – Per che? – Per ch’io amo’, divides each of the sonnet’s lines into three parts as opposed to Cecco’s two, with the total of 42 separate utterances being shared equally between the love-struck poet and his confidant; in ‘– Madonna, ’n voi lo meo core soggiorna’, the

[16] Marti, Mario, *Poeti giocosi del tempo di Dante* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1956), p. 192.
[17] ‘Cecco discovered, and mastered, the dramatic sonnet, the sonnet which brings to life an encounter’. Spiller, *The development of the sonnet* cit., p. 24.
[18] For the full text of ‘Poi che voi piace ch’io mostri allegranza’, see Marti, *Poeti giocosi*, cit., p. 85.
[19] ‘Cecco […] showed that by using half lines dexterously it is possible to set up a slanging match in a sonnet, and compress a comic encounter into a single poem’. Spiller, *The development of the sonnet* cit., p. 24. Cecco should still be considered inventive within the form, though, and he is apparently the first to incorporate more than two voices into the sonnet’s frame: sonnet 26, for example, features direct speech by Cecco and Becchina as well as a passerby. See Angiolieri, Cecco, *Sonetti*, ed. by Menotti Stanghellini, (Monteriggioni: Il leccio, 2003), p. 166.

madonna and the messere take it in turns to speak a line each; in '– Madonna, di voi piango e mi lamento', an example of the ultimately more widespread comic application of the dialogue sonnet, the speech between the madonna and the messere is organized according to the most common scheme, with the octet changing speaker every two lines and the sestet devoting a tercet to each of them.[20]

Of greater significance, however, is the fact that the dialogue tradition, as exploited by the sonnet form, has its origins farther back into French and Provençal poetry, in the forms of debate-poems known as the *tenso* and *coblas tensonadas*. Suitner has shown, for example, that Iacopo da Leona's 'Amor m'auzide. – Per che? – Per ch'io amo' is closely modelled on a *cobla* within a larger work entitled *Ges non puesc en bon vers fallir* by the troubadour Peire Rogier.[21] Suitner has also demonstrated that the opposition traditionally staged within the dialogue sonnet is influenced by other forms in vogue in medieval literature, such as the *contrasto*, with Cecco's sonnet '– Becchin' amore, i' ti solev'odiare', for example, being reminiscent of the *Contrasto di Cielo d'Alcamo*.[22] Similarly, Cecco's poems in turn stimulate intertextual dialogue within the same form in the Due-Trecento, and are echoed in further dialogue sonnets by contemporaries such as Meo dei Tolomei and Fino d'Arezzo.[23] Equally significant, in the context of dialogue, however, is the early development of the French *tenso* into the Italian

[20] The texts are produced in full in Marti, *Poeti giocosi*, cit., pp. 98-101. The ingenious structure of the first sonnet is such that only alternate lines present the speakers in the same order, consequently alternating the dominant voice in each line, thus avoiding monotony: – Amor m'auzide. – Per che? – Per ch'io amo. / – Cui? – La bella. – E non è ella saggia?

[21] See Suitner, p. 100, and p. 101: 'si può essere pressoché sicuri, attraverso esempi come questo, che la tecnica del sonetto dialogato a rapidissime battute in Italia è venuta principalmente dalla poesia provenzale'.

[22] Ibid., p. 104.

[23] See, for example, '– Malinconia, merzé! – Che vi cherando?', in Marti, *Poeti giocosi*, cit., p. 305.

tenzone, and the subsequent tradition of exchanging sonnets as 'versi a un destinatario'.[24] Beside staging dialogue within its parameters, the sonnet form would also be the vehicle for staging extended opposition, either in the serious vein as in the political tenzoni of Monte Andrea, or in the comic tradition, as with the six-sonnet-exchange between Dante and Forese Donati.[25]

Whilst the use of the dialogue sonnet diminishes in the Quattrocento, to be found only in the comic branch by representatives such as Domenico di Giovanni, better known as Il Burchiello, and later in direct imitations by Serafino Aquilano, the tradition begins to flourish again in the Cinquecento.[26] Intriguingly, the Cinquecento marks the beginning of a particularly Roman tradition, recording the first known dialogue sonnet in romanesco, between two typically Roman characters Vannozza and Jacovella, and the proliferation of the form amongst the Pasquinate compositions.[27] As is the case with the Duecento, the dialogue sonnet seems to find renewed popularity when other dialogic forms are in vogue within the literary panorama, so that the rediscovery of the classical dialogue in the Renaissance would seem to coincide with the reappearance of the dialogical sonnet, taken up in the Seicento for example by the likes of Marino and Zappi.

[24] See Giunta for a detailed account of various guises of the tenzone, which constitutes 'il vero genere politematico, sembra infatti che per i poeti medievali non ci sia argomento, per quanto arduo e 'prosaico', che non si presti ad essere discusso in versi in un dialogo a due o più voci', p. 94. Belli's circle, too, would exchange sonnets in this manner, see for example Paolo Piccardi's 'A Pepp' er tosto' in which Piccardi defends Belli's use of dialect, in Teodonio, Marcello, *La Letteratura romanesca: Antologia di testi dalla fine del Cinquecento al 1870* (Rome: Laterza, 2004), p. 313.

[25] See Marti, *Poeti giocosi*, cit., pp. 782-7.

[26] Interestingly, the generated intertextual discourse continues to dialogue with Cecco, as in Il Burchiello's sonetto caudato 'La poesia combatte col Rasoio', where the poet's discourse to his donna contains an allusion which would become a cliché within the sonnet tradition: «Io ti priego mi perdoni, / donna, s'alquanto nel parlar ti noio: / s'io non fuss'io, e l'acqua e 'l ranno caldo, / Burchiel si rimarrebbe in sul colore / d'un moccolin di cera di smeraldo.» See Zaccarello, Michelangelo, (ed.), *I sonetti del Burchiello* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), p. 177.

[27] Quoted in Giachery, p. 18. For the Pasquinate, see Marucci et al., *Pasquinate romane del Cinquecento*, e.g. no. 216, vol 1. p. 202, whose incipit will find echoes in Belli, as will the verbal duelling built around the profanity: – Infatti ell'andrà mal. – Che di' tu, cazo? / Che il re reso ha i mercanti, ha reso un cazo. / – Tanto è? Di' tu daver? – Parole, cazo. / – Son de' nostri? – De' nostri, cazo, cazo.

Likewise, the Settecento sees a wane in its use, although it is attested in Antonio Conti's 'Sonetto pastorale in dialogo (Ergasto, Damone)', before becoming popular again with realist writers as part of the return to regional dialects in the wake of Romanticism, where Belli is the major exponent, but followers such as Renato Fucini continue to employ the form.

The dialogue sonnet is thus a well wrought urn long before Belli begins imitating the dialogical poems in Carlo Porta. Indeed, the sonnet form has already been established as a space for conflict, building on the implicit notion in the tradition of the contrasting debate-poems, by opening up to non-literary languages of various kinds. Emphatically intertextual within its own tradition and yet intimately linked to developments in the wider literary sphere, the dialogue sonnet stands in a constant and continually-renewing discourse, locating its various employers in a wider meta-literary dialogue. The dialogue sonnet itself can therefore be seen as a sort of historical poetics and as such the perfect embodiment of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism; not only is the use of the sub-genre itself open-ended and interactive, so too is the direct speech material that it presents, forever present and communicating with readers past and future, despite the paradox of the sonnet's closed form.

2.2 The dialogue sonnet in Belli

In the case of Belli's dialect sonnet, the wider discourse is more extensive still, since at the very least it stands in dialogue with the literary tradition in lingua, according to Croce's concept of 'letteratura dialettale riflessa', if not in direct opposition to it as others such as Giuseppe Ferrari have seen it.[28] In light of this rich background, let us now turn

[28] See Elwert, p. 163.

to the dialogue sonnet as it meets with the many forms of opposition at play in Ottocento Rome. In this illuminating example of one of Belli's earliest dialogues, 205. 'L'amichi all'osteria', the sonnet's space accommodates multiple male characters eating and drinking in the osteria.[29] In common with the device of dialogue, the action begins in medias res, with the first quatrain capturing the enthusiasm of the men as they devour several types of foodstuffs and laud the merits of each. The second has one man profess to be full, as attentions turn from food to drink. The volta comes with the gastronomic Cockaigne of the fronte being punctured by the typically base but humorous comment on the colour of the wine. The concluding tercet then sees the discovery of an unnoticed extra chicken, with the final discussion revolving around who will have each bit:

> «Hai raggione per Dio! nun zò ccattive
> ste sciriole». «E tte piasce er marinato?».
> «Me tiro un antro pezzo de stufato.
> Maggnete st'ova che ssò ffresche vive».
>
> «Pe mmé, cquanno ho ppijjato antre du' olive
> ce n'ho dd'avanzo, ché ssò ggià arrivato.
> ...No, nun me fà piú bbeve: ho ssiggillato.
> Chi bbeve pe mmaggnà mmaggnà pe vvive».
>
> «Ma eh? ccorpo dell'anima de ghetto!
> pare er pisscio, sto vin de pontemollo,
> dell'angelo custode bbenedetto?».
>
> «Ohò! cciavemo ancora un antro pollo?!
> Maggni ala o ccoscia?» «No, nnemmanco er petto:
> si mme vôi fà sscialà, ttajjeme er collo».

The framing opening quatrain and closing tercet feature interaction at its closest, with the central part of the sonnet being given over to the uninterrupted voice of each character, most probably for reasons of narrative exposition. At face value the scene appears to present a hearty discussion between equals, but on closer inspection the dynamics of the

[29] *PR*, II, p. 245.

dialogue actually seem to skew the overall picture and hint at a series of tensions, hindering the reader's ability to draw any satisfactory conclusions. The proceedings look to be dominated by the meat-eating glutton, the first character to speak, with the participation by interlocutors being confined in the opening quatrain to ensuring yet another foodstuff meets with approval.[30] Indeed, the second speaker's discourse is characterized by restraint ('già arrivato' and 'sigillato') and a sense of justification; whereas the first has been devouring various types of meat and cannot resist 'un antro pezzo de stufato', the second looks to have been rationing himself to a Lenten diet, with the semantic load contained in 'antre du olive' minimal in comparison, as if lexical similarity is enough to elevate his meagre pickings to a similar status as his companion's insatiable appetite.[31] This revealed sense of opposition naturally has implications on the construction of identity within the dialogue form. Whilst the first character gives the impression of dominating, it is a seemingly more passive character who enjoys the single biggest chunk of uninterrupted speech by having exclusive rights to the second quatrain. The reader is therefore frustrated and prevented from drawing firm conclusions precisely because there is a plurality of voices which remain obstinately present, apparently regardless of the content of specific utterances.

Moreover, that frustration is compelled further still in the sestet as the mixing of voices becomes more a muddling of voices. The first tercet requires little analysis as the

[30] This passivity is continued at the level of grammatical constructions too, e.g. 'nun me fà piú bbeve'.

[31] In keeping with the fish and olives, the second character also refuses the eggs, which were traditionally forbidden during Lent along with meat and dairy products, although often sanctioned on payment of a donation. Indeed, elsewhere eggs are even elevated to the point of being fit for the Pope, forming part of 'la cuscina santissima' in 1818. 'La cuscina der Papa', starring beside such delicacies as 'caccia, e 'ggni sorte de vivanne rare'. With this in mind, it is difficult not to consider 'L'amichi all'osteria' a return to the medieval theme of Carnival set against Lent, as embodied by such texts as Molinet's *Debat du poisson et de la chair* and the Yorkshireman Robert Thornton's *Wynnere and Wastoure*, significantly an allegorical debate poem. On both texts and the background to this theme, see Cartlidge.

pendulum seems to swing back to the glutton, or a third voice, who delivers a damning appraisal of the wine in such a way as to send up his friend's apparent Catholic values at the same time. This might explain the concluding question mark, if the sentence were a feigned rhetorical question designed to ridicule the faithful observer of Lent. Were that the case, the opening line of the final tercet might be his rejoinder with 'pollo' to be taken as a double entendre, painting the glutton as a simpleton exhibiting wholesale rejection of the teachings of the Church.[32] Equally, however, it might be a separate voice altogether labelling the Christian himself as naïve for being gullible enough to observe Lent. This final tercet is especially puzzling, since the sequence of voices is deliberately elusive. On the one hand, the excitement of discovering a previously unnoticed chicken could easily be that of the glutton, as could his subsequent gesture of offering the smaller insignificant parts to his reluctant companion, thus saving the best cuts for himself. And in keeping with this reading, the negatives 'no' and 'nnemmanco' would fit with his companion's earlier rebuttals in line 7. On the other hand, though, if the punctuation is to be preserved thus, the question 'maggni ala o ccoscia?' would echo the passive character's style of questioning in line 2, and his phrasing might be read as another attempt to avoid further eating.[33] Neither explanation fully resolves the movement of the second tercet, and in any case, the final retort is deliberately ambiguous: with Belli exploiting the use of the definite article in grammatical constructions involving body parts rather than the

[32] '*Pollo* dicesi figuratamente ad uomo gonzo, e che si fa ingannare facilmente; e in modo particolare dicesi di chi per essere esperto al giuoco, si lascia abbindolare da chi ne sa', in the Rigutini-Fanfani *Vocabolario italiano della lingua parlata* (Florence: Barbèra, 1887).

[33] There is reason to doubt the transcription here as there are other apparent graphic infelicities, such as the accented /à/ in the second 'maggnà' on line 8, making it an infinitive, like the 'fà' and 'scialà' of the final line, when it presumably requires a third person singular present tense, as with 'bbeve'. It might also make more sense if line 12 and the first hemistich of 13 were uttered by the first speaker, for example.

possessive adjective, the neck could equally refer either to the chicken (supposedly a delicacy) or to the man himself.

Indeed, the interpretation of this particular line has flummoxed previous editors, including Vigolo, who labels it 'uno dei più strani versi del B[elli]'.[34] Rather than discussion revolving around its meaning in the context of the sketch, however, Vigolo and Teodonio have each read something deeper into this, consequently arriving at allegorical conclusions. According to both editors, the line may conceal a statement of Belli's poetics: whilst Vigolo sees it as 'forse rivelatore di una tormentosa sensibilità popolare del Poeta stesso', a gloss almost as enigmatic as the line itself, Teodonio concurs with Vigolo's reading, explicating it as an expression of authorial silence.[35] Despite the dangers of associating the author directly with one of his characters, the phrase does seem sufficiently anomalous amongst Belli's early compositions to invite speculation of this kind, all the more so given its privileged position as the sonnet's point of resolution and thus the mechanism of the entire poem. To take Teodonio's insight further, it seems plausible to read the final line as a manifesto against authorial intrusion, a renewal of his poetic vows. In the 'Introduzione', Belli's realist approach explicitly rules out projecting his own self onto his writing.[36] The fact that this sentiment is delivered in the context of the author's initial experiments with the dialogue form and the

[34] *I sonetti*, I, p. 308.
[35] Vigolo's gloss is from *I sonetti*, I, p. 308. According to Teodonio, 'Vigolo […] identifica il verso come una nascosta metafora rivelatrice di un aspetto profondo e inconfessato [...] della sensibilità (e non certo dei gusti grastronomici) di Belli, quasi che "tagliarsi il collo", cioè "essere costretto a tacere", sia per lui un piacere: il che confermerebbe che la spinta iniziale e primigenia a scrivere sia l'«impito», la costrizione morale, l'imperativo categorico, di dire la Verità.' Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 224.
[36] 'Esporre le frasi del romano quali dalla bocca del romano escono tuttora, senza ornamento, senza alterazione veruna, senza pure inversioni di sintassi o troncamenti di licenza, eccetto quelli che il parlator romanesco usi egli stesso: insomma, cavare una regola dal caso e una grammatica dall'uso, ecco il mio scopo.' *PR*, I, p. 15. Paradoxically, the real reason Belli refutes this sonnet may indeed be the fact that it belies his own presence.

concept of polyphony surely cannot be coincidental. Indeed, the elusive last tercet seems to cast an allegorical veil over the sonnet as a whole, inviting the grand pub meal to be seen as the plebeian equivalent of a classical banquet.[37] Moreover, the conventional pitting of the Lenten against the non-Lenten would also seem to put this interpretation beyond doubt. And if, as Bakhtin has shown, banquet images are 'intimately connected with speech', whilst the meal setting and act of eating is the only truly unshackled moment capable of revealing 'the gay truth', Belli's deceptive act of silencing might begin to make sense.[38] A rejection of authorial intrusion, then, in relation to the apparatus of the dialogue, would equal a total eradication of the poet's presence. 'Essere costretto a tacere', as Teodonio has it, would entail removing all traces of the bourgeois creative hand by doing away with narrative intervention, in preference for pure dialogue. Belli's puzzling last line may be read as confirmation of his coming to realize that the dialogue sonnet is the perfect vehicle for his realist project.

Whether or not a statement of poetics can be contained within the final line of 'L'amichi all'osteria', the poem does act as an introduction to what this chapter suggests to be the constitutive parts of Belli's poetics, and demonstrates the wider capacity of the dialogue sonnet form. Its attractions are manifold: it circumvents the need for a potentially incredible third-person omniscient narrator and in so doing avoids reducing plural voices to a single, simple interpretation; it bypasses the necessity for any mediation between the opposing voices which the form's binary, dialectical structure naturally encourages, instead presenting them at the undiluted interface of interaction; it introduces

[37] 'A traditional metaphor for the dialogue, since classical times, had been the banquet or symposium: as rich and various in its material provisions as the dialogue was in its arguments', Cox, p. 111.
[38] *Rabelais and his World*, p. 281. It might also be seen as part of the wider literary discourse surrounding the use of banquet imagery in the Italian vernacular tradition.

voices in the eternal present, a consequent effect of direct discourse itself; and it presents the dialogue or debate as open-ended. Although the sonnet resolves poetically in the usual way within the final tercet, the dialogue sonnet ensures that even the weakest voice is never extinguished. On the contrary, it remains alive and the debate is forever active, immediately vivid.[39] Indeed, as with 'L'amichi all'osteria', the dialogue seems to extend beyond both ends of the sonnet's fourteen lines, offering the reader merely a representative soundbite of a greater whole. The dialogic form gives the impression that the speakers exist not merely within the poem but that the poem allows a glimpse of what are real, fleshy identities. It is precisely through this particular formal structure, I would suggest, that the poet fully succeeds in 'facendo dire a ciascun popolano quanto sa, quanto pensa e quanto opera' and comes closest to finding that elusive 'metodo di esporre vibrato ed efficace', which constitutes his mission.[40] The dialogue sonnet, for all its features, is the most effective and most concentrated expression of Belli's broader poetics of opposition.

2.3 Girl talk: *Le confidenze de le regazze*

A clear example of how the device of direct speech functions within Belli's project, and how the dialogue sonnet in particular stands in relation to its more frequent monological counterparts, may be offered by the sequence entitled 586-593. 'Le confidenze de le regazze'.[41] A series of eight sonnets altogether, this particular group of poems provides ample evidence of the poet's need to turn to the dialogue sonnet in order to express the most intense moments of interaction. 'Le confidenze de le regazze' has long been

[39] 'Nel dialogo puro il poeta ti dà, è vero, l'assoluta vivezza del parlato come è nella vita'. Vigolo, p. 134.
[40] *PR*, I, p. 23.
[41] *PR*, III, pp. 377-393.

considered the single most obscene composition in Belli's notoriously rich profanisaurus. Omitted by Morandi even from the hugely popular volume that came to be known as '*Il sesto*', to which he relegated all indecent sonnets in a prudish attempt to sweep them under the carpet and spare the blushes of readers in a still heavily Catholic 1880s Rome, it would not see the light of day until the end of the 1940s. As the titillating title suggests, the subject matter is unsurprisingly risqué and its contents characteristically explicit: two presumably teenage girls, Tuta and Agata, discuss their newfound fascination with the male reproductive organ in particular and their subsequent initiation into sexual activity. Despite being bawdy in terms of the discussion's language, however, the sequence itself actually achieves quite profound effects over and above the immediately comic, with the dénouement revealing both young girls to be in the same terrifying predicament and intellectually incapable of dealing with pregnancy.[42] As well as the obvious loss of innocence, the poem is also a comment on sexual opposition and domination, social mores and popular superstitions.

A masterpiece combining supreme technical skill with verisimilar poetic voices, the whole poem is an extended dialogue played out between the two naturally curious youngsters and is distributed over the eight sonnets. The first half of the sequence is made up of dialogical monologues in the sense described in the introduction, that is, Tuta delivers the first two sonnets, is answered by Agata in the third, before taking the stage again in the fourth. The first sonnet sees Tuta explaining to Agata that for some time she has been curious about the distinctive bulge males exhibit in their trousers, and so has

[42] In treating the familiar topos, Belli is in dialogue with two further dialogical texts: Aretino's *Dialogo di Messer Pietro Aretino nel quale la Nanna il primo giorno insegna alla Pippa sua figliuola a esser puttana* (an author much admired by Belli – see the Zibaldone) and Porta's *Dormiven du Tosann* ('vergin istess tutt dò, ma in quella etaa / che comenza a spiurigh la passarina'). *Poesie*, p. 591.

resolved to make further enquiries directly with a member of the opposite sex, a certain ironically-named Felisce. Tuta then reports her findings to Agata in the second, with her monologue interestingly including a direct speech account of her dialogue with Felisce, which is framed around the construction of suspense and forms the centrepiece of the sonnet:

> Quer coso disce che sse chiama *uscello,*
> oppuro *cazzo*, e ll'antri dua *cojjoni*.
> Io je fesce: «E cch'edè sto ggiucarello?
> E sti du' pennolini a cche ssò bboni?».
> Mo ssenti, Àghita mia, quello che rresta.
> Disce: «Fa ddu' carezze a sto pupazzo».
> Io je le fesce, e cquello arzò la testa.[43]

Agata retorts proudly in the third that she is aware of their divergent anatomy from secretly observing men 'piscià pe li cantoni', but is keen to enquire what the 'sputarella' is to which Tuta refers and urges her to ask Felisce for an explanation. The fourth sonnet has Tuta recount a further meeting with the older man, whom she describes with a telling malapropism as 'er cavajjer zerpente', a humorous phallic reference on one level but further confirmation of a disparity in age and maturity. Indeed, this opposition becomes the crux of the remaining action, with Felisce exploiting Tuta's naivety, first imitating her inquisitiveness regarding the mysteries of the body and then her speech itself. Belli douses the poor Tuta's account with pathos, as she ironically falls for Felisce's feigned reciprocal curiosity, with her discourse even belying a mistaken sense of superior knowledge: 'ridennome de lui m'arzai la vesta'. Having duped Tuta into revealing herself, Felisce's manipulation continues at the linguistic level, with him disingenuously mirroring her innocent expression of surprise in sonnet two, 'e cch'edè sto ggiucarello?',

[43] *PR*, III, p. 381. Despite her nascent sexual awareness, however, one cannot help thinking that at least part of Tuta still conceives of the terms 'ggiucarello' and 'pupazzo' with the blanket innocence of childhood rather than the explicit sexual innuendo intended by the adult.

and reducing his register to the simplest possible by exploiting his knowledge of the girl's occupation in order to construct euphemism around a sartorial metaphor:

> «E cch'edè Ttuta? cqui cce tienghi un buscio»,
> me disse lui: «viè un po' in nell'antra stanza
> ch'io co un aco che cciò tte l'aricuscio».[44]

The harsh velar plosives of Felisce's last line of speech, predominantly composed of monosyllables, strike an ominous tone of violence, reflecting the sharpness of the needle image, which is in turn borne out in the sexual act itself as reported by Tuta in the final tercet[45]. What is interesting, however, is the fact that Felisce's real identity has been constructed through his direct speech and not refracted through the filter of a narrator. Granted, Tuta recounts some of his actions, but his own words are the source of his characterization, their full significance lost on Tuta but playing equally to the reader.

Of greater significance still, though, is the decision on the part of the poet to resort to direct dialogical speech in sonnets two and four at what are effectively the crucial moments of the poem thus far, namely the original interaction between Tuta and Felisce. Belli clearly employs this device precisely because their speech contains several layers of meaning and is able to reveal far more about the identities of the interlocutors involved and the dynamics of their interaction than can be offered by any one-dimensional and necessarily removed narration. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the real heart of the poem, the most intense phase of the discussion between the two girls, is played out entirely through the apparatus of the dialogue sonnet. With Tuta's brutal but

[44] The reader finds out in the sixth sonnet that the two girls are apprentice dressmakers through Agata's reference to 'scòla', and the expressions combining elements from that related lexis which Belli cleverly weaves into the girls' discourse, such as when the jealous Agata claims that she too wants to meet with Felisce to discuss a 'scerta tela fina…' *PR*, III, p. 389.

[45] 'Poi me porta de llà ddove se pranza, / cava er zu' bbúschero, e a ffuria de struscio / me lo ficca pe fforza in de la panza.' *PR*, III, p. 385.

brief revelation of the sexual act at the close of the previous poem, Agata is so intrigued that she interrupts the hither-to-unbroken sequence of monologue, as if her emotions are too intense to be contained within the poetic form of the meeting thus far, by bursting forth with multiple questions:

590. 'Le confidenze de le regazze' (5)

«E cche ssentissi, Tuta, in ner momento
che Ffelisce te fesce quer lavore?»
«Cominciai a ssentí ttanto dolore,
che vvolevo scappà ppe lo spavento».

«Eppoi?» «M'intese come un svenimento
e inzieme a bbatte presto-presto er core».
«Bbè, ttira avanti». «Eppoi un gran brusciore».
«E allora?» «E allora er coso m'annò ddrento».

«E llui tratanto?» «Se pijjava gusto
de metteme la lingua in de la bbocca,
e ccacciamme le zinne for der busto».

«E ttu?» «E *io*, si mmaippiú llui me tocca,
nun vojjo ppiú ste bbrutte cose». «Eh ggiusto!».
«No, nu le vojjo ppiú». «Quanto sei ssciocca!»

Having created the sense of suspense up until this point, Tuta now seems uncharacteristically reserved with her information, forcing the voracious Agata to prompt her into conveying more of the act itself through a series of 'ansiose brevissime battute'.[46] And so whilst Tuta, the instigator of the original discussion, still has by far the greater say, her domination over the interaction is beginning to wane and the dynamics of the dialogue undergo a shift. The following sonnet sees the sea-change in action, with Agata taking the lead from the very start in a more concentrated form of debate, the traditional agonistic dialogue:

591. 'Le confidenze de le regazze'

[46] Vighi, quoted in Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 618. Agata's thirst for further details is clear from her hastily-formed, fragmented interjections, almost all beginning on a variation of 'and…?'

«Tuta, si vviè Ffelisce stammatina,
dijje che all'ora ch'io torno da scòla
guardi quanno che Mmamma sta in cantina,
e entri, c'ho da dijje una parola».

«E cche ccosa vòi dijje, scivettola?»
«Ciò da parlà dde scerta tela fina...».
«Ma ppropio propio tela, eh Aghitina?
no de quer coso longo che jje scola?»

«E ssi ffussi accusí, cche cc'è dde male
de vedé si er giuchetto de Felisce
fascènnolo co un'antra è ttal'e cquale,

o ssi ttu mme sciai fatto la cornisce?
Eppoi tu ttanto ggià cciai messo er zale,
e nnu lo vòi ppiú ffà». «Chi tte lo disce?».

Tuta's discourse is now more active, including imperative verbal forms ('dijje') and elusive constructions, both the unexplained 'parola' and the metaphorical 'scerta tela fina'.[47] Invective is also present on the part of both speakers who employ ad hominem attack forms. Whilst Tuta resorts to insults such as 'scivettola', where the sarcastically-charged diminutive suffix is also echoed in her direct address form 'Aghitina', Agata questions the veracity of Tuta's word ('o ssi ttu mme sciai fatto la cornisce'?).

Once tensions subside, the final two sonnets in the sequence return to the dialogical monologue, where both girls realize they are pregnant and experience suffering in various ways, ranging from parental wrath to physical bodily pain. The effect of the return to monologue is thus to compound the sense of fear and isolation felt by each of the youngsters; even at the level of form, their voices begin to fade again into the darkness. In terms of Belli's view of the dialogue sonnet, however, there can be no question that he sees it as the most effective device for conveying a concentrated form of

[47] The 'parola' may be read as an opportunity for Agata to reprimand Felisce on behalf of her friend, or the opportunity to enter into a similar form of interaction with Felisce. Either way, further dialogue of any kind, whether conflictual or symbiotic, will ensue at the verbal level.

opposition. Indeed, with the dynamics of this sequence working in much the same way as the parts of the sonnet form itself (sonnets 1-4 for exposition and construction of rosy expectation, with the revelation at the exact mid-point, the end of sonnet 4, before the essential part begins with the volta in sonnets 5-6), direct alternating speech is reserved for the crux of the poem's message. So intense is the interaction in sonnets 5 and 6 that there is a total absence of the verba dicendi which had characterized the framing of the dialogical elements in the preceding sonnets.[48] The dialogue sonnet in Belli thus stands as the superior harbinger of action, emotion and interpersonal reaction in relation to its more pedestrian and narrative monological counterpart.

2.4 Performance effects, strategies, variations on a theme

Having established its centrality, attention should now be turned to the varying effects that Belli is able to stage through recourse to the dialogue sonnet, known significantly within the English tradition as the *dramatic sonnet*.[49] And it is not by chance that the vocabulary of the theatre has peppered the discussion thus far, for the mechanics of the dialogue sonnet lend themselves to theatrical analogy. Indeed, there are numerous sonnets where the briefest of narrative frameworks seem to act as stage directions in a dialogical role play. In 1389. 'Er bordello scuperto', for example, not only are the two characters of the investigator and the priest introduced schematically, the verba dicendi preceding their speech seem to serve as prompts for actors:

> Entrato er brigattiere in ner bordello
> je se fa avanti serio serio un prete.
> Disce: «Chi ssete voi? cosa volete?»
> Disce: «La forza, e pportà llei 'n Castello».[50]

[48] Compare such constructions as 'me disse lui', quoted above on page 12.
[49] The term is from Spiller, *The development of the sonnet* cit., p. 24.
[50] *PR*, VI, p. 137.

Vigolo identifies a direct influence of the theatre over Belli, even to the point of seeing a correlation between the number of dialogue sonnets produced after 1835 when Belli first encountered the actress Amalia Bettini.[51] Belli conceives of the theatre as the all inclusive arena, and this influence is borne out in the polyphony of the dialogue sonnet. In a directly theatrical setting, the dialogue in 1711. 'L'entrône der teatro' takes place not between two or three interlocutors, but a whole crowd of intermingling voices:

> Er ber zentí è la folla de paíni,
> quanno ch'essce la folla da la Valle.
> «Chi è cquella?». «Bbenemio, cche ppar de spalle!
> Guarda sta vecchia come spaccia inchini!».
>
> «Ecco ecco er novo duca Sceserini.
> Chi appoggia?». «Ohé, vve piasce quelo sscialle?
> Ggià mme capite...». «Oh ddio quanto sò ggialle
> ste regazze!... E pperché? Nu l'indovini?».
>
> «La Contessa stasera sta in brillanti».
> «Di' ffonni de bbicchieri». «Uh, vvedi vedi:
> passa la scuffiarina. E mmamma avanti!».
>
> E intanto che ss'aspetta la carrozza,
> tra er gioco de le mane e de li piedi
> la Compaggnia de San Martino abbozza.[52]

The 'ber zentí' is the attraction of polyphony. In Belli all the world really is a stage, and all the men and women merely players: in the introduction Belli significantly conceptualizes his entire oeuvre as a type of 'dramma'.[53] The church, osteria, or piazza

[51] 'Questi componimenti di dialogo puro sono comunque in minor numero rispetto agli altri e cominciano ad incontrarsi con relativa frequenza in uno stadio avanzato dell'arte belliana, dopo il 1835 quando il Belli frequentava molto i teatri e conobbe l'attrice di prosa Amalia Bettini.', Vigolo, I, p. 134. Whilst it is true that the dialogue sonnet is more frequent in Belli from 1835 onwards (as is his entire sonnet production as a whole), there are over 70 dramatic sonnets produced before that date.
[52] *PR*, VIII, p. 299.
[53] Ibid., I, p. 23.

transform themselves into microcosmic theatres, with the *Sonetti romaneschi* the extended script of Belli's epic play featuring all the voices of the piazza.[54]

As Bakhtin has pointed out, the concept of theatricality is innate within the very language of the marketplace.[55] Moreover, with Belli's sonnet staging the meeting of voices of all shades, the dialogue sonnet is suitable for showcasing Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia. Although Bakhtin actually sees the novel as the ideal ground for this reflection of a social reality, indeed the quintessential power of the modern novel, and questions the ability of poetry in general to reflect this dimension, Belli's diversity of voice is a special case. Furthermore, the particular guise of the dialogue sonnet not only fulfils the criteria for heteroglossic expression but goes a step further in showing various language stratifications in synchronic direct contrast to one another. The dialogue sonnets feature a whole spectrum of language varieties, including: the language of authority, such as the clergy in 595. 'Er confessore'; gendered speech as it differs between the sexes as in 'L'omo e la donna' (see next chapter); certain group languages such as the shared language of poor housewives in the sonnet sequence 1260. 'Le donne litichíne'; and even the language of childspeak as in the dialogue between mother and daughter in 496. 'L'indiani', or grandmother and granddaughter in 573. 'Er parto de Mamma'. What's more, Belli's dialogical sonnets also feature corruptions of language in one sense or another. For example, in 219. 'Er Zervitor de piazza, er Milordo ingrese, e er Vitturino a nnòlito', a trialogue between an English visitor to Rome and two swindling Romans

[54] This theatricality has been noted at the macrolevel: 'ciascun sonetto rappresenta una voce di un grande dialogo; tutti, sono voci di una folla anonima che si muove e vocifera, dalla quale, di volta in volta, si distaccano figure distinte, anche se prive di contorni fisici e solo implicitamente descritte, per presentarsi alla ribalta e far sentire la loro parola.', Clemente, p. 213. The dialogue sonnet seems a particularly effective method of presenting this at the microlevel however.

[55] In 'Language of the Marketplace', he often shows Rabelaisian characters working within 'marketplace spectacles' and stresses that 'France's dramatic culture was at that time closely related to the marketplace', *Rabelais and his world*, p. 155.

purporting to be tour guides, language conflict at various levels is the sonnet's driving factor and source of amusement:

> MIL. Ma, cwí, in buco... ho una... vacca, una phuttana. Yes,
> come dite voi? futta... futtana?...
>
> SERV. Ahà, vvasca, funtana.
> C'era sicuro a ttempo de l'antichi:
> ma mmó cche ha da restà? mmanco li fichi.

On the one hand, there is the immediately comic attempt on the part of the English tourist to speak Italian, with Belli's phonetic attempt to represent his discordant and overemphasized pronunciation as in 'cwí', a thin veil of linguistic aptitude which is belied in any case by the erroneous inclusion of 'Yes', as well as the malapropisms. Yet, on the other hand, there is the equally comic attempt by the fake guide to elevate his language to a register beyond his grasp, the so-called 'parlare civile', which is betrayed by his thick pronunciation (the consonantal doubling) as well as his bad grammar ('sicuro' instead of 'sicuramente') and awkward constructions such as 'cche ha da restà?' For the guide, 'er parlià ciovìle' is as much the foreign language as Tuscan is to the Englishman.

There is, of course, a long tradition of polyglossia in such dialogical forms as the contrasto, and so Belli can also be located into that wider discourse.[56] Indeed, a number of the dialogue sonnets revolve around the juxtaposition of different languages proper, such as the frequent opposition between Tuscan and Romanesco as in 541. 'Er custituto':

> «Chi ssiete?» «Un omo». «Come vi chiamate?»

[56] The earliest example is Raimbaut de Vaqueiras in the multilingual 'Eras quan vey verdeyar', but more specifically for our purposes in *Domna, tant vos ai preiada*, where the characters themselves explicitly draw attention to language opposition: the Genovese lady purportedly rejects the Provençal jester on the basis of language by telling him 'no t'entend plui d'un Toesco / O Sardo o Barbarì'. See www.trobar.org/troubadours/raimbaut_de_vaqueiras_03.php (accessed 15/11/2009).

«Biascio Chiafò». «Di qual paese siete?»
«Romano com'e llei». «Quanti anni avete?»
«Sò entrato in ventidua». «Dove abitate?»

«Dietr'a Ccampo-Carleo». «Che arte fate?»
«Gnisuna, che ssapp'io». «Come vivete?»
«De cuer che Ddio me manna». «Lo sapete
perché siete voi qui?» «Pe ttre pposate».

«Rubate?» «Ggià». «Vi accusa?» «Er Presidente».
«Ma le rubaste voi?» «Nun zò stat'io».
«Dunque chi le rubò?». «Nu ne so ggnente».

«E voi da chi le aveste?». «Da un giudio».
«Tutto vi mostra reo». «Ma ssò innoscente».
«E se andaste in galera?» «È er gusto mio».[57]

The language opposition is immediately apparent, with the standard seemingly lending the interrogating official some authority: the simple, neatly-formed questions in Tuscan stand in stark contrast to the rhemic responses of the boorish Romanesco which according to Teodonio borders on aphasia here. The desperate attempt on the part of the accused to reduce the opposition by claiming shared nationality with the accuser, 'Romano com' e llei', falls flat. Indeed, with his utterance revealing what pragmatics refers to as 'power semantics', that is the opposition between the hierarchy markers of the 'lei' and 'voi' forms, the effect is the exact opposite, extending the gulf between them yet further still.[58]

The juxtaposed power relations of the accused and accuser in the example above also introduce the important notion of the sonnet as a tribunal. With the form opening out to become a forum in the Latin sense of a public place of exchange, its chambers have

[57] The inspiration is Giovannin's interrogation by the French soldier in Porta: '*Chi siete?* Giovannin. *La parentella?* / Bongee. *Che mestier fate?* El lavorant / De frust. *Presso de chi?* De Isepp Gabella. / *In dovè?* In di Tegnon.' *Poesie*, p. 66.

[58] Power semantics of this kind are common in the dialogue sonnets. Cf. 594. 'Er bon padre spirituale', the bawdy dialogue between the confessor and a female penitent whom he address with the 'voi' form; similarly in 418. 'Er Logotenente', although significantly the official switches to the 'tu' form when trying to seduce the woman and returns to the detached 'voi' form once his sexual advances have been rejected, *PR*, III, pp. 395-397 and p. 15 respectively.

also been compared to those of the courtroom. Its natural ability to stage opposition before eventually finding unity has led to it being labelled a 'forensic instrument', well-suited for the clinical advocating of contrasting accounts.[59] What's more, the analogy goes much further: with the airing of opposing voices, judgement is sometimes suspended, as is largely the case in 541. 'Er custituto', where the Tuscan official offers no reaction whatsoever to any of the accused's answers, other than a seemingly tenuous half-judgement in 'tutto vi mostra reo'. The implication of this, especially with modern theory in mind such as reader-response criticism, is to assign the role of judge to the reader.[60] Indeed, the implicit appeal to the reader tends to be what drives the sonnet in particularly unjust situations or where justice can be seen to be corrupt, as in 418. 'Er Logotenente', in which the dialogue is based on sexual opposition between the omnipotent 'luogotenente' and the wife of a wrongly accused man. When the prelate invites the woman to decide the judicial outcome not by her verbal plea but by her corporeal cooperation, 'tu' marito lo vòi reo o innoscente?', the woman only has the reader to appeal to for an acknowledgement of the false sense of justice.

Equally, though, the incumbency to act as judge extends far beyond the judicial setting to include domestic disputes. Such is the case with 2049. 'Li comprimenti de le lavannare', for example, where 'lavannare' should be taken both as 'washerwomen' but also as 'vulgar fishwives', a reference to their vulgar tongues, and where 'comprimenti' is therefore tinged with more than a hint of irony:

[59] The definition is from Spiller, *The development of the sonnet* cit., p. 17.
[60] This also occurs in monological sonnets, such as 1026. 'Er povero ladro', where the speaker's implied dialogical voice directly addresses the silent adjudicator, whose role is fulfilled by the reader: 'Nun ce vò mmica tanto, Monziggnore, / de stà llí a ssede a ssentenzià la ggente / e dde dí: *cquesto è rreo, quest'è innoscente*. / Er punto forte è de vedejje er core.' See *PR*, V, p. 103. The appeal is necessarily stronger, however, in the conflictual situation of the dialogue sonnet.

«Passa er Papa, eh, Luscía?» «Perché, Vvincenza?»
«Nu lo vedi si cquanta puzzolana?»
«Care quele fijjacce de puttana!».
«Fússimo fijje tue, bbrutta schifenza».

«Eh regazze, pagamo sta mammana
c'avémo fatta lavorà a ccredenza?»
«Eh scrofa, chi tt'ha ddata la liscenza
d'usscí da Ripa pe vvení in funtana?»

«Pe ffà llogo a llorantre usscímo noi».
«La pulentara è mmatta in ner ciarvello».
«Tirate, zzitellucce, er fiato a vvoi».

«Addio porca da grasso pe l'assóggna».
«Addio vacche da carne de mascello».
«A ffiumaccio, a la chiavica, caroggna».[61]

The reader is thus called upon to judge in a context where inequality reigns supreme. Effectively a trialogue, not only is the innocent third-party 'mammana' outnumbered by Lucia and Vincenza, but seemingly by others too with Lucia's reference to a collective 'regazze'. Partiality is challenged, for example, by the unfair division of speech time. In this regard, Belli is just as inventive in his creative division of the sonnet's structure: the dialogue sonnet ranges from a complete level playing field, with characters uttering exactly the same number of syllables, as in 692. 'La Porteria der Convento', to a complete domination of the chambers by a single character, as in 2193. 'La raggione der Caraccas', a dialogue between a servant and master on the subject of cardinals, where one character is restricted to use of the final tercet.[62] Even in cases of disparity, however, the sonnet's form is such that extra weight may be lent to end rhymes, for example, and strategically-placed elements within the usual divisions of the sonnet, so that as in 'Li

[61] *PR*, IX, p. 123.
[62] *PR*, III, p. 611 and IX, p. 431, respectively. Inventiveness in dividing the sonnet's chambers also includes characters speaking on alternate lines, as in 2213. 'La spesa pe ppranzo'; clear division of the quatrains, for example, to be followed by repartee in the sestet, as in 2155. 'Le carte per aria'; or the first quatrain and tercet given over to one character, with the second quatrain and tercet to the other, as in 2232. 'Li panni stesi'.

comprimenti de le lavannare' above, the outsider has the final say and thus the final tug at the judging reader's senses.

Conclusion

There is overwhelming evidence to show that Belli feels compelled to turn to direct speech and the dialogue sonnet to stage the most intense form of interaction, and as such it can be considered the epicentre of the notion of opposition (social and political, as well as linguistic and literary) and the fulcrum of his poetics. Its self-contained nature can deliver a more concentrated form of dialogue than can be otherwise achieved; its multiple options for cell division make it the perfect form for introducing several voices, several languages, and several points of view.[63] In short, the dialogue sonnet can meet Belli's express intentions of conveying the various conflicting allegiances of the Roman populace, which he labels as the 'volgo presso il quale spiccano le più strane contraddizioni'.[64] With over 10% of his huge sonnet output devoted to dialogue sonnets proper, an element hardly accounted for in the literature, along with the countless implied and intertextual dialogues of various kinds, within which Belli is to be considered innovative in an already much-explored territory, the notion of dialogue in the *Sonetti romaneschi* is of fundamental importance.

[63] Compare Belli's paltry achievements in dialogue experimentation in the standard literary language and in the form of *terza rima*, for example, with his 1841 'Dialogo «Marco e il poeta»'. Text reproduced in full in Marsico, Rosanna, *Il romanesco del Belli "extravagante" ed il continuum linguistico della Roma primo-ottocentesca* (New York: Legas, 2002), pp. 233-.236.
[64] *PR*, I, p. 23.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES:
FU PPROPIO DONNA. BBUTTÒ VIA 'R ZINALE / PRIMA DE TUTTO E SS'INGAGGIÒ SSORDATO

Introduction

The quotation in the title of this chapter could easily be read within the context of women's suffrage movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or even the feminist protests of the 1960s and 1970s. Whilst it might be going a little too far to draw parallels with Germaine Greer's denunciation of the brassiere and apocryphal exhortations for women to put their repressive undergarment to the flame, it is at the very least a clear rejection of an emblem of femininity by a woman prepared to take on the fight. The 'zinale' itself may not be responsible for confining women to sex objects in Ottocento Rome as was claimed of the modern bra, but the term is certainly sexist in as much as its semantic field is evidently defined, and confined, by sex. Whether or not the regional 'zinna' is contained explicitly therein, though I would suggest it is, the Latin root SINUS is unmistakable; in 'grembiule', Belli's own gloss for the term, the referent is again denoted in similar terms in its derivation from GREMIUM, from which in turn

'grembo'.[1] If not a direct refutation of the sexual and the maternal then, casting off the 'zinale' at least amounts to a repudiation of the domestic. The garment is the symbolic straitjacket that woman has long been forced into wearing. The implied surprise of the statement, clearly from the male point of view, comes from the subject, 'donna', rebuffing what by definition is quintessentially hers. Moreover, the usual accoutrements of womanhood are divested in order to enter the active male domain. Is this some new kind of woman? What is the meaning of the adverb in 'fu ppropio donna'? What of the male persona? Could this woman really have taken up arms in the battle of the sexes?

The territory may be familiar, and the wider struggle well known, yet this is undoubtedly less so with reference to the work of a so-called 'poeta dialettale', especially as set in one of the most patriarchal and hierarchical of all Western societies, the closed world of nineteenth-century papal Rome. Consequently far removed from the likes of France and England in terms of the political climate which had spawned the engaged writings of an Olympe de Gouges or a Mary Wollstonecraft, and lagging well behind northern Italy in the scant prospect of industrialization and resulting collective

[1] On the etymology of 'zinale', dictionaries tend to concur that it derives 'da *seno* con sovrapposizione di *zinna* "mammella"', *Lo Zingarelli: vocabolario della lingua italiana*, 12th edn. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2005). In Belli, 'zinna' is both maternal and sexual. In 635. 'Mi' fijja maritata', a woman's married life is said to consist solely of repeated pregnancy and childrearing, 'panz'e zzinna e dda capo zinn'e ppanza', *PR*, III, pp. 486-7. In its sexual connotation, it varies in degrees of coarseness. In 797. 'Le figurante', the term is part of a mildly lewd, yet admiringly poetic, description of ballerinas as a male watches them 'tremajje in petto du' zinnette bbianche / come ggiuncate drento a le froscelle!', *PR*, IV, pp. 216-7, in which Vigolo identifies intertextual references to Aretino and Ariosto: '(*Ragionamenti, I[a] Giornata)*: "...due sorelline, grassettine, frescioline con quattro cosciette bianche che pareano di latte rappreso, sì erano tremolanti." [...] "Le poppe rotondette parean latte / Che fuor dei giunchi allora allora tolli..." (*Orlando Furioso,* XI, 68)'. Vigolo, *Il Genio del Belli* cit., II, p. 283. At the other extreme, as we saw in the previous chapter, in 590. 'Le confidenze de le regazze' (V) the term can be overt enough to fit in with Tuta's frank account of her treatment at the hands of the predatory Ffelisce: 'se pijjava gusto / de metteme la lingua in de la bbocca, / e ccacciamme le zinne for der busto', *PR*, III, pp. 386-7. There is also suggestion of an inherent sexuality contained within the term 'zinale' as a natural extension of its corporeality. In 2233. 'Er fatto de la fijja', where a father recounts how a member of the higher classes raped his daughter, 'zinale' seems to be a kind of euphemistic synecdoche: 'senza nemmanco dimannà er permesso, / entra co llei: la tira p'er zinale: / doppo tre ggiorni lei se sente male...' *PR*, IX, pp. 524-525.

consciousness of the working-class woman, the Rome of the *Sonetti romaneschi* is nevertheless historically on the cusp of the European awakening to the question of gender. Given the poet's own liberal stance and what Muscetta has identified as his 'istanza di una riforma egalitaria' in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, the treatment of gender would seem to constitute an intriguing position from which to read the sonnets.[2]

Curiously, there has been no sustained reading of Belli from the viewpoint of gender. There have been the usual cursory thematic overviews, such as Pietro Paolo Trompeo's 1950 article entitled 'Il Belli e le donne', which quotes a handful of exemplary female figures as depicted in the sonnets (young girl, wife, mother, grandmother), each framed by a dutiful line of introductory summary to be followed by an equally brief amount of commentary.[3] More recent critics, too, such as Guido Almansi ('L'oscenità del Belli') and Alfredo Giuliani ('Gioco e destino: i segni del sesso nella poesia del Belli') have verged onto similar ground, even revealing crucial elements of the gender division in the process, but their focus has lain elsewhere. Both restrict their enquiries to what may loosely be defined as the erotic, and both nevertheless tend to direct discussion of gender-relevant issues toward a greater ontological interpretation of Belli. Almansi, for example, despite claiming that his scope is to offer 'un più serio interesse' towards the obscene and 'nient'altro', does identify the female sex organ as 'un emblema del male universale', hesitatingly labelling the obscene as an intrinsic part of the poet's wider 'preoccupazioni teleologiche o filosofiche'.[4] In response to Almansi,

[2] Muscetta, Carlo, *Cultura e poesia di G. G. Belli* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961), p. 184.
[3] 'Il Belli e le donne' in *Quaderni ACI,* 3 (1950), 25-44. The article begins with the seemingly obligatory repetition of the poet's divided self and the inner conflict between 'il Belli accademico [...] impiegato al Bollo e Registro, [...] censore teatrale ossequiente' and 'l'altro Belli, il Belli romanesco'. The dated critical approach is also manifestly apparent in the concluding attempt to identify 'le donne in carne ed ossa ch'egli conobbe ed amò', drawing on the odd *verso d'occasione* in lingua.
[4] 'L'oscenità del Belli' in *L'estetica dell'osceno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), pp. 5-35.

Giuliani shows convincingly that 'la teologia del personaggio belliano è impastata di sessualità', and goes further still to conclude that Belli's poetics of the obscene is a sort of radical, carnivalesque form of transgression.[5] As a consequence of this lack of attention to the gender question itself in Belli, there has been little attempt to apply theory to the issue. In this chapter I intend to show that the sonnets can be read successfully and profitably from the point of view of gender, and that a theoretical framework will not only lend the discussion focus, but will actually open up a series of new perspectives from which to read the entire corpus of the *Sonetti romaneschi*.

Tellingly, Giuliani defines Belli's poetics of the obscene as 'una tecnica della contesa'.[6] Having already established opposition as a principal mechanism of the sonnets at a formal, dynamic level, I now want to continue the enquiry into the wider notion of conflict in thematic terms by showing that a major unexamined source of antagonism is that of the gender divide. Belli, like many others, highlights and exploits to various ends what seems to be the innate opposition occurring along the axis of the sexes. Indeed, as our opening quotation would suggest, polarity is the defining characteristic and starting point for what Hélène Cixous has termed the 'universal battlefield' of the gender division.[7] In her aptly entitled *Sorties*, set against a military backdrop characteristic of man's world according to our title quotation ('ssordato'), Cixous outlines how 'thought has always worked by opposition': just as 'Day/Night', so too man/woman. What remains, then, is a constant war between the sexes. Migration across the no-man's land between enemy lines, woman's rejection of the feminine 'zinale' and appropriation of the

[5] 'Gioco e destino: i segni del sesso nella poesia del Belli' in *Letture belliane*, III (Rome: Bulzoni, 1982), pp. 9-19.
[6] Ibid., p. 17.
[7] 'Sorties' in *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. by Susan Sellers (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 37-45.

masculine weapon, is inconceivable, hence the noteworthiness of her heretical act, along with the surprise and scorn implicit in the male persona's comment. Cixous, like Judith Butler who would follow in her post-structuralist feminist steps from the slightly adjacent perspective of the Anglophone tradition, aims to expose this beguilingly innate opposition as an artificial construct. Her feminist aim, however, is of little importance in itself; her methodology, on the other hand, can be put to good use. If, as affirmed by Simone De Beauvoir, womanhood is not innate, the construction of gender is precisely what matters to the literary scholar.[8] The French feminists in particular, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, are employed on account of the central role they ascribe to language in gender. I intend to examine how the eternal battle is waged in Belli's oeuvre and how those warring opposites are constructed at the level of the text.

3.1 *L'omo e la donna*: Much ado about nothing

Perhaps the most direct statement of the battle of the sexes, and thus potentially the most useful point of entry in terms of introducing the construction of gender within the logic of the text, is the sonnet entitled 1260. 'L'omo e la donna'. Seldom discussed by any of the major critics and universally underplayed by editors, the poem has probably suffered on account of its rare inclusion in anthologies, a fact almost certainly explained in turn by Morandi's original decision to confine it to *Il Sesto*.[9] Hardly one of Belli's most graphic poems, and certainly not obscene by modern standards, it is unlikely to have attracted the

[8] The paradigmatic statement of her book *The Second Sex*, reads thus: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as female.' *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Classics, 1997), p. 295. Her text will be used throughout this chapter.

[9] The sonnet features in some anthologies, including the incomplete *La plebe di Roma: I sonetti di G. G. B.*, ed. by Roberto Vighi (Florence: Sansoni, 1962-4) and *Er decoro de la mediscina*, ed. by Tommaso Chiaretti (Rome: CEPI, 1965).

notoriety of some of the volume's more famous inclusions. Its scant critical attention may also be explained by its stereotypical treatment of man and woman and the lack of immediate characterization given their roles as representative types. The characters featured are spokespersons for their respective sexes, a function stressed from the outset with the definite articles of the title reflecting generic totalities just as much as the poem's individual protagonists. The poem will serve as the point of departure for our wider discussion, both by offering a paradigmatic example of what might be expected in the portrayal of gender in Belli as defined in its own terms, and by revealing potential junctures with theoretical approaches to gender, especially as have been applied to literary theory, which will then form the discursive framework of the chapter. The reading of the poem will be broadly linguistic in nature, relying on semantics and pragmatics to uncover the dynamics of the text.

> 1260. L'omo e la donna
>
> «Sí», strillava, «è ggiustizzia da galerra
> che nnoi povere donne disgrazziate
> sempre avemo da èsse soverchiate
> come fússimo statüe de terra.
>
> Voiantri purcinelli de la Scerra
> date fora l'editti, predicate,
> dite messa, assorvete, ggiustizziate,
> e, ppe gionta de ppiú, ffate la guerra.
>
> Cos'ha, ppiú de la donna, un galeotto
> d'omaccio, pe pprotenne in oggni caso
> de stà llui sopra e dde tiené llei sotto?
>
> Cos'ha dde ppiú? una mano, un piede, un stinco,
> una bbocca, un'orecchia, un occhio, un naso?».
> Allora io: «Nu lo sapete? un pinco».[10]

As seen in the previous chapter, dialogue is a favourite method of staging and scrutinizing opposition in its most concentrated form. It is unsurprising, too, that

[10] *PR*, V, p. 599.

dialogism should be a constitutive element in the construction of gender. In this poem, as the title suggests, the apparatus of dialogue is used to bring man and woman face to face, word against word, side by side on the same platform of the sonnet's fourteen lines. And yet, as with so many of the dialogue sonnets, the most striking feature of this apparent duologue is one of glaring imbalance. Imbalance on a number of levels, in fact, but most immediately in terms of talk time enjoyed by each speaker, the man is seemingly prevented from getting a word in edgeways. Apparently, equal rights and freedom of speech are dashed from the very start. Whilst the woman enjoys the lion's share of the script, however, the man ironically has the first and the last word, silencing her both culturally and poetically. Or so it would seem.

Ostensibly, woman is raising her voice against the marginalization she suffers in society at the hands of man. She claims to be imprisoned by him, subjected to the rough justice he administers, as confirmed in line 7, with womankind effectively sent to the gallows at his behest. She is literally deprived of life, reduced to a voiceless, inanimate effigy. Man, by contrast, is the controller of the outside world, wielding his all-encompassing power to the point of abuse. Having complained of the ills inflicted upon her in the opening quartet, which she implicitly explains as part and parcel of man's authority in the second, the volta at the start of the sestet sees her begin to speculate on the foundation of this imbalance of power. Picking up on the innumerable male advantages, which culminated in the exacerbated emphatic doubling of 'ppe gionta de ppiú', woman now demands evidence of the elusive heavyweight qualifications that so easily tip the scales in man's favour. Her insistence on man's extra stake to privilege issues forth in two extended semi-rhetorical questions, couched in the form of

symmetrical refrains. In her attempt to locate her adversary's sine-qua-nonical manhood, she confines her demonstration to the corporeal on the assumption of primordial uniformity, producing a string of asexual body parts, beseeching him to offer up evidence of his own point of difference. As if to confirm that the lady doth protest too much, substantiation duly arrives in man's affirmation of his penis, to the surprise of none but the newly silenced female speaker. Anatomy is destiny after all.

Comic it may seem, and comic it certainly is by design, with Belli doubtlessly composing the entire sonnet around the idea of the retort. But at any sort of deeper level, its metaphorical extension and the semantic field the term thereby opens up is nothing short of enormous. The penis is thus established as man's unique source of power and supreme weapon in the battle of the sexes. Moreover, the entire world revolves around his penis. As spelt out in lines 5 to 8, man's ability to create order in the world, to establish the social contract, to organize, rule, manage, and crucially, to produce language, stems from the disyllabic 'pinco' nestled at the very end of the final line. For the sonnet is as much about the construction of language as it is about the gender divide; or rather, the gender divide is as much constructed through language as it is by mere differences in anatomy and genetics. The initial promise of concord and harmony, the affirmative 'sì' that the reader takes at face value, barely lasts a single syllable, before the division of semantic territories is immediately marked out by the pungent personal pronouns of 'nnoi' and 'voiantri'. Just as woman is confined by man to the metaphorical prison cell, so too is her language apparently bereft of all agency. She never carries out a single action. She is both socially and verbally passive, fully embodying the Hegelian

distinction of the sexes, what Cixous calls 'the model of the master-slave dialectic'.[11] Not once does she enjoy the luxury of a lexical verb or the active voice, apart from in the linguistic irony of the third line, where her tentative attempts to challenge the status quo are symbolically met with the renewed affirmation of her passivity. The feigned authority of 'sempre avemo' is shown up after the caesura by its almost doubly passive counterpart of 'da èsse soverchiate', in which syntax and signifier are married to reveal an illicit glimpse at the true nature of the signified. This is even more emphatic when read beside man's effortless superiority as expressed in that dominant 'pprotenne de stà llui sopra', where the alternative auxiliary 'stare' ironically amounts to an intrinsic condition and immutable truth. Indeed, such is the convoluted confusion of her expression in line 3 that the 'avere da' construction seems to carry both the meaning of obligation and that of necessity here; as if woman were not only forced into submission, but actually bound by her condition into craving that submission, as though harbouring a physical desire to be dominated. Similarly, her very existence is compromized at the linguistic level by a total absence of indicative or declarative being. Woman's essence is confined to the subjunctive mood of line 4; she exists not in or for herself but is defined by having meaning imposed on her by somebody else. Whether 'disgrazziate' or 'soverchiate', women are always acted upon. And the sexual connotation is intended, as it is throughout the proceedings and in line 11 especially, where she is pinned down, manhandled into a vulnerable position that De Beauvoir has called the 'posture of defeat'.[12] In short, woman is object rather than subject, as her own simile would have it at the end of the first

[11] 'Castration or Decapitation', trans. Annette Kuhn, in *Signs*, 7:1 (1981: Autumn), 41-55, p. 50.
[12] *The Second Sex* cit., p. 406. The notion is repeated throughout De Beauvoir's treatise, beginning early on: 'his domination is expressed in the very posture of copulation – in almost all animals the male is *on* the female', p. 54.

quatrain, likening her sex to man-made trophies existing solely for the enjoyment of their possessors.[13]

Yet whilst she may protest to be overpowered with the rest of her sex, her performance here alone belies the muted silence implied by her simile. She is seemingly an equal match both as man's sparring partner, and as his opponent across the dispatch box. She is not surprized in the least by man revealing his secret hand, for she is the one to goad him into doing so. Man might think she is ignorant of his greatest asset, hence his half-startled, half-inflated question in line 14. But that would be to underestimate her. Demanding man answer her question according to its premise, woman knows she can procure the response she desires through her command of rhetoric. By offering a seemingly naïve answer to her own rhetorical question and by restricting her definition to the corporeal, woman provides a template for man's reply. Following the seriatim logic of the seven body parts, he cannot but respond by uttering yet another, in fact the only one to mark him anatomically, and his one-track mind goes straight to the heart of the matter. In other words, she forces man to put his penis where his mouth is. But it doesn't stop there. By ending line 12 with the somewhat anomalous 'stinco', she obliges him, poetically speaking, to reveal his rhyming 'pinco'. On the one level, she succeeds in making man admit to his phallocentric language. On another, however, she backs him into a corner of total humiliation. Apparently aware of its derivation from the Latin diminutive PENICULUS, then PEN'C'LUS, she succeeds in reducing its weight further still until it vanishes into absolute nothingness.[14] For man's seemingly devastating reply

[13] Vighi glosses the fourth line as 'come se fossimo statue di terracotta', confirming the notion of objectification by adding that 'oggi si direbbe «oggetti»', *PR,* V, *p.* 598.

[14] 'Pinco' is also clearly connected with medieval Latin PINCA and Old Tuscan 'pinca', a kind of cucumber, and 'membro virile' (cf. *GDLI*, s.vv. 'pinco' and 'pinca', of uncertain etymology, possibly from

is at once utterly vacuous. Because the possessive is not required in Romanesco and Italian in reference to body parts, they are never ascribed an owner, instead left dangling unclaimed, clinging to their generic indefinite articles. She is thus able to use this as part of her strategy, for when confronted with the question 'cos'ha dde ppiú?', man replies 'un pinco', he is forced to prove her point by admitting his supremacy is built on thin air. 'Un pinco', of course, can equally be read as a negative intensifier.[15] One might have expected a defiant definite article in his answer, to assert *the* only tangible proof of sexual distinction, and yet in regaling him with her roll-call of indefinites, she leads her antagonist rhetorically into the meek negative intensifier. On her command, then, man proclaims his point of difference and shatters its pretensions in the utterance of a single noun.

She has thus established herself as his intellectual superior and easily claimed the moral high ground. Man is stumped by her questioning-attacking. Her only possible weapon has been her language. There is little doubt over the intent of her linguistic assault for each of the sonnet's parts has seen her prepare her battleground, readying the various strands to come together in a concentrated strike on all fronts. It is no coincidence, for example, that the prominent fixture of 'galerra' at the onset of her diatribe, enjoying the limelight of its natural pause 'in clausola', should be matched by the conspicuous 'galeotto' in the end position of line 9. In addition to the ad hominem

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Etruscan) and thus the element of poking common to phallocentrism, which shall be studied in due course. Others still maintain that 'pinco' may be a diminutive of PENIS, such as 'PENÍCULUS (contratto in PEN'C'LUS)', Ottorino Pianigiani, *Vocabolario etimologico della lingua italiana* (Rome: Società editrice Dante Alighieri di Albrighi, Segati, 1907), p. 1023.

[15] Others have read it in this way, including Vighi, whose explanatory note states that the phrase 'può qui giocare l'ambiguità dell'ironia, giacché *pinco*, come il suo più comune sinonimo, può anche significare «un bel niente»', *PR*, V, p. 598. Similarly Teodonio, who admits the reading that 'tra uomo e donna non c'è alcuna differenza, o che comunque la differenza è minima, visto che l'espressione *un pinco* può significare proprio "un bel niente"', Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 129.

attack being staged around the lexical choice of a nominal pair bearing pejorative suffixes ('galeotto / d'omaccio'), and the effective syntax of the enjambment which seems to emphasize the depth of her hitherto pent up indignation, the label 'galeotto' is woman's ironic assessment of man's judicial system she has outlined in the second quatrain. Moreover, if her discourse is read as an illocutionary act, the term allows her to take up the task of liberating her imprisoned sex.[16] The 'galerra', part of man's creation, is no place for a woman, but rather the jurisdiction more properly befitting the 'galeotto'; charged with committing crimes against mankind generally and woman in particular, man is forced to retreat into his etymological homeland.[17] She is attempting to wrench the statute books from man's hands in order to begin the long process of rewriting them. Similarly, her epithet of 'purcinelli de la Scerra' is of course a reference to Pulcinella and his renowned foolishness, and thus to man's buffoonery, allowing her to debunk the myth of masculine heroism and conquest by hoisting up war as the ultimate consequence of folly.[18] But it goes deeper still, foreshadowing the sonnet's dénouement. It is equally a comic allusion to Pulcinella's exaggerated nose, and thus to the long-perpetuated folk belief in correspondence between the proportions of a man's snout and those of his

[16] See John R. Searle, 'Indirect Speech Acts' in *Pragmatics: A Reader*, ed. by Steven Davis (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 265-277.

[17] Teodonio draws attention to lines 5-8 where woman seems to infuse man's actions with a sense of shame: 'si elenca una serie di attività tipicamente maschili […] presentate tutte indistintamente come attività negative e violente, come colpe', Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 129. I read them as accusations, charges read out in the court of reason, and as such woman is attempting to defy patriarchal man as identified by Rousseau, Hegel, Freud et al., by coveting his role as justice-maker.

[18] The mask is supposedly modelled on a native peasant of Acerra, or 'Paoluccio della Cerra' as the portrait attributed to Ludovico Carracci has it, whence 'de la Scerra' would be the expected outcome in Romanesco. The voiceless palatal affricate in the intervocalic position becomes a palatal fricative, as Belli explains in the introduction: '[p]receduta [la *c*] poi da una vocale, anche di separata parola, prolungasi strisciando, similare alla *sc*, di *scémo, oscèno, scimia*: per esempio, *piascére, duscènto, rèscita, la scéna, da li scento, otto scivici* (piacere, duecento, recita, la cena, dai cento, otto civici) e simili.', *PR*, I, p. 27

member, underlined poetically by the end-point elements of the final two lines.[19] More generally, however, the epithet also refers to the notion of theatricality, to performance and man's performative act in defining woman.[20] In alluding to the masking of reality, it suggests that the stereotypical role-playing of the gender divide is based on little more than pretence. Indeed, she draws attention to this puppetry again through her linguistic choice of the ambiguous verb 'pprotenne' in line 10, as she probes into what it is that allows him to demand and exact domination, but likewise what allows him to maintain his illusion of superiority. Like Cixous and Butler, she exposes the gender divide as an artificial construct.

In her command of language and her analysis, therefore, she seems to be in full control. But this cannot negate the fact that man has exclusive rights over her expression. Thus the eternal irony of her condition: symbolically, man frames her. The efficacy of his riposte may be questioned intellectually, yet he succeeds in silencing her, achieving resolution of a kind, if only poetic. And it is man who introduces her, to all appearances. Responding to some earlier prompt of his beyond the text, woman begins the sonnet in the affirmative, as if authorized and provoked into proffering an opinion, before her whole discourse is rendered less vivid by man's direct intervention in the seemingly innocuous verbum dicendi 'strillava'. Immediately, the prospect of equal involvement

[19] Internal evidence of this correspondence within the *Sonetti* includes the second of the poems entitled 'A Teta', itself based on Porta's 'Sent Teresin', whence it borrows the detail: 'Eppuro, in cuanto a uscello, ho pprotenzione / che ggnisun frate me pò ffà ppaura: / basta a gguardamme in faccia er peperone.' *PR*, II, p. 17; 'E sì che, quant a usell, sont persuas / Che nessun possa mettem suggezion, / E poeù basta domà vardamm el nas.' *Poesie*, p. 595.

[20] 'In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.' Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: London, 1990), p. 185.

promised by the title is thus obliterated, as the sonnet is revealed to be staging not straightforward direct discourse, but reported direct discourse. Woman does not exist, at least not in the framework of the poem. Like Cixous' fledgling consciousness in *Dedans*, woman is forced to speak through the mouthpiece of man, at a distance of indeterminate time and authenticity, casting both her thesis and its reception into question. Indeed, as Bakhtin has shown, this necessarily entails issues of reliability and consequently cannot fail to affect the reader's interpretation.[21] Moreover, man seems to be the reporter of her discourse, that is, man appears to be at one with the minimally-narrating male 'io' revealed at the beginning of the last line.[22] In other words, to borrow terminology from enunciation theory, there are two locutors and two enunciators, but man as narrator is conflated with man as locutor, thereby confining woman to the role of secondary locutor.[23] Man is both the experiencing self, and the narrating self. The reader can only take the leap of faith required to assume that the woman's words are not transposed and are thus faithful to her original speech, and whilst the narrator does not apparently enjoy

[21] 'Given the appropriate methods for framing, one may bring about fundamental changes even in another's utterance accurately quoted. […] Another's discourse, when introduced into a speech context, enters the speech that frames it not in a mechanical bond but in a chemical union (on the semantic and emotionally expressive level); the degree of dialogized influence, one on the other, can be enormous.' *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 340. The comments are made in relation to Bakhtin's treatment of the novel, but have been extended to discourse theory in general, and can equally be applied to a narrative poetry context. For more on Bakhtin and the problems of reported discourse, see previous chapter.

[22] A feminist reading might also see this, in conjunction with the dénouement, as a demonstration of the Lacanian distinction of the subject, with the 'io', 'il più lurido di tutti i pronomi' as Gadda called it in *La cognizione del dolore*, pertaining solely and disdainfully ('allora io') to the male: 'Lacanian theory reserves the "I" position for men. Women because they lack the phallus, the positive symbol of gender, self-possession and worldly authority around which language is organized occupy a negative position in language', Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Inscribing femininity: French theories of the feminine' in Greene, G. and Kahn, C., (eds.), *Making a Difference* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 83. This will be central to my reading of Belli and will be clarified in due course.

[23] I use these terms in the sense of Oswald Ducrot's refinement of Lacan's split subject, as applied to speech and thought presentation particularly in fictional narratives by Sophie Marnette (following Dominique Maingueneau) in *Speech and Thought Presentation in French*, pp. 19-38.

the degree of control that narrated discourse or indirect discourse would convey, there is an inevitable sense of bias or conflict of interests on his part.[24]

Furthermore, this partiality is not merely due to the fact that woman is quoted by man, since the peculiarities of the verbum dicendi itself have serious implications. Although any reported discourse necessarily struggles to be neutral as has been said, the verb 'strillava' entails a layer of emotional intensity over and above a simple 'disceva', for example.[25] The choice of verb adds to, nay crucially begins, her overall characterization, which is implicit rather than explicit in the sonnet given their intended identities as generic types. Man thus defines woman in his words before she can define herself through her own discourse, an astute political move against which her subsequent attempts to characterize man can thus only be seen as partially successful. Her discourse is now essentially superfluous in terms of its overall effect. Worse still, 'strillava' affects and preconditions her entire speech, by calling into question its measure and composure. It may be the verb of protest and potential emancipation, but it is equally the verb of desperation, an admission of total loss of control, as exemplified by the mother's failed attempts to restrain her wayward son Cesere in 954. 'La strillata de mamma'. The reader has now been briefed, warned to take whatever she says with a pinch of salt. The outcome of the narrative intervention is not merely to signal her indignation, but to involve the reader by posing a series of questions. Is she shouting because her complaint has not previously been heard? Is her explosion of protest long overdue? Has she never

[24] It may also be possible to make a further distinction between the voice of the verbum dicendi and that of the male 'io' in line 14, potentially going so far as to identify another (male?) *je*-narrator. 'Strillava' is the only developed narrative element in the poem, and as such is said differently from both the extemporal and merely implied verbal 'allora io' of the male enunciator, and the reported discourse of the male locutor which is indicated by the quotation marks, although the latter is probably a graphic convention added by editors.

[25] 'Disceva' or 'diceva' is the most common of the verba dicendi in the *Sonetti.*

before been allowed to vent her anger? The effect of the imperfect tense, as opposed to a past historic, historical present or even atemporal present, is twofold. First, it lends a sense of frustrated prolongation to the sentiment of her discourse, giving the impression that her suffering has always been perpetuated. Second, it consigns her discourse, and thus its sentiment, to the finite past. Either way, the only temporal marker in the entire sonnet results in the indifferent shrug of the misogynist. Assuming man is both enunciator and locutor, his narrative 'strillava' equates (if we take into consideration the notion of implicature in pragmatics) to the meanings "she always shouted in vain", "she was shouting but she isn't/can't now" and "she was shouting and so I silenced her".[26] It thus amounts to the Duke of Ferrara's ruthless power politics in Browning's 'My Last Duchess', and could be similarly read as man's dramatic monologue. What might have been presented as an age-old yet unresolved, continually relevant battle in the eternal present has bowed under the pressure of patriarchy.

The reader is prompted and indeed required to fill in these missing details, the unsaid, because the context of enunciation is unknown. The reader cannot know the nature of the original discussion between the two characters, nor the enunciative context of man's subsequent retelling of the encounter. And yet there are certainly deliberate hints in that direction. The structure of the framing narrative, for example, would lead the reader to conclude that the male narrator is relating the encounter to another man, with woman therefore outnumbered, and to deduce that the receiving forum is the sole preserve of the male sex. The 'strillava' is effectively turned into a state of constant, latent potentiality, reconfirming her return to muffled silence other than when man

[26] The full meaning of 'strillava' is pragmatically rather than semantically determined, on the basis of context. See François Récanati, 'The Pragmatics of What Is Said', reprinted in *Pragmatics: A Reader*, ed. by Steven Davis (Oxford: OUP, 1991).

symbolically chooses to let her have her say, since she is now also excluded from the all-male receiving context. Whether this be the *osteria*, the priesthood, the regime, or society at large, the logical conclusion is that everything is off-limits for her, given her identity as Everywoman and the prevailing domination of patriarchy. In this sense, then, with the reader urged to fill in the blanks, the sonnet is an example of what Eco has termed an 'open text', in that the poetics of the piece work on the dynamics of subjective interpretation.[27] The text is deliberately ambiguous, its tensions can never be resolved fully. If my reading has seemed to shift from one perspective to another, from a defence of man's upper hand in the proceedings, to woman's greater subversive control, and back in turn to man's overall dominance, it is due to the conflicting signposts that Belli has intentionally positioned along the meandering way. This dual possibility, this irreducibility, is precisely the point of the sonnet, beyond the energy of the original tête-à-tête and its subsequent afterlife in man's memory. The elicited binary reading is of course designed to reflect at once symmetry and dissymmetry, chiefly but not exclusively corporeal, as well as the tug of war and dynamics of battle, the alternating momentum as it swings between the two combatants in their various rounds of conflict.[28] And the internal elements throughout reflect this shifting, with language recalling that of the adversary, and structures mirroring those of the opponent in this constant paradox of constructed antithesis.[29]

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[27] In specific reference to the plays of Brecht, but representative of his overall thesis, Eco describes a work as open 'in the same sense that a debate is "open"', that is 'a solution is seen as desirable and is actually anticipated, but it must come from the collective enterprise of the audience.' *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts*, p. 55.

[28] Teodonio concurs that there are two 'pian[i] di lettura', though he limits the effect to the comic: 'la compresenza delle due risposte possibili rientra nella dinamica del comico belliano', Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 129.

[29] Discussion is thus based around antonymic juxtapositions, as in Cixous, such as the sopra/sotto hierarchy, the silent/loquacious dichotomy, and the passive/active dialectic, all to emphasize the inherent

Ultimately, however, man is more equal than woman. She is fighting a losing battle, and her lances are but straws. Despite her vociferous protestations, her reasoned argument, and her polished, persuasive defence that more than demonstrates her manifest accomplishment in the seemingly masculinist language, woman remains man's inferior. She remains as she set out, the second sex that the very title establishes as the norm even at the level of syntax.[30] Significantly, however, she is by no means voiceless; she fights the fight emphatically. So much so that she may even be considered a proto-feminist, 'una femminista *ante litteram*' as Teodonio fleetingly calls her.[31] Her argument is politically solid in the evidence she presents, but also witting in what she neglects to mention: she tellingly avoids any reference to her role as reproductive mother whilst simultaneously couching her search for sexual differentiation in the corporeal. She at least exhibits the potential to subvert, if only literarily. As a result, 'L'omo e la donna' is more than a vivid street contest between two warring popolani of nineteenth-century Rome. It is an ontological quest for first principles and a foray into the kind of theoretical discussion that would come to mark the debate over gender, in literature and beyond, from the not-so-distant eve of female emancipation in Marxism, to the current wake of the various feminisms. It is effectively a definition of the 'woman problem' and a

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antagonistic difference between man and woman. Similarly, at the structural level, the formulation of man's short discourse can be read as a doubly ironic destruction of woman's longer discourse, first in his concentrated mimicry of her semi-rhetorical questions, and second by his ability to provide a concrete answer, merely reinforcing her passive inability to assert.

[30] In this regard, Dale Spender has drawn attention to linguistic embodiments of man's so-called 'natural' primacy within the patriarchal order in such structures as conjoined noun phrases, including 'male and female, husband and wife, brother and sister, son and daughter', *Man Made Language, p.* 147. This can certainly be read as sexist ideological convention, and indicative of a patriarchal order as I read it in *L'omo e la donna*, but the rhetoric of Spender's analysis is misleading to suggest that this amounts to a prescribed rule of language. As has been pointed out by Maria Black and Rosalind Coward, there is nothing syntactically wrong with the formulation '*women and men*, or *wife and husband*', or 'la donna e l'omo' for that matter: '[t]his is not a syntactic rule, but merely an ideological pronouncement, since it does not express any general *syntactic* property of co-ordinate structures', *Screen Education*, 39 (Summer, 1981), reprinted in *The Feminist Critique of Language*, p. 106.

[31] Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 129.

catalogue of loaded key terms, introducing the salient issues and familiar topoi of gender studies. As well as the innate antagonism between woman and man, the sonnet establishes woman as the excluded, restricted, passive other, forced into occupying an inferior symbolic position. Man, on the other hand, enjoys a de facto and de jure victory in the battle of the sexes on account of his untouchable weapon. In the poetic masterstroke of the 'pinco', Belli encapsulates and anticipates the multi-disciplined thinking of a century and more surrounding the debate over gender.

3.2 The signification of the *pinco*.

The female speaker of 'L'omo e la donna' would do her utmost to appear to have eradicated the 'pinco', yet its roots run far too deep for it to be magicked away into thin air. As suggested above, the 'pinco' is everything and nothing at the same time, at once a magic wand bestowed with all power and a mere fantasized emblem of that mythical power. Having briefly mentioned the notions of patriarchy and phallocentrism in passing, we should now focus on the latter in greater detail. Whilst a number of potential theoretical junctions have already been highlighted in the reading of 'L'omo e la donna', I would suggest that the sonnet's full significance, at least in terms of our discussion of gender, might be appreciated better in the light of certain fundamental tenets of psychoanalysis. Belli's 'pinco', I shall argue, is akin to Lacan's phallus, and the key (*chiave*, as the Italians say) to unlocking a central feature of gender construction in the *Sonetti romaneschi*.

At any level, 'L'omo e la donna' is to be read as a pertinent definition and discussion of phallocentrism and its effects. We have suggested that the sonnet goes beyond a mere street vignette, to represent an ontological search for first principles in the

battle of the sexes. Belli's sonnet, in my view, is the same fundamental philosophical enquiry into sexual differentiation that forms the basis of Freudian doctrine and thus that of the psychoanalytic school of thought in general. As such, the sonnet's title, 'L'omo e la donna', may be considered tantamount to *becoming man and woman*, for its characters display, exude even, all the existential angst associated with the development into gendered subjects. For Freud, sexual distinction and the appropriation of masculine and feminine identities depend on his central Oedipus complex, on a child's 'phallic stage', and the symbolic notion of castration. Indeed, Belli's sonnet might be read as the universal response to the castration problem, with its naïve child-like voices embodying Freud's little boy and little girl dialectic. With fixation on the penis, the only recognizable genital marker, the boy's fear of castration, of losing his sexual organ and thus having his phallus-bestowed authority challenged or removed by the opposite sex, is implied in the poem through his narrative frame: such is his concern that he feels the need to tell of the episode and consequently nullify the threat of woman's thesis by containing it and submitting it to his final word. The little girl's supposed disappointment at being castrated, the realization of not possessing a penis of her own and her recognition of the inferiority that this so obviously entails could not be verbalized in stronger terms. As Luce Irigaray and other feminist critics of Freud have stated, for all its diametrical opposition, sexual differentiation essentially 'boils down to being plus or minus one sex organ: the penis, and "sexual otherness" comes down to "not having it"'.[32] As has been seen, 'L'omo e la donna' arrives at the selfsame conclusion.

[32] Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 52.

There is no escaping the fact that whilst Freud clearly ascribes symbolic value to the penis, what he nevertheless produces, in common with the Belli sonnet, is a materialist biologism. As Terry Eagleton summarises, for Freud 'we come to be what we are by an interrelation of bodies' and the very physical object of the penis reigns supreme in this process.[33] Freud's thought goes some way to explaining the concept of phallocentrism in sexuality and heterosexual identity, but fails to account for subsequent constructions of gender beyond the anatomical. Freud might be able to explain something of gendered identities, but like Belli's female voice, we remain baffled as to how man's 'pinco' can automatically lead to his unquestionably greater authority. It is with Lacan's post-structuralist reinterpretation of Freud, however, that his biological impasse may be overcome by replacing the physical penis with a metaphysical or abstract phallus, where not having it does not signal the end of the argument, but the starting point of the enquiry. Lacan's critical inroad is to consider the phallus not a real and corporeal marker of difference, but a symbolic and linguistic signifier of absence and exclusion.

In *The signification of the phallus*, Lacan revisits Freud's castration complex, confirming its validity but arguing that it can only be surmounted by establishing 'a relation of the subject to the phallus without regard to the anatomical difference of the sexes'.[34] The phallus is privileged by Lacan 'because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term, since it is equivalent there to the (logical) copula'.[35] Based conceptually on the image of the fleshy penis, the phallus is of itself entirely mental in composition, existing solely as a product of the system of language or logos. The phallus

[33] See 'Psychoanalysis' in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 141.
[34] *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 312.
[35] Ibid., p. 318.

thus only resembles the penis in abstract terms and the two are not to be confused. As in the Belli sonnet, it is made of the non-tangible. It is, in fact, a negative non-thing, 'un pinco'. It is the signifier that has no signified. If Lacan's phallus can be said to be composed of any substance at all, it may be considered constituted only by intersubjective desire. Desire for Lacan, though, is a continual displacement arising from the subject's inability to articulate needs through the order of signifiers, an endless chain of substitutes, which necessarily involves alienation of that need from the subject itself. The nature of this displacement, however, is unconsciously structured. As a signifier, referential only as part of a whole network of other signifiers, neither man nor woman can be said to have direct access to the phallus since it does not exist materially as an object. The phallus can only be possessed or embodied symbolically: man may be confirmed as having the phallus if another desires his penis; woman in turn may actually be the phallus if another desires her body as a whole. Realization that identity is built upon contingency, on a subject's difference from and similarity to the other, is the key to successfully overcoming the Oedipus complex and thus entering the symbolic order, the world of signifiers. For Lacan, the phallus is promoted as the all-important, transcendental signifier, whose role is nothing short of 'indicat[ing] the structures that will govern the relations between the sexes'.[36] It is in this new sense that the full extension of the 'pinco' may be grasped.

The effects of the phallus must now be teased out. Rather than phallocentrism, the myriad implications of the Lacanian theory of the phallus in particular are better described by Derrida's term of phallogocentrism, with its deliberate emphasis on the linguistic. Combining the notions of 'the phallus as universal arbiter of sexuality' and

[36] Ibid., p. 318.

'the word as ultimate arbiter of truth', Derrida's neologism seems to be an explicit version of what Lacan to my mind is already hinting at in employing the term 'copula' in the quotation above, for the subject/predicate relation is not unlike the resulting relative positions of man and woman.[37] Sidestepping the problematic nature of privileged status in the slippery world of signifiers, the elevated phallus can only favour the masculine. Its logical implication is indeed the exclusion of women. As Derrida concludes, the result of Lacan's phallus is that woman is 'the unveiled site of the lack of a penis'.[38] Castration is the all-important notion here. The advent of the symbolic introduces a new absence that was not there in the real; language allows the designation of non-entities. Woman's body is forever scarred by a lack of the phallus, which in turn establishes the utterly oppositional, and conceptually hierarchical, status of man and woman. There is only the phallus and the non-phallus. Hence Lacan's famous statement that woman does not exist, that is, she exists not as an ontologically consistent entity, but only as a symptom of man. Woman is the negative image of man.

The resulting ramifications for gendered identity are manifold. Successful navigation of the Oedipus complex and castration is essentially the process of subjectification, the rupturing of the imaginary unit of mother and child, and the recognition that total fulfilment of one's desire is impossible. This, after all, is the fundamental lack signified by the phallus. The male overcomes this loss by submitting to the law of the father, repressing desire for the mother, and pretending to have the phallus as an object of desire for the other. The female, however, has to renounce the innate idea

[37] From the entry on the notion of PHALLOGOCENTRISM, in *Feminism and psychoanalysis: a critical dictionary*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 217.
[38] 'Le facteur de la vérité', trans. by Alan Bass, in *The Post Card: from Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 439.

of having the phallus, thus giving up part of herself in order to identify with the mother and become an object of desire for the other. Whereas the male 'becomes a subject, an "I" able to function within a (patriarchal) Symbolic order', for the female 'it is never clear that she becomes a subject and attains an identity in the same way the boy does.'[39] Whilst in 'L'omo e la donna', the male comfortably identifies with the 'io', so that there is correspondence of identity between the definite article of 'l'omo' and the speaking subject, the female can only be said to exist merely as part of some hazy 'noi donne'. Unable to establish herself as a subject, to define an identity of her own, she is forced to appeal to the imaginary collective. 'La donna' is symptomatically fragmentary, she is 'the figure of castration', as Derrida states, for unlike the male, she never seems to emerge completely from the castration complex, she is never fully integrated into the symbolic order.[40]

This exclusion and only partial subjectivity compromise woman's freedom. Slavoj Žižek, perhaps the most eminent interpreter of Lacan, uses the thought of the Austrian philosopher and contemporary of Freud, Otto Weininger, as a point of comparison for the Lacanian formulation of the phallus and its effects for woman. According to Weininger, women have no subjectivity at all, but are rather purely objects, purely opaque 'statüe de terra', as Žižek explains:

> […] sexual differentiation is grounded in the very ontological opposition of subject and object, of active spirit and passive matter. Woman is a passive, impressionable object, which means that she is entirely dominated by sexuality.[41]

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[39] From the entry on the notion of the SUBJECT, in *Feminism and psychoanalysis: a critical dictionary*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 414.
[40] Le facteur de la vérité, trans. Alan Bass, in *The Post Card: from Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 441.
[41] 'Otto Weininger, or "Woman doesn't Exist"', in *The Žižek Reader*, ed. by Elizabeth and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 129.

As in Lacan, woman is the negative image of man, but only insofar as a projection of his own sexuality, a reflexive construction of man himself whose role is to keep him sexual by constantly desiring the phallus that dominates her life completely. In this sense, 'on account of this constitutive submission to the phallus, woman is heteronomous in the strict Kantian sense, unfree, at the mercy of external Fate'.[42] Woman is thus born free, and yet before long she is in chains, indeed subjected to a 'ggiustizzia da galera'. Moreover, woman's futile attempt to reduce this ontological opposition, to overcome her fundamental lack of subjectivity, manifests itself in symptoms of hysteria: 'the more she desperately endeavours to assume male spiritual values, the more hysterical she becomes'.[43] In Lacan too, the nature of feminine subjectivity is hysterical. Similarly, in Cixous, hysteria is the ultimate consequence of woman's inability to enter the Symbolic order, a direct result of the phallus.[44] It is perhaps in this light that the 'strillava' finally assumes its full meaning as the primordial cry of helpless resignation, the consequential residue of what Žižek paraphrases as her 'constitutive enslavement'.[45] With 'L'omo e la donna in mind', it is difficult not to see the ultimate implication of the 'pinco' from the same viewpoint as Weininger, who concludes that 'the phallus thus deprives woman completely and irrevocably of her freedom.'[46]

[42] Ibid., p. 133.
[43] Ibid., p. 133.
[44] Like Weininger, Cixous sees women as entirely outside the realm of subjectivity, condemned instead to be nothing but the object of desire. Unable to enter the Symbolic as speaking subjects, they 'always inhabit the place of silence', muted by the phallic economy, precisely as we find in *L'omo e la donna*. 'Silence', she continues, 'is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic, and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through.' 'Castration or Decapitation', trans. Annette Kuhn, in *Signs*, 7:1 (1981: Autumn), 41-55, p. 49.
[45] It is no coincidence either that the nineteenth century has been characterized by female hysterics.
[46] 'Otto Weininger, or "Woman doesn't Exist"' cit., p. 133.

There are fundamental conceptual differences, made abundantly clear by Žižek for one, between the more misogynistic and age-bound thought of Weininger, which is nevertheless closer to the patriarchal world of the *Sonetti romaneschi*, and the more abstract psychoanalytic Lacanian account, which is equally open to charges of anti-feminism. The philosophical complexity of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, too, is beyond the scope of this chapter. The point of enlisting these thinkers as theoretical allies, however, is to show how the penis in Belli is also elevated to a level beyond the literal-anatomical; it achieves its power as it takes on a higher symbolic meaning, a propensity to penetrate and mediate everything, from social interaction to language itself. It is in this sense that Belli's 'pinco' is akin to Lacan's phallus. Just as the phallus is not entirely the construction of Lacan the thinker, in that its veracity is established at least within the logic of language, so too must the 'pinco' be seen as more than the construction of Belli the poet: it is doubtless in large part, at least in its effects, a very realistic psychosocial portrayal of Ottocento Rome. Yet the enquiry Belli conducts is essentially textual and the 'pinco' his literary artifice, so that at times it will inevitably be conflated with the seemingly real rather than confined to the symbolic. Whilst exact identification between Lacan's phallus and Belli's 'pinco' is obviously impossible, therefore, the relevance of the Lacanian notion of the phallus and its status in language (its linguistic make-up as well as its central position in language) can be usefully borne in mind as we examine the extent of its metaphorical reach in Belli's battle of the sexes. Even if 'L'omo e la donna' is not an explicit theory of the phallus in the same sense as a scientific treatise, the 'pinco' certainly acquires a special position in that battle within the economy of the text.

3.3 Caged birds: *l'uscello in gabbia* and *la gabbia de l'uscello*.

Having established a firm basis for a potential psychoanalytic reading of the 'pinco', we now need to trace its effects in the Bellian hypertext. Like Freud and Lacan, Belli too seems to identify the process of early sexual development as key to determining the role of the phallus in gender construction and interaction between the sexes. Woman's development throughout life is a favourite theme treated in several sonnets, usually from a misogynistic male point of view (see, for example, 666. 'L'abbichino de le donne' and 667. 'Tutt'ha er zu' tempo'). Yet particularly revealing from our perspective is the *fronte* of 408. 'La vita de le donne', where Belli explicitly confirms the very notion of phallogocentrism and introduces a metaphorical representation of its effects which is used repeatedly within the *Sonetti*.

> 408. 'La vita de le donne'
>
> La donna appena arriva ar rifriggerio
> de godé li bbimestri o er bonifiscio,
> incomincia a ccapí che ccos'è ciscio
> e pprincipia a ppeccà dde disiderio:
>
> po' appena è bbona de sonà er zarterio
> e dde fà ar maschio cuarche bbon uffiscio,
> incomincia a rrubbà la carne ar miscio
> e pprincipia a ppeccà de cazzimperio.

In a portrayal befitting of Weininger, womanhood is reduced to unadulterated sexuality. Leaving aside the cleverly worked comic effects of the multiple double entendres, discussion can be confined to the polysemous 'ciscio', the instinctive 'disiderio' and the vitally important 'cazzimperio'. Female desire is clearly directed towards the penis. Natural desire, however, quickly mutates into the unshakable yoke of phallic domination, as emphasized at the formal level, for which Belli effectively coins his own term. 'Cazzimperio', especially in Romanesco, is attested as a dysphemistic play on the

predominantly Tuscan 'cacimperio', and as such is an instance of the very common food metaphor as extended to sexual acts.[47] Moreover, it seems to have already acquired an established sexual connotation of its own.[48] But with a Lacanian backdrop firmly in place, it would seem clear from its contextual setting that Belli has deliberately chosen the compound noun for its composite parts, with equal stress on the latter element. 'Cazzimperio' is Belli's equivalent of phallocentrism, the literal empire or rule of the phallus, a force similar to natural desire, yet seemingly distinct and twice as compelling given its subsequent position in the process of sexualization. Indeed, as a woman there is no question of not submitting to its dominion: it is presented as integral to her development that she will be besieged by both powers, as evidenced by the resounding 'pprincipia a peccà per'. Her urge to act according to this force is an instinctive, pre-

[47] Belli glosses the term as 'nome volgare della salsa' in a note to his earlier sonnet 294. *La bbotta de fianco*, where the phrase also carries a suggestive sexual overtone. In a discussion revolving around proverbial double entendres of culinary terms such as 'sale', the male speaker predictably lowers the tone by turning an initial complement towards the woman into a sexual proposition. After making the leap of linguistic association from 'sale' to 'pepe', probably aided by and anticipating further phonetic allusions, 'c'otr'ar zale c'avete in ner griterio / tienete er pepe drento a cquell'imbrojjo', he finally suggests lewdly that 'co ssale e ppepe e cquattro gocce d'ojjo / poderissimo fàcce er cazzimperio.' On food metaphors for sexual acts or body parts, see Allan and Burridge, *Euphemism & Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 99-100.

[48] Piero Camporesi, editing Pellegrino Artusi's *La Scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010), cites the Romagnolo form 'cazzimpevar', which according to Pisanelli is known to excite 'gli appetiti venerei' and have the effect of '[fare] star dritto il membro', before conjecturing that 'cacio imperio' is an 'evidente corruzione di *cacio in pepe*', p. 243. In Belli, most editors acknowledge the double entendre, providing the gloss 'pinzimonio': Gibellini 'qui in traslato', Vigolo-Gibellini, *Sonetti*, p. 99; Teodonio 'traslato osceno', Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 433. Vaccaro's dictionary has the secondary meaning of 'coito', *VRB*, p. 160, though only Vighi explains the 'cacimperio' basis: 'Non è escluso che la deformazione di significato sia furbesca, e derivi proprio dall'assonanza oscena collegata con l'azione dell'intingere', cited in Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 316. See also in this regard an early attestation with a clearly sexual meaning in an anonymous, recently rediscovered seventeenth century sonnet 'Da che quell sì focoso Casimperio', Biblioteca Casanatense MS.130, now quoted in Claudio Costa, 'Intorno ad un sonetto romanesco del Seicento pubblicato da Benedetto Croce (con alcuni testi inediti del XVII secolo' in Laura Biancini, et al., (eds.), *Croce e la letteratura dialettale: Giornata di studi, Roma, Biblioteca nazionale centrale, 11 dicembre 1996* (Rome: Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Roma, 1997), pp. 89-124, (p. 108). The sonnet begins: 'Da che quell sì focoso Casimperio / M'hèbbe in letto scaldato à suo piacere, / Subito in Sogno mi sì fè uedere / Nell'Abito, che ueste l'Adulterio'. Costa, despite admitting that it could 'alludere a un generico atto sessuale', is more inclined to think that it signifies 'un membro virile' (p. 108), and in terms of the attestation remarks: 'notevole per antichità questa forma, ma anche perché, dato il contesto, ne viene retrodatato l'uso metaforico, tratto dal significato proprio di "intingolo"', (p. 122).

determined, subconscious part of her female condition. The phallus is again responsible for a lack of freedom.

In keeping with psychoanalytic theories of sexualization, the 'disiderio' and the 'cazzimperio' are both defined in this sonnet by the post-castration discovery of the 'ciscio'. Glossed by Belli as '"Uccello", in due significati', the young woman primarily begins to understand what it is like to be a bird. That is, she feels a desire to want to spread her wings of freedom, to find her own direction, even if that path is wayward.[49] In choosing the figure of the bird, Belli makes use of a long-established literary trope to describe the woman. Ellen Moers, the American feminist critic, wonders why the avian metaphor is so 'hallowed with female associations':

> Is the bird merely a species of the littleness metaphor? Or are birds chosen because they are tortured, as little girls are tortured, by boys like John Reed, who 'twisted the necks of the pigeons, killed the little peachicks…'? […] Or is it because birds are beautiful and exotic creatures, symbols of half-promised, half-forbidden sensual delights […]?[50]

She goes on to conclude that 'of all creatures, birds alone can fly all the way to heaven – yet they are caged. Birds alone can sing more beautifully than human voices – yet they are unheeded, or silenced.' Her telling example is taken from Christina Rossetti's poem *A Royal Princess*, where woman's restricted liberty is established through a double metaphorical comparison to the bird: 'Me, poor dove that must not coo – / eagle that must not soar.'[51] The implication in 'La vita de le donne' too is that woman begins to recognize her freedom is somehow restricted, hence the conscious transgression of some kind of border as expressed in the verb 'peccare'. More than a transparent reference to

[49] 'Peccare' is to be read both in the sense of sinning, but also of erring. A phonetic play on *peccare/beccare* might also be intended to compound the avian metaphor.
[50] *Literary Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1978), p. 245.
[51] Ibid., p. 250.

sexual initiation associated with the transition from childhood to womanhood, however, I read this as an allusion to the caged bird metaphor, symptomatic of her lack of freedom as caused by the 'cazzimperio'. Woman is jailbird.

The metaphor, then, should be considered as part of the broader theme of the patriarchal containment of women, as exemplified by the thought of Moira Gatens, which the French feminists in particular, such as Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, see as a byproduct of the Lacanian phallus.[52] Yet the seemingly paradoxical implication of the phallus, however, is that whilst it is 'an object that distinguishes the sexes and marks their oppositional status', it is simultaneously the element 'that designates the possibility of the union of the two sexes'.[53] In Belli as is well known, the union of the sexes, at least in the immediate sense of Lacan's fleeting 'copula', is famously frequent. But beyond that, if instead we think in terms of Derrida's more durable notion of the copula 'of copulation', that is, both the inscribed tendency to marry things intellectually and culturally, as well as to perform couples of ourselves, the effects of the phallus as agent of union is enlightening to say the least. In the *Sonetti*, rather than the blissful paired-bird image, the attempt to bridge the opposition of the sexes in any sort of sustained coupling results again in the caging of women. A distilled and concentrated example of domestic conjugation, yet emblematic of woman's condition in general, is provided by the figure of the wife:

> 1484. 'La mojje marcontenta'
>
> Nun me la sento, nò, nnun me la sento:
> queste cqui nun zò llègge da cristiani,
> d'avé da stà li mesi e ll'anni sani

[52] On patriarchal confinement, see Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
[53] From the entry on the notion of the PHALLUS: FEMINIST IMPLICATIONS, in *Feminism and psychoanalysis: a critical dictionary*, ed. by Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 219.

a mmorisse de pizzichi cqua ddrento.

Mai un po' d'aria! Ma' un divertimento!
Sempre ammuffita cqui ccome li cani!
Che mmariti! Che ccori indisumani!
E sse laggneno poi si mmuta vento.

Co cquella sscimmia tua de Luscïola
er tempo d'annà in zònzola sce ll'hai:
tutti li gran da-fà ssò ppe mmé ssola.

Oh, inzomma, io drento casa incaroggnita
nun ce vojjo stà ppiú. Ssi ccaso-mai,
nun ho ggruggno né età de fà sta vita.[54]

Woman is kept against her will (notice the reappearance of the double passive construction in 'd'avé da stà'), contained by the patriarchal laws ('llègge', synonymous with the 'ggiustizzia da galerra') of 'cazzimperio'. She is imprisoned in every sense, cooped up, restricted to the solitary confinement of house arrest ('drento casa', a further insistence on enclosure following the earlier 'cqua ddrento').[55] Images of decay and stagnation ('ammuffita') feed on this bestial ('ccome li cani') and unnatural ('mai un po' d'aria') incarceration. Reminiscent of 1678. 'La povera mojje', whose protagonist sees married life as the ultimate form of suffering ('Oh cche vvita! Si Iddio nnun ciarimedia /

[54] Conjugality as a form of cage is also historically accurate. In Margherita Pelaja's examination of marriage in nineteenth century Rome, she finds that the pledging of wedlock, interestingly by both sexes, is used as a form of 'trappola' to the extent that the term even takes on a semi-technical definition in disputes: 'Nelle storie conservate dagli incartamenti processuali del Tribunale Criminale del Vicariato si rintracciano spesso miscugli originali di «trappole»', *Matrimonio e sessualità a Roma nell'Ottocento* (Rome: Laterza, 1994), p. 62.

[55] Similarly confined to the domestic cage of wedlock is the subject of 785. *Er madrimonio de la mi' nipote*. The young girl's early reactions would seem to indicate her recognition of the impeded freedom her prospective husband and the institution of marriage will afford: 'E mmó cche llei je stira e cche jje lava, / lui je sce fa lo stufo e la strapazza: / e llei s'accora, e ppiaggne che ss'ammazza, / che cce l'ho vvista fà ssino la bbava.' Tellingly, Teodonio reads the 'bbava' element not as a mark of anger, but rather as a clinical symptom of a well-known associated condition, 'il manifestarsi delle convulsioni isteriche', Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 814. It is impossible not to draw parallels with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, where the female narrator's confinement to a single room with barred windows, in a house surrounded by 'hedges and walls and gates that lock', leads to insanity. She ultimately becomes at one with the woman behind the allegorical wall-paper, a figment of her imagination, who 'takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard'. Her half-demented, half-defiant final hysterical cry of "I've got out at last" may be read as an escape of sorts from the prison of patriarchy. Not surprisingly, the birdcage metaphor is implied in the story too by her husband John referring to her as 'a blessed little goose'. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*, ed. by Catherine J. Golden (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 131-144 .

è mmejjo de morí che ppenà ttanto'), the result of this union is figurative premature death (its abnormality expressed by the oxymoronic 'li mesi e ll'anni sani / a morisse'), as indeed some feminist thinkers observe as its ultimate outcome for women in the battle of the sexes.[56] Although, as with 'L'omo e la donna', it is impossible not to feel the impact of the determined, at least latent, female energy to break the mould. Whilst Belli's woman does not yet have the courage of Ibsen's Nora, the bubbling impetus for a collective breaking free of the patriarchal cage is indisputably there. After all, the sentiment expressed by the resolute emphatic opening of the first line remains wholly intact at the end in 'nun ce vojjo stà ppiú'.

It would be misleading in our investigation of the oppositional nature of the sexes to suggest that Belli is constantly concerned with the unjust effects of patriarchy as perpetrated against woman. Similarly, it would be remiss not to dwell momentarily on the custom-made, corresponding opponent of 'la mojje marcontenta'. As in many other instances of opposition, the binary aspect of thought highlighted by Cixous is mirrored in Belli's *poema* through the specific construction of adversarial characters, often in pairs of sonnets bearing the same manuscript date, as in this case.[57] Integral to his portrayal is the other side of the story:

> 1485. 'Er marito stufo'
>
> Madalena, finisscela: e nnovanta.
> Nun me roppe li fiaschi, Madalena.
> Lasseme stà: nnun me fà ffà una sscena

[56] See, for example, Alice Jardine's 'Death Sentences: Writing Couples and Ideology' in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 6, No. 1/2, The Female Body in Western Culture: Semiotic Perspectives (1985), 119-131.

[57] Equally, it would be too simplistic to pretend the *Sonetti* present a blanket female voice concerning the effects of marriage. Here, too, Belli is keen to present adversarial voices. Compare, for example, the wife's catalogue of insults and complaints in 1100. 'La mojje disperata', whose sentiments 'debbono declamarsi con veemenza d'ira e di pianto' according to Belli's instruction, and 1107. 'La bbona mojje', written a day later, in which the woman remains affectionate and 'ccontenta', despite her hot-headed husband having to visit the 'esattore'. *PR*, V, p. 275.

de le mie. Ôh ttu sseguita: ôh ttu ccanta.

Che lingue! Che ccervelli da catena!
Se ne perdi la razza tutta quanta!
E cce fiotteno poi s'uno le pianta,
e sse laggneno poi si un omo mena.

Eh ddàjjela! Ho ccapito: ggià lo vedo
che sta jjoja finissce cor pagozzo.
Io fo li fatti: a cchiacchiere te scedo.

Bbada, nun te fidà ssi ancora abbozzo:
zittete llí, pperch'io sto un antro crèdo.
E ppoi te do de piccio e tte scotozzo.

The diatribe of 'Er marito stufo' distinguishes itself from that of 'La mojje marcontenta' principally by its more direct, *ad hominem* (or *ad feminam*) form of attack, and its greater violence, including at the linguistic level. Over and above this distinction, however, the sonnet does paint the picture of woman as victim of patriarchy, both in the quotidian sense, as the recipient of the brutal and confrontational barrage of threats and insults; and in the more philosophical sense too, as demonstrated perfectly in the damning line 11. In so doing, the sonnet returns us to the avian metaphor as applied to woman. In addition to her characterization as a chatterer, a frequent charge by male figures in the *Sonetti* but equally by myriad literary examples perhaps none more so than Ibsen's Torvald, the husband bemoans what he describes as her customary bird-like whining ('ôh ttu ccanta'). Cixous, in her characteristic, half-ironic yet entirely serious assessment of the phallic economy, extracts the metaphorically decapitated woman from the cinders of the Oedipal myth as the 'chienne chanteuse', physically unable to speak cogently in the patriarchal tongue, condemned instead to tweeting empty prattle:

> She sings out because women do…they do utter a little, but they don't speak. […] [T]hey talk, talk endlessly, chatter, overflow with sound, mouth-sound: but they don't actually *speak*, they have nothing to say.

> They always inhabit the place of silence, or at most make it echo with their singing.[58]

Although the avian metaphor in its most immediate sense of impeded liberty has been considered 'a metaphor that truly deserves the adjective female', in Belli, perhaps surprisingly, the caged bird *topos* is not confined to woman.[59] Probably based on such proverbial notions as 'l'uccello in gabbia è come un uom sposato', marriage especially, but conjugality in general, is also seen from the male point of view as an agent of imprisonment. Explicitly confirming the entrenched patriarchal nature of proverbial language, the male speaker of 131. 'Lo scarpinello vojjoso de fà' twists the metaphor in an attempt to paint woman as the predatory hunter and his sex as her helpless victim. As the title promises, the poem features obscene discourse from a particularly misogynistic male:

> Starebbe ccqui dde casa una largazza,
> che jje dicheno Ciscia Scola-nerbi?
> Ebbè, io sò lo scarpinel de piazza,
> mastro Grespino de-li-culi-ascerbi,
>
> che jj'ho da mette un paro de spunterbi
> a 'na su' sciavattella pavonazza;
> e doppo je dirò cquattro proverbi,
> s'in ner lavore mio nun me strapazza.

The cobbler's routine is exceptionally explicit, beginning with the vulgar and derogatory metathetic form of 'ragazza' in the opening line, which is contextualized by the equally offensive metaphors constructed around the trade of the 'scarpinel', especially the 'spunterbi' and the 'sciavattella', the latter coming to signify something akin to 'worn-out little shoe' (cf. It. 'zoccola'), with the referent put beyond doubt through the crude

[58] 'Castration or Decapitation', trans. Annette Kuhn, in *Signs*, 7:1 (1981: Autumn), 41-55, p. 49.
[59] *Literary Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1978), p. 294. Marriage as a depriver of freedom for both sexes has been a rich source for satirical treatment. Cartoonist Mel Calman depicts a birdcage enclosing his famous little man character along with his wife, both of whom are uttering the words "you're freer than I am".

qualification of its colour. The bird metaphor in the *fronte* is confined to the name of his unfortunate victim, the unforgettable Ciscia Scola-nerbi. An *accorciativo* or shortened form of Francesca, equivalent to the male Ciccio for Francesco (particularly prevalent in Rome), 'ciccia' in its nominal sense, as Vighi points out, also has the literal meaning of 'uccelletta', as a term of endearment or hypocoristic.[60] But here what is usually a *vezzeggiativo* is by no means entirely positive. On the contrary, 'ciscia' refers principally to the female sexual organ, the equivalent of the male 'ciscio' as seen in 'La vita de le donne', so that Belli, or the speaker, invests her with a typically Boccaccian 'nome parlante'.[61] The young woman (in a further layer of ironic meaning, 'cicia' is often used to refer to youngsters) is thus objectified completely, her essence reduced to her sexuality synecdochically, with her pseudo-surname functioning as an adjectival epithet that passes comment on her alleged promiscuity. In the *sirma*, however, the male plays sexual politics by spinning the bird metaphor on its head. Drawing on proverbial misogyny, he likens the condition of lustful man, bewitched by the female spell, to that of a blackbird ensnared by lime. Although not caged, the avian image remains that of impeded liberty, with the scarcely credible presentation of woman relying on the hyperbolical use of hunting metaphors:

> Presempio: Omo incazzito è un merlo ar vischio.
> La donna è un cacciator de schiopperete
> che vva a ccaccia cojjoni senza fischio.

Similarly, in the more sober 991. 'Er vedovo', the bitter male protagonist totally belies the melancholic sense of mourning expected of the sonnet's title by considering the

[60] *PR*, II, *p.* 92.
[61] See Michelangelo Zaccarello, 'Primi appunti tipologici sui nomi parlanti' in *Lingua e stile,* XXXVII (2003: June), 59-86. The secondary meanings of 'ciscia' and 'nerbi' are confirmed by Belli in the sonnets 560. 'La madre de le Sante' and 561. 'Er padre de li Santi', both of which are studied closely in due course.

bond of marriage tighter and more restricting than physical fetters: 'Er zanto madrimonio? er pijjà mmojje? / accidentacci a cchi ne disce bbene. […] È mmeno male de passà in catene / mill'anni, senza mai potesse ssciojje.' Consequently, marriage is frequently cautioned against in a bid to preserve freedom (see, for example, 234. 'A ppijjà mojje penzece un anno e un giorno' or 283. 'Er bon conzijjo'). In 161. 'Puro l'invidiaccia', the caged bird metaphor raises its head once more in reference to the male condition, with a jealous love-rival acerbically admitting defeat but taking comfort from the victor's necessarily sacrificed liberty, as expressed in the purely masculinist language of the concluding tercet:

> mó llui zappa sta Vènera, e la stabbia;
> ma ppresto, a ffuria d'aribbatte er chiodo,
> s'ha da trovà come l'uscello in gabbia.

Interestingly, the birdcage is used to symbolize marriage both as an enclosed liminal space, and thus the usual locus of compromized freedom, with all its associated burdens including children, but also as the paradoxical prison of legitimate sexual liberty. Marriage, then, is the uneasy prerequisite for sustained sexual activity; the price man has to pay to enjoy continued sexual relations.[62] Man, however, will frequently refuse to pay that price, instead wanting to have his cake and eat it. In a glaring example of the prevalent misogyny constantly percolating through the *Sonetti*, the protagonist of 844. *La*

[62] Marriage as the legitimating factor of sexual relations is by no means fictional. Pelaja finds that the concession of sex in exchange for the promise of marriage is often a woman's only form of bargaining, 'una specie di trappola, in cui uno dei partner – generalmente la donna – attirava l'altro per indurlo a regolarizzare la relazione'. In an archival case study of the courtship in 1849 between Paola Savini (coppolettara) and Filippo Gerardini (giovane di macellaio), for example, Pelaja finds that the records of the Vicariato show this gender politicking at work: 'Finalmente dietro le sue assicurazioni che mi avrebbe sposata quante volte mi avesse trovata vergine, trovandomi sola con esso nella piazza del Popolo e precisamente vicino alla fontana che sta verso il Pincio, sulle ore tre della notte non ricordando il giorno preciso ma era d'estate, mi mostrai disposta a condiscendere. [...] In prova che egli era rimasto soddisfatto per avermi trovata vergine mi assicurò che entro due mesi mi avrebbe sposata [...] e così successivamente ogni giorno mi conosceva carnalmente, per una o anche due o tre volte...»', *Matrimonio e sessualità a Roma nell'Ottocento* (Rome: Laterza, 1994), p. 36.

sincerezza dismisses his partner's talk of 'er zanto madrimonio e lo sposà'. By no means devoid of affection since he addresses her endearingly as 'sorcia mia', thus a further indication of the threat to freedom posed by the very concept of marriage rather than a lack of feeling for the woman, he nevertheless tells her in the frankest terms that wedlock is out of the question:

> Sempre una cosa m'hai sentita dí:
> l'amore sí, mma er madrimonio no:
> pe mmojje no, mma ppe pputtana sí.[63]

Relating to the sexual, the bird metaphor is also employed for the courtship that forms the subject of 161. 'Puro l'invidiaccia', the wooing stage of the relationship prior to any long-term bridging of the gender divide. Rather than any idealized displays of plumage, however, the Bellian incarnation brings to bear the full force of patriarchy, to the detriment of woman. Claiming the metaphor in this instance to be indicative of the polar gender roles assigned to the sexes, Almansi states that 'il rapporto fra uomo e donna è simile a quello tra cacciatore e preda', that is a more violent version of the taming of the shrew theme, where woman is prey, 'incarrognita' like 'la mojje marcontenta', passively poised to undergo 'murder by the hunter'.[64] Accordingly, 'la preda è esaltata nei suoi aspetti piú carnali, bassi, animaleschi', and to illustrate what he calls the 'posizione dominatrice del maschio', Almansi cites the exemplary 59. 'La peracottara'.[65] The predatory male opens his account with 'Sto a ffà la caccia', and proceeds to lie in wait for the suitably plump, game-like 'pasciocca', whom he intends to ambush in the most direct of means (notice the violent 'schiaffà' and equally violent, but also bestial, 'ingrufalla'):

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[63] Teodonio draws attention to the 'rime tronche' adding to man's abrupt 'sincerezza', Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 874.
[64] Almansi, 'L'oscenità del Belli' in *L'Estetica dell'osceno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 5-35, p. 28. Moers, E, *Literary Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1978), p. 250.
[65] Almansi, 'L'oscenità del Belli' cit., pp. 28-9.

'Ché la voría schiaffà ddrento a 'n portone / e ppo' ingrufalla indove tocca, tocca [.]' Central to his attack, of course, and implicit in 'ingruffalla', is his supreme phallic weapon, the full devastation of which is made explicit in the second of the sonnet pair modelled, as we saw in chapter one, on Porta's 'Sent Teresin', 99. 'A Teta':

> Pe tterra, in piede, addoss'ar muro,
> a lletto, come c'ho ttrovo d'addoprà l'ordegno,
> n'ho ffatte stragge: e pe ttutto, sii detto
> senz'avvantamme, ciò llassato er zegno.

Male bravura aside, the force of that 'n'ho ffatte stragge', an element absent in the original Porta poem, is utterly brutal; the effect of the phallus is the obliteration of women. As Almansi has it, 'il "lui" moraviano è qui un meccanico ariete pronto a sfondare le porte delle fortezze, a far *stragge* di nemici, lasciando un *zegno* sulle loro carni.'[66] Women are the mere objects of target practice for men's 'little soldiers'.

Similarly, with this aspect of the bird metaphor in mind, it is hard not to identify the woman in 1656. 'Er cacciatore' as potential prey. It seems likely that Belli intended the reader to make the association even though editors to date have not made this equation explicit. The sonnet ostensibly features a woman rejecting a potential suitor:

> Fijjolo, me seccate inutirmente.
> D'un cacciatore io poco me ne fido.
> Nun me guardate fisso, ché nun rido.
> Fijjo caro, io nun sposo scerta ggente.

The basis of the rejection is what she believes to be the inhumane pursuit of defenceless prey, with Teodonio quick to identify her attitude as 'umanissimo e francescano', before reading the sonnet as an allegorical defence of pacifism, hoisting her up as 'l'emblema di chi resiste alle prepotenze di quanti vogliono imporsi al mondo con la violenza e con le

[66] Ibid., p. 26.

armi'. [67] Teodonio is right to highlight the use of war imagery, I would suggest, but fails to associate the sonnet with the 'caccia alla donna' theme: the woman in question identifies the hunter's target as 'una povera passera innoscente', which I read as a deliberate, sexualized analogy for woman (either herself or in general) given the discussion of courtship, and which in turn has to be located within the battle of the sexes.[68]

Whilst the bird metaphor is clearly used to portray both man and woman, a fine dividing line separates the sexes absolutely. Man may well be threatened by the birdcage, teeter on the threshold of the coop even, with woman usually somehow held responsible for impinging his freedom, but crucially he often resists entering its realm in the first place. Woman, on the other hand, is caged by default. She aspires to soar to freedom beyond the bars of the cage. The dynamics are thus fundamentally different. Woman begins within, and struggles to break free; man is born without, and by and large remains at liberty. It is by no means coincidental that Belli highlights and exploits the double meaning of the original avian metaphor in 'La vita de le donne'. The 'ciscio' in its other sense, as 'uccello' in the second of the 'due significati', is central to this defining distinction.

As in English 'cock', Italian 'uccello' and Romanesco 'ciscio' can mean both 'bird' and 'penis'.[69] In making use of this common semantic meeting point, Belli locates

[67] Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 532.
[68] As we shall see in due course, 'passerina' is one of the many synonyms listed in 560. 'La madre de le Sante'. Cf. also Porta's *Dormiven du Tosann*, the protagonists of which are described as being of the age when 'comenza a spiurigh la passarina'. *Poesie*, p. 591.
[69] The dual meaning is widespread in Indo-European languages. Latin 'gallus', German 'Hahn', Swedish 'kuk' and Danish 'kok', as well as the sexual connotations of French 'coq' and the verb 'coquer', are among the many examples cited by Allan and Burridge in 'Penis as Cock: One Instance of the Bird as a Sexual Metaphor' in *Euphemism & Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 104-109.

his work within a long tradition running throughout Western literature, with one of the earliest examples being Lesbia's 'passer' as identified by Poliziano in Catullus 2 and 3.[70] The artifice is chiefly comic, relying on the natural tendency to use metaphor and euphemism in order to take delight in making reference to the taboo. As such, its incarnation in popular literature, 'la tradizione popolare e popolaresca' as Teodonio calls it, parodies the widespread motif in the earlier lyrical tradition of bird as a symbol of love.[71] In a famous illustration of the popular metaphor's extensive malleability, Boccaccio's 'Caterina e l'usignolo' episode in the Decameron (Quinta Giornata, Novella Quarta) is a comic twist on the romantic fairy tale, actually probably modelled on the *Lai de Laüstic* by Marie de France, and constructed entirely around the semantic correspondence between 'nightingale' and 'penis' contained in the Tuscan 'usignolo'.[72] With imagery similar to that already seen, Caterina's innocence, 'con maravigliosa diligenza guardata', is fiercely protected at the beginning of the story by her parents, Lizio da Valbona and his wife Giacomina. The ominous appearance of Ricciardo, 'un giovane bello e fresco della persona', soon results in Caterina being overcome by a 'soperchio caldo'. On account of her raised temperature (both due to the season and her ardent desire), she contrives to be allowed to sleep on the balcony in the open air, in the hope of hearing the metaphorical nightingale sing, thus helping her to sleep more peacefully having quenched her raging heat. Predictably, Ricciardo reaches the balcony

[70] In his unpublished doctoral thesis on the sources of Belli's *Sonetti romaneschi*, Nicholas Timiras identifies a resurgence of the bird as penis metaphor in the poetry of the Settecento and early Ottocento, with Italy as the 'probabile centro di diffusione'. Timiras, Nicholas, "Le fonti dei sonetti romaneschi di Giuseppe Gioachino Belli." Doctoral dissertation. University of California, Berkeley, 1978. p. 346. On Catullus, see Hooper, R. W., 'In defence of Catullus' Dirty Sparrow' in *Greece & Rome*, Second Series, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Oct., 1985), 162-178.

[71] Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 259. For background to a specific species of the bird metaphor and its literary history, especially in relation to the following Boccaccio example, see Thomas Allen Shippey, 'Listening to the Nightingale' in *Comparative Literature*, 22 (1970), 46-60.

[72] All references from *Decameron*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), II, pp. 631-639.

under the cover of darkness and the nightingale metaphor is used for the euphemistic description of physical consummation generally, and probably the male erection and ejaculation specifically: '[…] e dopo molti basci si coricarono insieme, e quasi per tutta la notte diletto e piacer presono l'un dell'altro, molte volte faccendo cantar l'usignuolo'.

In a reversal of the man as 'cacciatore' image, sexual woman is presented as the bird-catcher when Caterina's father discovers the lovers with evidence of his daughter's sinning literally in hand, as he tells his wife: 'tua figliuola è stata sí vaga dell'usignuolo che ella è stata tanto alla posta che ella l'ha preso e tienlosi in mano'. With Caterina having captured the nightingale, and by extension ensnared her mate, the only thing to do is to marry the youngsters promptly, 'sí ch'egli [Ricciardo] si troverà aver messo l'usignuolo nella gabbia sua e non nell'altrui', thus preserving honour. In a remarkably egalitarian version of the metaphor, swift marriage will ensure both Caterina's continued possession of the nightingale (her husband's penis, and as synecdoche, her husband) and Ricciardo's new ownership of the cage (Caterina's vagina, and as synecdoche, Caterina as his wife). Equality is short lived, however, since the story's conclusion sees yet further semantic shifting within the bird metaphor, as liberty and control curiously and suddenly seem to reside once again with the man:

> [...] in presenzia degli amici e de' parenti da capo sposò la giovane, e con gran festa se ne la menò a casa, e fece onorevoli e belle nozze, e poi con lei lungamente in pace e in consolazione uccellò agli usignuoli e di dí e di notte quanto gli piacque.

With 'uccellare agli usignoli' appearing to be another euphemistic metaphor for the liberal sexual activity afforded by wedlock, man resumes his place atop the phallocentric pyramid of patriarchy.

In an equally extended example of the penis-as-bird metaphor, Belli constructs 237. 'L'uscelletto' entirely around the lewd double entendre. Confirmation of the obscene is only revealed definitively at the very latest possible moment, the final word 'matarazzo'. As with the conclusion to the Boccaccio episode, man is the agent of the metaphor, in this case the phallocentric popolano-orator:

> 237. 'L'uscelletto'
>
> Sor Maria Battifessa, v'ho pportato
> un uscelletto d'allevasse a mmano,
> che lo cacciò mmi' Madre da un pantano,
> dove Tata sciaveva seminato.
>
> Nun guardate ch'è cciuco e spennacchiato:
> lo vederete cressce a mmano a mmano.
> Anzi allora tienetelo ingabbiato,
> perché ssi vvola ve pô annà llontano.
>
> Sin ch'è da nido, fateje carezze:
> cerca l'ummido poi, ma nnò lo sguazzo;
> e la gabbia la vò ssenza monnezze.
>
> De rimanente è uscello da strapazzo:
> e nn'averete le sette allegrezze
> fascennolo ruzzà ss'un matarazzo.[73]

As in Boccaccio, comedy is the poem's abiding feature, successfully secured from the very title through the humorous diminutive suffix.[74] Comic too is the juxtaposition of the respectful pleasantries of polite address (the woman is given the title 'Sor' and spoken to in the 'voi' form) and the incongruous female name (the common yet pious-sounding

[73] Timiras notes intertextual affinities, 'probabilmente dovute all'ampiezza della espansione del tema', between *L'uscelletto* and Jean-Pierre de Béranger's contemporaneous *Le petit oiseau*, the male voice of which attempts to solicit sympathy and sexual favours by telling his lady the following: '[...] Ma belle, disais-je, regardez / l'épaisseur du plumage / de l'oiseau que bien vous regardez / et qui s'ennuie en cage.' He also goes on to show convincingly that Filippo Pananti's 1803 'poemetto didascalico', *Il Paretaio*, may be a direct source for the poem, quoting the lines 'Poi porrebber tante uova in troppa ardenza / Il povero uccelletto spennacchiato, / E bisogna in amor riprender fiato', of which Belli's lines 5 and 6 especially seem to be a condensed version. Timiras, Nicholas. "Le fonti dei sonetti romaneschi di Giuseppe Gioachino Belli." Doctoral dissertation. University of California, Berkeley, 1978. p. 346.

[74] Cf. 100. 'A Ghita', where an equally insistent male voice harries a woman with a similar request for sexual favours: 'Sto sciorcinato d'uscelletto cqui / da tanti ggiorni sta ssenza maggnà, / perché nun j'ho saputo aritrovà / canipuccia che ppozzi diggerí.' *PR*, II, p. 21.

'Maria', coupled with the obscene compound neologism 'Battifessa'). Woman is thus essentially equated with her sexual organs by the male protagonist, however, and objectified completely as a result. Woman is also presented, as in the Boccaccio passage, as the bird-catcher (both the addressee of the persona's discourse, and his own mother), and urged to act as protector of her possession, complete with the veiled threat of male promiscuity (lines 7 and 8) if woman is not forthcoming with her sexual availability. In a display of psychological power-wielding, man gives the impression of divesting control to woman, whilst simultaneously attempting to ensnare her with his discourse, and keep her trapped within his linguistic net.

This power-wielding, however, is conducted purely at the level of language. The bird metaphor is the most distilled illustration of the cemented position of the phallus within the language of the *Sonetti* and man's privileged position as its native speaker. In 2252. 'L'inzoggno d'una regazza', however, Belli captures a young woman's fledging sexuality, portraying it crucially as the moment of linguistic awakening. The realization of the supremacy of metaphor arrives in an almost epiphanic dream, which Vighi has rightly defined as 'freudiano'.[75] Reminiscent generally of the portrayal of sexual awareness and desire in 408. 'La vita de le donne' and more specifically of initial female naivety as we saw depicted in 586-593. 'Le confidenze de le regazze', the sonnet features a young girl asking an older and wiser 'sora Nena' for advice on how to interpret a particularly vivid dream which has recently caused her to reflect:

> Me sò ddunque inzoggnata un ber cestino
> pien de scetroli e cco un uscello rosso,
> che mme guardava e ddiventava grosso
> come cresce in dell'ojjo uno stuppino.

[75] *PR*, IX, p. 564.

Poi me veniva a svolazzà vviscino:
e a l'improviso me zzompava addosso
e mme fischiava poi drento in un fosso
che nun era ppiú ffosso, era un giardino.

The penis-as-bird metaphor is taken up this time from the female perspective. As in 237. 'L'uscelletto', attention is focussed on its ability to grow, emphasized poetically in the first quatrain by the prominence of the *rima piana* 'rosso / grosso', set against the diminutive endings of lines 1 and 4. The theme of flight is maintained in 'svolazzà', but the movement is personified too in the decidedly Roman 'zzompava addosso', pointing to male impulse. The transitive verb 'fischiava' is perhaps the metaphorical pivot of the poem. It continues the metaphor's semantic field in its primary auditory sense of mimicking birdcall, but in the context of the poem's manifold double meanings it also assumes a very active and performative sense, no doubt at least partially on account of phonetic associations with *fissare* and *ficcare*. Boggione and Casalegno attest the same metaphorical meaning in another Belli sonnet, 814. 'La scrupolosa', where the insistent male uses the verb as part of his strategic blackmail to encourage the woman to submit to his overt advances:

Per un bascio co mmé ttanta cusscenza,
eppoi te fai fischià ddar Padre Carlo.[76]

Belli essentially confirms the obscene meaning of 'fischià' here, but acknowledges a certain linguistic elasticity in the usage, in what can be described as one of his most playful annotations. He clearly deems the expression peculiar enough to warrant comment, but instead of providing an explanatory gloss, he coyly adds 'Se sapeste qual brutto significato ha qui il «fischiare»!...', leading Vighi to conclude that the footnote

[76] *Dizionario storico del lessico erotico italiano: metafore, eufemismi, oscenità, doppi sensi, parole dotte e parole basse in otto secoli di letteratura italiana*, ed. by Valter Boggione and Giovanni Casalegno (Milan: Longanesi, 1996), p. 159.

'finge una "pruderie" che accresce la comicità del verso'.[77] In the primary sense of the 'fischiava' in 2252-2253. 'L'inzoggno d'una regazza', man tries to entice woman into yet another enclosed space, but with the deliberate and equally lewd secondary meaning in mind 'fosso' is invested with corporeality. In the language of phallogocentrism, 'fosso' and 'giardino' signpost familiar anatomical *topoi*, and become the girl's most intimate body part. The sexual connotations are reinforced by the general breathlessness of the poem, confirmed explicitly by the girl in the final tercet ('Allora me svejjai co ttanta pena / che nun potevo ripijjà ppiú ffiato'), and syntactically by the lack of punctuation and the polysyndeton, as Teodonio points out.[78] The sonnet's comedy thus consists of the fine line it traces between innocence and knowledge, both sexual and linguistic, whether genuine or feigned on the girl's part. Somewhat uncomfortably, hierarchical distance is imposed and celebrated between the speaker, and thus reader, of the poem and the female subject of the sonnet as she undergoes initiation into the language of patriarchy. In her reply, the canny Nena (echoing the mother-daughter dynamics of Aretino's Nanna and Antonia) confirms and explains the metaphorical reality of the girl's dream in the second of the pair of sonnets.

Indeed, when woman has gained some direct knowledge of man's world, however, a very different picture emerges. Intriguingly, in 470. 'La sposa', Belli's woman not only attempts to enter into the linguistic domain of man, but to assert control from within. With Belli drawing on similar themes to the Boccaccio passage, albeit far removed from idealistic fabledom, his calculating bride rises to the occasion,

[77] *PR*, IV, p. 252.
[78] Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 1141.

appropriating man's precious bird metaphor only to reject it along with one of the usual mechanisms of patriarchy:

> 470. 'La sposa'
>
> Eppuro, avanti a tté, ccore mio bbello,
> sibbè cche ssana nun me ciai trovata,
> gnisunantro m'ha ffatto er giucarello
> e ècchete la cosa com'è annata.
>
> Un giorno in d'un ortaccio a Mmarmorata,
> pe ccure appresso a un maledett'uscello,
> scivolo: un pass'in farzo, una scossciata,
> 'na distrazzion de nerbi…, ecco er fraggello!
>
> Pe ffatte vede che nun zò bbuscíe,
> te dico che ffu ttanta la pavura,
> che m'agnédeno via le cose mie.
>
> Eppoi me pare 'na caricatura
> sto sano o rotto, e ste cojjonerie:
> io ciò er buscio? e ttu er cazzo che l'attura.

In a comic and ludicrous explanation of her lapsed virginity, which she quickly identifies as akin to woman being broken, used, damaged and no longer integral according to the male rhetoric, the female protagonist sends up the penis-as-bird metaphor. Employing the familiar natural setting of the *ortaccio*, as seen in Boccaccio with the father's garden and the 'giardino' in 'L'inzoggno d'una regazza', she paints herself paradoxically as the proverbial bird-catcher (explicit in line 6), and hence sexually awakened, but also as the passive victim of misfortune, 'scivolo', 'un pass'in farzo, una scossciata'. In so doing she sows her own clever double meanings, and demonstrates her understanding of man's linguistic game, already implicit in her use of 'giucarello'.[79] She is briefly willing to enter into it, proving herself equally adept at sustaining his metaphors. After going along with the game for so long, however, she dismisses it as puerile nonsense in the final tercet,

[79] For example, 'una scossciata' is glossed by Vighi as 'allargamento delle gambe sino a slogarsi le cosce', presumably akin to the English *doing the splits*. The expression is meant to describe an involuntary movement following the metaphorical wrong footing, but equally suggests sexual positioning and one wonders whether it also carries the modern sense of a woman provocatively showing leg.

powerfully rejecting the mechanics of phallogocentrism as ‘’na caricatura’. This woman is the savvy combatant, strong enough to diffuse the male rhetoric and mimic it with her own, in such a way to show its lack of substance. Even the concluding obscene metaphor, designed to appeal to man’s penchant for the bawdy and to arouse him, thus deflecting attention from her impurity, blazons equally under the banner of what she defines as ‘cojjonerie’.

Finally, with this linguistic jousting between the sexes in mind, the full meaning of woman’s development in ‘La vita de le donne’ can really be understood in all its significance. When in ‘La vita de le donne’ the young woman ‘incomincia a ccapí che ccos’è ciscio’, she does of course begin her sexual initiation to the penis; equally, however, she embarks upon her linguistic initiation to the phallus, in the true Lacanian significance of the term. That is, she begins to understand the wide-ranging extent of what the wise owl of ‘La sposa’ defines as man’s ‘maledett’uscello’. In this sense, ‘L’uscelletto’, ‘L’inzoggno d’una regazza’ and ‘La sposa’ represent vital stages in woman’s linguistic apprenticeship.[80] The bird metaphor, then, is an extended illustration of both the place of the phallus in language and its ultimate caging capabilities, especially in relation to woman. The ‘ciscio’ is both the caged bird and the caging agent. Again in Belli, however, as with the female voice of ‘La sposa’ and ‘La mojje marcontenta’, there is dissention and disquiet in woman’s breast, an urge at least to begin breaking free of the cage. Belli’s use of bird imagery has to be seen as a precursor for what would become an

[80] Exactly the same process may be observed in 591. ‘Le confidenze de le regazze’, the sixth sonnet of the sequence. When the curious Agata attempts to arrange a visit from Felice so that she too may experience the exciting new things Tuta has recounted, Tuta is quick to see through her pretence: ‘«E cche ccosa vòi dijje, scivettola?» / «Ciò da parlà dde scerta tela fina...». / «Ma ppropio propio tela, eh Aghitina? / no de quer coso longo che jje scola?»’ *PR*, III, p. 389. The linguistic coming of age is demonstrated through the use of phallic euphemism, the recognition of a metaphorical other language, a web of secretive doublespeak.

iconic literary motif in the wider move towards female emancipation. Against the dark, patriarchal background of nineteenth-century papal Rome, it is easy to forget that the *Sonetti* are written less than half a century before such defining texts in European and world literature as Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). A seminal text in early feminism, the latter begins and ends on the central image of the bird as a symbol for the fate of woman.[81] The caging ultimately represented in these and other such texts, of course, is patriarchal, and no agent is greater in that than the phallus itself, even if philosophical and psychological thought still had to formulate it and social mores still had to come to accept it. The beauty in Belli, however, is that the avian symbol of patriarchal confinement is explicitly phallic in nature, and as such is a sort of metaphorical microcosm of a greater psycho-social phenomenon. Belli's woman has clearly begun to realise the signification of the 'pinco'. Like Porta's Ninetta del Verzee, she has come to realise that the phallus, man's greatest weapon in the battle of the sexes, is 'minga on usell, / Ma el manegh de tucc quanc i cognizion'.[82]

3.4 What's in a name? Skirting the genitals.

In his characteristically interesting essay entitled 'I sonetti dell'insignificanza', Guido Almansi lauds Belli with the dubious distinction of 'grande poeta e grande profeta della tautologia', before stating the following:

[81] The novel opens on Madame Lebrun's caged parrot, which is used to symbolize Edna Pontellier's domestic caging in her relationship with her older husband Léonce, much like in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*. The bird image runs throughout and serves as a symbol of progress and hope as it describes her awakening to liberties of various kinds. Her wings of freedom are finally broken, however, and the avian metaphor is employed in the novel's concluding scene of Edna's suicide: 'A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.', *The Awakening and other stories*, ed. by Pamela Knights (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 127.
[82] *Poesie*, p. 125.

> Nel confronto fra Gertrude Stein («a rose is a rose is a rose») e Giulietta Capuleti («What's in a name? that which we call a rose | By any other word would smell as sweet», *Romeo and Juliet*, II, 2, 43-44), si sa da che parte vuole stare il popolano romano. Il personaggio belliano vuole la convincente persuasività di una parola che confermi il già saputo, assicurando la perennità del vino e delle sue gioie attraverso l'assoluta concordanza del *mot* con lo stesso *mot* (che perciò si identifica con la *chose*).[83]

Hinting at some sort of underlying Saussurean tension on Belli's part, between his popolano subject and his authorial self, Almansi returns us, somewhat circuitously, to the crucial issue of semiotics, to the importance of symbolization and Lacan's insistence on metaphor. Examining a number of sonnets to determine Belli's use of what he calls the 'modello retorico dell'*elenchus*', Almansi briefly comments on the sonnet pair of 560. 'La madre de le Sante' and 561. 'Er padre de li Santi', two poems devoted entirely to the vocabulary of genitalia. The former features a further 41 terms for the female reproductive organs in addition to its euphemistic title, with the latter an impressive 53 for the corresponding male parts, both expressed in the most colourful of language, which will be analysed in due course. Surprisingly, however, neither sonnet is included in Almansi's study of the obscene, and Giuliani in turn simply lists 'Er padre de li santi' as one of the 'sonetti famosi' of 1832. Their wider critical reception is worse still, despite being well known, doubtlessly explained on both counts yet again by their obscene subject matter. To date, they have been seen almost exclusively as part of Belli's 'mania del catalogo' (Vigolo), as his attempt to 'elencare voci e metafore nomenclative [...] assumendo la burlesca metafora aretiniana a titoli violentemente libertini e anticristiani' (Muscetta). As we saw in chapter one, 'Er padre de li Santi' in particular is closely based on Porta's 'Ricchezza del vocabolari milanes', and as such Belli has been seen to follow

[83] *Tre sondaggi sul Belli* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), p. 15.

his so-called predecessor both in maintaining 'la difesa di un linguaggio sfacciato' (Muscetta) and in demonstrating 'ricchezza lessicale e [...] abilità metricale' (Vighi). [84]

According to Almansi, however, 'Er padre de li Santi' 'mette in guardia i lettori circa l'altissimo numero di maschere dietro cui si cela la *verge*.'[85] As with the avian imagery, the sonnet introduces various forms of phallic representation. Unwittingly, Almansi even seems to point towards a Lacanian concept of metaphor. For Lacan of course, metaphor is the premise of his thought, the basic form of human linguistic function. In his 'metaphor of the subject' or 'paternal metaphor', the only possible way of creating meaning out of pure nothingness is the process in which 'a signifier takes as its signified another signifier which has been emptied of its signified'.[86] In other words, faced with nothingness, man metaphorically substitutes something for nothing in the first place, and continues substituting ad infinitum along the chain of signifiers. Hence the primacy of the literal 'pinco': 'the first catachretic signifier is, and must be, meaningless, and it is this meaningless signifier that Lacan assimilates to the phallus'.[87] Initially, Almansi simply reiterates the catalogic reading of 'Er padre de li Santi' by suggesting that 'sussiste un intento didattico, informativo, [...] quasi dizionariesco'. But he does get closer to the truth in my view when going on to qualify that 'l'intenzione è, oltre che didattica, mnemotecnica: il sonetto è un *memento phalli*, e una conferma della forza noumenica dei suoi vari *nomina*.'[88] Read against a Lacanian background, this interpretation begins to make sense, in stark opposition to the dismissive assessment by

[84] Conceived polemically in defence of dialect as a literary medium and intended as a satirical means of showcasing the myriad ways in which Milanese is able to describe the testicles, Porta's poem almost certainly provides the inspiration for this pair of sonnets, even though Belli had already directly imitated the Porta sonnet in 107. 'Li penzieri libberi', as we saw in chapter one.
[85] 'I sonetti dell'insignificanza' in *Tre sondaggi sul Belli* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), 5-46, p. 25.
[86] Chaitin, Gilbert, *Rhetoric and culture in Lacan* (London: CUP, 1996), p. 5.
[87] Ibid., p. 4.
[88] 'I sonetti dell'insignificanza' cit., p. 25.

Vighi.[89] The noumenal aspect of metaphor is precisely what needs to be stressed, so that the depth of penetration reached by the phallus *linguistically* may be seen:

> The institution of the phallic signifier, like Lacanian metaphor, is a process involving several moments; that is why he can attribute apparently incompatible qualities to the phallus without genuine contradiction. It represents completeness, but only by virtue of symbolizing the process by which that completeness is irrevocably lost. In that sense, it is self-referential; that is, the phallus as signifier – the differential process of signification – represents the loss of the phallus as signified – the noumenon.[90]

Almansi is thus completely justified in considering the sonnet as an illustration of the 'proliferazione linguistica del fallo'. Like Lacan's phallus, Belli's 'pinco' is devoid of all phenomenal attributes: the phallus exists only at the level of the text as a purely linguistic phenomenon.

Where Almansi does fall down, however, is in his blanket dismissal of 'La madre de le Sante'. Despite extolling the virtues of Belli's complex enumeration of male genitalia, somewhat mysteriously the plethora of terms to describe the female anatomy is nothing more than a simple list of seemingly unconnected terms or 'lemmi disparati', incapable even of any didactic use: 'la lista rimane lista e non riesce ad inventare una propria ragione d'essere'. [91] In my opinion, 'La madre de le Sante' has to be read together with 'Er padre de li Santi'. The sonnets are deliberately created as a mirror image, and labelled as such for all to see. As is known, numerous other names for tabooed body-parts figure throughout the *Sonetti romaneschi*, but this binary brace allows and cries out for

[89] Vighi chooses to mar the splendid pages of the *Edizione Nazionale* of the sonnets by concluding his summary of the sonnet with the following: 'Inaccettabile, pertanto, l'entusiastico giudizio che ne dà l'Almansi.' *PR*, III, p. 316.
[90] Gilbert Chaitin, *Rhetoric and culture in Lacan* (London: CUP, 1996), p. 61.
[91] 'I sonetti dell'insignificanza' cit., p. 26. He adds that, in the case of 'La madre de le Sante' in particular, 'non avviene la trasformazione da informazione linguistica ad informazione estetica', which probably explains why the sonnets do not feature in his *Estetica dell'osceno*.

concerted direct comparison.[92] As will be shown, 'La madre de le Sante' confirms the phallus as the privileged signifier in the Lacanian sense, and should indeed be read in this vein. Put simply, the phallus is constructed and reinforced through the metaphorical definitions of female genitalia just as much as through the metaphorical definitions of male genitalia. In customary fashion, Belli uses the binary construction of the two sexes pitted against each other to show how woman is defined merely as man's negative inferior.

Rather than tautology, metaphor and symbolic overlap is perhaps a more useful way of considering the generating force of the two sonnets that follow in full. Because they are dedicated entirely to the substantive nomenclature of genitalia, they constitute a particularly fruitful, self-contained catalogue of the kinds of metaphor used in reference to the sexual organs of both genders. Moreover, the semantic field involved extends well beyond the sexual-anatomical, so that the various synonyms are useful not only in terms of the linguistic trope of metaphor in relation to copulation specifically, but also for what they reveal about the construction of gender more widely and the relative standings of the two sexes. The pair displays a whole array of metaphorical associations, yet within them certain themes can clearly be seen to develop and indeed tally with studies on the slang of sexuality as related to gender.

[92] As Nicola Di Nino notes 'Belli evita normalmente di chiosare i termini che designano i genitali femminili e maschili rinviando ai due sonetti repertori *La madre de le Sante* [...] e *Er padre de li Santi*'. *Giuseppe Gioachino Belli: Poeta-linguista* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2008), p. 119. 'Pinco', for example, in 1260. 'L'omo e la donna' is clearly footnoted with the intention of referring the reader to 561. 'Er padre de li Santi', even though the reference is unfinished. The manuscript gloss reads thus: 'Vedi il Sonetto..., al quale questo vocabolo può servire di appendice.' *PR*, V, p. 599.

Much has been made of the linguistic domain of slang in recent years, especially by feminists, in terms of gender and sexual division.[93] Even today, however, 'analysis of the semantic or metaphorical categories in genital slang is not common.'[94] Needless to say, no attention has so far been paid to it in relation to Belli's sonnets other than by Almansi and none has been dedicated directly to this sonnet pair.[95] As will become evident, the notion of phallogocentrism remains glaringly obvious in the broad categories and types of terms which emerge. Remarkably, the semantic fields raised have been proven to be accurate across a range of languages and cultures by empirical research, and as such are enlightening for what they reveal about gender construction both within and beyond the *Sonetti romaneschi*.[96]

560. 'La madre de le Sante'

Chi vvò cchiede la monna a Ccaterina,
pe ffasse intenne da la ggente dotta
je toccherebbe a ddí vvurva, vaccina,
e ddà ggiú co la cunna e cco la potta.

Ma nnoantri fijjacci de miggnotta
dìmo scella, patacca, passerina,
fessa, spacco, fissura, bbuscia, grotta,
fregna, fica, sciavatta, chitarrina,

sorca, vaschetta, fodero, frittella,
ciscia, sporta, perucca, varpelosa,

561. 'Er padre de li Santi'

Er cazzo se pò ddí rradica, uscello,
ciscio, nerbo, tortore, pennarolo,
pezzo-de-carne, manico, scetrolo,
asperge, cucuzzola e stennarello.

Cavicchio, canaletto e cchiavistello,
er gionco, er guercio, er mio, nerchia, pirolo,
attaccapanni, moccolo, bbruggnolo,
inguilla, torciorecchio, e mmanganello.

Zeppa e bbatocco, cavola e tturaccio,
e mmaritozzo, e ccannella, e ppipino,

[93] See, for example, Grossman and Tucker, 'Gender Differences and Sexism in the Knowledge and Use of Slang' in *Sex Roles*, 37:1/2 (1997:July), 101-110, and Klerk, Vivian de, 'Slang: A Male Domain?' in *Sex Roles*, 22:9/10 (1990:May), 589-606.

[94] Braun, Virginia and Kitzinger, Celia, '"Snatch," "Hole," or "Honey-pot"? Semantic Categories and the Problem of Nonspecificity in Female Genital Slang' in *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May, 2001), 146-158, p. 148.

[95] Di Nino is probably the first to pay close attention to certain aspects of slang in the sonnets in his recent study, especially in section three of chapter three, 'Il gergo, i linguaggi settoriali e le smammate'. Di Nino, *Giuseppe Gioachino Belli* cit., pp. 142-157. He briefly mentions the two sonnets in question but restricts his observation to making a dubious distinction between the categories of slang and euphemism: 'Va peraltro osservato che nei sonetti sopra citati, repertori di sinonimi di parti corporali poco decenti, la proliferazione di metafore e perifrasi obbedisce, più che alla lirica del gergo, a quello dei meccanismi eufemistici'. Ibid., p. 152.

[96] Vighi estimates that over half of the terms in each of the sonnets are no longer in current use. Most, however, remain at least recognizable, thus giving no reason to think of them purely as artificial constructs for the purpose of poetic composition. *PR*, III, pp. 314-316.

chiavica, gattarola, finestrella,
fischiarola, quer-fatto, quela-cosa,
urinale, fracoscio, ciumachella,
la-gabbia-der-pipino, e la-bbrodosa.

E ssi vvòi la scimosa,
chi la chiama vergogna, e cchi nnatura,
chi cciufèca, tajjola, e ssepportura.

e ssalame, e ssarciccia, e ssanguinaccio.

Poi scafa, canocchiale, arma, bbambino:
poi torzo, crescimmano, catenaccio,
mànnola, e mmi'-fratello-piccinino.

E tte lascio perzino
ch'er mi' dottore lo chiama cotale,
fallo, asta, verga, e mmembro naturale.

Cuer vecchio de spezziale
disce Priàpo; e la su' mojje pene,
seggno per dio che nun je torna bbene.

Some features are strikingly common to both sexes. Euphemism, perhaps understandable although somewhat incongruous alongside the more numerous dysphemistic terms, is nevertheless used in both sonnets (circumlocutions such as 'quer-fatto', 'quela-cosa' for female genitalia; 'cotale' for the male). The extremely prevalent food metaphor, too, is present in both sonnets, though more frequent for male anatomy ('fritella', 'fracoscio', 'la-bbrodosa' for the female; 'scetrolo', 'pezzo-de-carne', 'ssalame', 'ssarciccia', 'ssanguinaccio' for the male, with the latter three all based on the age-old sausage analogy). It is thus difficult to maintain, at least on the basis of this sonnet pair alone, Greer's conviction that women's sex organs in particular are metaphorically constructed 'for consumption'.[97] Similarly, animal imagery is employed for both sexes (female

[97] 'The poetical figure which indicates the whole by the part is sadly employed when indicating women as skirts, frills, a bit of fluff or a juicy little piece. These terms are all dead, fleshy and inhuman and as such easy to resent but the terms of endearment addressed to women are equally soulless and degrading. The basic imagery behind terms like honey, sugar, dish, sweety-pie, cherry, cookie, chicken and pigeon is the imagery of food. If a woman is food her sex organ is for consumption also, in the form of *honey-pot, hair-pie* and *cake-* or *jelly-roll*.' *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 297. Elsewhere, however, Greer admits to a universal application of the food metaphor as here, though still sees this as part of masculinist language: 'The interpretation of souls and bodies became the pummeling of one lump of meat by a harder lump of meat.', 'The politics of female sexuality' in *The madwoman's underclothes: essays and occasional writings 1968-85* (London: Pan Books, 1986), p. 36. Others have also highlighted the widespread 'violence inherent in representations that collapse sexuality and consumption and have titled this nexus "carnivorous arrogance" (Simone de Beauvoir), "gynocidal gluttony" (Mary Daly), "sexual cannibalism" (Kate Millet), "psychic cannibalism" (Andrea Dworkin), "metaphysical cannibalism" (Ti-Grace Atkinson) […]', Adams, Carol J., *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 20th Anniversary Edn. (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 89.

'sorca' and male 'inguila', the latter again presumably on the basis of shape). A specific form of animal imagery, the bird metaphor, already seen to be more frequent in reference to woman, is applied seemingly indiscriminately to the genitalia of both sexes ('passerina' and 'ciscia' are presented as feminine equivalents of the male 'uscello' and 'ciscio', probably with the intention of suggesting natural pairing).

Above these commonplaces, however, a clear picture of hierarchical, sexual difference emerges. The figures of synecdoche and metonymy are employed more frequently in relation to the female anatomy. Indeed, there are terms in which 'elision between part and whole – women and women's genitalia are not separable, they are, to all extents and purposes, the same thing.'[98] The opening term in 'La madre de le sante', perhaps the most anodyne of all, the headword the rest of the catalogue will attempt to define, is tellingly 'monna' ('madonna', 'signora'). In the male case an element of personification is introduced (as in 'er guercio', 'er mio', 'mmi'-fratello-piccinino'), yet the trope actually regales positive subjectivity on the male organ, whereas in the case of woman emphasis is always placed on her objectification through her sexual body parts.[99] The female organs, and hence woman herself, are portrayed as passive; the male organs, and hence man himself, are portrayed as active, dominant and aggressive. The resulting female figure is at one with De Beauvoir's description of woman as the submissive party in the mating process: 'She always feels passive: she is caressed, penetrated; she undergoes coition whereas the man exerts himself actively.' Fittingly, 'La madre de le sante' twice makes use of a common metaphor applied to women. As De Beauvoir

[98] Braun, Virginia and Kitzinger, Celia, '"Snatch," "Hole," or "Honey-pot"? cit., p. 152.
[99] Cf. Ugo Foscolo's memborable reference to his 'fratellino' in a letter to his sometime lover, Antonietta Fagnani Arese.

continues, woman 'feels that she is an instrument: liberty rests wholly with the other'.[100] Similarly, for Greer passive woman is 'to be played upon by a master, to be his favourite instrument upon which he might father masterpieces'.[101] The same image of woman is implied when her genitals are described as 'chitarrina', the organ depending on the outside agency of the other, its utility based solely on the accomplishment of his end-use. Equally 'fischiarola', glossed by Vigolo as 'fischietto per le allodole', is the whistle to attract skylarks and thus male members, going back to the penis-as-bird metaphor and confirming beyond doubt the interpretation of 'fischiava' in 'L'inzoggno d'una regazza'.[102]

The conceptual basis of almost all the metaphors presented appears to be the perception of female genitalia as negative nothingness, 'a "nothing" organ', as opposed to the positive, tangible materiality of the male organ.[103] Whilst the penis is imagined as some kind of protrusion ('cavicchio', 'attaccapanni', 'pirolo', 'ccannella' etc.), the female sex organs are conceived of in terms of hollow space ('bbuscia', 'grotta', just like the 'fosso' in 'L'inzoggno d'una regazza'), fully embodying the Lacanian lack, and definable only in opposition to male anatomy. The basic implication is that the male organ is to fill that space (accordingly the penis is projected as 'zeppa', 'tturaccio'), duly completing woman, momentarily curing her of her congenital-existential defect. She is, therefore, nothing more than a receptacle ('vaschetta', 'sporta'), both for man's member

[100] *The Second Sex* cit., p. 406.
[101] 'The politics of female sexuality' in *The madwoman's underclothes* cit., p. 37.
[102] Quoted in *PR*, III, p. 314.
[103] Braun, Virginia and Kitzinger, Celia, '"Snatch," "Hole," or "Honey-pot"? cit., p. 155. Cf. Tuta's decision to yield to Felice's insistence in 589. 'Le confidenze de le regazze' (4), lifting her dress 'pe ffà vvedé cche nun ciavevo ggnente.' *PR*, III, p. 385.

and his seed, as in the 'gabbia dell'uscello' motif.[104] Her genital space, however, is far from semantically empty. The caging metaphor is continued with 'scella' and 'la-gabbia-der-pipino', and its inherent element of danger made explicit in 'tajjola', only to be eclipsed in the bitter, pessimistic conclusion to the list in 'ssepportura'. The usual heady mixture of mystery and misogyny is thus fully on display.[105] Moreover, the receptacle often bears the mark of Kristeva's notion of abjection, the repugnance roused at the sight of bodily fluids, decay and death.[106] Already tacit in the image of the female wound, so that any images of roses and sweetness are banished completely, woman is described as 'chiavica' and 'urinale' (which might also explain the reference to the scatological implied by 'sorca' as the particular 'topo di fogna').[107] Similarly, 'patacca' combines two themes of abjection in its reference to staining as well as to worthlessness. Furthermore, Greer's famous 'epithets of hate', namely 'gash, slit, crack', find strikingly similar predecessors in 'fessa', 'spacco', 'fissura'.[108] Woman is thus portrayed as a locus of

[104] 'Feminists have asserted that paradigmatic women are "holes, receptacles, containers – things [men] can or want to fuck" (Penelope, 1990, *Speaking Freely*)', cited in Braun, Virginia and Kitzinger, Celia, '"Snatch," "Hole," or "Honey-pot"? cit., p. 151. Greer also locates the receptacle motif firmly among the rhetorical devices of misogyny: 'The man regards her as a receptacle […], a kind of human spittoon […]' *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 284. Almansi uses the final line of 'La sposa', quoted above, to show that woman even 'accetta il suo ruolo di puro *Buscio*: Io sciò er buscio? e ttu er cazzo che l'attura', *L'estetica dell'osceno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), p. 9.

[105] The familiar metaphorical territory is perhaps best surveyed by De Beauvoir, whose reference to childhood seems to hint at a psychoanalytic reading of male sexuality: 'Doubtless many young men adventure not without anxiety into the secret dark of woman, once more feeling childhood's terror at the threshold of a cave or tomb, its fright at jaws, scythes, traps: they fancy that the swollen penis may be caught in the mucous sheath.' *The Second Sex* cit., p. 405.

[106] On abjection, see Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[107] Similarly Greer, who states that women 'are conceived somewhere between pissing and shitting', defined according to 'excretory functions [which] are regarded as intrinsically disgusting', *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 284. On the treatment of female genitalia in the *Sonetti* as a whole, Almansi would go so far as to say that 'il sesso femminile non esce mai dall'ambito della *monnezza* e della *palus*'. 'L'oscenità del Belli' in *L'Estetica dell'osceno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 5-35, p. 18.

[108] 'Lady love your cunt' in *The madwoman's underclothes* cit., p. 77. This is echoed in her other writings, according to which Belli's Romanesco should be firmly included in what she calls 'hardboiled patois': 'in some hardboiled patois the woman herself is referred to as a *gash*, a *slot*.' *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 297.

injury (as well as imperfection), her organs a type of wound, yet another form of abjection; at once the Lacanian scar of course, but equally the damage wrought by man's weapon and the mark of defeat in the battle of the sexes. The violence implicit in the stick imagery used to describe the penis ('tortore' [bastone], 'stennarello' [mattarello], 'asta', 'verga') becomes explicit when the referent is transformed into weaponry, as already seen in 'A Teta'. Man's organ is thus his 'mmanganello' and 'arma'. Correspondingly, woman's vagina is the 'fodero', the scabbard in which to sheathe her formidable opponent's destructive sword.

This is the phallogocentric language of patriarchy at its most destructive. Woman's intimate body parts are nothing but a male accessory, 'a mere hole', as Greer has it, simply 'troops for the use of'.[109] If anything, the military imagery is misleading in suggesting the pretence of battle, since woman exists only in a gradation of passivity, from victim of violence to mere nothing object. The 'sexual battle' and 'war game' Greer identifies between the sexes is waged purely by man in this sonnet brace.[110] Woman has no means of fighting back. With anatomy the focal point for differentiation, man's weapon is used to rub her out, to erase any potential subjectivity on her part. What remains is a battle for hearts and minds, pure propaganda to keep her passive. Here, Cixous's 'eternal battlefield' is hardly a level playing field. In short, a negative no-thing can be no match for the all-powerful phallic being. Whilst the 'fallo' of 'Er Padre de li Santi' is clearly not yet bestowed with all the theoretical trappings of the Lacanian phallus, it is nevertheless quite unmistakably an implement of power. As the protagonist of 269. 'L'ordegno spregato' makes plain, man's most obvious marker of gender is his

[109] 'The politics of female sexuality' in *The madwoman's underclothes* cit., p. 37.
[110] Ibid., pp. 36-7.

greatest tool, 'er più mejjo attrezzo', in the battle he wages against woman.[111] His 'rradica' is at once the source of his power over her and his crowning symbol of victory ('cucuzzola'), his brazen flag hoist aloft in proud defiance. Occupying a central position in a world wide web of language, it serves to maintain and propagate (hence its description as 'bbambino') male control and female subordination. This sonnet pair, then, is not merely a catalogue of the obscene, as too many have been wont to read it. Nor is it the arena for biological warfare between the dismembered genitals. It is the battleground for superiority in the conflict of gender construction. Or rather, the imperialistic training camp in the time-worn art of patriarchy.

3.5 The gender impasse: *chi ddisce donna disce danno*.

The trouble with the two sonnets studied in the previous section is that, whilst clearly binary and liberal in the sense that they describe female and male genitalia in taboo terms side by side, what they fail to do is to present slang as used by females and males. It is highly likely, if not certain, that both sonnets are composed entirely of nomenclature used predominantly or exclusively by male speakers. This much is all but confirmed by internal evidence. Belli is indisputably keen to differentiate his content in terms of register, essentially separating all interim discourse from the frame provided by the first quatrain of 'La madre de le Sante' and the coda of 'Er padre de li Santi'. A lofty register, the domain of 'la ggente dotta', 'er mi' dottore' and 'cuer vecchio de spezziale', is not what interests Belli. Indeed, even the few examples of such a register are produced in

[111] This too is a familiar trope of phallocentric patriarchy, as again Greer points out: 'the names for the penis are all *tool* names'. *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 297.

humorous, disparaging ways.[112] The lowly register of the popolani, 'nnoantri fijjacci de miggnotta', is what matters. What Belli does not do, however, is to differentiate content in terms of gender. 'Nnoantri fijjacci de miggnotta', just as 'la ggente dotta', 'er mi' dottore' and 'cuer vecchio de spezziale' for that matter, suggests an entirely male cohort.

The relative structures of the two poems also suggest a male bias. The fact that Belli goes beyond the normal parameters of the fourteen lines by adding codas to both sonnets can only be interpreted as a desire to do justice to the proliferation of genital slang terms in his Ottocento Rome, an eagerness to demonstrate the richness of the dialect, following the example of Porta. That one coda should be longer than the other, however, is significant when read beside the conclusions of our semantic analysis. Several empirical studies have shown that both sexes 'produce [...] more slang terms, and more varied slang terms, for men's genitalia (compared with women's)'.[113] Accordingly, 'Er padre de li Santi' exhibits some 53 individual items as opposed to the 41 of 'La madre de le Sante'. Crucially, it has also been consistently shown that men 'produce [...] more slang terms for both men's and women's genitalia than [...] women'.[114] Given the substantially greater number of terms for the male organ, and the semantic nature of the female epithets, it is my conviction that both sonnets reproduce purely the language of men. It is sage, of course, to caution against the indiscriminate application of statistical

[112] Affected attempts by popolani to use the *lingua* instead of dialect, a favourite theme in Belli which he labels as 'parlà ciovile', include the rhotacism in 'vvurva' and the desonorization in 'vaccina'. Belli explains in the introduction that 'la *l* fra le vocali e le consonanti mute si muta in *r*', and similarly, 'la *g* fra due vocali non si addolcisce mai nel modo che sogliono i buoni favellatori italiani, come in *agio*, *pregio*, *bigio*, ecc., ma si aspreggia invece e si duplica. Doppia poi, o preceduta da consonante avanti alla *e* ed alla *i*, si pronuncia turgida come la *c* ne' medesimi casi.' *PR*, I, p. 27. 'Vaccina' is particularly comic since it works on more than one level, interfering with the standard term, diminutive of 'vacca', and thus fitting in with the bestial portrayal of woman as well as the theme of abjection when read in its secondary meaning of 'sterco'.
[113] Braun, Virginia and Kitzinger, Celia, '"Snatch," "Hole," or "Honey-pot"? cit., p. 148.
[114] Ibid., p. 148.

data to literary studies. Yet when there is obvious overlap from a sociolinguistic point of view, it becomes clear in the case of Belli at least that the language of the sonnets reflects a wider social truth as part of a greater picture of gender construction.[115]

The gender of the individual lexical items themselves also contains interesting information. According to Luce Irigaray, 'grammatical gender is neither motiveless nor arbitrary.'[116] The fact that 'La madre de le Sante' displays a significantly higher percentage of grammatically gender-specific terms (36 feminine; only 5 masculine) than 'Er padre de li Santi' (40 masculine; 13 feminine) again suggests this is the language of men and the dominant patriarchal linguistic order. Moreover, the semantic categorization of the 5 masculine terms used in reference to female genitalia (abjection, receptacle, euphemistic circumlocution, abjection, edibility, respectively) and by contrast the total absence of abjection, for example, from all terms depicting the male referent, would appear to be conclusive evidence that the sonnets catalogue male terms only, and confirms Irigaray's assessment of the link between language and the enforcement of sexual difference:

> Just as an actual woman is often confined to the sexual domain in the strict sense of the term, so the feminine grammatical gender itself is made to disappear as subjective expression, and vocabulary associated with women often consists of slightly denigrating, if not insulting, terms which define her as an object in relation to the male subject.[117]

[115] Belli fully intends to do this, of course. Throughout the introduction, he insists his project is anchored in reality: 'Esporre le frasi del romano quali dalla bocca del romano escono tuttora, senza ornamento, senza alterazione veruna, [...] ecco il mio scopo'; 'per dare una immagine fedele di cosa già esistente'; 'io ritrassi la verità'. *PR*, I, pp. 15-37. What he cannot have realized, however, is that the gender bias in the language of the popolani conforms to patterns shown to be consistent across languages, cultures and time periods.

[116] *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a culture of difference*, trans. by Alison Martin (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), p. 12.

[117] Ibid., pp. 12-13. Supporting the thesis that 'La madre de le Sante' and 'Er padre de li Santi' represent merely the speech of men, Irigaray continues: 'How could discourse not be sexed when language is? It is sexed in some of its most fundamental rules, in the division of words into gender in a way not unrelated to sexual connotations or qualities, just as the lexicon is sexed, too. Differences between men's and women's discourses are thus the effects of language and society, society and language.' Ibid., p. 25. In terms of abjection as applicable more to the realm of the female, see Keith Allan's 'revolting effluviae' theory in

In a sense, it is self-evident that the content of 'La madre de le Sante' especially is man-made. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the **'**stereotype of males as slang-users, females as slang-eschewers is supported in all serious linguistic writings on the topic.'[118] But this sexual difference in the propensity to use this particular form of slang is merely part of the phallic politics of war being waged in the battle of the sexes, one mere symptom of which is that 'women have had the power of *naming* stolen from [them].'[119] 'La madre de le Sante' is obviously male-produced since the only nomenclature available, playful or otherwise, as many feminists have pointed out, is conceived and bandied about by men:

> It is absurd that women can only name their sex by the terms of phoney objectivity, the scientific terms which seek to push away the reality of the thing by talking about it in foreign tongues, clitoris, labia majora and minora, the glands of Bartholin for God's sake! The only other terms they may employ have been deformed by centuries of sadistic male use. […] Women have no names of their own for what is most surely their own.[120]

The sonnet pair of 'La madre de le Sante' and 'Er padre de li Santi' is thus a demonstration of the unbridgeable gender gap and the absolute phallocentrism of the linguistic order. It performs and reinforces the Lacanian reading of language and the predication of culture upon the necessarily meaningless phallic signifier. The thematics of war are an essential part of the signifying process in its most basic sense:

'Some English terms of insult invoking sex organs' in *Meanings and Prototypes: Studies in linguistic categorization*, ed. by S.L. Tsohatzidis (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 159-194. Noting that 'more taboos surround the body and effluviae of women', he explains that 'if we identify the physiological milestones in a woman's life as menarche, pregnancy, and menopause, they are stained with blood; and there can be little doubt that the original cause for the very different ways in which men and women are perceived is female physiology, which renders the female at a comparative disadvantage to the male when she is menstruating or child-bearing, during lactation, and even at later stages of child-rearing.' This, he concludes, allowed 'men [...] to control the domain that supposedly distinguishes humans from animals.' Ibid., pp. 169-170.

[118] Klerk, Vivian de, 'Slang: A Male Domain?' in *Sex Roles*, 22:9/10 (1990: May), 589-606, p. 589.

[119] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, USA: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 8.

[120] 'The politics of female sexuality' in *The madwoman's underclothes* cit., p. 38.

> As every inquisition, holy war and colonization has demonstrated, the best way to persuade oneself of that substance [the validity of the metaphor] is to force others to acknowledge it. Conversely, the most potent weapon of colonization is the exposure of the senselessness of the subjugated nation's cultural symbols. More powerful than the will to power, which in fact derives from it, this thirst for being is at the root of the narcissistic identification which divides humanity into a perpetual conflict among segregated groups.[121]

To sustain the phallic economy, the penis (and man) has to be glorified as the positive everything, elevated almost to personified subjectivity; the vagina (and woman) has to be denigrated to negative nothingness, reduced to worthless objectivity. Eternal conflict on the strength of empty propaganda is the only means of maintaining the pretence of hierarchy. Hence the remarkable feat by the robust female of 'L'omo e la donna' in even attempting to do the opposite for womankind by forcing man to admit to his hollow 'pinco'. Ultimately, in the case of 'La madre de le Sante', it is impossible to conjecture any concrete ownership over the linguistic terms it categorizes, and there would seem to be little difference in any case since women, like men, have apparent recourse to an essentially phallic language. All of the above would explain the skewed, generally misogynistic portrayal of women sexually, but it equally raises complex and problematic questions about Belli's female characters as a whole.

Almansi's quotation at the beginning of the last section in which he makes the Saussurean distinction between signifier and signified, also makes a further crucial, if only implicit, distinction: the dividing line between 'il personaggio belliano' and the poet himself. Despite Barthes' assertion that 'it is language which speaks, not the author', and Belli's numerous protestations in the introduction of having merely depicted the truth, the responsibility of recording and cataloguing the loaded terms of 'La madre de le Sante'

[121] Gilbert Chaitin, *Rhetoric and culture in Lacan* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 5.

and 'Er padre de li Santi' rests squarely with Giuseppe Gioachino Belli.[122] At best he tacitly, perhaps innocently, perhaps unconsciously even, propagates the phallic strategy. At worst, he actively endorses it. Indeed, Almansi's careful study of the obscene, in a climate already enlightened by poststructuralism no less, leads him to confirm 'la predilezione del Belli per gli aspetti ributtanti della femminilità'.[123] A further, potentially even more damaging, distinction should be drawn between the enumerative 'La madre de le Sante' and the more frequent depictions of female voices involving varying degrees of monologue or dialogue interspersed by narrative framing. In 1534. 'La donna filisce', for example, a plausible female position emerges in the wider battle of the sexes. What is questionable, however, is not whether this democratic *prise de position* is valid, but rather whether the speaking 'io' is actually feminine:

1534. 'La donna filisce'

Ggià, pperché nun m'amanca la minestra
me credeno una mojje affurtunata.
E io, vedi, sò ttanta disperata,
che mm'annería a bbuttà da la finestra.

Ne li guai d'antri ggnisuna è mmaestra.
Pe ccapí bbene er zon d'una sonata
bbisoggna de sentí, ssora Nunziata,
tutti li sciufoletti de l'orchestra.

S'ha da stà a li crapicci e a li stravèri
d'un maritaccio, pe ssapé, ccommare,
si una donna pò vvive volentieri.

V'abbasti questo cqua, cche da st'aprile,
nun c'è ccaso che ttienghi, in quel'affare
lui vò entrà da la parte der cortile.

[122] 'The Death of the Author' in *Image-Music-Text*. ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 142-148, p. 143. Belli has indeed suffered more than most, and continues to do so in certain quarters of Italian criticism, from the critical approach Barthes condemns which is 'tyrannically centred on the author', p. 143.
[123] 'L'oscenità del Belli' in *L'estetica dell'osceno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 5-35, p. 18.

Whilst there is an air of plausibility to the overall discourse, as a quasi-communal, class struggle against the 'maritaccio', designed to undermine the patriarchal hold, something unmistakably and naggingly resists. Comedy is undoubtedly a complicating extra in this instance. Perhaps because the euphemism of the final line seems to hint at masculinist language, or to signify an act imbued with unshakable associations of male dominance in the collective conscience, an authenticity of voice is somehow punctured. Moreover, the appending of titular labels to individual poems smacks of authorial intervention. After all, whose expression of happiness or ironic pseudo-happiness is the title 'La donna filisce' purporting to represent? This is one of a number of sonnets featuring 'la comare', implicitly pigeonholing the figure of the woman as a gossip. The ultimate question is whether Belli's characters, regardless of apparent gender, are always playing to a patriarchal gallery, either subliminally or consciously. Is his poetic persona, even if it shifts and mutates from one vignette to the next, de facto masculine in nature? There remains, in other words, the potentially insuperable obstacle of Belli as the patriarchal author in a patriarchal culture.

But before Belli is hauled before the court of literature on the very modern charge of authorial misogyny, there are numerous instances where a particularly female koiné, seemingly devoid of phallic imprint, is employed to render convincing, mimetic female voices. The depiction of the mother figure in the *Sonetti* is an extensive case in point. Indeed the portrayal of strong mothers often sees a momentary ceasefire in the battle between the sexes, offering instead a glimpse of a certain conjugal stability, despite economic poverty in the overwhelming majority of the cases. Few would doubt the authenticity of the female voice in 1679. 'La famijja poverella', for example, where the

poor yet devoted mother engages in a sort of desperate rallying cry to her starving Peppe e Lalla:

> Nò, vvisscere mie care, nun piaggnete:
> nun me fate morí ccusí accorata.
> Lui quarche ccosa l'averà abbuscata,
> e ppijjeremo er pane, e mmaggnerete.[124]

Employing a number of rhetorical strategies, she defiantly attempts to remain positive and to boost the morale of her children whom she risks alienating due to their hunger (they physically separate themselves from her and she is forced to tell her son 'nun vòi stà a lo scuro' and her daughter 'nnun méttete llí ar muro'). The maternal bond, however, is stressed linguistically in the utterly tender, if antiquated, 'vvisscere mie care', encapsulating the vital and corporeal physicality of the relationship between mother and offspring. Struggling to gain control over their emotional response through a series of negatives ('Nò', 'nun', 'nun'), she instead attempts to lift the mood and opts to instil a sense of hope focussed on the father's ability to provide. The final line of the quatrain is extremely effective: not only does the first verb display a conjugal unity of purpose, the rhythm also pauses naturally, and quasi-religiously, on the sanctity of the bread, before the shift in verb person post-caesura bursts with self-sacrifice by the mother, triumphantly concluding on the promise that the children will enjoy the active process of eating.

[124] Pascoli would include the poem in his scholastic anthology *Fior da fiore* as 'l'unica composizione di questa raccolta, che sia in vernacolo'. Despite its dialectal singularity, the sonnet is in some ways the most representative of his entire project: 'Ma qual poesia può vantar più diritti di questa a esser letta dai giovinetti!' Pascoli clearly sees this as one of Belli's best compositions and selects it for its pre-eminent portrayal of motherhood: 'Grande poeta fu il Belli, nè mai così grande come in questo sonetto, nel quale egli ha interpretato il cuor delle madri, mondo infinito.' *Fior da Fiore*, ed. by Caterina Marinucci (Bologna: Pàtron, 2009), p. 75.

As Di Nino has pointed out, such is Belli's concern to render linguistic realism that he even mimics the affectionate nurturing language between mothers and young children, which he refers to as 'le smammate':

> Le *smammate* sono, come spiega il poeta stesso, "smancerie, vezzi di madre" ossia dei vezzeggiativi stucchevoli e sdolcinati che la mamma usa nei confronti dell'infante.[125]

These particular linguistic traits, perhaps better defined as nursery forms, are typically and most frequently based on the figure of onomatopoeia. In 1661. 'Er pupo', for instance, the first of two contiguous poems bearing the same title and featuring the same mother and son, the proud parent attempts to show off her infant's fledgling speech to relatives in what is an instantly recognizable scene:

> 1661. 'Er Pupo'
>
> Che bber ttruttrú! oh ddio mio che cciammellona!
> Nò, pprima fate servo a nnonno e zzio.
> Fàteje servo, via, sciumàco mio,
> e ppoi sc'è la bbebbella e la bbobbòna.
>
> Bbravo Pietruccio! E ccome fa er giudío?
> Fa aéo? bbravo Pietruccio! E la misciona?
> Fa ggnào? bbravo Pietruccio! E cquanno sona?
> Fa ddindí? bbraavo! E mmó, ddove sta Iddío?
>
> Sta llassú? bbraavo! Ebbè? e la pecorella?
> Fate la pecorella a zzio e nnonno,
> eppoi sc'è la bbobbòna e la bbebbella.
>
> Ôh, zzitto, zzitto, via: nòo, nnu la vonno.
> Eccolo er cavalluccio e la sciammella...
> Eh, sse stranissce un po', mma è ttutto sonno.

Sound imitative-forms abound: 'ttruttrú' for 'horse', from 'trotto' or 'trottare', as in English 'trot-trot'; 'aèo', for the cry of Jewish 'stracciaiuoli' or rag-and-bone men; 'gnào' for the call of the cat, as in English 'miaow'; 'dindí' for the sound of the doorbell, as in English 'dingdong'. The vocative 'vezzeggiativo' 'sciumàco mio', along with diminutive

[125] Di Nino, Nicola, *Giuseppe Gioachino Belli* cit., p. 155.

uccio suffix in Pietruccio, and the mother's anaphoric praise in the second quatrain culminating in the emphatic lengthening of the vowel in 'braavo' on line 8, all capture the affectionate and doting language of the mother figure. As Di Nino states, the curious expression 'la bbebbella e la bbobbòna', repeated but inverted in the sestet, relies quite simply on the repetition of the /b/ consonant typical of babbling babies and 'come una nenia serve a mettere a proprio agio il bambino intimorito dalla presenza del nonno e dello zio'.[126] There is no masculinist agenda detectable in any of this. On the contrary, Belli strives to capture intimate, almost primitive, linguistic interaction between mother and her 'crature', as she often refers to them endearingly in the *Sonetti*, free of sexed connotations (before the onset of castration) and the vital scourge of power politics.

In addition to evidence of an exclusively feminine koiné, Barbara Garvin has shown that Belli conceives of the mother as an inventive and creative linguistic entity, yet a further reason to absolve the poet of conspiracy to promote the cause of patriarchy. She bases her thesis on the exclusively feminine setting of sonnet 569. 'Er rosario in famijja', in which a mother attempts to recite the rosary and engage in handiwork simultaneously, whilst encouraging and admonishing her daughter Nena as she reluctantly does the same:

> 569. 'Er rosario in famijja'
>
> *Avemmaria*... lavora... *grazia prena*...
> Nena, vòi lavorà?... *ddominu steco*...
> uf!... *benedetta tu mujjeri*... Nena!...
> *e bbenedetto er frú*... vvà cche tte sceco?...

[126] Ibid., p. 156. Lino Cascioli gives a useful explanation of these terms in the Roman proverb 'le bebbelle e le bobbone fanno er pupo lazzarone': 'Le cose belle ("le bebbelle") e le cose buone ("le bobbone") vengono qui pronunciate come si usa da sempre nel rivolgersi ai bambini piccoli, cioè scandendo le sillabe. Si dice a Roma ai più piccini per farli star buoni: ti do la bebbella (il giocattolo); oppure ti do la bobbona (la ciambella). Il detto viene anche pronunciato in senso ironico nei confronti di chi è di umore capriccioso e mutevole. Il proverbio comunque ammonisce a non viziare troppo i bambini e avverte che il mondo è minacciato dalla stupidità dell'indulgenza, mentre può essere rinnovato da una generazione più responsabilmente educata.' Cascioli, Lino, *Proverbi e detti romaneschi* (Rome: Newton Compton, 1987), p. 186.

fruttu sventr'e ttu Jeso. *San*... che ppena!...
ta Maria madre Ddei... me sce fai l'eco?...
Ora pre nobbi... ma tt'aspetto a ccena...
peccatori... Oh Ssignore! e sto sciufeco
de sciappotto laggiú ccome sce venne?
Andiamo: indove stavo?... Ah, ll'ho ttrovato:
Nunche tinora morti nostri ammenne.
Grolia padre... E mmó? ddiavola! bbraghiera!
Ho ccapito: er rosario è tterminato:
finiremo de dillo un'antra sera.

At one level, the meeting of the distorted, liturgical Latin and the aggressive, domestic Romanesco in the mother's speech is extremely comic. But the juxtaposition raises issues of a more complex nature. In addition to the relegation of the religious and spiritual in a sort of class division, eclipsed in importance by life-affirming labour, as expressed in the central 'lavora' of the first line, the sonnet also makes an important contribution to the construction of gender. Rather than interpreting the distorted Latin as general evidence of the masculine and thus phallocentric economy, however, and woman's exclusion from it (like Sheridan's Mrs Malaprop, female voices in the *Sonetti* tend to misrepresent ecclesiastical Latin to comic effect more frequently than male characters), Garvin sees revolution in the mother's destruction of the Latin and renewal in what she terms her phatic language, symbolic of the biological and educational role associated with motherhood:

> Belli dà alla mamma la funzione creatrice del linguaggio, ed essa crea il linguaggio distruggendo quello vecchio del cerimoniale. Il ruolo della mamma è quello di essere connesso con la nascita, con il partorire, e anche con i primordi della lingua che impara il bambino.[127]

[127] Garvin, Barbara, 'Lo straniamento della funzione fàtica del linguaggio' in *Letture belliane*, III (Rome: Bulzoni, 1982), 55-80, (76).

Convincingly, she reads the (feminine) Romanesco as energetic and vital, as opposed to the stagnant and incapacitated (male) Latin. In effect, she does interpret the Latin as an imprint of phallogocentrism, but intriguingly, sees it as a mere vestige of its former power, hailing woman as victorious in a linguistic battle of the sexes, between the old, male order and the new, constant female order:

> Due funzioni si incrociano: quella della madre creatrice, simboleggiata dalla recitazione dell'*Ave Maria,* [...] e quella della divinità maschile [...] che è solo nominalmente il creatore. La creazione dell'uomo è caratterizzata dalla sua finitezza, ed è rappresentata dal latino del cerimoniale, lingua liturgicamente fissata per sempre. Il lavoro creativo della donna, della madre, invece, non finisce mai: il lavoro di creazione linguistica, come anche quello della cucitura, è continuo. [...] Il rosario termina, ma non la produzione o creazione di linguaggio. La fine del rosario è anche simbolica della morte divina (*consummatum est*). Dopo la morte del dio rimangono due donne, la madre e Maddalena (*Nena*, diminutivo appunto di Maddalena).[128]

The battle is indeed concluded emphatically in the sonnet by the irony of the distorted 'Grolia padre' in line 12, with woman literally shaking the patriarchal pedestal on which language appears to have been placed to date. Even if Lacan's theory is valid, it seems equally true that 'il linguaggio che afferma rapporti familiari è connesso con il ventre materno.'[129]

The thorough portrayal of the mother figure would not be complete at a more thematic level without Belli's probing a number of familiar topoi, including the following: the so-called natural instinct to desire children (as in 1633. 'Oggnuno ha li sui', where an infertile woman 'nun ride mai, sospira, e sse lamenta de nun poté ffà ffijji') and the realistic warning against idealized concepts of childbearing (as in 860. 'Li fiji', where a fertile woman explains that 'allattalli, smerdalli: a 'ggni malanno / sentisse

[128] Ibid., p. 78.
[129] Garvin, Barbara, 'Lo straniamento della funzione fàtica del linguaggio' in *Letture belliane*, III (Rome: Bulzoni, 1982), 55-80, (79).

cascà in terra stramortita:'); the equation of womanhood with motherhood (in 1467. 'La morte de Tuta', following the death of her daughter, the distraught mother rejects her female identity and role, and implicit associated claims of subjectivity: 'Io pe mmé nun zò ppiú ddonna.'); conflictual help and advice for new mothers by their own mothers (as already seen in 'L'allèvo', in addition to shared experience, an amount of mother-daughter rivalry over the technique of breastfeeding hangs over the sonnet). Belli thus explores, as far as is possible in his chosen form, the hallowed mother-daughter relationship supposedly the preserve of authors belonging to one or the other category according to the militant feminist stance, itself open to the charge of biologism. Although feminists would face a painful coming to terms with what they saw as the most troubled figure after patriarchal man himself, to be rejected outright, following De Beauvoir, as his very accomplice in perpetuating his phallic economy, nonetheless the mother remains the 'dominant structuring principle of female identity'.[130] It seems to me, moreover, that Belli does explore the problematic of maternal subjectivity as part of the 'cult of motherhood in the nineteenth century', not so much through strong, yet facile, mother-daughter character depictions, but from the essential position of language.[131]

On the validity of authorship on the basis of sex, little can be done to overcome the gender impasse, other than to show a clear appropriation of feminine language. Belli perhaps escapes some of the charges filed against his gender compatriots by the apparent absence of a dominating narrative voice, in favour of a preponderance of female character voices. Robust voices, it should be recalled, by no means silent voices, often taking on

[130] Giorgio, Adalgisa, (ed.), *Writing Mothers and Daughters*: *Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2002), p. 7.
[131] Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, (eds.), *The Lost Tradition of Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1980), p. 56.

the cause of their sex. Nevertheless, depending on one's viewpoint, there remains the problem over the ultimate authenticity of voice. The gender impasse thus risks rapid descent into a critical impasse. But whilst the full extent of author theory is beyond the scope of this chapter, and the ensuing 'theory wars' an unnecessary diversion, the only exit from the vicious circle is to state the illegitimacy of identifying the mouthpiece of such sonnets as 'La madre de le Sante'. Like the sentence in Balzac's *Sarrasine* for Barthes, nobody can be said to utter it. Or put slightly differently, though it may be reasonable to ask whose voice it is anyway, it is unreasonable to assume that Belli is the perpetrator of its implications. In short, it is better and more productive to read him as dead author, rather than lambaste him ideologically as patriarchal author.

3.6 Bridging the gap: the prostitute as 'virilis femina'.

In the *De mulieribus claris*, Leaena is distinguished from the long list of famous women (queens, goddesses, empresses etc.) primarily on account of her occupation as a prostitute, a fact Boccaccio takes great pains to justify in choosing to include her in his roll call. A further mode of distinction, however, is the epithet 'virilis femina', suggesting she is remarkable for encroaching on or somehow appropriating the masculine.[132] Historically, Boccaccio's description is appropriate. Leaena was a member of the class of Greek women known as hetaerae, or elevated courtesans, who blurred the usual boundaries of gender division by incurring certain male duties such as the payment of taxes. Crucially, however, they would also enjoy other manly privileges such as

[132] Boccaccio recounts the legend of Leaena displaying remarkable physical and mental capacity in resisting torture by cutting off her own tongue (after being accused of murder merely by association) with strength of both kinds clearly being catalogued as a male virtue. Virginia Brown indeed translates 'virilis femina' as 'manly woman', Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. by Virginia Brown (London: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 206.

education and the dubious honour of participation in otherwise all-male symposia. In so doing they would command a level of respect from men much greater than that afforded to ordinary women in what has been described as one of the most phallocractic societies of all.[133] De Beauvoir's feminist analysis of the hetaera essentially sees her greater status in relation to the opposite sex as a result of the eschewing of both marriage ('directly correlated with prostitution' in any case) and motherhood:[134]

> Free to make disposal of themselves and of their fortunes, intelligent, cultivated, artistic, they were treated as persons by the men who found entertainment in their company. By virtue of the fact that they escaped from the family and lived on the fringes of society, they also escaped from man; they could therefore seem to him to be fellow beings, almost equals.[135]

The city of Rome has long been seen as a capital of prostitution. In the 1580s, the very Catholic priest Gregory Martin noted the 'famous or rather infamous and notorious sinful wemen of the citie' whose 'art' Montaigne was keen to record, recalling how they would 'exhibit themselves behind their lattices with such refinement of trickery […] to make themselves appear so much handsomer than they really were'. [136] Moreover, such was the population of prostitutes in the Eternal City that papal legislation was introduced in a bid to control them:

> By Caravaggio's time the prostitutes were so numerous that they had been corralled by papal edict into their own enclosure by the Tiber, the Ortaccio di Ripetta – a name which joked that the place was a reverse Eden.[137]

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[133] 'The keys to this alleged achievement were said to be the education and grooming of the woman, and her ability to translate her charms into a high enough economic status so that she could feel autonomous. [...] Athenaeus wrote about "hetaerai who had a sense of self-respect, who took care to get an education and set time aside for learning" [...]' Keuls, Eva C., *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 194.
[134] *The Second Sex* cit., p. 568.
[135] Ibid., p. 122.
[136] *Roma Sancta*, ed. by George Bruner Parks (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1969), p. 143. *The Journal of Montaigne's Travels in Italy*, trans. by W.G. Waters (London: John Murray, 1903), pp. 146-7.
[137] Graham-Dixon, Andrew, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane (*London: Allen Lane, 2010), p. 74.

Indeed, despite obvious difficulty in gauging the numbers involved 'in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', some estimates give the figure as high as '10,000 to 40,000 prostitutes' in Rome alone.[138] The higher than normal frequency in the city is usually explained by the heavy presence of the Church and its exclusively male membership. There is no doubt that the quintessentially male dimension in the epicentre of the Catholic Church continued to be a dominant factor in the Ottocento, but in addition to the pious gentlemen given to holy pastimes, nineteenth-century Rome saw an even greater preponderance of men as the city also became a centre of labour. As Margherita Pelaja has shown, Ottocento Rome was wholly unbalanced in terms of gender by:

> una mascolinità composta, più che dal clero, da una moltitudine di giovani arrivati a Roma dalle campagne in cerca di lavoro, come domestici, facchini, giovani di bottega presso artigiani e commercianti.[139]

The overwhelmingly male demographic and the elevated number of prostitutes thus go hand in hand. When the persona of 909. 'L'istoria romana', therefore, coolly declares that 'oggni donna è pputtana', his words cannot be rejected entirely as cheap misogyny or a cynical attempt at satire.[140] The peculiar social context of the sonnets' Roman setting has to be borne in mind.

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[138] Cipolla, Carlo, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700*, trans. by Christopher Woodall (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 72. Cipolla concedes the figures are probably exaggerated.

[139] Pelaja, Margherita, *Matrimonio e sessualità a Roma nell'Ottocento* (Rome: Laterza, 1994), p. 69. She also explains that Belli's Rome had spiked in terms of male population through the stationing of soldiers in the city, hence the frequent references to 'sordati' in the sonnets: 'Dalla fine del Cinquecento, da quando esistono cioè anche deboli memorie statistiche, la popolazione di Roma era stata prevalentemente maschile. Il tasso di mascolinità aveva raggiunto il 175% nella prima metà del XVII secolo, per ridursi poi progressivamente e impennarsi di nuovo tra il 1792 e il 1797, quando il papa concentrò numerose truppe a Roma nel timore dell'invasione francese.'

[140] The odious speaker of 104. 'A Ccrementina', whose direct rage against his unwilling partner culminates in the outrageous 'Si nun me la vôi dà, bbuttela ar cane', confirms the preponderance of Roman prostitutes, in somewhat cruder terms: 'a Roma nun ciamancheno puttane / da vienì ccarestia de passerina.' *PR*, II, p. 29.

There is no suggestion on my part that Belli's prostitutes achieve the status of hetaerae. At times they suffer the same stinging scorn as any other marginalized groups. What I do want to show, however, is that the comparison is useful in demonstrating how the usual binary construction of gender identities is uniquely skewed by the figure of the prostitute. In the *Sonetti romaneschi*, the prostitute is strangely mythologized and manages to shake off, at least in the collective (and thus male?) imagination, the shackles of gender typecasting which so heavily impede the other members of her sex. The most obvious and immediate of these is the domestic caging epitomized by the likes of 1484. 'La mojje marcontenta', but embodied too by the mother in 1679. 'La famijja poverella' with her reliance on the husband to provide food. The prostitute character is the only example in Belli of a woman breaking free of what Gilman, the author of *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, defined in her *Women and Economics* as woman's 'sexuo-economic condition'.[141] Whereas Porta, for example, has numerous examples of financially independent women in Milanese society, such as the Donna Fabia Fabron de Fabrian, the only women in Belli to gain any comparable economic self-sufficiency and consequently higher social status, with the possible exception of the 'padrona' (who is not developed as a character, rarely speaks, and is used merely to define a servant etc. in opposition), are the innumerable Roman prostitutes. Issues of morality and psychology aside, woman as purveyor of a commodity is no longer bound to a single individual for financial support. It may be argued that the condition of women as prostitutes is more intensely 'sexuo-economic', but as De Beauvoir points out, whilst 'their need of man is most urgent' in

[141] 'Gilman invented this term to illustrate that the female sex has an economic function which leaves woman financially and socially dependent on her mate, bound to the home for survival.', Catherine J. Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 10.

that their existence depends wholly on the opposite sex and his phallic instincts, the difference is that 'no man is absolutely their master'.[142] Dependence on man as a group or species seems to distort, perhaps even reverse, the usual dynamics, instead bestowing a sense of empowerment upon woman. The female protagonist of 616. 'Er commercio libbero', for instance, assumes the persona of the modern-day businesswoman, speaking openly of a disinterested transaction: 'venno la mi' pelle'. She readily and proudly describes prostitution as a lucrative 'mestiere' that reaps unparalleled financial rewards, captured by the verbal end-rhymes of 'bbutta' and 'frutta'. Her financial jargon continues to statements of new-found confidence and authority in dealings with men ('nun c'è cchi avanzi bajocchelle / su la lana e la pajja der mi' letto'), to the point where the term she herself employs to refer to her profession, 'lo scortico', is seemingly constructed from the female viewpoint and designed to refer to the exploitation of men. De Beauvoir even goes so far as to label the hetaera's condition as a 'type of feminine emancipation':

> In the money or other benefits she gains from man, woman may find a compensation for her feminine inferiority complex; the money has a purifying role; it does away with the battle of the sexes.[143]

It does indeed do away with the battle of the sexes in the sense that it brings her out on top for the very first time. The prostitute diffuses man's phallic weapon by embracing it and manipulating it in order to construct her own rival power. Returning to Lacan's notion of inter-subjective desire, Belli's prostitute is the only woman successful in exploiting her own status as male object of desire. By entering fully into the phallocentric enterprise, by recognizing her desirability and existing as pure object, woman curiously

[142] *The Second Sex* cit., p. 582.
[143] Ibid., p. 584.

takes on a new status and identity, finally managing to achieve what has always remained necessarily beyond her grasp, namely subjectivity:

> Paradoxically, those women who exploit their femininity to the limit create for themselves a situation almost equivalent to that of a man; beginning with that sex which gives them over to the males as objects, they come to be subjects.[144]

Prostitution, therefore, at once enforces phallocentrism whilst subtly threatening to undermine it from within. Full acceptance of the implications of the phallic signifier on her part seemingly equals a complete reduction of the antagonism of the gender divide. It is as if, by accepting his reasoning and by laying down her defensive shield, she forces man to see the contingency of that rationale, and thus to weaken his phallic hold. Woman as prostitute momentarily becomes masculine. In much the same way that man has used his conceptual phallic implement, she transforms her own genital-being into an anti-phallic weapon of near equal capabilities. In this sense she is 'virilis femina'. Gone is the active male/passive female dynamic of the masculinist gender system, turned on its head by woman's new status in the phallic economy as an inelastic super good. Prostitutes are unique among women in being able 'to transform their passive virtues into activities' and 'to use man as an instrument and perform masculine functions through his agency'. Crucially, and unusually, she does so according to man's own rules. Belli's prostitute realizes that:

> to make the man pay [...] is to change him into an instrument. In this way the woman avoids being one. The man may think he 'has' her, but this sexual possession is an illusion; it is she who has *him* on the much more substantial economic ground.[145]

[144] Ibid., pp. 580-1.
[145] Ibid., pp. 581-2.

One such character to let man know of his new subservience is the prostitute of 892. 'Li miseroschi'. Stressing her absolute unavailability outside the financial transaction ('a mme le sbiosse / nun me le sona chi nnun cià cquadrini'), she mockingly dismisses men unable to pay, relegating them to a lower social class ('Co nnoi li scarzacàni? heh heh, cche ttosse!'). Her confidence is shown by the barrage of invective she directs at them (e.g. 'brutti paíni'), in which money is often used as her linguistic weapon: 'Sori sfrizzoli agretti e ttenerini'. She thus goads him, making the equation between manhood and affluence, defining money as the real tool of what was previously considered masculine agency ('cqua nun c'è passo c'a le bborze grosse'). Her new position of power gives her authority, allows her to confront man from a stronger platform. Part of taking on man's confidence is achieved by taking on his language, and the new power dynamic allows her to mimic the linguistic violence usually meted out by men. Not only does she appropriate phallogocentrism, as if heeding Antonia's advice to Nanna to speak as coarsely as possible in Aretino, but she also brings about an entire role reversal, rejecting men, both their sexual demands and their sexual language:

> e cce viengheno a ddí: *ssucchia sto cocco!*
> Succhiatelo tra vvoi co li culetti,
> contentanno accusí mmànico e ffiocco.

As his lewd demand is made, she now has the strength to bark the imperative order back at man en masse (notice the change from third person singular to plural), outperforming him linguistically with her knowledge of male slang.

There is no doubt that man himself recognizes the potency of the sway which woman as pure object constantly exerts over him in his impulse-driven existence. The

mathematics of the phallic economy could not be simpler, as 426. 'Un indovinarello' makes plain:

> 426. 'Un indovinarello'
>
> Sori dottori, chi ssa ddimme prima
> come se chiama chi ggoverna er monno?
> Cuello che mmanna tanta ggente in cima,
> cuello che mmanna tanta ggente in fonno?
>
> Er Papa? er Re? - De cazzi, io ve risponno:
> sete cojjoni, e vve lo dico in rima.
> Er *pelo* e er *priffe* è cquer che ppiú se stima
> pe cquanto è llargo e llongo er mappamonno.
>
> Er priffe e 'r pelo sò ddu' cose uguale,
> der pelo e 'r priffe sò ttutti l'inchini,
> p'er priffe e 'r pelo se fa er bene e 'r male.
>
> E una cosa dell'antra è tanta amica
> cuanto la fica tira li cudrini,
> e li cudrini tireno la fica.

The sonnet's movement is somewhat laboured but the point is clear enough: as pure object of desire and demand, woman's control over men is supreme. She or her genital-object-being, epitomized by the prostitute, is what gives legitimacy to the whole phallic enterprise. The masculinist, heterosexual concept of the phallus as signifier is only meaningful in its direct relation to woman's sex organs. Consequently, she has the potential to control everything ('ggoverna er monno'), the very reverse of the 'cazzimperio', and has greater influence than two distinctly male authorities, 'er Papa' and 'er Re'. Indeed, the elevated status of woman as prostitute among men is repeatedly echoed throughout the sonnets, as in the first tercet of 1001. 'Li polli de li vitturali':

> Preti, frati, puttane, cardinali,
> monziggnori, impiegati e bbagarini:
> ecco la ggente che ppô ffà li ssciali.

Not only is the figure of the prostitute ranked provocatively among the otherwise entirely male establishment, further centrality is lent to 'puttane' semantically and rhythmically as the term enjoys the limelight of the caesura.

A further paradoxical element of the prostitute's characterization, though entirely explicable by her newly-acquired masculinity, is her oscillation in the male imagination between respect and revulsion. Belli's most famous prostitute character symbolizes this dichotomy. The sonnet pair dedicated to 599-600. 'Santaccia de Piazza Montanara' describes a particularly accommodating prostitute, probably a real personage given Belli's note detailing her as 'notissima e sozzissima meretrice di chiara memoria'.[146] The opening quatrain encapsulates the tensions of man's emotional response, as well as the economic factor:

> Santaccia era una dama de Corneto
> da toccà ppe rrispetto co li guanti;
> e ppiú cche ffussi de castagno o abbeto,
> lei sapeva dà rresto a ttutti cuanti.

The high esteem, as expressed in the euphemistic title of 'dama de Corneto' (a well-known pun on 'corna' going back to Renaissance texts and possibly earlier, playing also on 'dama di Corte', and thus intended to allude to, and deride, high society) is genuine, as is the 'rrispetto'.[147] She is seen as a venerable and charitable figure, providing a service to the poorest of men, 'li bburrini', to the point of offering her wares 'in zoffraggio'. Santaccia thus expresses the juxtaposition of respect, as contained in the word-stem, and revulsion, as portrayed by the pejorative suffix, with the negative image emphasized by

[146] *PR*, III, pp. 404-407.
[147] The 'dama de Corneto' probably refers to a real toponym (Tarquinia, for instance, was known as Corneto), but is doubtless another 'nome parlante' referring to 'corna' and thus the lady who cuckolds others. Cf. *GDLI*, s.v. 'corneto': 'laudare a corneto'.

the 'guanti' hinting comically at disease, both on her part and that of her customers.[148] The reason for her respect and notoriety, however, is that she more than any other consciously and willingly objectifies herself completely, transforming herself entirely into the crux of male desire: 'ddiventava fica da ogni parte'. In the male imagination, she is the emblem of femininity, literally 'La madre de le Sante'. As Teodonio states, 'diventa l'immagine mitica e figurale di una sessualità totale'.[149] She thus epitomizes man's construction of her, and this is precisely what she attempts to achieve: 'il segreto consisteva in uno sfruttamento intensivo e simultaneo della sua ricettività orifiziale e del suo patrimonio prensile.'[150] In other words, she is content to exist as pure object, hence her status among men. The need for opposition dissipates when opponents share the same worldview. Man, too, it must be said, in his most animal-biological form, is equally content to abdicate the responsibilities of subjectivity in return for the blissful ignorance of pure objectivity. 102. 'L'incisciature', despite the phallogocentric title, offers a glimpse of the harmonious copula of copulation, in which unadulterated objectivity is the idealized condition:

> È un gran gusto er fregà! ma ppe ggodello
> più a cciccio, ce voria che ddiventassi
> Giartruda tutta sorca, io tutt'uscello.[151]

[148] The prostitute's repulsion is often associated with her reputation as a bearer of disease. Man habitually complains of being infected by her, as in 585. 'Li fiori de Nina', whereas she in turn spends much of her time professing a clean bill of health, as in 387. 'La puttana sincera' ('Io sò pulita com'un armellino'). In 930. 'La puttana abbrusciata', a prostitute defends her troop following a recent chemical attack on one woman, 'fatto veramente accaduto in Roma' according to Belli, following accusations of infecting a client. She defiantly rejects the sexist charge of disease spreading as a solely feminine trait: 'Eppò adesso sarà la donna sola / a attaccà la pulenta che ss'attacca? / e a nnoi chi cce l'attacca? San Nicola?' Almansi even sees venereal disease as a key factor in mediation between the sexes at large, not just between prostitutes and clients: 'tutte le manifestazioni sociali imperniate su un contatto fra un uomo e una donna si articolano in un codice linguistico che deve comprendere la parola *pulenta*.' 'L'oscenità del Belli' in *L'Estetica dell'osceno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 5-35, p. 27.

[149] Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 627

[150] Almansi, 'L'oscenità del Belli' in *L'Estetica dell'osceno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 5-35, p. 34.

[151] Ibid., p. 32. The dénouement of 'L'incisciature' is a clear reworking of Aretino, poem V of the *Sonetti lussuriosi*: 'Perch'io prov'or un sì solenne cazzo / che mi rovescia l'orlo della potta, / io vorrei esser tutta

For perhaps the first time, there are no competing egos, with the male speaker in fact employing the first person plural to represent the coveted state of suspended antagonism: 'soffiamo tutt'e dua come ddu' gatti'. Gone is the perpetual conflict between the sexes, at least momentarily, leading Almansi to describe 'L'incisciature' as 'l'unico sonetto del Belli che abroga la tirannica gerarchia dei sessi'.[152]

The figure of the prostitute thus unites all the elements of gender construction and the battle of the sexes examined hitherto. Within the binary division of male/female, the prostitute assumes a dualistic and paradoxical status. In her willingness to simulate total objectification, she is exceedingly feminine, wholly dependent on men. At the same time, however, she can afford to be free of them, independent of them, economically self-sufficient, exploitative even within the logic of the phallic imagination. In this sense, she is super-woman, and achieves a level of power ordinarily associated with the masculine identity. As 'virilis femina' she both maintains the phallic strategy of war, by pandering to man and validating his phallogocentrism, but equally destabilizes it from within, by exploiting the emptiness of his 'pinco' and sharpening the powers she has over him as object of desire. Claiming subjectivity for the first time then, she alone bridges the seemingly irresolvable gulf between the sexes.

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quanta potta, / ma vorrei che tu fossi tutto cazzo.' Aretino, Pietro, *Sonetti lussuriosi e Pasquinate*, ed. by Maria Beatrice Sirolesi (Rome: Newton Compton, 1980), p. 55. Cf. also Giorgio Baffo's eighteenth century Venetian sonnet 'L'autore vorria esser tutto cazzo', which begins 'Amici, son in Mona. Oh che gran gusto!', before concluding 'E per darghe più gusto a sta creatura, / Esser vorrìa in sto punto tutto Cazzo'. Baffo, Giorgio, *Poesi*, ed. by Piero Chiara (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), p. 82. In this light, cf. Belli's Santaccia, 'che ddiventava fica da ogni parte', in 600. 'Santaccia de Piazza Montanara' (2). *PR*, III, p. 407.

[152] Almansi, 'L'oscenità del Belli' in *L'Estetica dell'osceno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 5-35, p. 32.

Conclusion

The quotation serving as the title of this chapter is taken from sonnet 279. 'La papessa Ggiuvanna', Belli's version of the legend of the female Pope Joan. The lady who rejects the domestic, therefore, and takes up the battle of the sexes is no ordinary woman; or rather, she is the ordinary woman per se but mythologized in the collective conscience. Her womanliness is both the reason for her legend and the motivation of the poem. Ggiuvanna is the typical female who accomplishes the atypical feat of attempting to escape her gender. The sonnet is thus symbolic of the particularly Roman patriarchal economy and woman's marginal position within it:

279. La papessa Ggiuvanna

Fu ppropio donna. Bbuttò vvia 'r zinale
prima de tutto e ss'ingaggiò ssordato;
doppo se fesce prete, poi prelato,
e ppoi vescovo, e arfine Cardinale.

E cquanno er Papa maschio stiede male,
e mmorze, c'è cchi ddisce, avvelenato,
fu ffatto Papa lei, e straportato
a Ssan Giuvanni su in zedia papale.

Ma cquà sse ssciorze er nodo a la Commedia;
ché ssanbruto je preseno le dojje,
e sficò un pupo llí ssopra la ssedia.

D'allora st'antra ssedia sce fu mmessa
pe ttastà ssotto ar zito de le vojje
si er pontescife sii Papa o Ppapessa.

Having successfully climbed the male hierarchy by suppressing her femininity, from the depths of mere womanhood to the pinnacle of authority, she is finally belied by her sex, plagued by the symbolic 'dojje' of her biological function as mother. Her paradigmatic role according to the patriarchal mindset is captured by the grotesque, almost bestial, neologism of 'sficò'. Only in myth can woman become the patriarch, and even then she cannot escape her anatomy. The sonnet is useful, however, in distilling the quintessential

masculinity of Rome, both as historic reality and textual setting for the *Sonetti romaneschi*. Rome is clearly defined, and backed up by historical evidence, as a phallocracy, 'with its exceptional preponderance of priests, monks, and cardinals, [in which] women were underrepresented.'[153]

In short, as in De Beauvoir and Lacan, woman is always other. Otherness, however, is the motivating factor of the *Sonetti romaneschi* as a whole and by no means the realm exclusive to woman. Indeed, Belli's male characters too belong firmly in the category of 'nnoantri'. En masse the inhabitants of the sonnets share characteristics of the repressed female in wider culture, and form a sort of emasculated, abject race. The phallic language of the sonnets must be seen against this highly gendered background, but the battle of the sexes is merely part of the greater class war. As in Foucauldian terms, language is always political. Belli's plebeian subject is the impotent Other and the violent, sexual language is a form of linguistic revenge against oppression. The revolutionary language of the *Sonetti romaneschi* will form the final chapter of this thesis.

[153] Cipolla, Carlo, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000-1700*, trans. by Christopher Woodall (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 72.

CHAPTER FOUR

WAR AND PEACE:
THE SILENT REVOLUTION

Introduction

As we saw in the opening chapter, the premise and originality of Belli's poetic enterprise is one of linguistic mimesis. The poet goes to great lengths in the introduction to explain his radically new use of the word to capture the oral reality of his subjects. In this sense, his difference is linguistic. As a result, he has been widely termed a realist. Vigolo labels Belli's poetry a type of 'mimo' and Meneghello, for example, is one of many to echo the view.[1] His practice is thus revolutionary from this perspective alone. Prior to Manzoni, there is very little linguistic realism in modern Italian literature, and even following the various rewritings of *I promessi sposi*, the protagonists Renzo and Lucia are still linguistically suspect, speaking not in Comasco or a Northern Lombard dialect of any sort, but Florentine; and even then of a questionably refined nature somewhat out of kilter with his humble speakers. So whilst linguistic realism proper would only come after the Risorgimento, Belli's originality in part consists of realistically portraying the speech of

[1] Vigolo, *Sonetti*, p. LXIV; 'Realista, profondamente legato alla vita che scorre attorno a lui, ha creato dal vernacolo romanesco uno straordinario linguaggio letterario'. 'Roma. il Papa e il Diavolo' in *Il 996: Rivista del Centro Studi Giuseppe Gioachino Belli*, III.1-2 (2005), 15-22 (15).

the people, 'quello che per tanti secoli era stato nient'altro che muto spettatore', as Moravia has it.[2] Carlo Muscetta has stressed Belli's revolution in this respect:

> quand'egli parlava di un dramma che aveva per protagonista il popolo del suo tempo, non si può non pensare che il suo proposito era quanto di piú ambizioso e rivoluzionario si potesse pensare.[3]

At the same time, however, many have recognized the transgression inherent in Belli's linguistic realism, the exaggerated use of profanity, for instance, the twisting of malapropisms to comic artistic effect, or the issue of corrupted language. Despite admitting to the mimetic quality of Belli's poetry, Vigolo insists that Belli assumes what he calls the 'mascherone grottesco del personaggio "popolo"'.[4] Bakhtin, too, has spoken of 'grotesque realism' in an attempt to bridge the shift from mimesis to transgression.[5] Against such a background, Belli's literary language has been seen as a 'fenomeno in parte atipico, in parte tradizionale nell'Ottocento romantico' based on the 'precisione dei prelievi fonici dall'*usus* popolare e della loro totale ristrutturazione'. Consequently, Belli's sonnets occupy a liminal space, 'zone intermedie tra realtà linguistica e invenzione stilistica'.[6] In exhibiting a certain amount of this apparent paradox, Belli perhaps fits best into the category of romantic realism:

> Significant in such representations is the possibility of reversal of the lines of causality, the presence of an escape hatch through which the fictional being may in some way evade the apparently ineluctable limitations of his experience.[7]

This chapter seeks not to locate Belli within the minutiae of artistic movements, but to quantify the degree of revolution in his literary language itself. To do so I shall

[2] *L'uomo come fine, e altri saggi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1963), p. 30.
[3] Muscetta, *Cultura* cit., p. 371.
[4] Vigolo, introduction to *I sonetti* (Milan: Mondadori, 1952), I, p. xlvi.
[5] *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 192.
[6] Petrocchi 1981, p. 15.
[7] George J. Becker, *Realism in Modern Literature* (New York: Ungar, 1980), p. 102.

draw on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, specifically their radical approach to analysing the literary language of Franz Kafka. Rather than pigeonholing Kafka according to established critical trends, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature shows Kafka as the subversive voice of a marginalized minority, exercising revolution through the reappropriation of the major language. In treating linguistic distortion as an intensely political strategy, their framework will provide a new way of reading Belli's Romanesco as an affirmation of the collective subject 'nnoantri', and finally reveal the real dynamics of rebellion at work in the *Sonetti*.

4.1 Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature

Rooted in the developments of psychoanalysis, yet straining decidedly against the impossible constraints they see in the analytical potential of the Freudian Oedipus Complex, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of schizoanalysis consciously rejects what for them is the mania of the single signifier. While such a stance raised eyebrows in the intellectual community with the publication of their *Anti-Oedipus* in the early 1970s (in addition to the direct attack on Freud, which necessarily implied a sideswipe at the tenets of Lacan's thought, the book also dealt a blow to the foundations of Marxism for example), the polemics intensified more recently when the philosophical heavyweight Slavoj Žižek dismissed Deleuze and Guattari's notion of schizoanalysis as a fully-fledged rejection of Lacanian psychoanalysis.[8] Deleuze and Guattari, however, insisted that their thinking was merely an extension of Lacanian theory, a 'famous

[8] In his typically confrontational and subversive style, Žižek disputes the revolutionary claims of Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, claiming that 'What Deleuze presents as "Oedipus" is a rather ridiculous simplification, if not an outright falsification, of Lacan's position.' *Organs without Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 71.

critique (though not rejection) of psychoanalysis', as Daniel W. Smith puts it.[9] Despite the philosophical debate regarding Deleuze and Guattari's position in relation to Lacan, which is of little immediate consequence for the present study, their ideas can be used without undermining the theoretical underpinnings of the previous chapter. In any case, like their Lacanian forebears, the theories of Deleuze and Guattari are still anchored entirely in the insights offered by semiotics, hence the intimate connections to the linguistic thinking of Saussure and Derrida, and hence the particular utility and applicability of some of their findings to the realm of literary texts. Indeed, as Ronald Bogue articulates it, what unites Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and equally Lacan for that matter, is their focus on 'relations of power in heterogeneous arrangements of body parts, texts, machines, goods and institutions' in order to 'explain the existence of structures of power'.[10] The point of identifying such relations at the micro level, Bogue continues, is that these 'arrangements at once flatten elements from traditional, hierarchically differentiated codes into a single surface of components', in turn making it possible 'to isolate specific elements of those codes within unconventional yet discrete units of analysis.'[11] Usefully, Deleuze and Guattari offer a specifically textual expression of their thinking in relation to the writings of Kafka. As their 'most detailed and extended application of schizoanalysis to literature', *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* provides the most sensible starting point for a discussion of their theories before concentrating on

[9] 'The Inverse Side of the Structure: Žižek on Deleuze on Lacan' in *Criticism*, Vol.46, No. 4 (Fall, 2004), 635-650, (636).
[10] Bogue, Ronald, *Deleuze and Guattari* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 106.
[11] Ibid., p. 106.

the light these may be able to cast upon the power relations at play within the language of Belli's sonnets.[12]

Explicitly differentiating their approach from the psychoanalytical model of subjectivity, Guattari states that 'rather than moving in the direction of reductionist modifications which simplify the complex', by introducing an all-encompassing master signifier in other words, schizoanalysis 'will work towards its complexification, its processual enrichment, towards the consistency of its virtual lines of bifurcation and differentiation, in short towards its ontological heterogeneity'.[13] At the most basic level, then, Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis is a further theoretical articulation of Otherness. The key component of their analytical apparatus, both generally and in relation to Kafka's literary universe, is the notion of the 'rhizome'. Developed in *Anti-Oedipus*, the rhizome is conceived of in direct opposition to traditional binary modes of thinking. As Bogue puts it, the rhizome is 'the antithesis of a root-tree structure, or 'arborescence', the structural model which had dominated Western thought.'[14] In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari claim that such a narrow system of seeing and interpreting the world has 'never reached an understanding of multiplicity', with the overwhelming result that 'binary logic and biunivocal relationships still dominate psychoanalysis […], linguistics, structuralism, and even information science.'[15] Examples of this type of analysis include 'the tree of delusion in the Freudian interpretation of Schreber's case' in the psychoanalytical field, and Chomskyan phrase structure rules in

[12] Bogue, p. 107.
[13] Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 61.
[14] Bogue, p .107
[15] *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 7.

linguistics, whose 'grammatical trees [...] begin at a point S and proceed by dichotomy', but the same patterns, they argue, can be observed widely.[16] In such a concept of knowledge, arborescences are necessarily 'hierarchical, stratified totalities which impose limited and regulated connections between their components' and which point logically towards the beginnings and ends of the entities they represent.[17] Rhizomes, on the other contrary, are merely series of connections, 'non-hierarchical, horizontal multiplicities' which defy regimented structural modelling, 'whose components form random, unregulated networks in which any element may be connected to any other element.'[18]

Alluding to Kafka's eponymous novel, but using the metaphor here to illustrate their reading of Kafka's entire opus as a 'rhizome, a burrow', Deleuze and Guattari begin by explaining that 'the castle has multiple entrances' making access possible 'by any point whatsoever; none matters more than another, and no entrance is more privileged.'[19] The analytical process depends on the many possible connections to be made within the space of the writer's work, rather than a predetermined, linear approach. Already similarities begin to emerge with how in the introduction Belli conceives of the relations and interactions between his individual poems and their relative position in the wider fabric of his poetry as a whole.

> Distinti quadretti, e non fra loro congiunti fuorché dal filo occulto della macchina, aggiungeranno assai meglio al fine principale, salvando insieme i lettori dal tedio di una lettura troppo unita e monotona. Il mio è un volume da prendersi e lasciarsi, come si fa de' sollazzi, senza bisogno di progressivo riordinamento d'idee. Ogni pagina è il principio del libro, ogni pagina la fine.[20]

[16] *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 5.
[17] Bogue, p. 107
[18] Ibid., p. 107
[19] Deleuze-Guattari, p. 3.
[20] *PR*, I, p. 23.

Indeed, this professed notion of an open-ended, cyclical structure, directly influenced in my view by Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova,* on which Joyce is known to have based *Finnegans Wake*, with its endless riverlike circularity, fits squarely with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, as does the inherently interconnected nature of all things human, such as language, laws and beliefs, that Vico includes in the 'senso comune'.[21] Vigolo, for instance, highlights the 'quasi perfetta armonia e proporzione del circolo, in cui ogni punto è principio e fine' and Gibellini similarly describes the sonnets' cosmic chronology as 'un tempo circolare che ripete se stesso, con disperazione e vitalistica allegria, nella coincidenza di cronaca e metastoria, in un eterno perenne quotidiano'.[22] More than this, however, in warning against the myopic approach of 'una lettura troppo unita', Belli hints at an underlying rhizomic organization in the 'filo occulto', which has long been the source of puzzlement among critics, of which none has

[21] Despite not making this specific point, Edoardo Ripari has shown an influence of Vico on Belli's poetics, including from a linguistic point of view: 'Se da un lato la presenza della *Scienza nuova* nelle carte zibaldoniane si comporta in modo carsico, negandoci la possibilità di giungere a sistematiche conclusioni sulla reale riflessione del Belli, d'altra parte gli indizi a nostro favore ci consentono di ricostruire, pur indirettamente, settori di "ricerca" concreti in materia di storia, religione e in particolare di linguaggio', *L'Accetta e il fuoco: cultura storiografica, politica e poesia in Giuseppe Gioachino Belli* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2010), p. 8. Ripari also sees a Vichian 'visione ciclica delle cose umane' (p. 12) in the well-known sonnet 1379. 'Li Monni', in which the speaker opines that 'tutti li grobbi / che stanno sparzi pe li sette sceli / sce se troveno ebbrei, turchi e ffedeli / come in ner nostro', concluding in the final line 'cazzo! quant'antre incarnazzione e mmorte!' Incidentally, here Vigolo instead sees an 'evidente riferimento all'*Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* di Fontenelle'. *I Sonetti*, II, p. 1876. Equally, however, it probably owes something to Giordano Bruno's vernacular dialogue *De l'infinito universo et mondi*. On the indisputable influence of Vico on Joyce, beyond the mere 'commodius vicus of recirculation' (p. 3) and the 'vicous cicles' (p. 134) in *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 1992), see Donald Phillip Verene, 'Vico's *Scienza Nuova* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*' in *Philosophy and Literature*, 21.2 (1997), 392-404. Burgess, too, in the introduction to his abridged version of the *Wake*, entitled *A Shorter Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), immediately recognizes parallels with the 'Viconian cycle' (p. 16), stating that the book's 'pattern is loosely derived from the Italian philosopher Giovanni Battista Vico' and his presentation of history as 'a circular process of recurrences' (p. 8), before showing that the Vichian model is evident right from the title: 'The primary meaning is one with an apostrophe – "the wake of Finnegan" – but, as we read the book, we find a secondary meaning assuming a greater and greater part in the semantic complex: "The Finnegans wake up, the cycle is renewed". The very name contains the opposed notions of completion and renewal: "*fin*" or "*fine*" (French, Italian) and "again"' (p. 21).

[22] Vigolo, *Il genio del Belli* cit., I, p. 107. Vigolo-Gibellini, *Sonetti*, p. xliv.

offered a satisfactory reading. Vigolo took it to refer to the 'misterioso rapporto' existing between individual sonnets, describing it essentially as a thematic unity.[23] Gibellini links it to theatricality and the 'maschera del popolo', but sees it as an organizational device 'che regge l'orditura dei sonetti con una segreta struttura'.[24] Vigolo and Gibellini, among others, thus do little more than propagate Belli's metaphor of cryptic obscurity, the whole being held together by a sort of 'legge segreta'[25]. Such a convenient critical sidestep offers very little regarding the nature of this 'filo occulto'.

Most have also read Belli's definition of 'distinti quadretti' as indicative of his need for a fixed, self-contained structure in the sonnet form. Again Vigolo, despite acknowledging connections beyond the single unit, nevertheless privileges the autonomy of the individual sonnet.[26] Similarly Gibellini, whilst recognizing the poet's 'polemica contestazione' in relation to Porta that we outlined in the first chapter, claims that Belli's appropriation of the famous Milanese characters involves removing them from the 'continuità testuale' of their original context with its 'nozione lineare e progressiva del tempo', presumably reworking them into an entirely different reality of his own.[27] This in

[23] Despite protesting that 'non vi è peggior segno di incomprensione rispetto all'opera sua che la pretesa di creare esteriori raggrupamenti per generi o affinità di argomenti', and declaring, moreover, that the critic finds himself 'di fronte allo stesso pericolo' (I, p. 108), Vigolo cannot avoid falling into his own trap. In attempting to show how 'l'ermeneutica belliana può ben approfondire il rapporto che spesso si sottende fra un componimento e l'altro' (I, p. 108), Vigolo disappointingly observes that the act of composing poems around certain episodes often yields further poems, and that there is continuity between poems in sonnet sequences or sonnets written during the same day. Indeed, in the second volume, which collects poetic examples to illustrate the sections of the first, Vigolo merely has groups of sonnets which share an 'argomento affine' to prove that Belli 'lavorava per materie' (II, p. 68). Fasano also finds Vigolo 'deludente' in this regard, 'riducendosi alla ricerca curiosa e sinanche un po' pettegola dell'incatenarsi degli "spunti" ispirativi'. Fasano, Pino, *I tarli dell'alberone: saggi belliani* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), p. 35.
[24] Pietro Gibellini, 'Le voci parlanti nei *Sonetti romaneschi* del Belli' in *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, 45.2 (2006), 155-177, (168).
[25] Aldo Borlenghi and Luigi Gregoris, 'Porta, Belli e la poesia dialettale nel primo Ottocento' in Armando Balduino (ed.), *Storia letteraria d'Italia: L'Ottocento* (Padua: Francesco Vallardi, 1990), pp. 929-1020, (p. 982).
[26] '[L]'unità estetica e poetica, di forma e di contenuto dei sonetti si dimostra indiscutibilmente una sola: quella data loro dalla struttura e dalla durata stessa del sonetto.' Vigolo, *Il genio del Belli* cit., I, p. 107.
[27] Vigolo-Gibellini, *Sonetti*, p. xliv.

turn would suggest that he conceives of Belli's *Sonetti* as a series of microcosmic islands. Yet the insistence on the 'distinti quadretti', however, does not preclude wider networks and junctions of associations. Far from it, in situating the poems firmly in the greater matrix of the 'macchina', which critics have all but ignored, the poet explicitly encourages such connections. In this regard, Deleuze and Guattari's conception of text as a 'literary machine' offers a useful way of interpreting Belli's 'filo occulto della macchina', and only later, once the various effects of the Deleuzoguattarian rhizome have been seen, will the approximation become obvious in its full implications.[28] For Deleuze and Guattari, 'the machinic […] is not at all reducible to the *technically* machinic.'[29] On the contrary, the rhizomic machine is a 'conjunction of the natural and the artificial' and its operating function 'consists of a perpetual construction of "machinic arrangements" (*agencements machiniques*), collections of heterogeneous elements that somehow function together'.[30] What, then, if Belli's 'filo occulto della macchina' were seen more as an organic substance? What if connections were less regimented and thus less discoverable in the sense that whereas textual exegesis can be demanded and indeed successfully sustained, it can never exhaustively reveal and map the full extent of the many aleatory links that, like the botanical rhizome, merely continue to proliferate? In short, what if the unity that Belli hints at were not a single mystery to be unlocked by a Lacanian super signifier, as implied by the metaphor of masonic mystery, but a multiplicity in the Deleuzoguattarian sense? In negotiating Kafka's rhizomic castle, Deleuze and Guattari maintain that 'only the principle of multiple entrances prevents the

[28] Deleuze-Guattari, p. 18.
[29] Garin Dowd, 'The Abstract Literary Machine: Guattari, Deleuze and Beckett's *The Lost Ones*' in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 37.2 (2001), 204-217, (204).
[30] Bogue, p. 108.

introduction of the enemy, the Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is actually only open to experimentation.'[31] The shift in perspective from Lacan actively encourages that analytical experimentation and sees the work as a multifarious essence whose existence and purpose depends on eliciting such engagement and multiple readings. With this in mind, then, the hallowed poetic harmony and consistency of the *Sonetti romaneschi* would be secret only in the sense of ultimately defying all logical containment.

In the abstract, descriptions of this kind remain obscure, but in *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari offer a clearer description of the rhizome as part of the literary machine, particularly in terms of its practical reach and functions:

> A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.[32]

If Žižek is right in one respect, though, in charting how Deleuze fledges Lacan's psychoanalytical nest, it is in pinpointing the overtly political nature of the Deleuzoguattarian model of schizoanalysis. Schizoanalysis is political to a revolutionary degree, which is integral to what they see as the project of minor literature. [33] The rhizome is thus part of a political organism first and foremost. The link, perhaps initially surprising, between the semiotic, i.e. the linguistic, and the political is pursued further still:

> A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of

[31] Deleuze-Guattari, p. 3.
[32] *A thousand plateaus* cit., trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 7.
[33] 'Deleuze and Guattari maintain many key analytic concepts […] transforming them to give support to their revolutionary and utopian paradigm.' Luke Cadwell, 'Schizophrenizing Lacan: Deleuze, [Guattari], and *Anti-Oedipus*' in *Intersections*, 10.3 (2009), 18-27, (24).

> dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages. There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogeneous linguistic community. Language is, in Weinreich's words, "an essentially heterogeneous reality." There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity.[34]

Indeed, this politico-linguistic nexus is the central tenet of Kafka's minor literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, who see the literary as a particular manifestation of a greater power struggle. This meeting of the linguistic and the political, as will be seen, is the real attraction and opportunity for an ultimately revolutionary reading of the *Sonetti* in which the core ingredients of Belli's literary machine, I would suggest, can finally be contextualized in full.

In chapter three of *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, entitled 'What Is a Minor Literature?', Deleuze and Guattari attempt to answer their own question by identifying three constituent elements. A literature of this sort, they claim, is linguistically subversive, inherently political, and articulated as a collective utterance. Interestingly, then, language is the prime component: 'the first characteristic of minor literature […] is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization.' By deterritorialization, what is meant is a propensity to break or weaken the links of existing chains of power. When applied to language, this means challenging and destabilizing the supremacy of the major language by using it from a marginalized position. The collective use of the major language by a minority results in a markedly alien version of the same language, thereby inevitably displaying a certain amount of linguistic otherness. By way of example, Deleuze and Guattari cite Kafka's identification of the 'Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague'. In resorting to the majority language of German, the Jews of

[34] *A thousand plateaus* cit., p. 7.

Prague are 'simultaneously a part of this minority [those who speak German but consider it foreign] and excluded from it [precisely because it is not their own], like "gypsies who have stolen a German child from its crib."'[35]

Intimately connected to the linguistic aspect is the second characteristic of minor literatures, which states that 'everything in them is political'. Whereas in major literatures, events take place at the level of the individual and remain the concern of the individual, with 'the social milieu serving as a mere environment or background', the 'cramped space' of a minor literature 'forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics.' In minor literatures, the individual is necessarily inextricable from society's affairs 'because a whole other story is vibrating within'. The individual concern thus transforms, transcending the level of the marginalized individual to become 'commercial, economic, bureaucratic, juridical'. Quoting directly from Kafka's *Diaries*, Deleuze and Guattari conclude that 'what in great literature goes on down below, constituting a not indispensable cellar of the structure, here takes place in the full light of day[;] what is there a matter of passing interest for a few, here absorbs everyone no less than as a matter of life and death'.[36]

Given the shift away from the concern of the individual, it follows logically that 'the third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value.' As part of the marginalized group, what the individual author says 'already constitutes a common action'. And since 'the political domain has contaminated every statement (*énoncé*)', the practitioner of minor literature creates an 'active solidarity', therefore becoming the champion of a new form of activism. With the final characteristic

[35] Deleuze-Guattari, pp. 16-17.
[36] Ibid., p. 17.

of collectivism outlined, the very tangible implications of this tripartite force begin to reveal themselves: 'literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation'. The marginalized position within the 'fragile community' is the very condition that allows the writer a greater 'possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility'. The literary medium, as a highly political arena, ensured by a collective 'deterritorializing' language, is thus no longer a tired chamber of apathy in which tradition is merely perpetuated by the old guard, but rather the crucible of a bubbling and burgeoning unrest. The literary space is the only place to channel that disquiet and begin enacting a change in the status quo:

> The literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come, not at all for ideological reasons but because the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere in this milieu: *literature is the people's concern*.'[37]

Deleuze and Guattari's model of minor literature is thus a democratization of literature, an opening up of the literary empire not simply to ensure the neglected, marginalized minority is included in its remit in a newfound spirit of tolerance, but to ensure literature itself is hijacked and pressed into the service of society's Others. Literature with a capital L, like language, has to be deterritorialized, shaken up and subverted from within, wrested from the hegemonic control of the establishment.

4.2 *L'arberone* versus *la radisce*

Before demonstrating in greater detail, and beyond the point of doubt, that Belli's project throughout the *Sonetti romaneschi* fulfils each and every one of Deleuze and Guattari's criteria for the revolutionary battleground of minor literature, which will in turn lend an

[37] Deleuze-Guattari, pp. 17-18.

analytical and theoretical framework to Belli's literary enterprise and contextualize elements of his poetics, it is worth pausing to consider how even at the level of a single sonnet the tenets of Deleuzoguattarian thought outlined thus far are of immediate and obvious relevance. One poem in particular would seem to be illustrative of the sonnets' political engagement as a whole, and reveal a glimpse at how such a theoretical application might offer rich rewards indeed. The sonnet in question is 1060. 'L'arberone':

> Immezzo all'orto mio sc'è un arberone,
> solo ar Monno, e oramai tutto tarlato:
> eppuro fa er zu' frutto oggni staggione
> bbello a vvede, ma ascerbo e avvelenato.
>
> Ricconta un libbro che dda quanno è nnato
> è vvienuta a ppotallo oggni nazzione;
> ma er frutto c'arifà ddoppo potato
> pizzica che nemmanco un peperone.
>
> Quarchiduno me disce d'inzitallo,
> perché accusì er zu' frutto a ppoc'a ppoco
> diventerebbe bbono da maggnallo.
>
> Ma un Carbonaro amico mio me disce
> che nnun c'è antro che ll'accetta e 'r foco,
> perché er canchero sta in ne la radisce.

The poem ostensibly features a marginalized individual of the lower classes, evidently speaking in a language with a high coefficient of deterritorialization (the major language of Tuscan/Italian employed from a position of peripheral subordination), and from a collective point of view.[38] The subject of the sonnet clearly transcends the individual, too, in its overtly political concerns, thus meeting the other defining characteristic of Deleuze and Guattari's minor literature, as confirmed by the crucial reference to the 'Carbonaro' in line 12. As Gibellini states, 'l'iniziale maiuscola non lascia dubbi sull'anfibologia dell'apologo', promoting the humble charcoal seller to a far more politicized form of

[38] Belli's Romanesco as a 'deterritorialized' langue is explored in the following section.

activity: 'il "Carbonaro" è anche "membro della Carboneria"'.[39] The persona's close associate, therefore, is a member of the liberal-leaning, secret society of the Carboneria, one of the principal revolutionary and conspiratorial organizations of the Risorgimento, which had been influential in masterminding uprisings against foreign occupiers in Naples and Sicily in the early 1820s and which was increasingly gaining ground in central Italy, before transforming into Giuseppe Mazzini's Giovane Italia movement in the volatile political climate of the early 1830s.[40] The delayed epiphany of the poem's political dimension thus recasts its entire discourse in a different light. What at first seem to be the innocuous, almost bumbling musings of a parochial Roman plebeian suddenly acquire a raw political immediacy, of wide-ranging significance, including, potentially, at a national level.

In this new light, what exactly is the 'arberone' heralded by the title and discussed at length in the body of the sonnet? Given the poem's political denouement, a metaphorical meaning is clearly intended. Indeed, somewhat unusually, Belli confirms as much in a footnote to the title, stating that 'questa è una allegoria da cercarne il senso nella *Vigna del Signore*.'[41] As a result, Gibellini glosses the 'arberone' as 'la Chiesa', referring the reader to the Biblical episode of Luke 20.[42] In the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, versions of which are found in three of the four gospels, God's vineyard is abused by those entrusted with its care. The husbandmen restrict access to its produce,

[39] Vigolo-Gibellini, *Sonetti*, p. 293.
[40] Maria Lanza usefully notes that 'anche quando la Federazione mazziniana si fu stabilmente impiantata, continuò a Roma l'affiliazione alla Carboneria (spesso si faceva addirittura una doppia affiliazione) specialmente tra i popolani', Lanza 1976, p. 121. Lanza also notes the popolino's tendency to side with Mazzini, perhaps unsurprising giving his strong religious convictions: 'al conflitto di Belli nei confronti del potere corrisponde l'effettivo divaricarsi delle passioni dei popolani che non erano soltanto papalini, ma anche, e in cospicuo numero, mazziniani. Di qui le sollecitazioni (e le paure) che Belli evidentemente ne raccoglie', p. 121.
[41] *PR*, V, p. 174.
[42] Vigolo-Gibellini, *Sonetti*, p. 293.

against the orders of its creator, and seek to assert ever greater control over the vineyard in an attempt to usurp its owner. Traditional interpretations of the parable read the vineyard as God's creation, and the husbandmen as priests charged with administering God's realm.[43] Belli also seems to confirm the meaning of the vineyard in a much later sonnet, 1964. 'L'allonguzzione der Papa', written in 1838.[44] Adding a further level of textual resonance, Fasano rightly sees a Dantesque allusion to the same episode in the 'vigna che tosto imbianca, se 'l vignaio è reo' of *Paradiso* XII, all the more convincing when taken with Buonaventura's assessment of the papacy in the following tercet.[45] One might also be tempted to draw parallels with Renzo's vineyard in *I Promessi sposi*.[46] The vineyard is clearly a topos and so with the essential meaning of the 'arberone' uncovered,

[43] Some notable commentators, such as C.H. Dodd, even locate the parable in historical fact: 'The parable, in fact, so far from being an artificially constructed allegory, may be taken as evidence of the kind of thing that went on in Galilee during the half century preceding the general revolt of A.D. 66. […] The opening words of the story are all but a quotation from Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Is. v. 1-2), which would be familiar to every Jewish hearer. Every such hearer would also know that by long tradition, beginning from that poem of Isaiah's, Israel was the Lord's vineyard. It follows that the crime of the wicked husbandmen, who refused their landlord his due, and met his appeals with a defiance that stopped at nothing, is the crime of the rulers of Israel.' *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1935), p. 126.

[44] The malapropism of the title refers to a specific papal allocution by Gregory XVI in 1837, in which he likens the Church to a vineyard, offering prayers 'al Padre delle misericordie, affinché riguardi propizio dall'eccelso abitacolo de' cieli la *Vigna* piantata dalla sua destra'. Part of the pronouncement is quoted by Belli in a footnote. For the context, see Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 847. In the sonnet, Belli's speaker satirizes the papal address, and comments on the vineyard metaphor in the final tercet: 'Poi verzo er fine disce chiaro e uperto / che la Cchiesa è una viggna. E cquesto puro / nun je se pò nnegà. Vviggna è de scerto.' *PR*, VIII, p. 259. Belli provides a further gloss, stating the 'qui *vigna* è vero sinonimo di cuccagna', and Lanza notes that 'questa lettura ironica del lemma "Vigna del Signore"' is also found in Porta's 'Meneghin Tandoeuggia', Lanza 1976, p. 121.

[45] Fasano, *I tarli dell'alberone* cit., p. 37. In the fourth sphere of *Paradiso*, the Franciscan Buonaventura refers to the same parable in his praise of the founder of the Dominican order: 'Domenico fu detto; e io ne parlo / sì come de l'agricola che Cristo / elesse a l'orto suo per aiutarlo'. *Paradiso*, XII, 70-72. Shortly after, Buonaventura criticises Boniface VIII's treatment of the poor, in which obvious parallels can be drawn, for instance, with the reign of Gregory XVI, two years into whose reactionary policies Belli writes 'L'arberone': 'E a la sedia che fu già benigna / più a' poveri giusti, non per lei, / ma per colui che siede, che traligna'. Paradiso, XII, 86-90. This is perhaps further evidence of Belli speaking up for the rights of the popolino.

[46] Although Manzoni's treatment of what is most likely the same Biblical source has often been considered a statement of his concept of 'provvidenza', the digression has also been read as a political allegory, with the vineyard symbolizing the conditions of Italy under foreign rule. According to Petrocchi, for instance, Manzoni uses the vineyard to represent 'lo stato di un paese abbandonato dal suo vero padrone, in piena balia di tutti, furfanti alti e bassi'. *I Promessi sposi di Alessandro Manzoni raffrontati sulle due edizioni del 1825 e 1840*, ed. by Policarpo Petrocchi, 4 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1902) IV, p. 935n.

the poem's political contents become clearer. The Roman Catholic Church as an institution has become corrupted from within by its own servants and seems doomed in its current form, requiring either reform or annihilation, with the speaker apparently inclined towards the latter. Teodonio, in fact, sees the 'arberone' as the symbol of an 'istituzione fradicia e malata che ha necessità solo di una radicale eliminazione'.[47] What is clear is that the 'arberone' is a quintessentially arborescent structure in the Deleuzoguattarian sense, in need of root and branch surgery, or as the Italian expression has it, it needs cutting 'di sana pianta'.

All but ignored by Vigolo, the sonnet is fleetingly referred to by Muscetta (surprising, perhaps, given his study of what he calls the poet's 'interessi etico-politici'), but has since received further attention, first from Samonà, and more recently from Pino Fasano, whose detailed textual analysis of the sonnet against a wider contextualization is highly convincing.[48] According to Fasano, the opening quatrain 'proietta fulmineamente l'immagine di centralità e isolamento della Chiesa nel mondo', but equally locates the beating heart of the organization firmly in Rome, with the Vatican as a sort of synecdoche for the Church's global reach: 'quell'"orto" è anche il deserto della campagna romana, e propone subito l'identificazione fra l'istituzione e la città, fra la Chiesa e Roma.'[49] There is no doubt whatsoever that the corruption is seen as a particularly Roman phenomenon. Fasano also makes sense of the augmentative suffix in 'arberone', claiming that it debunks any myths of grandiosity associated with the Church

[47] Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 1093.
[48] In Muscetta, *Cultura* cit., see especially chapter six, 'Ideali e sentimenti politici', pp. 153-213. In Samonà, Giuseppe Paolo, *G.G. Belli: La commedia romana e la commedia celeste* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1969), see especially chapter five, 'Fermenti di miscredenza, eversione politica e dialetto', pp. 71-98. In Fasano, *I tarli* cit., see especially chapter one, 'I tarli dell'alberone. Belli 1834', pp. 19-66.
[49] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 25.

and that it 'anticipa figurativamente la specificazione esplicita di vecchiaia e decadenza' as contained in the second line. This is partly true, of course, but at the same time the augmentative is part of a more nuanced argument. The 'accrescitivo' also heralds an age-old, dignified majesty, promising shelter for the entire orchard, and yet the Church's protective mission is being blatantly betrayed at the temporal level. Similarly, finding the phrase 'solo ar Monno' slightly unclear, or rather, deliberately ambivalent (with singularity simultaneously positive and negative), Fasano picks up on the shifting dynamics when he states that 'l'unicità assomma segnali di gloria e di sgomento, di orgogliosa esaltazione e di faticosa sopravvivenza'.[50] I would take the latter element further still, however, to suggest that the speaker recognizes unequivocally from the outset that the Roman papacy is a uniquely anachronistic form of government.[51] With the idea of decay strengthened alliteratively in the 'tutto tarlato' description, the disease is presented as natural rather than heavenly, with the onetime splendour spoiled and wormed away by elements of God's creation itself. In other words, this has nothing to do with religious matters, but is a question of pure politics, entirely separate from what the Church might represent spiritually. As Samonà and Lanza have pointed out, this is much more an attack on the temporal power of the papacy, which would only be abolished some thirty years later as Italian troops breached Porta Pia on 20 September 1870, realizing the then late Cavour's progressive vision of a 'libera Chiesa in libero Stato'.[52]

[50] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 25.

[51] According to Ripari too, the poem sees the Church as a 'caso unico al mondo per la sua essenza teocratica', Ripari 2010, p. 221. In my view, the poem is a meditation on the separation of the powers, the temporal and the spiritual. Recognizing the necessity to strip the papacy of its political power is still entirely compatible with a celebration of the Church's religious powers, hence the apparently opposing forces of the sonnet and its potentially undecided speaker.

[52] Samonà, p. 87. Lanza sees the 'arberone' as the Church, adding 'ma indubbiamente la mira è al potere temporale, la cui storia è accennata nei vv. 5-6'. Following the logic of the sonnet, she argues that the allegory 'parrebbe implicare infatti l'idea della fine violenta non solo del potere temporale, ma della stessa

Fasano even finds a political meaning in the adversative conjunctions 'eppuro' and 'ma', apparently highlighting 'il deposito di contradditorietà dei caratteri storici della Chiesa', which lines three and four outline: 'vecchiaia e ostinata vitalità' in the tree's perennial fruit bearing, and 'magnificenza esteriore' in the insistence on appearance, both in stark contrast to the reality of the 'interna, tossica malignità', again strengthened through the alliteration.[53] Similarly, Vighi takes lines three and four, somewhat more narrowly, as 'un'allusione all'esteriorità delle periodiche grandiose manifestazioni', the sporadic public displays of pomp and ceremony associated with the ecclesiastical calendar, and refers the reader to 1713. 'La riliggione der tempo nostro'.[54] The particular adjectives of the fourth line, moreover, according to Fasano's acute reading, harbour 'un indubbio richiamo alla leggendaria tradizione di splendori e delitti dei papati rinascimentali', presumably echoing the political manoeuvring of some fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Popes in a manner reminiscent of temporal princes, with the papacy

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chiesa cattolica.' In this regard, she links the poem's content to certain revolutionary enlightenment authors, stating that 'sembrerebbero fruttare a pieno, a questo punto, le apocalittiche previsioni dei Volney e degli Herbigny'. The choice of Volney and Herbigny is clearly suggested by Muscetta, who attempts to locate Belli's political thought in the wider European context and reconcile the poet's writings with some of his readings, noting that Volney 'è l'ideologo più audace ch'egli ebbe modo di frequentare con assidue letture prima del '30' (the *Zibaldone* bears witness to this) and speculating that Belli might also have been familiar with Herbigny due to various affinities. See Muscetta, pp. 181-194. On Belli's transcription of the contents of a work by Volney, see Luttaza 2004, p. 150. Lanza ultimately clouds her reading of 'L'arberone' somewhat by reducing it to Belli's general anticlerical stance, claiming that 'qualche giorno dopo (26 gennaio) Belli precisa il suo intendimento nel sonetto *Er 28 settembre* (1068), riprendendo il filo della sua polemica che è evidentemente diretta non contro la Chiesa ma contro l'impostura clericale secondo la quale "sotto la parola / de quella *Cchiesa* s'ha da intenne er Reggno" (vv. 13-14).' Lanza 1976, pp. 121-122. The distinction between 'Cchiesa' and 'Reggno' here is clearly intended as a specific attack on the temporal power of the papacy in my view, again suggesting this is the real target of 'L'arberone'.

[53] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 25.

[54] *PR*, V, p. 174. The cross-reference is appropriate, since the sonnet features a speaker equally disillusioned with religion, with both poems lamenting a recent decadence as expressed through the adverb 'oramai'. The poem begins: 'Che rriliggione! è rriliggione questa? / Tuttaquanta oramai la riliggione / conziste in zinfonie, ggenufressione, / seggni de crosce, fittucce a la vesta.' The persona attempts to expose what he sees as the empty rhetoric and pageantry of religion, propagated both by the Church authorities, with the condemnatory enumeratio including such items as 'priscissione', and as the opening quatrain illustrates (and where this sonnet differs from 'L'arberone'), by the collusion of the so-called believers, who are happy to perform sham 'ggenufressione' and 'seggni de crosce'. The speaker goes on to conclude that the paper on which the gospel is written is fit merely for wrapping cured meats, 'è un libbro da dà a ppeso ar zalumaro'.

plagued by corruption and the frequent selling of Church offices.[55] The meaning of the opening quatrain is now clear: the Church goes through the motions of keeping up appearances, but its produce, either its teachings generally or the personnel the Pope nominates in terms of cardinals, despite the outer gloss, is neither what it seems nor what it should be. As an organ of power, it is rotten to the core.

The second quatrain confirms the political allegory, with the Church's territories having been subjected to a series of foreign invasions, each in turn failing to solve its original problems, instead making the situation worse. Fasano reads the fifth line, with its mention of a book, as a general reference to history, in which the papacy has been 'preda volta per volta di una violenza laica che tenta vanamente di assoggettarne e ridimensionarne la presenza storica', but which merely brought about 'una ulteriore degradazione'[56]. Lanza, however, considers it a 'probabile allusione a un libro preciso', and conjectures plausibly that the book in question might be Pietro Giannone's *Storia civile del regno di Napoli*, having recognized an affinity between the image of the cancer in the sonnet's final line and a similar one in Giannone's introduction: Lanza explains that 'il cancro che rodeva il regno napoletano era il mito della donazione di Costantino che aveva dato alla Chiesa il potere feudale di sfruttamento delle plebi.'[57] Indeed, despite

[55] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 25. Such a suggestion is by no means far-fetched. Belli's portraits of corruption at the highest level of the papacy are numerous. See, for example, at a general level, 2121. 'La vita da cane', or attacks on specific figures such as Gregory XVI in 395. 'Momoriale ar Papa'. Moreover, the papacy is often considered an eternal office, both in the sense of divine right and succession, and an innate tendency towards perpetual misdemeanour (see, for instance, 1698. 'Er passa-mano', which begins 'Er Papa, er Visceddio, Nostro Siggnore, / è un Padre eterno com'er Padr'Eterno. / Ciovè nun more, o, ppe ddí mmejjo, more, / ma mmore solamente in ne l'isterno.') With this in mind it is more than conceivable that Belli may have used the excesses of past Pontiffs as yardsticks for his satire of contemporary papal incumbents. Belli is clearly aware of the Pasquino tradition he inherits, for example, with the earliest commentator Morandi describing the sonnets as "pasquinate d'autore", quoted by Gibellini in Vigolo-Gibellini, *Sonetti*, p. 630.

[56] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 25.

[57] Lanza 1976, p. 121. Giannone's book is referenced several times in the *Zibaldone*, including the contents of an 1823 edition transcribed in a forty-page long index in volume VIII, unedited but see Luttazi, especially p. 271. See also *LGZ*, p. 542. In a letter to Vincenza Roberti, too, on 14 December 1833, a month

Lanza not mentioning it, the same allegorical image of diseased roots was used by Lorenzo Valla himself in attributing the corruption of the entire Church to the Pope as illegitimate political leader and exploiter of the people.[58] Such a reading lends further substance to the revolutionary nature of the poem as a whole, and helps to situate Belli more firmly on the side of the popolo, a controversial point to which we shall return in due course.

Not all commentators are in agreement over the reference to 'oggni nazzione', either, with Vighi taking the pruning as an allusion to the 'diverse invasioni subite dalla città papale, e particolarmente all'ultima dominazione francese del 1808-1814' and the poisonous fruit as a reference to the Restoration and its 'tristi effetti', presumably Austrian hegemony over the control of the Italian peninsula, following the Congress of

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prior to writing 'L'arberone', in which he laments being divided professionally between various parts of the machinations of state, calling it 'un paese d'inferno', Belli advises Roberti on which historians her daughter should read. Having recommended Frenchman Charles Rollin, Belli states that 'le altre storie italiane di classici autori moderni, tanto italiani che stranieri, sono troppo politiche e sublimi per una tenera mente', among which he includes Giannone, Mazzocchi Alemanni 1973, I, pp. 49-50. There can thus be no doubt that Belli was familiar with the *Storia civile del regno di Napoli*, which Mazzocchi Alemanni describes in his footnotes to the letter as a 'monumento dell'anticurialismo', ibid., p. 51.

[58] Valla's exposure of the fraudulent donation of Constantine, effectively an attack on the legitimacy of papal temporal power, includes some ferocious criticism of the papacy. With the dialogic format of the text, the Pope is put on trial as the dominant voice of Valla's advocate character accuses the pontiff of keeping the people in a state of perpetual servitude, repeatedly forcing them into rebellion: 'At papa, ut videre licet, insidiatur sedulo libertati populorum. Ideoque vicissim illi quotidie oblate facultate […] rebellant.' The long list of papal crimes against the Roman populace bears striking similarities with some of Belli's sonnets: 'Deum testamur, iniuria cogit nos rebellare, ut olim Israel a Roboam fecit. Et que tanta fuit illa iniuria, quanta portio nostre calamitatis graviora solver tribute? Quid enim, si rem publicam nostram exhaurias? Exhausisti! Si templa spolies? Spoliasti! Si virginibus matribusque familias stuprum inferas? Intulisti! Si urbem sanguine civili perfundas? Perfudisti! Hec nobis sustinenda sunt? An potius, cum tu pater nobis esse desieris, nos quoque filios esse obliviscemur? Pro patre, summe pontifex, aut (si hoc te magis iuvat) pro domino hic te populus advocavit, non pro hoste atque carnifice.' There are similarities here too with the failure of the 'arberone' to fulfil its protective role of sheltering the orchard as promised in the augmentative suffix. In Valla's version of the allegory, the whole of Italy's ruin stems from a single source, namely the corruption of the papacy: 'Si fons amarus est: et rivus; si radix immunda: et rami; si delibatio sancta non est: nec massa. Ita e diverso, si rivus amarus: fons obstruendus est; si rami immundi: e radice vitium venit; si massa sancta non est: delibatio quoque abominanda est.' *La falsa donazione di Costantino*, ed. and trans. by Olga Pugliese (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli,1994), pp. 238-242.

Vienna in 1814.[59] Lanza similarly reads the 'frutto' in lines seven and eight as the product of foreign invading forces, but takes it to refer to more recent events occurring on the eve of the sonnet's composition, namely the 'grave situazione economica seguita agli interventi francese e austriaco nei moti di Romagna'.[60] What she most likely has in mind are the revolts in and around Bologna in 1831, following the economic crisis of the late 1820s and administrative confusion brought about by the death of the weak Pius VIII, 'un gran brutto strucchione de Pontefisce', in December 1830.[61] Equally, many of the failed uprisings of the Carbonari also took place in these years, despite similar failings in the previous decade, spurred on by the shift to popular sovereignty in France with the July Revolution of 1830, only to be crushed again in the Papal Legations in 1831 by Austrian troops at the request of the newly-elected Gregory XVI.[62] Pockets of unrest continued throughout the early 1830s, however, with Belli even finding himself close to some of the

[59] *PR*, V, p. 174. There is further textual evidence of Belli's attitude towards the Restoration in another of the politicized sonnets of early 1834. In 1119. 'L'Ombrellari', an umbrella seller recounts how he rejoiced at the appearance of a rainbow after several 'mesi assciutti', which Belli comments on in a particularly cryptic fashion: 'l'apparizione dell'iride è sempre un miracolo promettitore di serenità, episodio storico della gran tregua fatta da Dio con Noè dopo a' cento giorni, ai quali successe la prima restaurazione, diversa alquanto da quella venuta poi dietro ai cento giorni di Bonaparte', *PR*, V, p. 299. Teodonio calls this 'una fine stoccata contro la Restaurazione', finding it particularly odd since Belli 'arriva perfino a intervenire sul testo sacro, giacché nella *Genesi* non si parla affatto di "cento giorni"'. It is difficult to disagree with Teodonio's conclusion that such a stance represents 'un'adesione ai princìpi liberali'. Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 1152.

[60] Lanza, *Sonetti*, II, p. 1123.

[61] Belli's early sonnet on 'Pio Ottavo', according to Morandi, marks the point where the poet 'comincia a parlare per conto del popolo, e col vero linguaggio del popolo', quoted in Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 19. For the historical context of Restoration Italy, see David Laven, 'The Age of Restoration' in John A. Davis, (ed.), *Italy in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 51-73.

[62] To protect his interests, Gregory XVI established a ramshackle band of armed brigands known as the 'centurioni', manned by some of the poorest and most brutal members of the popolino, including thugs and criminals. In 148. 'L'incontro cor padrone vecchio', Belli stages a meeting between a nobleman and his erstwhile servant, now employed as a mercenary in the appropriately nicknamed 'Reggimento Canajja', which the master dismisses as a 'corpo di poco onor'. Belli explains in a footnote that 'dall'epoca della rivolta del 1831 è stata organizzata una milizia di bravi papalini anfibia tra il soldato e il birro, la quale ha ottenuto dai popoli il nome di *Regimento-Canaglia*'. *PR*, II, p. 127. 'On the government side, Austrian intervention to crush the revolutions did little to restore political authority or to control the tide of popular hostility which continued to mount after the revolutions were over: in Bologna, for example, repeated uprisings against the papal administration obliged the Austrians to retain a garrison there until 1838.' Lucy Riall, *Risorgimento: The History of Italy from Napoleon to Nation State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 15.

troubles. On 10 May 1832, for instance, he had written to his wife from Fossombrone in the Marche, then in the Papal Legations under the reactionary protection of the new Pontiff and thus a mere stone's throw from Ancona. Long controlled by the French prior to the Restoration, Ancona as such had been a revolutionary stronghold for the Carboneria, with Mazzini's Giovane Italia also garnering support there. Upon election, Gregory XVI had made the capture of the port city the first priority of his new government. In February 1832, the French had once again stationed troops there, in a provocative show of strength against both the papacy and the Austrians, whose forces Gregory had to rely on, inevitably leading to resentment among the indigenous population, which Belli describes in his letter to Mariuccia:

> Avrai udito che in Ancona accadono de' sussurri, ed i Carabinieri sono rinchiusi e guardati dai francesi. Pare che tutto provenga dalla imprudenza di un ufficiale di quel corpo, il quale all'istanza un po' viva di certi cittadini che chiedevano la restituzione di un ottonaio carcerato per fabbricazione d'armi vietate, si vuole che corrispondesse con un colpo di pistola il quale uccidesse un uomo che usciva di chiesa pe' fatti suoi. Il popolo parve molto indignato. La frequenza di simili sconcerti pei diversi luoghi dello Stato non può essere favorevole al ristabilimento della buona intelligenza reciproca, tanto necissaria pel ritorno di un ordine desideratissimo, al quale ciascuno dei partiti dovrebbe cospirare, cooperando col sagrifizio d'una parte del proprio orgoglio e del sommo diritto che affaccia. Il Mondo pare oggimai una caldaia di mosto. Per ora gran'acido si sviluppa: quando ci consoleremo col vino di tanto fermento?[63]

Belli's description of the fraught political situation as 'una caldaia di mosto' and the 'gran'acido' of the struggles fits perfectly as an illustration of the burning, infected fruit of 'L'arberone'. His impatience in the letter to see an end to the turmoil and some kind of positive outcome is apparently mirrored in the sonnet. The volta turns towards a solution to the problem of the Church, with each tercet suggesting separate options. The

[63] *Lettere*, I, p. 248.

first is to intervene in a productive way: by grafting ('inzitallo', glossed by Belli as 'innestarlo') some liberalism onto the 'arberone', sanitising reform of the bitter anachronism might be possible, its fruit gradually becoming palatable, 'bbono da maggnallo'.[64] The second is the more radical solution, and the central force of the poem: since the corruption and disease is so engrained, 'er canchero sta in ne la radisce', total eradication might be called for through 'll'accetta e 'r foco'. As we have already seen, commentators have read the 'Carbonaro' as a member of the revolutionary society. What they seem to have missed, however, is that whilst 'll'accetta e 'r foco' were the charcoal-burners' tools of the trade and method of producing charcoal, the hatchet was significantly the symbol of a master carbonaro, the more important revolutionary rank.[65] Fasano thus rightly paraphrases the message of the final tercet as 'la violenza distruttiva rivoluzionaria', and it is difficult not to see this as the ultimate point of the poem.[66]

Having analysed the poem's content, something must be said of the poem's speaker. As Fasano observes, the two solutions to the problem of the 'arberone' are 'presentate come pareri altrui', rather than as those proposed by the persona, with 'entrambe suscettibili di credito da parte del parlante'.[67] It is nevertheless true that the speaker seems to have more sympathy for the second option, both because the persona is closer to the 'Carbonaro amico mio' than the neutral and unconnected 'quarchiduno', and because it receives more poetic prominence at the sonnet's point of resolution. As Lanza points out, then, it seems that 'l'unica vera soluzione è dunque quella rivoluzionaria,

[64] Belli might have in mind the events of 1821, when the liberal-leaning Carlo Alberto of Savoy, as regent of Piedmont-Sardinia, conceded a constitution to appease the revolutionaries of the Piedmont insurrection, which was later rescinded upon the return of the king, Charles Felix.
[65] See Johann Peter Kirsch, 'Carbonari' in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 18 vols (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), III, p. 330-331.
[66] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 25.
[67] Ibid., pp. 25-26.

auspicata dai "carbonari"'.[68] Muscetta thus conjectures that the sonnet might have been prompted 'dall'audacia di un cospiratore del '34, qualificato con termine meno generico e anacronistico del solito "giacobino"', whereas others have taken the 'Carbonaro amico mio' more literally, with Vighi commenting generally that 'il poeta contava tra i suoi amici diversi patrioti', and Ripari even going so far as to suggest a potential identity in Felice Scifoni.[69] Implicit in Vighi and Ripari's remarks, however, is the conflation of the poem's speaker with Belli as author. Indeed such a conflation is the accepted critical reading of the poem.

It is true that there is a relative lack of characterization in terms of the persona. With most of the poem's detail beyond the opening quatrain consisting of reported discourse, be it the authority of written sources in the guise of the book or oral sources in the two advisors, the speaker discloses surprisingly little about himself apart from his Roman roots, which are gleaned from the fleeting reference to the 'orto mio' and the language of his speech. Alluding to Belli's own introduction, Fasano observes that the persona is not one of the typical figures populating the *Sonetti*, who usually reveal

[68] Lanza, *Sonetti*, II, p. 1123.

[69] Muscetta, *Cultura* cit., p. 180. *PR*, V, p. 174. Ripari, Edoardo, *L'accetta e il fuoco: cultura storiografica, politica e poesia in Giuseppe Gioachino Belli* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2010), p. 221. Scifoni, whom Muscetta calls 'un vero e proprio cospiratore, propagandista rivoluzionario tra i popolani di Trastevere', was known to frequent the 'Società di lettura' that Belli had founded in 1830, which according to Teodonio marked 'uno dei momenti di più intensa rottura da parte di un ristrettissimo gruppo di intellettuali nei confronti della cultura ufficiale in quegli anni di piena Restaurazione'. Muscetta, *Cultura* cit., p. 200; Teodonio 2004, p. 312. Hosted by Belli, the society sought to recreate 'quell'elemento liberale escluso, dopo i moti del 1820-21, dalla Tiberina', in an attempt to facilitate 'l'acquisto, evidentemente clandestino, di riviste', thus serving as 'una sorta di esercitazione segreta di uno dei fondamenti strutturali dell'ideologia liberale: la libertà di stampa'. Ripari 2010, p. 125. Such was his commitment to the revolutionary cause, notes Ripari, that in 1831 'il sovversivo' Scifoni 'sarebbe stato imprigionato per cospirazione, e che ancora nel 1849 si sarebbe distinto per una fervida protesta antipapale nel corso della Repubblica mazziniana' (p. 125). Paolo Piccardi, 'poeta vernacolo di argomento politico' (Muscetta, p. 200), was also a member of the society, with whom Belli shared 'un medesimo sentimento di insoddisdazione e di fastidio per la situazione storico-politica' (Teodonio, p. 312), as demonstrated in a Romanesco sonnet by Piccardi (transcribed by Belli and occasionally mistakenly attributed to him) entitled 'La rivoluzzione der 31', see *PR*, IX.2, p. 37. A plausible alternative candidate for the carbonaro, if in fact a real identity was intended, might also be Pietro Sterbini, another high-profile revolutionary friend of the poet.

elements of their identity, including occupation: 'non bottegaio, non servo, non nudo pitocco né credula femminetta o fiero guidatore di carra: cade ogni schermatura plebea'.[70] The second part of the argument, stressed by Samonà, Vighi and Teodonio, is that because the sonnet depends on allegory, 'usata solo in funzione parodistica' according to Samonà, it necessarily betrays the fundamental character of the poetry as a whole: 'smentisce, o almeno contraddice, la natura comico-figurale del sonetto belliano', as Teodonio has it.[71] Leaving aside the one-dimensional description of the sonnets as comic, and the unfortunate choice of 'figurale' as a counter to the allegorical, the charge here is that the device of allegory is beyond the intellectual capacity of the Roman plebeian, 'essendo come concezione alieno dalla mentalità popolare'.[72] Through a dubious step of logic, the implication is that the persona must, by default, be a closet member of the bourgeoisie at one with the author. Such an argument might be plausible for the personae throughout the sonnets, but to distinguish the speaker in this poem is misguided. Moreover, the basic premise is flawed, however, not only in the wake of Barthes, but since poetry itself is beyond the means of the 'idioti', as Belli makes plain in the introduction, just as the countless linguistic puns, literary allusions, and the overall top-down sense of social consciousness presented in the sonnets cannot convincingly be maintained as products of realism.[73] Thirdly, and perhaps marking the most bewildering point in the reasoning, the revolutionary spirit of the sonnet is also taken as evidence of

[70] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 28. In the introduction, Belli states: 'Ogni quartiere di Roma, ogni individuo fra' suoi cittadini dal ceto medio in giù, mi ha somministrato episodii pel mio dramma: dove comparirà sì il bottegaio che il servo, e il nudo pitocco farà di sé mostra fra la credula femminetta e il fiero guidatore di carra.' *PR*, I, p. 23.
[71] Samonà, p. 82. Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 1093.
[72] Vighi, *PR*, V, p. 174.
[73] 'Il popolo quindi mancante di arte, manca di poesia. […] Questi idioti o nulla sanno o quasi nulla […] Sterili pertanto d'idee, limitate ne sono le forme del dire e scarsi i vocaboli.' *PR*, I, pp. 15-21.

an overlap between Belli and his speaker, since this too is beyond the plebeian mindset.[74] Paradoxically, this final point is argued blindly despite almost all commentators denying a progressive reading of Belli, on the basis of the author's conservative identity and subsequent denial of authorship, and despite their similar refusal to countenance any appetite for rebellion among the humble lower classes, on the basis of plain ignorance and an ultimate attachment to the Pope.

The upshot of this widespread equation of the speaker in 'L'arberone' with Belli as poet, is that the poem represents an 'eccezionalità imbarazzante' (Fasano) within the wider opus, forcing critics into apologetics of varying levels of plausibility. Some have dismissed the poem as a one-off, as if it were a lone rallying cry in the dark desert of the vast sonnet sequence. Although critics see no apparent contradiction in the fact that Belli's plebeian characters often denounce injustice, whether represented by an authoritarian form of government, by corruption in the judicial system, or by disparity between the rich and poor, the particular political impegno of 'L'arberone' is to be reserved for the bourgeois author. Even the otherwise insightful Fasano makes a tendentious distinction between 'l'eversività ribellistica primordiale, istintiva, talvolta affiorante nel tessuto propriamente *plebeo* dei *Sonetti*' and what the speaker of 'L'arberone' reveals as 'la lucida consapevolezza dell'esigenza di rimuovere – con qualsiasi mezzo – l'insidia cancerosa dello stato teocratico dal quadro di laica razionalità progressiva che il dominio borghese del mondo sta delineando'.[75] And yet, such a neat distinction would seem difficult to sustain given that two days previously, for example, Belli had written an equally scathing attack on the temporal power of the papacy,

[74] Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 1093.
[75] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 28.

ingeniously entitled 'Er governo der temporale'. The malapropism, perhaps a typical plebeian feature of speech, nevertheless involves the subtle shift from 'temporale' as adjective, to 'temporale' as noun, with the meaning something akin to 'the government of the storm', a feat presumably beyond the linguistic capabilities of the plebeian intellect.[76] Again, with no apparent sense of contradiction, editors have eagerly noted that 'eccezionalmente il poeta attribuisce qui al personaggio le proprie idee'.[77] Exception is clearly part of the norm.

Indeed, the apparent anomaly of 'L'arberone' has led to the likes of Vighi performing puzzling acrobatics. Having artificially removed the composition from the totality of the sonnets, on account of its exceptionality, he is forced to conclude that the poem 'rientra quindi nel disegno generale dell'opera romanesca soltanto per il linguaggio dialettale'.[78] This is undoubtedly, and emphatically, the case. How odd that Belli should include a 'sonetto romanesco' as part of his *Sonetti romaneschi*! If the contents of 'L'arberone' are so incongruous, so blatantly out of tune with his plebeian characters, why does the poet bother to attempt to mask them with the literary language he has by now been developing in over a thousand previous sonnets and deign to include the poem alongside his other creations? As Fasano shrewdly notes, Belli had used the same image of the disease-ridden roots of the 'arberone', including the identical phrase, almost a decade previously in a poem in lingua, to somewhat muted effect.[79] Could it be then that

[76] Linguistic distortion and the degree of plebeian awareness involved in such malapropisms will be discussed in the following section.
[77] *PR*, V, p. 162. The opening quatrain runs as follows: 'Ôh, ppenzateve un po' ccome volete / ch'er reggno ar Papa je l'ha ddato Iddio, / io sto cco le parole de don Pio: "Sete cojjoni assai si cce credete"'.
[78] *PR*, V, p. 174.
[79] The 1825 poem is called 'Che tempi! ossia il teatro' and 'il discorso è […] anche lì allegorico, come segnala il titolo, remando dal teatro a più generali deprecazioni sulla società moderna'. The relevant lines run as follows: 'Guardi che esempi, / che Iddio ci aiuti! / Veda in che tempi / siamo venuti! *Princîpis ostïa* / chi ha testa dice. Sta tutto il canchero / nella radice.' Fasano, *I tarli* cit., pp. 30-31. Note the analogy with

the language is in fact the poet's primary source of characterization across the entire collection?

It is here where Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework will allow us to reconcile the various contradictions posited by previous readers of the sonnet. To be fair to Fasano, he does see entirely that the poem's political force resides exclusively in its language, acknowledging that 'il romanesco è pienamente necessario a *L'arberone*'.[80] The credibility of the enunciation is dependent entirely upon the major language being deployed in a subversive fashion from a collective position of marginality. Despite politics being waged 'immezzo all'orto mio', the speaker and his associates are still, and always have been, excluded from the polis. Fasano thus recognizes the necessity of the deterritorialized language to express the exclusion behind the simmering rebellion:

> Ma proviamo a togliere questa guasta e corrotta favella a *L'arberone*: non rimarrebbe nulla. L'incisività simbolica della figurazione, la sua capacità semantica, è tutta affidata alla linearità "proverbiale e concisa" del romanesco. Basterebbe togliere le lievissime deformazioni foniche che caratterizzano il primo emistichio del v.2, "Solo ar monno…", per ridurne la già segnalata drammaticità contraddittoria alla banalità patetica di un sintagma consunto e poeticamente quasi muto, '*solo al mondo…*' – senza contare il contributo che la preposizione articolata romanesca a*r* dà al rotacismo del verso ("solo a*r* monno e o*r*amai tutto tar*l*ato"), che insieme allo scoppettio finale di dentali sorde ("*tutt*o *t*arla*t*o") sembra evocare direttamente lo sfrigolio rovinoso che corrode la pianta-Chiesa […].[81]

As with all the sonnets, the speaker's status as part of a collective minority is expressed, and assured, through language. In the end it is the very language of the sonnet which delivers the hammer blow of its poetic message. The deterritorialized language 'sembra

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the sentiment expressed by Porta's Donna Fabia Fabron de Fabrian in 'Offerta a Dio (la preghiera)': 'Ora mai anche mì don Sigismond / Convengo appien nella di lei paura / Che sia prossima assai la fin del mond, / Chè vedo cose di una tal natura, / D'una natura tal, che non ponn dars / Che in un mondo assai prossim a disfas.' *Poesie*, p. 616.

[80] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 29.

[81] Ibid., p. 31.

affondare direttamente il colpo d'accetta nel profondo del primordio romano'.[82] Unsurprisingly, Fasano is thus forced to see more than a mere poetico-linguistic necessity in the Romanesco, and admit instead to an absolute 'necessità romanesca del discorso politico de *L'arberone*'.[83] In this sense, then, as Samonà finds, 'scelte politiche si rivelano anche quella del dialetto e del "personaggio del popolo"'.[84]

The exclusion is perhaps best seen close up in 'Lo scaricabbarili der governo', where existential difference is boiled down to a pronominal gulf in status.[85] The refrain 'ce penzeranno lòro' runs throughout the sonnet, repeatedly stressing the impotent otherness of the implied 'nnoantri', but ironically denouncing the empty promise of future action. As with 'L'arberone', the exclusion here is political, but is merely an intensification of the subjects' marginalization which extends across all aspects of society. In Deleuzoguattarian terms, Belli thus becomes the champion of a new form of activism, forming an 'active solidarity' with his plebeian subjects, regardless of any fun poking he indulges in at their expense along the way. In an essay entitled 'La plebe e i liberali nei sonetti del 1834', in which 'L'arberone' is conspicuous by its absence, Umberto Carpi ultimately denies the possibility of a progressive reading of the poetry, and yet his observation on the collective subject of the sonnets now makes sense. Within the poetic I of the *Sonetti*, or rather the plural 'nnoantri', the intellectual author and the Roman underclass 'vengono accomunati di fronte alla realtà […] dall'essere entrambi esclusi ed emarginati, dalla comune incapacità-impossibilità di praticarla

[82] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 32-33.
[83] Ibid., p. 31.
[84] Samonà, pp. 92-93.
[85] *PR*, IX, p. 251.

politicamente.'[86] The poet is fully aware of the impracticability of his political manifesto for change as exemplified in 'L'arberone', hence Ripari concluding that 'l'assenza di prospettive, di rimedi praticabili coinvolge l'intera stratificazione sociale'.[87] This is entirely true, yet the literary realm offers a whole series of possibilities which are otherwise unavailable. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, 'the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere in this milieu'.[88]

The exercise is by no means idle, either. It is not just a question of capturing a broken people for the sake of mimesis. What matters is the literary forum in which to experiment. In Belli, literature certainly is the people's concern. The omnipotence of the literary dimension lies in stark contrast to the impotence of the real. Belli knows he is not about to bring down governments, but literature is the realm of the possible and is destabilizing in and of itself. It is in this light that the unanimous recognition of the revolutionary spirit in 'L'arberone' can be fully accommodated. Against Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature, there is no contradiction entailed in recognizing that 'L'arberone' harbours 'propositi eversivi' (Muscetta), a 'prospettiva […] rivoluzionaria' (Teodonio), and 'tutti gli elementi di forza del radicalismo critico di Belli' (Ripari), even when bearing in mind the poet's bourgeois nature and conservative views, including those of his later years when authorship of the sonnets is denied.[89] The sonnet is entirely political, but we need not get caught up in trying to locate it absolutely in the

[86] Umberto Carpi, *Il poeta e la politica: Leopardi, Belli, Montale* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1975), p. 74.
[87] Ripari 2010, p. 221; Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 1093; Ripari 2010, p. 221.
[88] Deleuze-Guattari, pp. 17-18.
[89] Muscetta, *Cultura* cit., p. 180.

circumscribed politics of Restoration century Rome. In other words, the politics transcend the actual, as Fasano concludes:

> l'eccezionalità di un sonetto come *L'arberone* non sta tanto nei suoi contenuti alternativi al sanfedismo e/o al ribellismo dei plebei, ma nel suo rendere esplicito il sospetto, la possibilità, magari la proposta di una visione del mondo alternativa e innovativa.[90]

It is a manifesto for political change, but the ultimate message of 'L'arberone' is that neither political solution proposed in the sonnet itself is truly viable. The poem is the only healthy, functioning part of the world it creates. Literature is thus the only possible method of eradicating cancers: 'the literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come.'[91] In the aforementioned 'Lo scaricabbarili der governo', the gulf in status between 'loro' and 'nnoantri' seems infinitely unbridgeable. And yet the poet has the audacity to imagine change. Until some such future time when the unthinkable might occur, poetry is the only realm in which revolution is literally possible:

> Sai come va a ffiní? ffinissce poi
> che ssi sti *lòro* nun ce penzeranno,
> un po' ppiú in là cce penzeremo noi.

This is how the 'macchina' of the *Sonetti romaneschi* can be seen as 'an anti-Oedipal machine, a revolutionary political machine, and an a-signifying linguistic machine.'[92]

4.3 Belli's Romanesco as deterritorialized langue

As 'L'arberone' shows, Belli is clearly subversive and anarchic in theme. Many other sonnets, particularly those of 1834, defined by Vighi in an eponymous essay as Belli's 'momento della maturazione', also display revolutionary, anti-establishment thematics.[93]

[90] Fasano, *I tarli* cit., p. 55.
[91] Deleuze-Guattari, pp. 17-18.
[92] Bogue, p .108.
[93] Vighi 1984, pp. 7-38.

In addition to the already mentioned 'Er governo der temporale', notable examples include 1235. 'La Scittà eterna', in which the legitimacy of temporal power is again criticized, and countless attacks against the corruption of the papacy. Belli seems to be particularly occupied by politics during this time, even resorting to events in recent history to pass comment on current affairs. This is why, for instance, in January 1834 the poet writes a sonnet entitled 'L'ottobre der 31', describing the hypocrisy of Gregory XVI's handling of the economic crisis amid the instability of the uprisings in various parts of the Papal States. 'In un tempo de tanto fraggello', the speaker notes, the Pontiff not only presided over vast and unaffordable public spending on the upkeep of the papal palaces, 'sse spenne mijjara a rrifà bbello / tutto er palazzo', but also spends significant periods away from Rome 'a vvilleggià', obviously at public expense.[94] Meanwhile the Vatican's propaganda machine is continually working to save face, as Belli points out in a footnote: 'Ne' molti editti che si stamparono durante le vicende politiche del 1831, non si leggevano che espressioni di cordoglio e di pianto delle paterne viscere di Sua Beatitudine.'[95] The point of resorting to a situation in recent memory, as Vighi conjectures, 'è probabilmente dovuta a circostanze analoghe' in the current political landscape, especially when the historical experience is staged in the vivid present.[96] This is undoubtedly the case, as later in the same year Belli writes the corollary to the poem in

[94] *PR*, V, p. 157. In a note, Belli adds his own criticism of such spending: ''Malgrado la trista condizione dell'erario in quel tempo, si spesero vistose somme per rimodernare il palazzo, cosí che meglio che ad un Papa potesse dar ricetto ad una sposa regina.' However, Gregory XVI's hypocrisy merely continued that of his predecessors. Spending policies of this kind were by no means new. An anonymous seventeenth century pasquinade against Innocent X, for example, has a simple critique of public policy and basic statement of need from the perspective of the people: 'Noi volemo altro che guglie e fontane! / Pane volemo, pane, pane, pane!' Dell'Arco, *Pasquino e le pasquinate* (Milan: Martello, 1957). p. LIV. Such concerns were perennial, and the conditions of the general population confirmed by external sources, particularly the accounts of travelling foreigners. Writing as late as 1859, for instance, Frenchman Edmond About noted that in the Rome of Pius IX 'the budget of public works is devoted to the repair of churches, and the building of basilicas', even against a backdrop of blatant poverty and inequality. About 1859, pp. 188-189.
[95] *PR*, V, p. 157.
[96] *PR*, V, p. 156.

1332. 'L'ottobbre der 34', when the economy is again in dire straits, this time owing to drought. The reader is expected to make connections and draw logical conclusions from the fact that once again 'er Papa sta in villeggiatura', with quotidian reality an utter irrelevance for the head of state: 'Tanto, o ppiove o nun piove, er Papa maggna'.[97]

In Belli, however, rebellious thematics of this kind are compounded at the linguistic level. Having shown how the *Sonetti romaneschi* fit broadly within Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature, we now need to examine how Belli's Romanesco mirrors what they see as its essential ingredient: deterritorialized language. At face value, however, there is apparently a significant stumbling block barring the application of Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka's langue to Belli's literary language. 'A minor literature', we are told, 'doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.'[98] Apparently worse still, 'regionalisms', by which they mean a 'dialect or patois, a vernacular language', cannot 'contribute to revolutionary movements'.[99] But both obstacles are easily overcome. As we saw in the opening chapter, Belli does not conceive of his language as a dialect or patois. Indeed, in the important letter to Gabrielli, he goes further than he does in the introduction to refute such an equation: 'Il parlar romanesco non è un dialetto e neppure un vernacolo della lingua italiana, ma unicamente una sua corruzione o, diciam meglio, una sua storpiatura'.[100] The notion of linguistic distortion, as will become apparent, is of fundamental importance for Deleuze and Guattari's agenda of rebellion. The language of the *Sonetti romaneschi* is thus a corrupt version of the standard major

[97] *PR*, VI, p. 13.
[98] Deleuze-Guattari, p. 16.
[99] Ibid., p. 24.
[100] *LGZ*, pp. 377-78.

language, and as a sociolect, Belli's literary idiom is anchored in the language of a very clearly defined minority.[101] Moreover, in the same letter, Belli is certain that his main method of characterization will allow him to pursue a sociological agenda, with more than a hint of the power struggles to come: it is through this particular language that the minority can express 'i suoi originali pensieri intorno ai piú elevati ordini di questo social corpo di cui esso occupa il fondo'.[102] As Bogue states, quoting from *A Thousand Plateaus*, 'major and minor languages are not "two different sorts of languages, but two possible treatments of the same language", one of which extracts from linguistic variables "constants and constant relationships", the other of which "puts them in a state of continuous variation"'.[103] Bogue goes on to say that 'the expressive elaboration' of a minor language allows it to undermine 'the major language's constants' and to 'deterritorialize the major language', pointing out that 'the lexical penury of a minor language also serves the same end'.[104] Belli's literary language clearly does the same from both perspectives, and fulfils all the criteria of deterritorialized langue.[105]

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the main weapon of minor literature is its revolutionary langue, an 'asignifying intensive utilization of language'.[106] To illustrate what they consider as examples of deterritorialization, in which a major language is somehow wrested from its anchors of power and subjected to 'strange and minor uses' in order to subvert the literary world from within, Deleuze and Guattari point to the way in

[101] Belli goes on in the letter to describe Romanesco as a 'favella non di Roma ma del rozzo e spropositato suo volgo'. *LGZ*, p. 378.
[102] *LGZ*, p. 378.
[103] Bogue, pp. 107-123, (p. 118).
[104] Ibid., (p. 118).
[105] In the letter to Gabrielli, Belli acnkowledges the lexical penury of Romanesco: 'nel linguaggio di una plebe si può dir poco o nulla, perché la vera plebe difetta di vocaboli come di notizie e di idee'. *LGZ*, p. 378. According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is 'the German language of Prague [...] in its very poverty' that will allow Kafka the creative room for political manoeuvre. Deleuze-Guattari, p. 20.
[106] Deleuze-Guattari, p. 22.

which a 'Czech Jew writes in German, or an Ouzbekian writes in Russian', or what 'blacks in America today are able to do with the English language.'[107] Attempting to analyse further what it is about Prague German, with its 'withered vocabulary' and 'incorrect syntax', which allows Kafka to transform it into such a destabilizing force, they argue that a whole range of subversive effects are caused by various linguistic elements expressing the 'internal tensions of a language', which they call 'intensives' or 'tensors'.[108] Drawing on the work of Belgian linguist Haïm Vidal Séphiha, scholar of Judeo-Spanish, who 'terms intensive "any linguistic tool that allows a move toward the limit of a notion or a surpassing of it"', Deleuze and Guattari define tensors as 'all sorts of master-words, verbs, or prepositions that assume all sorts of senses; prenominal or purely intensive verbs as in Hebrew; conjunctions, exclamations, adverbs; and *terms that connote pain*'.[109] The closest they come to offering concrete examples of some of these intensives in action is in enlisting Klaus Wagenbach's observations on the linguistic distortion and invention in Kafka's peculiar German:

> Wagenbach cites as the characteristics of this form of German the incorrect use of prepositions; the abuse of the pronominal; the employment of malleable verbs (such as *Giben*, which is used for the series "put, sit, place, take away" and which thereby becomes intensive); the multiplication and succession of adverbs; the use of pain-filled connotations; the importance of the accent as a tension internal to the word; and the distribution of consonants and vowels as part of an internal discordance. Wagenbach insists on this point: all these marks of the poverty of a language show up in Kafka but have been taken over by a creative utilization for the purposes of a new sobriety, a new expressivity, a new flexibility, a new intensity. "Almost every word I write jars up against the next, I hear the consonants rub leadenly against each other and the vowels sing an accompaniment like Negroes in a minstrel show."

[107] Deleuze-Guattari, pp. 17-19.
[108] Ibid., p. 22. The term 'intensive' is borrowed from the postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard.
[109] Ibid., p. 22.

> *Language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or limits.*[110]

The above almost reads as a description of Belli's Romanesco. In the letter to Placido Gabrielli, Belli states that 'la lingua abbietta e buffona de' romaneschi', which he claims is not suited to translating a sacred text, is merely a 'storpiatura' of the major language, labelling Romanesco a 'favella non di Roma ma del rozzo e spropositato suo volgo'.[111] From the introduction to the sonnets, whilst it is clear that Belli is anchoring his language in realism, he is already hinting that he will put it to a new literary use and push it further along similar lines of escape. The description of the new language he is recording often resorts to value judgements of corruption. His task is to capture 'il suono della voce cupo e gutturale', with individual phonemes being distinguished from the "correct" language of Tuscan.[112] The sounds represented by the grapheme *g*, for example, involve connotations of bitterness and turgidity:

> La *g* fra due vocali non si addolcisce mai nel modo che sogliono i buoni favellatori italiani, come in *agio*, *pregio*, *bigio*, ecc., ma si aspreggia invece e si duplica. Doppia poi, o preceduta da consonante avanti alla *e* ed alla *i*, si pronuncia turgida come la *c* ne' medesimi casi.[113]

Beyond the introduction, however, distortions of the type identified by Wagenbach and conceived as tensors by Deleuze and Guattari, are commonplace. The

[110] Deleuze-Guattari, p. 22. The penultimate sentence is a quotation from Kafka's diaries.
[111] *LGZ*, pp. 377-78.
[112] *PR*, I, p. 25.
[113] *PR*, I, p. 31. In the introduction, it is clear that Belli is aware of the gap between graphic convention and the phonic reality of the referent: 'La scrittura è mia, e con essa tento d'imitare la loro parola. Perciò del valore de' segni cogniti io mi valgo ad esprimere incogniti suoni.' *PR*, I, p. 31. Taking relevant graphemes in turn alphabetically, first dealing with consonants and then briefly vowels, Belli is fully aware that many graphemes represent different phonemes, as his examples amply demonstrate. In the example quoted above, dealing with the voiced palatal affricate in '*agio*, *pregio*, *bigio*', he is commenting on the shift in pronunciation from the so-called correct (Belli is preoccupied by the concept of 'l'ortoepia' in the introduction) and 'softened' [ʒ] (to what he considers the corrupt and 'bitter' [ʃ]. In '1012. Er confessore de manica larga', the main character is a certain Padre Biagio, rendered 'Padre Bbiascio', and one of his phrases also shows the same sound change, when his imperative 'e vvàcce adascio' is glossed by Belli as 'vacci adagio'. Belli would appear to be consistent in his orthography here, since 'bigio', for example, is rendered 'biscio' in 145. 'Er galantomo'.

incorrect use of prepositions, for instance, is omnipresent in the *Sonetti*. One such frequent example is *in ne* ('in ne la radice' ('L'arberone'), 'in ne la gola' ('La stragge de li nnoscenti'), 'in ne le fiche eterne' ('La bbella Ggiuditta')), a sort of pleonastic hypercorrection possibly revealing interference from, and unease with, the particle *ne*, in turn suggesting confusion between its partitive and locative functions, or a more basic ignorance of the convention *in + def. art. = nel/nella*, which usually results in *ner/nella* or *ne la*.

Abuse of the pronominal, as Wagenbach has it, also features heavily. Corruptions of indefinite pronouns include 'ggnisuno', 'ggnissuno', 'gnisun', 'gnissun', and a very early 'nisuno' in 146. 'A li caggnaroli sull'ore calle', as well as the frequent 'antro' and the emphatic 'gnisunantro' in 470. 'La sposa'. In the introduction, Belli highlights what he sees as a phono-morphological change in Romanesco when he states that 'la *i* nei monosillabi *mi, ti, ci, si, vi,* trasformasi in *e*, pronunciandosi *me, te, ce, se, ve*.'[114] Again this is seen as a corruption, when it is in fact more likely a conservative maintenance of the Latin protonic *e*, which instead closes to *i* in Tuscan. As a result, personal pronouns include 'me' and 'te', but also 'je' or 'jje', with Belli erroneously referring to the latter as an article in the introduction: 'l'articolo *gli* si muta in *je*: *je disse, fajje* (gli disse, fagli), ecc'.[115] Interestingly, Belli hazily distinguishes the vowel change from *i* to *e* in monosyllables, along with the change from *e* to *i* in conditional 'se' ('la *e* in *se*, particella condizionale, volgesi in *i*'), as particularly ungrammatical corruptions, as if the other phenomena he has been describing are merely issues of sound change and orthography:

[114] *PR*, I, p. 37.
[115] *PR*, I, p. 31. Vighi rightly points out that this is 'un'evidente svista o salto di copiatura', explaining that the poet 'avrebbe dovuto dire "Ma *gli* come articolo si muta in *li* (*li spiriti*, ecc.), come particella pronominale in *je*: *je disse*, ecc.", o simili.'

‘Questo rilievo per altro apparterrebbe più alla grammatica che all’ortografia: e noi di grammatica non parleremo, potendone i vizii apparir chiaramente dagli esempii’. [116]

In this regard, however, Belli has clearly identified his subjects as those exhibiting to the greatest extent what he sees as linguistic corruption. When commenting on his perceptive observation of the shift from preconsonantal *l* to *r*, for instance, he sees this in terms of linguistic slovenliness, despite apparently noticing a continuum of sound change across social groups: ‘alcuni non della infima plebe volgono l’articolo *il* in *el*, laddove la vera plebaglia dice sempre *er*’.[117] As a result, the sonnets pair frequent markers of phonetic distortion, such as apheresis (e.g. ‘un mijjon de Malessciti’ in ‘Chi fa, ariscéve’), prosthesis (e.g. ‘ariscéve’ in ‘Chi fa, ariscéve’), and metathesis (e.g. ‘ggrolia a Ddio’ in ‘La bbella Ggiuditta’), with conspicuous errors of grammar, such as incorrect superlative forms (e.g. ‘ppiú mmejjore o ppiú ppeggiore’ in 1813. ‘L’indoratore’), including cases where the adverbs ‘mejjo’ and ‘peggio’ are mistakenly used as adjectives (e.g. ‘È un gran birbo futtuto chi sse lagna / de le cose ppiú mmejjo der Governo’ in 559. ‘Le ggiurisdizzione’).

In terms of adverbs, unsurprisingly the most common is ‘sempre’ (268 occurrences), followed shortly by ‘mai’ (262 occurrences), both of which suggest oppression and at least an acknowledgment of social stagnation, if not a deeply felt frustration on the part of the personae. Other adverbs such as ‘stessamente’ and ‘istessamente’ seem to compound the sense of conservative dominance, and signify a political preoccupation on the part of the poet. Tensors such as these, in drawing attention to the status quo, thus contribute to the linguistic subversion that attempts to undermine

[116] *PR*, I, p. 37.
[117] *PR*, I, p. 33.

it. In addition to those identified by Wagenbach, we saw how Deleuze and Guattari also identify exclamations as intensives. These abound in Belli and seem to function as particularly rebellious expressions of protestation.[118] There are at least 43 occurrences of 'cazzo!' alone across the corpus, for instance, including a particularly emphatic version in 485. 'La vecchia pupa', where a doubly strong 'Cojjóni, cazzo!' is accompanied by a footnote to explain the force of the exclamation: 'L'accento enfatico di questa esclamazione deve cadere sulla seconda sillaba della prima parola, come si dicesse per esempio: *Salùte, per bacco! Bràvo, caspita!*'[119] This fits well with Wagenbach's insistence on the accent as a tension internal to the word.[120] Other exclamations proliferate, many acting as protestations, including further cases where internal tensions are stressed by accents, particularly those featuring double vowels to capture exacerbation: 'ah!' ('pronunziato con un certo accento vivo e quasi d'impazienza, è negativa', 649. 'Er governà'), 'ajjo!', 'ahó!', 'ahú', 'eh!', 'ehé', 'ehée', 'ehèe', 'ehéi!', 'ma!', 'maa!', 'màa!', 'màah!', 'oé!', 'oh' (often accompanied with 'bbona!', as in 926. 'Li peggni', signifying an 'interiezione usata quando altri non vuole persuadersi delle parole o dell'operato di alcuno', with irritation also expressed through stress: 'l'*a* finale

[118] See Merola, Nicola, 'Apostrofi e invettive: materiali in forma di appunti' in *Letture belliane*, II (Rome: Bulzonui, 1981), 51-66.
[119] *PR*, III, p. 157.
[120] Cf. Belli's often ironic use of stress distribution within words to comic effect. In 287. 'La lingua tajjana', for example, the haughty woman who takes it upon herself to correct the dialect speech of her young interlocutor merely reveals their shared linguistic identity when lambasting her with a series of hypercorrections: 'Bbestia, se disce *sédere* e nnò *ssede'*. *PR*, II, p. 425. The character here is a speaker of the so-called 'parlà ciovile', the affected version of the more socially prestige language as spoken by an outsider. Indeed, Teodonio calls it 'un linguaggio "altro"'. Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 236. As such, it nevertheless reflects a much wider class tension. Similar distortions can be found in 215. 'Er servitor-de-piazza ciovile' and 216. 'Er parlà ciovìle de piú'. *PR*, II, pp. 266-271. On Belli's acute awareness of the importance of stress, see 1203. 'Er bijjetto d'invito', to which the poet appends a scansion table detailing rhythm and pronunciation according to what Vighi calls 'un'errata concezione metrica' based on classical verse. *PR*, V, pp. 474-477.

deve udirsi alquanto prolungata'), 'ôh' ('interiezione d'impazienza, o conclusione di discorso', 1055. 'Er governo der temporale'), 'ohé!', 'ohó!', 'ohò!', 'uf!', 'uff!', 'uh!'[121]

These already denote pain, but other pain-filled connotations of various types saturate the *Sonetti*. Expressions of poverty are very frequent, for example, not just in sonnets specifically dedicated to the theme, such as 449-450. 'La poverella', whose lines Belli explains in an earlier variant 'debbono articolarsi con prestezza e querela petulanza', 1100. 'La mojje disperata', whose sentiments 'debbono declamarsi con veemenza d'ira e di pianto', or 1679. 'La famijja poverella', Pascoli's favourite; but throughout, with a sort of collective identity being formed by speakers recognizing themselves as belonging to 'the poor'. Variations of this recognition are manifested in the following descriptions, many of which include emphatic suffixes: 'poveracci', 'poveraccio', 'poverella', 'poverelle', 'poverelli', 'poverello', 'poveretta', 'poverettaccio', ' poverette', 'poveretti', 'poveretto', 'poverina', 'poverini', 'poverino'.[122] In addition there are over a hundred occurrences of 'povero', in excess of sixty occurrences of 'povera', more than fifty occurrences of 'poveri' and twenty-plus occurrences of 'povere'. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprising given the plebeian preference for the more concrete and tangible, there are only four occurrences of the abstract noun 'povertà', and the same is true of the Roman equivalent 'guittarìa', with greater instances of adjectives 'guitto' or appellative nouns 'guittarello'. There are, however, some twenty-odd expressions of 'miseria' and variations, perhaps due to an ecclesiastical familiarity.

[121] *PR*, III, p. 80; *PR*, V, p. 261; *PR*, IV, p. 501; *PR*, V, p. 163.
[122] An investigation into Belli's creative use of suffixes, both in general and in specific regard to the tensored language and nodes of pain relating to the portrayal of the 'ggentaccia bbassa' (1807. 'Er bene der Monno'), would make for a very interesting further study in itself.

Pain-filled connotations also include the widespread insistence on death, hunger, and suffering of all sorts.[123] Indeed, life itself consists essentially of misery, as charted by the catalogue of woe in 781. 'La vita dell'Omo'. Suffering even extends beyond the earthly life: following the prenatal affliction of 'Nove mesi a la puzza', the various ages of man heap yet more misery on the hapless Roman plebeian, through disease ('e un po' de scarlattina e vvormijjoni'), hunger ('er diggiuno'), and financial worry ('li debbiti'), only to conclude with the promise of eternal torment ('viè la Morte, e ffinissce co l'inferno'). Implicit in 'La vita dell'Omo' is also a sense of corporeal pain, the daily reality of which is perhaps best seen in the well-known sonnet we saw in the opening chapter, 1170. 'Li du' ggener'umani':

> Noi, se sa, ar Monno semo ussciti fori
> impastati de mmerda e dde monnezza.
> Er merito, er decoro e la grannezza
> sò ttutta marcanzia de li Siggnori.
>
> A su' Eccellenza, a ssu' Maestà, a ssu' Artezza
> fumi, patacche, titoli e sprennori;
> e a nnoantri artiggiani e sservitori
> er bastone, l'imbasto e la capezza.
>
> Cristo creò le case e li palazzi
> p'er prencipe, er marchese e 'r cavajjere,
> e la terra pe nnoi facce de cazzi.
>
> E cquanno morze in crosce, ebbe er penziere
> de sparge, bbontà ssua, fra ttanti strazzi,
> pe cquelli er zangue e ppe nnoantri er ziere.

[123] On the ever-present image of mortality, 'quela puttana de la morte' as the speaker calls it in 1268. 'Li sordati bboni', see, for example, sonnet 816. 'Li Morti de Roma', where the underclass are a breed apart even in death: 'Cc'è ppoi 'na terza sorte de figura, / 'n'antra spesce de morti, che ccammina / senza moccoli e ccassa in zepportura. / Cuesti semo noantri, Crementina'. *PR*, IV, p. 259. Teodonio calls the last line quoted 'uno dei più straordinari versi dell'intero corpus' for its fatalism. Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 845. Yet Vighi rightly finds within the sonnet 'un atteggiamento di rabbiosa impotenza in cui si sente vibrare il desiderio della rivolta'. *PR*, IV, p. 258. Muscetta goes even further still, calling the poem 'cosa unica nella nostra letteratura' for its ground-breaking portrayal of lower-class tragedy. Noting that tragedy had been the 'patrimonio e privilegio delle classi elevate' in classical literature, and that even in Manzoni 'il dramma dei suoi umili, regolato dalla Provvidenza, è a lieto fine', he states that the *Sonetti* wage a radical war of change in this regard: 'nei sonetti di Belli il tragico è solo dei poveri: il canone è polemicamente rovesciato'. *Cultura e poesia di G. G. Belli* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961), p. 388.

Misery is again presented as a life-long given for the destitute plebeians, who are defined in negative opposition to society's prosperous. Otherness and exclusion are stressed from the outset by 'fori', itself conspicuously coupled with 'Siggnori', in the first of a series of binary oppositions played out by end-rhymes. 'Monnezza' is paired antithetically with 'grannezza', and 'palazzi' is undercut by the bisyllabic 'cazzi'. Perhaps the starkest opposition is contained in the rhyme pair of 'Artezza', which draws attention explicitly to the unreachable apex of the social hierarchy, and 'capezza', meaning 'cavezza' or 'halter', which demotes the popolino to animalistic baseness. Unsurprisingly, animality is yet another mark of deterritorialization according to Deleuze and Guattari. 'Capezza' is also one of three nouns strongly denoting the intense perception of suffering as bodily pain, along with 'bastone' and 'imbasto'. Intimately connected, 'capezza' is equally suggestive of 'capezzale' and illness, and as such another expression of pain. Abjection has often been associated with marginalized groups including the poor, but here such a reading seems strengthened by their associations with waste, their identities presented as mere by-products of subjectivity. Similar to the image of abjection found in 'La vita dell'Omo', members of the underclass are 'impastati de mmerda' (ironically contrasted at the phonic level with the 'merito' of the ruling classes), and where the rich are made of honourable blood, the poor are made of 'ziere', in a heretical conclusion which strongly suggests coagulation and repulsion (even in its culinary sense it remains a by-product), signifying exclusion from the symbolic order. Inequality is certainly not skin deep; physiological otherness courses through their veins. The popolino is thus the class that is rejected absolutely by social reason, and condemned to occupy a space of liminality, hence Vighi calling this poem 'il colmo di quell'indignazione che innesca la protesta

sociale del poeta nell'opera intera'.[124] Crucially, however, that protestation is very much alive, at least poetically. 'Capezza', of course, suggests an unbreakable propensity for unruly rebellion, which Belli enacts through his use of tensors.

The persona of 'Li du' ggener'umani', effectively the elected spokesperson for Belli's Romaneschi as a whole, defines his kin as 'sservitori'. The speaker of 1164. 'Li Vicarj', another sonnet written in Belli's politically-charged year of 1834, similarly defines the underclass as those who are kept befittingly under the yoke of servitude: 'cchi ubbidissce semo sempre noi'.[125] Part of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature is its ability to undo the chains of linguistic dominance. This includes a necessary hatred of 'all languages of masters'. [126] In stating that 'there is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor', they identify 'Kafka's fascination for servants and employees', noting 'the same thing in Proust in relation to servants, to their language'.[127] The same phenomenon is abundantly evident in the *Sonetti*. Belli's deterritorialized Romanesco as a whole is a denial of the language of masters, with his personae clearly detesting the linguistic hegemony of their superiors.

One brilliant embodiment of the linguistic exclusion waged by society's masters, but equally the utter hatred felt towards their language by society's underlings, is offered in poem 1209. 'Avviso'. A frustrated and almost childlike member of the lower classes struggles to read a public notice advertising the sale of a house. The sonnet begins thus:

> Bra-man-do — il — Rev-do — Ven-le— Mo-na-ste-ro
> de — San-ti — Cos-ma virgola e — Da-mi-a-no
> ven-de-re virgola o — af-fit-ta-re — un — pi-a-no

[124] *PR*, V, p. 404.
[125] Ibid., p. 393.
[126] Deleuze-Guattari, p. 26.
[127] Ibid., p. 26.

d'u-na — su-a — ca-sa virgola e — l'in-ti-e-ro [128]

The plebeian's patience is tried to breaking point by the laborious task of deciphering the Tuscan standard (although Belli is also taking a sideswipe at authority in the pretence of linguistic hierarchy and bureaucratic legalese in particular, or 'il vizioso sistema di comporre e di punteggiare […] nelle carte governative', as he calls it in a footnote) through which he is excluded from civilized life.[129] The standard rules of orthography, sole province of the literate, are exploited brilliantly in such a way as to emphasize the poet's wider point. The use of the dashes of varying length to suggest hard-earned pauses between words and great effort even between syllables is coupled with the sporadic punctuation provided by the ironic 'virgola', the non-word being the only thing pronounced with any degree of fluency. Similarly, Belli resorts to the device of ellipsis at the end of the penultimate line to show that the reader finds the task too taxing to complete, succumbing to frustration before even getting to the end of the notice. The majority of the sestet is taken up with the painful rendition of the following: 'Si avvisa tutti, e singoli aspiranti, che domani alla precisa ora d'ore 17 resta ingiunto al Notaro del Loco Sig. Briganti…'[130] A momentary pause follows the ellipsis, introduced after the aptly-named swindler Signor Briganti, who is emblematic of what the popolino sees as the ruling classes. [131] The hiatus is quickly broken, however, when the speaker 'perde la pazienza', as Belli comments, 'e conchiude coll'ultimo verso col quale ritorna in se stesso' (note the poet's acute awareness of the importance of language in the maintenance

[128] Belli provides the original for the benefit of readers: 'Bramando il Revdo Venle Monastero de Santi Cosma, e Damiano vendere, o affittare un piano d'una sua casa, e l'intiero [orto]'. *PR,* V, p. 1209.
[129] *PR,* V, p. 491.
[130] Ibid., p. 491.
[131] The notary's name, as with so many in Belli, adds further comic characterization by encapsulating the exploitation of the poor at the hands of the rich, who are seen as 'briganti', yet another typically Boccaccian 'nome parlante', on which see previous chapter.

and expression of identity), eventually blurting out the expletive final line in his own language: 'Che sse vadi a ffà fotte, e mmetto er punto'.[132] Ironically, the plebeian has the final say, adding the crucial element of punctuation to the discourse himself. The title thus also works in reference to the speaker: his public announcement is the refusal to be bound by the language of dominance.

As has been pointed out, 'una delle reazioni elementari di un suddito oppresso e impotente contro il suo potente oppressore è l'insulto.'[133] In addition to the pain-filled exclamations such as 'cazzo!' as seen above, this links into the idea of billingsgate, or foul abusive language, against which an extensive reading of the *Sonetti* from this perspective could easily be maintained. More generally, however, the polylinguistic situation of Rome, is exploited here and on a number of occasions by Belli, as we saw in relation to dialogue. Poem 2091. 'Er zervitore novo', for instance, presents the existential gulf between masters and servants as essentially linguistic in nature, with the comedy based entirely around incomprehension. The servant fails to grasp the meaning of the master's imperative 'va imbecile', with the register of the Latinate 'imbecile' probably beyond his linguistic experience, coming to interpret it as 'va' in bescille', and thus as some kind of locative reference, leaving him wondering about its whereabouts: 'Dove sta sto *bbescille*? drento, fori, / in piazza, pe 'na strada, ggiú ppe un vicolo?...' As the title suggests, the servant is new and evidently exposed to linguistic otherness for the first time, left nevertheless determined to somehow overcome the linguistic barrier: 'Vall'a

[132] *PR*, V, p. 491.
[133] Merry, p. 110.

intenne er parlà de li Siggnori!'[134] Deleuze and Guattari similarly acknowledge the centrality of polylingualism to the project of minor literature:

> To make use of the polylingualism of one's own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play.[135]

Belli is clearly making use of his tensored language to oppose the hegemony of the linguistic standard, the language of power as wielded by those with influence, be they in the ranks of the theocracy or simply the rich in general. In 2075. 'L'art'e bbasso', as the title instantly declares, there is again the idea of very binary social division and opposition, as portrayed in some of the sonnets already seen such as 816. 'Li Morti de Roma', 1170. 'Li du' ggener'umani' and 1807. 'Er bene der Monno', yet here there is a sense of potential subversion:

> Li Conti, li Marchesi, li Bbaroni,
> e ttutta st'illustrissima canajja,
> ce tiengheno a nnoantri pe mmarmajja
> da trattà cco li nerbi e li bbastoni.
>
> Eh, bbontà lloro contr'er nostro merito.
> Ma ssi fussimo noi nati siggnori,
> chi l'avería li carci in ner preterito?

The master-servant dichotomy is still there, emphasized by a healthy dose of Deleuzoguattarian hatred as expressed linguistically by the ironic use of the elative suffix in the oxymoronic 'st'illustrissima canajja'; and the nodes of pain are still there too, reinforcing the hierarchy, with the reference to bestiality and corporeal punishment in 'li nerbi e li bbastoni' and 'li carci in ner preterito'. Yet, there is unmistakably 'un senso di

[134] *PR*, IX.1, p. 211.
[135] Deleuze-Guattari, pp. 26-27.

rivendicazione', as Vighi has noted. What hasn't been said, however, is that this revenge is linguistic.[136] The speaker is reversing the traditional roles purely through language: the 'canajja' replaces the 'mmarmajja', eroding difference, and the rhetorical question imagining a world upside down hangs on a revealing battle of linguistic register, with 'preterito' intended euphemistically in the 'basso linguaggio' of the popolino, in which language is being wrenched back from the tight grip of the dominant oppressors.

Some of these dynamics have indeed been noted before, but without the theoretical force of the wider political implications that Deleuze and Guattari provide. Vigolo, for example, has seen the clash of 'cultura' and 'anticultura' in Belli, as well as the reduction to animality and the intensive expressions of pain through language:

> Si sente che, in quella condizione miserabile e quasi di animalità, la parola resta una delle poche consolazioni dell'uomo e forse la sua sola liberazione; poiché in fondo l'unica libertà che quel basso popolo conosceva era la libertà del linguaggio spregiudicato, piú spesso sconcio e blasfemo, infiammato dal vino come nei poeti, nel quale sfogava i suoi dolori, le sue ire, la sua carnalità e tutta la veemenza dei suoi sensi meridionali in una immediatezza quasi corporea. Ma in essa trovava anche il suo diletto estetico e se ne faceva un continuo teatro, popolato di immagini e di figure.[137]

Incidentally, animality in its strictest form is also used to a political end in the sonnets, including in the narrow sense.[138] In a manner typical of satire generally, and anticipating the political use Trilussa would later make of his animal characters in a Roman context, Belli has two memorable bestial adaptations of contemporary affairs, 1395. 'L'elezzione nova' and 1570. 'La favola der lupo', both written unsurprisingly in 1834.[139] In

[136] *PR*, IX.1, p. 178.
[137] Vigolo, *Sonetti*, I, p. XXX.
[138] Cf. the conclusion to 1001. 'Li polli de li vitturali': 'Perché ste sette sorte d'assassini, / come noantri fussimo animali, / nun ce fanno mai véde li quadrini.' *PR*, V, p. 53.
[139] For Trilussa, see especially *Lupi e agnelli*, *Ommini e bestie*, and *Giove e le bestie*, all now collected in Costa and Felici 2004.

'L'elezzione nova', clearly parodying the election of Gregory XVI, and what it sees as the transparent mysteries and mindless process of power, Rome is imagined as 'la scittà de Trappolajja', a deceptive trap to ensnare all its inhabitants, who are befittingly described as the 'sorcajja', glossed by Vighi as 'il popolo dei sorci'.[140] The spiritual leaders of this murine people are both given 'nomi parlanti' suggesting bestial consumption: the previous incumbent, 'er Re de sorci Rosichèo Siconno' plays on the verb 'rosicare', whilst Gregory is nicknamed 'Divoríno Sesto', obviously playing on 'divorare', with 'Sesto' probably an ironic reference to the fact that Gregory XVI was by no means the first-choice candidate following the impasse of the 64-day conclave.[141] Similarly in 'La favola der lupo', 'la ribbijjone' and the political skirmishes of the 1831 revolts are imagined as a battle between the good and evil of the animal kingdom. The Pope and the papacy are depicted as the 'lupo', entailing more than an echo of Dante's absolutist 'lupa', 'nella quale la critica dell'Ottocento riconosceva la Curia romana', whilst the liberals are represented as the 'canóne mastino', with its associations of safeguarding and upholding possession by moral right.[142] More contentious is the portrayal of the people, who at first sight are seen as the seemingly helpless 'pecore' caught between two masters, but who on closer inspection reveal themselves to be

[140] *PR*, VI, p. 150. There is a sexual allusion here too. As seen in the previous chapter, 'sorca' is also one of the synonyms listed in 560. 'La madre de le Sante'. This is continued in the name of 'Rosichèo Siconno', where the numerical epithet is clearly playing on 'conno'.

[141] In a note to 1052. 'L'Ottobre der 31', Belli refers to the pontiff who 'pper dio jjeri era frate', which he glosses as 'Gregorio XVI in brevi istanti passato dal chiostro al trono'. *PR*, V, p. 157. 'Sesto' might also be taken in its nominal sense of 'order', and thus as an ironic, antiphrastic reference to Gregory XVI's general incompetence.

[142] *PR*, VI, p. 532. Teodonio claims that Belli maintains a neutral position within the poem, and yet recognizes 'la critica feroce del sonetto […] che riguarda anzitutto il papa-lupo'. Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 445. Vighi is more convincing when he sees the poem as 'una delle più chiare affermazioni di adesione del Belli alle idee liberali'. *PR*, VI, p. 532.

spineless turncoats ('pecore frabbutte' which Belli glosses as 'disleali'), at the merest sign of papal aggression.

Vigolo also came close to suggesting a socio-political use of the literary language in noting the 'speciale interesse che il Belli aveva per tutti i linguaggi alterati', especially those that are 'disintegrati e in crisi', recognizing that the poet was critically aware of the fact that 'l'inerzia convenzionale del fatto linguistico fosse rotta e messa in oscillazione da elementi sia pure patologici, che per altro liberano, da quella rottura della stasi, insolite e latenti energie espressive'.[143] Others, too, have similarly referred to Belli's creative use of linguistic distortion.[144] Davide Conrieri, for example, has even spoken of intensities, fleetingly mentioning 'quella che si è chiamata *intensità* delle deformazioni linguistiche', but has failed to link it to a wider revolutionary purpose.[145] Petrocchi, more so than others, has even attempted to categorize the distortion into four distinct types:

> a. alterazioni volute per accentuare la rozzezza del parlante (dell'«io» plebeo)
> b. alterazioni per mera finalità di sarcasmo umoristico (per lo più diretto verso vocaboli d'ambito ecclesiastico)
> c. alterazioni «passionali» (cioè che nascono da uno stato d'animo di acutissimo sdegno, tale de non consentire l'uso normale del termine)
> d. alterazioni che nascono dalla scelta della forma diviata rispetto a quella normale altrove presente (cioè dall'elemento «sorpresa»).[146]

Yet, while these are doubtless helpful in analysing Belli's craft, they again blur the boundaries between poet and persona, and worse still, do little to illuminate the literary purpose of the linguistic deformation in the first place. Indeed, where previous commentators differ from my reading of the distortion is in their wont to link it

[143] Vigolo 1963, I, pp. 147-148.
[144] On linguistic distortion in Belli generally, see Vigolo, *Il genio del Belli* cit., II, pp. 192-220; Merry, pp. 107-168; Petrocchi. Giorgio, 'Il romanesco come divertimento', in *Letture belliane*, II (Rome: Bulzoni, 1981), pp. 7-20; Davide Conrieri, 'Deformazione linguistica ed equivoco', in *Letture belliane*, IV (Rome: Bulzoni, 1983), pp. 103-129; Di Nino, *Giuseppe Gioachino Belli* cit., pp. 133-173.
[145] Conrieri, 'Deformazione linguistica' cit., 127.
[146] Petrocchi, 'Il romanesco' cit., 17.

exclusively to comedy: deformations are 'compilati nell'intenzione di trarne non soltanto citazioni ma anche effetti comici derivanti da storpiature, incomprensioni e usi sbagliati'.[147] This 'tensored' language, or what Vighi has called 'una sorta di «filologia comica»', has traditionally been seen as the 'punto d'incontro tra l'umorismo del poeta e il suo spiccatissimo interesse linguistico', as if the poet were literally engaged in it purely for fun.[148] Comic effects are obvious and undeniable, but to deny a greater literary enterprise is too reductive. Satire generally might be a better way of qualifying the linguistic distortion, since there are places where there is no real sense of the comedic.

Indeed, Belli himself implies that his use of linguistic distortion is not merely confined to comic intentions. In the letter to Placido Gabrielli, he states that 'la lingua abbietta e buffona de' romaneschi' is not suited to translating a sacred text, and predicts that nobody will be willing to undertake such a translation, except perhaps for 'due o tre goffi scopamestieri che van travestendo in pessimo romanesco or questa or quell'opera classica in servigio de scene, e col scopo di eccitare le risa'.[149] That final detail then, much like where he distinguishes himself from his dialect predecessors in the introduction, would suggest Belli sees his own use of Romanesco as having wider aims than comedy alone. More than that, it would suggest linguistic deformation is not even principally directed towards securing a laugh.

Interestingly, as Vigolo seemingly does in the quotation above, and as Petrocchi's types of deformation suggest, Belli also ascribes a propensity for creative linguistic distortion to the *plebe* itself. In a note to a relatively early poem, one of three featuring some of the poet's strongest invective against a targeted individual, which we mentioned

[147] *PR*, IX.2, p. 175.
[148] Ibid,, p. 175.
[149] *LGZ*, p. 378.

in chapter one in relation to the influence of Carlo Porta, Belli states that 'il romanesco tende di sua natura ad alterare il suono delle parole, allorché per ispirito di satira, in lui acutissimo, vuole rendere il senso equivoco e farlo ingiurioso.'[150] The particular context detracts somewhat from the credibility of the claim in this instance, but the general point is useful to bear in mind.[151] Teodonio notes that Belli writes the final poem in this trio a year and a half after the original pair of sonnets (composed on 14 and 16 February 1830), when the poet 'aveva ben maturato l'intero suo progetto poetico', indeed a mere week after writing the first draft of the introduction in the letter to Spada on 5 October 1831.[152] It is nevertheless fair to say that at the time of writing the note, Belli is in the crucial phase of sharpening his characterization, with this type of linguistic creativity thus a defining characteristic of his personae in the poet's consciousness. In terms of the

[150] *PR*, I, p. 89.

[151] *PR*, I, p. 89. The poem in question is 16. 'P'er zor dottore ammroscio cafone'. A note by the poet to the first sonnet explains the motivation: 'Il signor dottore Fabrizio D'Ambrosio, napolitano, esiliato, stampò un libercolettaccio in cui esaminando le donne di Roma, vomitava mille ingiurie contro i Romani.' *PR*, I, p. 89. D'Ambrosio's thesis, entitled *Perché in Roma le donne sono più belle, più attive e più perspicaci degli uomini?*, was that the damp climate left the men of Rome lacking in virility. To give a sense of the strength of Belli's invective, an earlier alternative title for the three sonnets was: 'A quer panzone fottuto in culo d'er sor Dottore Ambroscio cafone, che disce male de li Romani drento in ne li libbri de stampa. Tre sonetti.' *PR*, I, p. 89. As for the superiority of Rome's women, however, Belli's personae maintain similar opinions in such sonnets as 533. 'Le donne de cquì'. In terms of the distortion, the footnote to the third poem is prompted by the phrase 'carzoni e ccamisciola de frustaggno', with its play on 'frustato' and 'fustagno', as Belli explains in the same note: 'nel caso attuale, per dire che il dottore sia stato *frustato* pel corpo dal libro contro di lui stampato, non disconviene alla malizia romanesca la viziatura di *fustagno*, termine in uso, in *frustagno*, per la qual viziatura questo vocabolo viene per puro accidente, indipendentissimo da perizia filologica, ad essere restituito alla sua incognita forma.' *PR*, I, p. 89. Since 'frustagno' and 'fustagno' are both attested in dictionaries in the sense of the English cognate 'fustian', Belli's claim that this is typical of deliberate plebeian punning is dubious, though this takes nothing away from their perceived tendency towards what Vighi calls 'deformazioni furbesche'. *PR*, I, p. 88. Belli is explicit about the plebeian propensity for distortion in a miscellaneous manuscript note, now edited by Orioli: 'La sapienza che hanno gl'ignoranti a dire spropositi è incredibile. Se ne ascoltano talora di sí nuovi e preziosi che tutta la mente di Vico e di Romagnosi non saprebbe giungere a immaginare (a combinare)'. *LGZ*, p. 577. On this question of malapropism and linguistic deformation among the lower classes, see also Beccaria, Gian Luigi, *Sicuterat. Il latino di chi non lo sa: Bibbia e liturgia nell'italiano e nei dialetti* (Milan: Garzanti, 2002). Beccaria gives dozens of examples from the *Sonetti romaneschi*, throughout his various thematic sections.

[152] Teodonio claims that 'quello che talvolta può apparire un puro gioco un po' intellettualistico si presenta invece come una delle chiavi fondamentali del mondo belliano, ben chiarito nella nota: la parola plebea, nella sua spropositata ignoranza, ridà senso a ciò che non ha senso, ricuperando il valore profondo e fondante dei suoni'. Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. 25.

distortion, then, Belli is clearly exaggerating what he sees as a natural playful tendency of his subjects, stretching his realist premise for literary effect. In true Deleuzoguattarian fashion, he is pushing his literary language along lines of flight.

Of all the Belli commentators, Bruce Merry seems to get closest to the truth in this respect in his essay on deformation entitled 'Semantica delle deformazioni linguistiche nei sonetti romaneschi'.[153] Moreover, in setting out his stance in a deliberately ambiguous phrase, he immediately sees that language in Belli is simultaneously the principal means of controlling people (the 'capezza' of 'Li du' ggener'umani') and yet their potential means of escape: 'i personaggi plebei reagiscono al sistema sociale che domina e controlla le loro vite con la parola'. The word is thus the weapon for both parties, on either side of the dividing line. Merry is seemingly less optimistic than Deleuze and Guattari in terms of initiating change, however, claiming that 'il plebeo non può cambiare la realtà sociale e morale da lui criticata' since the popolino is lacking in 'l'autorità e la conoscenza necessarie per modificare o almeno identificare le cause dello stato ingiusto delle cose'. One would expect a rather static reading of the sonnets then, but Merry hints at dynamic movement in what he considers the defining characteristic of the popolino: what it does have 'in abbondanza', he observes, is 'l'esuberanza verbale', which determines the very nature of the sonnets. In describing how this verbal exuberance has the ability to break down the boundaries of convention, Merry identifies deformation as part of the popolino's rebellion, unwittingly mirroring the Deleuzoguattarian notion of deterritorialized langue in the features that he highlights:

> La sua indignazione emerge da un sottofondo represso in una vasta gamma di possibilità grammaticali e lessicali che vanno bene al di là delle convenzioni della lingua e del dialetto; i grossolani errori della sua parlata,

[153] In *Tre sondaggi sul Belli*, ed. by Guido Almansi (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), , pp. 107-168.

> le inesattezze dei suoi riferimenti, vengono cosí adottati dal poeta per convogliare la violenza della sua polemica da analfabeta. […] Avviene cosí che la deformazione di una parola, o di un concetto logico, o di un'informazione storica, aggiunge un significato secondo che la formulazione corretta non avrebbe potuto dare. Questo è ciò che intendo per "semantica della deformazione linguistica".[154]

In hitting upon the idea of channelling violence linguistically, Merry unwittingly reveals in Belli the same creative use of the very same destructive forces that Deleuze and Guattari see at work in Kafka. Restricting his observation to matters of religion, though the principle extends across the sonnets according to our reading so far, Merry shows the tangible effects of this deterritorialized langue:

> L'operazione linguistica del Belli nei sonetti di carattere religioso o sacramentale tende non tanto a riformare la situazione corrotta quanto a deformarla, provocando un costante attrito semantico sulla superficie grafica o fonetica delle frasi devozionali più comuni. I mezzi dell'operazione sono linguistici, i risultati sono sociali, in quanto il prestigio delle istituzioni ecclesiastiche viene minacciato da questi pericolosi giochi di parole.[155]

Merry cites the opening quatrain of 303. 'La santa commugnone' as an obvious example of how 'la lieve alterazione di due parole deformi e deprima la santità di uno dei sacramenti'.[156]

> La sera ch'er Zignore a ôr de scena
> distituí la santa caristia,
> nun zo ccapí pperché ffussi de vena
> de dàjje er nome de sta bbrutta arpia.

Merry points out that 'distituí', which Belli glosses as 'instituì', whilst obviously an 'errore risibile dell'ignorante plebeo', is equally, and much more importantly, an 'errore significante' for the poet and reader alike since one automatically reads 'la "d-" come privativa'. The effect, as Merry demonstrates, is by no means negligible. Indeed, it is

[154] Merry, 'Semantica' cit., pp. 109-110.
[155] Ibid., p. 118.
[156] Ibid., p. 118.

nothing short of an outright attack on the tenets of Christianity itself: 'il rito centrale della religione cristiana viene degradato da questa "d-" e dall'altro simile errore che segue, "caristia" (per "eucaristia")'.[157] The latter is not entirely an error, however, as Vighi notes that 'in romanesco "eucarestia" e "carestia" suonano omonimi'.[158] It is instead a simple case of apheresis, with the loss of the initial unstressed diphthong, a natural sound change in historical linguistics. The effect is on the literate reader, and Belli is exploiting an existing feature of linguistic deformation for literary and political gain, which is strengthened syntactically by the juxtaposition with the qualifying adjective 'santa'.[159] Semantically, then, Belli is striking at the roots of Christianity in an alternative way to the primitive, violent methods suggested in 'L'arberone': 'il sacramento che dovrebbe nutrire spiritualmente è quindi collegato a un'area semantica opposta ("caristia"/"digiuno"; "digiuno"/"mancanza di cibo"), mentre intorno crollano le "istituzioni"'.[160]

The institutions equally include the temporal side of the Church. Take, for instance, sonnet 528. 'Er decretone', which satirizes both the law in general and those who make it:

> Stamme a ssentí. Da cuarche ssettimana
> vado a ppulí le scarpe la matina
> a un avocato de strada Bbaccina
> incirconciso a ora de campana.
>
> Oh indovinesce un po', Mmuccio, indovina
> che ggenio ha sto fijjol d'una puttana:
> de vestimmese in coppola e ssottana
> e bbiastimamme in lingua lattarina.

[157] Ibid., p. 119.
[158] *PR*, II, p. 458.
[159] 'Caristia' is indeed used in both senses within the corpus. In 1178. 'La lègge', a poem satirizing the application of the law, in which Belli argues that the laws themselves are plentiful, but those who ostensibly uphold it are open to corruption. 'Caristia' is used here in the sense of 'shortage': 'E mmanco vederete caristia / d'abbati, monziggnori e ccardinali / giudisci de li sagri tribbunali, / da impiccavve sur detto d'una spia.'
[160] Merry, 'Semantica' cit., p. 119.

M'aricconta le cause c'ha indifese:
me parla d'Accimetti e dde somario,
de le lite smorzate e dde l'accese:
der Tribbunal de Rota e dder Ficario:
e 'ggni matina me tierrebbe un mese
cor quietovive de sto bber zalario.

The situation is reminiscent of Manzoni's portrayal of the immoral Azzecca-Garbugli, with his symbolic dress as here, whose self-proclaimed duty is to 'imbrogliare'. Both plebeians are similarly bamboozled by the practice of the law, although Belli's persona is by no means as easily impressed as the hapless Renzo. On the contrary, the speaker here is disdainful of the lawyer's pomp and insistence on hierarchy, which are emphatically represented by his language. The 'lingua lattarina', an amalgamation of 'latina' and 'latrina', is at one level a plebeian malapropism, but the possibility cannot be ruled out that the speaker knows exactly what he's doing linguistically, so that the deformation is revealing of what the servant really thinks, both of the master himself and his highfalutin jargon. The same might be said of 'incirconciso' in the opening quatrain, parodying the Latinate and pompous 'circumcirca', which the servant presumably employs to mimic and mock the master's haughty speech (besides the vaguely comic and broadly sexual reference to circumcision, coupled with the 'Ficario' for 'Vicario' in the final tercet, Vighi suggests '"circonciso" possa esser riferito all'avaro avvocato'), or merely innocently reproduces in a garbled manner having loosely heard it, without understanding, when used by the master.[161] Either way, the target of the poem's satire is

[161] *PR*, III, p. 246. Belli uses the distorted 'Ficario' on another occasion, in the sexually-charged 296. 'Pe ddispetto'. The poem features a man, whose procuress wife has been sentenced to prison in a monastery, recounting an affair with the wife of his uncle, who has also been imprisoned, with the meaning playing on ambiguity and double entendre between the religious and the obscene. Merry remarks that 'il cambio di consonanti iniziali proietta la nomenclatura del titolo gerarchico ("Vicario") verso quella parte anatomica femminile il cui uso viene sconsigliato dal Vicario, ma di cui il plebeo intende continuare a servirsi nonostante la proibizione clericale'. Merry, p. 111. Andrea Camilleri plays on a similar distortion in the

as much the master's language as the servant's. And the very title too is another example of deformation and a multi-layered reference. Glossed by Belli as an Italianized version of the French 'décrotteur', meaning 'shoe shiner' and thus referring to the persona's occupation, it is equally the augmented version of 'decreto', suggesting a satirical take on the lawyer's discourse: it at once entails the enforcement of hierarchy on the basis of class (the upper class member of society, and here an extension of the theocratic government, sets the laws for the underlings to follow), but again obliterates such pretension as an augmented distortion of 'cretino'.

The litero-linguistic disestablishmentarianism may be seen in reference to two of Rome's focal points: the Quirinale, once the summer residence of the Pope until the conclusion of the Risorgimento with the Capture of Rome in 1870, and St Peter's. Together they are emblematic of nineteenth-century Rome's highest authority, both spiritual and temporal. Rather than instilling respect and foreboding among the popolino, the Quirinale instead becomes the 'Qui-orinale' in 681. 'Pare una favola!', and along very similar lines, the Vatican is transformed, or rather deformed, in 706. 'La messa der Papa', into 'Ssampietro, er gran Ponte-ficale'. This is the subversive and creative effect of the 'intensive utilization' of deterritorialized language that Deleuze and Guattari reveal. There is, therefore, every reason to consider Belli, like Kafka, 'an experimenter

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setting for his Montalbano stories, the fictional Sicilian town of Vigata. In *Il birraio di Preston*, for example, the German engineer Fridolin Hoffer repeatedly pronounces Italian words with a German accent, most memorably in the comic scene where language interference produces a misunderstanding over hot and cold water. Camilleri's narrator comments that 'per un attimo infatti Hoffer dimenticò che si trovava a Vigàta, in Sicilia, e non riuscì a controllare la continua traduzione che era costretto a fare dal tedesco in italiano.' The confusion occurs over German 'Kalt' and Italian 'calda', before Hoffer remembers that cold water in Italian is 'acva fredda'. *Il birraio di Preston* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1995), p. 69. As Hoffer garbles various other Italian words, there is little doubt that Camilleri has a comic Germanic pronunciation of Vigata in mind here.

who tinkers with the wheels and gears of the social machine and sets them into a delirious overload.'[162]

4.4 The revolutionary *Sonetti romaneschi*

In attempting to draw out the wider implications of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of minor literature, Bogue has stressed the intensely political nature of this form of writing, echoing Orwell's statement that all writing is at heart political, with one of the writer's chief concerns being the 'desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples' idea of the kind of society that they should strive after'.[163] 'At least since Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* (1953),' Bogue notes, 'a number of critics and writers in France have been trying to reconcile formal experimentation and political activism in art.' Locating Deleuze and Guattari firmly in the French tradition, Bogue continues that 'many [critics and writers] have argued that the deformation of naturalized, ideological codes of representation is an artistic strategy that is also a revolutionary practice.'[164] Deleuze and Guattari themselves cite earlier writers as those they see as emblematic practitioners of the subversive art. In addition to Kafka, Joyce, Beckett and Céline are hailed as exemplars. There is little doubt that Belli would have been included in that list had his work been known to them.

Affinities with Joyce have long been recognized in the *Sonetti*. Anthony Burgess, as sharp as ever, sees the connections, claiming Belli's 'vast sonnet-sequence, presenting realistically the demotic life of a great capital city, may be regarded as a kind of proto-*Ulysses*'; and hinting at the blend of realism and transgression that we mentioned in the

[162] Bogue, p. 108.
[163] Orwell, George, 'Why I write' in *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 4.
[164] Bogue, pp. 107-123, (p. 122).

introduction to the chapter, on which deterritorialization is entirely dependent, he adds that 'Belli can be seen as an underground link between the age of romanticism and the age of naturalism'.[165] Earlier still, Eleanor Clark had also seen the poet as a forerunner for Joyce, stressing that Belli had dragged poetry in a new direction and concluding that 'the sonnet form […] led him more and more into a heightening and compacting of language values […] with no parallel in the novel before *Finnegan's Wake* [sic]'.[166] In comparing the two authors, more recently Melchiori has described the idiom of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as 'un linguaggio inventato eppure radicato nel quotidiano', noting

[165] Anthony Burgess, *ABBA ABBA* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 86. Burgess had previously stated that 'James Joyce, who was briefly a bank clerk in Rome, knew Belli's work, so I am told, and recognized an affinity.' 'Writing in Rome', *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 October 1975, p. 1296. Burgess partly makes the connection in order to draw attention to an Italian translation of *Finnegans Wake* he claims to be working on entitled *pHorbiCEtta*, in the wake of his study of the novel, published as *Joysprick: An Introduction to the Language of James Joyce* (London: Deutsch, 1973). Equally, though, he is misled by Eleanor Clark's claim that Joyce 'greatly admired his [Belli's] work', reprinted a year prior to his *TLS* article in her essay 'G.G. Belli: Roman Poet' in *Rome and a Villa* (Henley-on-Thames: Aidan Ellis, 1974), pp. 330-368, (p. 332). Burgess corrects his mistake in the *TLS* when reviewing Gibellini's rework of the Vigolo edition of the *Sonetti* some twenty years later: 'James Joyce, during his period of employment as a Roman bank clerk, seems not to have known of Belli', 'Petrarch of the Roman gutter', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 January 1992, p. 25. Burgess is not the first to succumb to what Mazzocchi Alemanni has called 'il mito della conoscenza e dell'ammirazione joyciana di e per Giuseppe Gioachino', 'L'Europa del Belli' in Riccardo Merolla (ed.), *G.G. Belli: romano, italiano ed europeo: atti del II convegno internazionale di studi belliani* (Rome: Bonacci, 1985), pp. 41-66, (p. 41). According to Giorgio Melchiori, 'il nome del Belli non figura in nessuno degli scritti pubblici o privati di Joyce, neppure nella fittissima corrispondenza tenuta con il fratello Stanislaus rimasto a Trieste nei sette mesi che Joyce trascorse a Roma come impiegato di banca dal primo agosto 1906 al 5 marzo 1907 – eppure in quelle lettere egli rende minutamente conto al fratello […] dei suoi incontri romani e di ogni libro o giornale che legge.' Giorgio Melchiori, 'Belli e Joyce: un incontro mancato' in Riccardo Merolla (ed.), *G.G. Belli: romano, italiano ed europeo* cit., p. 190. Melchiori does, however, admit that since Joyce was a 'grande frequentatore di osterie […] è difficile pensare che egli non avesse sentito recitare qualcuno dei sonetti belliani' (p. 190), and does find evidence of Joyce probably reading a Belli sonnet. The poem in question is 2173. 'Er Papa bbon'anima', on the death of Gregory XVI, since it appeared anonymously and under a different title in the 7 October 1906 issue of the 'violentemente anticlericale', weekly satirical magazine *L'Asino*, of which Joyce was an avid reader as shown by his correspondence (p. 191). In relation to Burgess, Melchiori points to the *ABBA ABBA* versions of Belli as illustrative of 'quelle raffinate alchimie linguistiche che Burgess ha ereditato da Joyce' (p. 189). On Burgess's extensive engagement with Belli, see Howard, '"All right, that's not a literal translation' cit.

[166] *Rome and a Villa* (Henley-on-Thames: Aidan Ellis, 1974), pp. 332-333.

exactly the same phenomenon in Belli.[167] Melchiori also observes the rebellious use of distortion, the tensored language of the two:

> V'è innanzitutto in Joyce come nel Belli la ricerca costante dei ritmi del "parlato" nelle sue forme apparentemente più quotidiane e antiauliche. Di più, le deformazioni deliberate di espressioni colloquiali per arricchirne le valenze semantiche in chiave spesso satirica – deformazioni che costituiscono la sostanza stessa del linguaggio dell'ultimo Joyce sia "inglese" sia "italiano" – sono state anticipate dal Belli, come bene ha visto la scuola inglese di studiosi belliani: ecco in Belli *caristia* per *Eucarestia*, *circumferenza* per *conferenza*, *cazar* per *czar*, e via dicendo, deformazioni che vanno ben al di là, nelle intenzioni, della casuale e comica improprietà linguistica dovuta a insufficienza culturale. [168]

Similar features, of course, continue to be employed in literary contexts to socio-political ends. Emily Apter has observed that Irvine Welsh's 'Edinburgh dialect' in *Trainspotting*, for example, 'can be seen as a tensored language deeply indebted to Joycean linguistic play', including the billingsgate element found in Belli:

> Welsh's Scottish vernacular is not so much a transposition of accent and slang but a subcultural *Sprache* that has the effect of wounding Standard English with the slings and arrows of warped speech, at least for a Brit or an Anglophone reader outside of Scotland. At first glance, the obstacles to reading a page of *Trainspotting* create a shock to the system, since there is such a disjunction between eye and ear, such a preponderance of what Deleuze and Guattari call "tensors", or nodes of pain.[169]

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[167] 'Belli e Joyce: un incontro mancato' in Riccardo Merolla (ed.), *G.G. Belli: romano, italiano ed europeo* cit., p. 192. Cf. Kafka: 'The situation of the German language in Czechoslovakia, as a fluid language intermixed with Czech and Yiddish, will allow Kafka the possibility of invention.' Deleuze-Guattari, p. 20.

[168] 'Belli e Joyce: un incontro mancato' in Riccardo Merolla (ed.), *G.G. Belli: romano, italiano ed europeo* cit., p. 193. He goes on to distinguish between linguistic invention from what he terms construction: 'Credo che a distanza di oltre un secolo, la involontaria lezione di James Joyce ci aiuti a comprendere che quello del Belli non è né un linguaggio assolutamente spontaneo e immediato (Riccardo Merolla, ne *Il laboratorio di Belli* [Roma, Bulzoni, 1984], ha documentato il complesso processo di elaborazione di singoli sonetti attraveso serie di note che a loro modo ricordano la massa di appunti joyceani preparatori di *Finnegans Wake*); né tanto meno un linguaggio "inventato". È piuttosto un linguaggio "costruito", e costruito sull'immediatezza della pura oralità del dialetto.' (p. 195).

[169] Emily Apter, 'Warped Speech: The Politics of Global Translation' in Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, (ed.), *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures, and the Challenge of Globalisation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 185-200, (pp. 188-189). Gibellini has noted Belli's anticipation of the same visual portrayal of linguistic distortion: 'L'oralità è connaturata alla poesia in dialetto: risulta difficile pensare, almeno prima di certe esternazioni novecentesche, a un dialetto per gli occhi anziché per gli orecchi.' 'Microfono in versi: le voci parlanti nei sonetti romaneschi del Belli' in *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, xlv, 2, 2006, 155-171, (p. 155).

In categorizing such elements, Deleuze and Guattari ascribe to Kafka 'a postmodern attitude toward language, an avant-garde politics aimed at the creative subversion of social representations'.[170] They also credit him with 'an impersonal Nietzschean laughter that transforms grotesque absurdity into affirmation through the productive activity of writing.'[171] The same could surely be said of Belli, were it not for the fact that he publically denied authorship of the sonnets.

On 19 August 1837, writing in his will a mere couple of years after producing his most political sonnets, Belli stipulates the following: 'Presso il sig. Domenico Biagini esiste una cassetta piena di miei manuscritti in versi. Si dovranno ardere'.[172] The instruction to burn the sonnets is repeated to acquaintances in letters: the sonnets are 'da tenersi riposte e poi forse un giorno bruciarsi', he beseeches one friend.[173] Similarly in 1849, with the doomed Roman Republic barely halfway into its five-month existence and foreign invasion imminent, as the French are readying to restore the Pope, a dispirited Belli returns to writing his testament:

> Commetto io sottoscritto ed impongo al dilettissimo mio figlio Ciro che qualora per divina disposizione mi accadesse di morire senza potergli verbalmente comunicare le mie estreme intenzioni, arda egli e distrugga dopo la mia morte tutte le carte esistenti in questa cassetta e contenenti i miei versi in vernacolo e stile romanesco, da me condannati indistintamente al fuoco affinché non sian dal mondo mai conosciuti, siccome sparsi di massime, pensieri e parole riprovevoli.[174]

This time, however, such is the poet's preoccupation with the turbulence of wider events and their unpredictable long-term outcome, that in a bid to protect the honour of the

[170] Bogue, pp. 107-123, (p. 122).
[171] Ibid., p. 122.
[172] Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. xxxix.
[173] *Lettere*, II, p. 450.
[174] Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. xxxi.

family name, particularly in respect to his son Ciro who had recently risen to a respectable position in the judiciary, Belli takes the matter into his own hands and personally destroys some of his writings, as his nephew Paolo Balestra testifies:

> Sull'animo di nostro zio fu tale il cambiamento che produssero quelle gesta che in quello scorcio del 1849, riflettendo al passato, presagendo l'avvenire, ebbe tanta forza di spirito da rinunziare ad una sterile gloria, e di sua mano abbruciò sul focolare della cucina in nostra presenza, che per noi ragazzi fu un divertimento, una quantità di scritti, che da mio padre seppi poi in appresso essere stati componimenti in dialetto romanesco.[175]

There can be no doubt, then, that Belli was fully aware of the incendiary nature of his sonnets and their revolutionary potential, especially in such an unstable political climate. As a writer, however, he seeks to shelter behind the mask of his characters and does his utmost to pare down his transgression by enlisting a whole cast of potential literary allies in the introduction, as Vighi has shown, including Juvenal and Martial as chief satirists, but also Seneca and Ausonius, as well as the rebel Baroque painter Salvator Rosa.[176] The plea not to shoot the messenger, however, does little to heal the wounds his work deliberately creates.

Despite his protestations, critics have continually recognized the lethal force of Belli's mordant edge. Teodonio, for instance, identifies 1349. 'Le risate der Papa', which ends with a line that is emblematic of the satirical mode of writing ('Chi rride cosa fa? Mmostra li denti'), as 'una strepitosa riflessione, degna del miglior Machiavelli'.[177] Perhaps the most convincing of all illustrations of his rebellion, however, is provided by the fact that the leading revolutionary of the entire period, Giuseppe Mazzini, recruits Belli as a political ally in his long fight against the papacy. Exiled in London from 1837

[175] Teodonio, *TSR*, I, p. xxxi.
[176] *PR*, I, p. 5.
[177] Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 221.

following a series of failed insurrections in Italy and repeated arrests in Switzerland and France, Mazzini recognizes the rebellious nature of the poet's writings, which despite all his attempts to stifle, were nevertheless circulating fairly widely both in unauthorized manuscript form and in print. Belli's revolution, then, is only partially silent after all. Well known for his appreciation of literature, Mazzini writes to Giuseppe Giglioli, a long-term collaborator who had been teaching Italian literature and language in London and Edinburgh, on 3 November 1846. He concludes his letter with the following instruction: 'Se trovi qualcuno tanto ardito da dire che il Papa non fa poi gran cosa, dagli il sonetto che unisco'.[178] The sonnet in question is 2121. 'La vita da cane':

> Ah sse chiam'ozzio er zuo, bbrutte marmotte?
> Nun fa mmai ggnente er Papa, eh?, nun fa ggnente?
> Accusí vve pijjassi un accidente
> come lui se strapazza e ggiorn'e nnotte.
>
> Chi pparla co Ddio padr'onnipotente?
> Chi assorve tanti fijji de miggnotte?
> Chi mmanna in giro l'innurgenze a bbotte?
> Chi vva in carrozza a bbinidì la ggente?
>
> Chi jje li conta li quadrini sui?
> Chi l'ajjuta a ccreà li cardinali?
> Le gabbelle, pe ddio, nnu le fa llui?
>
> Sortanto la fatica da facchino
> de strappà ttutto l'anno momoriali
> e bbuttalli a ppezzetti in ner cestino!

Something of a more scathing version of 1708. 'Cosa fa er Papa?', according to Teodonio 'la satira nei confronti del papa raggiunge in questo sonetto uno dei vertici più compiuti'.[179] With its rhetorical flourishes (including such tensors as interjections, exclamations, and the insistent questions), it is easy to see why this particular

[178] Mazzini, *Scritti editi ed inediti* (Imola: Cooperativa tipografico-editrice Paolo Galeati, 1919), XXX (Epistolario XVI), p. 254.
[179] Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 1009.

composition was 'il sonetto più noto ai tempi del Belli'.[180] It is published in Lausanne in 1846 after it 'aveva rapidamente viaggiato attraverso l'Europa', and Teodonio points out that a contemporary copy makes its way as far as the United States.[181] There are also secondary sources confirming Belli personally recited the poem in various places. One such source is the liberal Count Paolo Campello Della Spina, who married a descendant of the Bonaparte family, and who, according to Gibellini, 'lo ricorda recitato […] dal poeta in casa del cardinal Luciano Bonaparte, figlio di Carlo principe Canino'. Moreover, in a further ironic twist, Teodonio and Gibellini also report evidence that in 1846, the same year that Mazzini sends the letter to Giglioli, 'Francesco Maria Torricelli lo sente recitare a Senigallia dal nipote di Pio IX'.[182] The ostensibly private sonnet thus makes it almost as far as the holder of the targeted office.

Belli at least feigns annoyance at the unauthorized circulation of his Roman sonnets. In a letter to Vincenza Roberti on 30 October 1846 he is at pains to correct an erroneous version she had received and passed onto him for confirmation of his authorship, which Belli admits to somewhat ironically and probably with his various directions to destroy his papers in mind:

> Il sonetto da voi compiegatomi, chiunqe ne sia l'autore, fu da me conosciuto al cadere dell'anno 1844, e la sua lezione era allora quale ve la scrivo sullo stesso foglietto che vi rispingo. L'originale non si è trovato mai. Vi contenterete perciò di quello che vi mando, seppure non è peggiore dell'altro.[183]

More serious protests are made against editors of publications which include unauthorized versions of the sonnets, especially if published closer to home. In 1855, for

[180] *I panni in Tevere: Belli romano e altri romaneschi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1989), p. 183.
[181] Vigolo-Gibellini, *Sonetti*, p. 586; Teodonio, *TSR*, II, p. 1009.
[182] *I panni in Tevere* cit., p. 183.
[183] *Lettere a Cencia*, ed. by Muzio Mazzocchi Alemanni, 2 vols (Rome: Banco di Roma, 1974), I, p. 116.

example, Ubaldo Maria Solustri, who had included a number of Belli's sonnets in a publication entitled *Il fiore: strenna poetica italiana compilata per l'anno 1855*, is the recipient of the following rebuke:

> Nel cadermi sotto gli occhi la strenna Il Fiore, da V.S. qui compilata pel corrente anno, mi ha recato spiacevole maraviglia il vedere che Ella, me vivo e presente in Roma, abbia creduto ben fatto il pubblicare a mia insaputa sulla pag.a 105 alcuni versi in vernacolo popolare, attribuendo ad essi il mio nome, ed indicandoli per inediti quasiché Le fossero pervenuti dalle mie mani. Nessuno mi ha mai chiesto que' versi: a nessuno gli ho mai dati; e posso anzi dire con verità di non averli mai scritti, tanto li trovo deformi nel suo libro, e pieni di spropositi e di arbitrarie lezioni. Oltre di ché, seppure ho io mai composto qualche bagatella di quel genere, la ho fatta per mio solo capriccio e non per la stampa. Debbo dunque con Lei dolermi di questa Sua libertà; e nello stesso tempo protesto ancora contro le altre due inesatte pubblicazioni che trovansi a pag.e 43 e 140.[184]

The careful protestations of the truth depend on distortions and 'spropositi' the poet refers to here are clearly not the Deleuzoguattarian tensors he had employed for artistic purposes, but rather betrayals of his orthographical system.

Conclusion

It is easy to see the political attraction of Belli to somebody like Mazzini, who on the declaration of the Roman Republic in 1849, famously cried 'dopo la Roma degli Imperatori, dopo la Roma dei Papi, verrà la Roma del popolo'.[185] Indeed, the rhetoric of Mazzini's *La Giovine Italia*, the mouthpiece for which was the purpose-built eponymous journal, included repeated references to the people and their importance in the revolution, although scholars have shown this to be motivated by political gain.[186] For this reason,

[184] *Lettere*, II, p. 345.
[185] See Giuseppe La Farina, *Storia d'Italia: dal 1815 al 1850*, 3 vols (Turin: Società editrice italiana, 1860-61), II, p. 708.
[186] 'Frequent references to *il popolo* (the people) show the democratic slant of Mazzini's thinking, but a close reading reveals that in his mind only those who possessed a national awareness deserved to be called *popolo*. The rest, no matter how many, were merely *gente* (ordinary folks), not to be despised, but not to be honoured or heeded, either. The distinction between *popolo* and *gente* was necessary to preserve the myth

Asor Rosa unsurprisingly charges Mazzini with populism in *Scrittori e popolo*, whilst pointedly exonerating Belli from the charge he otherwise applies to most modern Italian writers, including Manzoni.[187] There is enough evidence in the *Sonetti* themselves, however, to show a deep sympathy with the plight and injustice of the ordinary people, their dissatisfaction with the management of affairs, and their unjustified lack of involvement in the peculiar polis of nineteenth-century Rome. Regardless of what he says formally, and his frequent attempts to deny authorship, the sonnets are revolutionary in this sense alone, as Mazzini clearly shows, along with Belli's evidently very real fear of retribution. Barbara Garvin might be right to refute the possibility of 'una presa di coscienza di classe in senso marxiano', since Marx's writings are yet to come, but there can be no denying the binary social order and Belli's early challenging depictions of exclusion.[188] As Deleuze and Guattari point out, literature expresses acts of rebellion 'insofar as they're not imposed from without and insofar as they exist only as diabolical powers to come or revolutionary forces to be constructed.'[189] Belli's real revolution is thus wrought on a literary scale and should be measured against the potential wounds it creates principally through language. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of tensored language, blatant and nowhere better exemplified than in the *Sonetti romaneschi*, really allows

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that revolutions were 'popular', given that the majority showed little inclination to mount the barricades.' Roland Sarti, 'Giuseppe Mazzini and his opponents' in John A. Davis, (ed.), *Italy in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 74-107, (p. 83). It must be said that Belli also makes similar class distinctions in the *Zibaldone*, for which see *LGZ*, p. 516.

[187] "Perché ci sia populismo", writes Asor Rosa, "è necessario insomma che il popolo sia rappresentato come un modello". *Scrittori e popolo* (Rome: Savelli, 1975) p. 13. Belli states unequivocally in the introduction: "questo [il popolo] io ricopio, non per proporre un modello ma sì per dare una immagine fedele di cosa già esistente e, più, abbandonata senza miglioramento". *PR*, I, p. 4.

[188] Garvin, Barbara,'La indiggnità papale' in *Tre sondaggi sul Belli*, ed. by Guido Almansi, Barbara Garvin, and Bruce Merry (Turin: Einaudi, 1978) pp. 47-105 (p. 98).

[189] Deleuze-Guattari, p. 18.

Belli's rebellion to be quantified for the first time. Even if his revolution is ultimately silent, its literary effects are palpable.

CONCLUSION

> *In queste poesie l'autore sa di essere un uomo del secolo XIX, e di parlare ad uomini di questo secolo, quindi i suoi temi, i suoi concetti, le sue parole, si concordano all'età nostra e ai nostri costumi.*[1]

The above quotation is taken from the frontispiece of *Versi inediti di Giuseppe Gioachino Belli romano* (Lucca: Giusti, 1843), a selection of Belli's poems in standard Italian, printed privately and funded by the poet's friends.[2] Frankly, in relation to his production in lingua, the veracity of the statement is yet to be proven. Although the poetry in Italian, numbering a staggering 45000 verses in all and thus dwarfing the 'monumento' of the *Sonetti romaneschi*, has now been edited in full, it has hardly been studied at all.[3] I suspect, however, that the traditional view, according to which 'little of that vast production is of literary interest', may need revising.[4] Any cursory look at the standard poems will reveal ample evidence of linguistic experimentation within the staid literary language of convention, as if the poet is rebelling there too against what he refers to in one letter as 'i putenti arcaismi d'una favella fradicia per quasi sette secoli di vita'.[5] There are dialogue sonnets, such as 'Il conte e il maggiordomo', privileging direct speech and a

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[1] Quoted in De Mauro, *Storia linguistica* cit., p. 313.

[2] The phrasing suggests it may be Belli's own. Cf. the profession of originality in his literary 'monumento'in the introduction to the *Sonetti*: 'In lei sta certo un tipo di originalità: e la sua lingua, i suoi concetti, l'indole, il costume, gli usi, le pratiche, i lumi, la credenza, i pregiudizi, le superstizioni, tuttociò insomma che la riguarda, ritiene un'impronta che assai per avventura si distingue da qualunque altro carattere di popolo.' *PR*, I, p. 13.

[3] For the production in lingua, see *Belli italiano* cit. See also *Belli romanesco: L'introduzione, gli appunti, le prose, le poesie minori*, ed. by Roberto Vighi (Rome: Editore Carlo Colombo, 1966).

[4] Garvin, Barbara, 'Belli, Giuseppe Gioachino', in *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, ed. by Peter Hainsworth and David Robey (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p. 54.

[5] *Lettere*, I, p. 455. Cf. the descriptions of Romanesco as 'una favella tutta guasta e corrotta'. *PR*, I, p. 21. Taken together, Belli is clearly engaged in a provocative renewal of the language of poetry. Future study with this new dimension in mind should be a priority. Anti-classical poems abound in the standard, much like in Porta. Cf. e.g. 'Il purista', 'Il neologo', 'I testi di Crusca'. *Belli italiano* cit., II, pp. 474-481.

conversational tone, and there are experiments with language mixing, such as 'Le italiane lettere', with flashes of the distinctive wit so prevalent in the *Sonetti*.[6] There are also denunciations of social inequality and corruption, such as 'La protezione de' grandi'.[7] It strikes me, therefore, that Belli uses rebellion as a strategy in the standard, albeit without the revolutionary force of the Romanesco, to attack what he calls 'i moderni difettucci umani' in something of a paradigmatic statement of his poetics entitled 'I miei versi'.[8]

Read in relation to the *Sonetti romaneschi*, however, the above quotation is absolutely appropriate, as borne out by the findings of this thesis. Against any measure of modernity, Belli's poetry not only withstands scrutiny, but rewards the application of modern critical tools such as literary theory, revealing that the *Sonetti* are engaged with many of the same artistic trends sweeping across Europe in the long nineteenth century as a whole. Belli faces the same challenges of literary and linguistic realism, for example, as those faced by a Dickens in England, whom Orwell accuses of not allowing 'anyone who is to play a heroic part to speak like a working man', and a Hugo in France, whose Gavroche presents the argot of street urchins and petty criminals in strikingly similar ways to some of Belli's characters.[9] In this regard, Belli's *Sonetti romaneschi* fulfil what Auerbach would describe as the 'foundations' and principal achievements of realism, namely:

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[6] *Belli italiano* cit., II, p. 725. In 'Le italiane lettere' linguistic misunderstanding is exploited for comic effect when an English Lady seems to be particularly enjoying a recital of Vittoria Colonna's poetry. The speaker is busily proclaiming the global success of Italian literature, but when the 'pastorello' goes to compliment the lady on her cultural knowledge, her reply betrays her: '*Thank-you*, rispose: *ooh sì, trovato bello! / Tuto in onore di piaza Colonna*' [sic]. *Belli italiano* cit., II, p. 667.
[7] Ibid., II, pp. 682-3.
[8] *Belli italiano* cit., II, p. 467.
[9] Orwell, 'Charles Dickens' in *Essays* cit., p. 56.

> the serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential respresentation'.[10]

If anything, Belli exceeds the description of a modern, nineteenth-century man of letters, as this thesis has shown, particularly in the final chapter. In creating a revolutionary literary language capable of destabilizing the tired, classicizing literary language of his day, Belli foreshadows some of the great linguistic innovators of twentieth-century European literature, such as Joyce, Kafka and Beckett. Belli's revolutionary spirit has long been recognized, by Carducci among others, but it has always been taken as a negative element: 'grandissima l'arte e la potenza [...] del Belli', writes Carducci, 'ma in una poesia che nega, deride e distrugge.'[11] With the framework of modern literary theory, however, such a position need not be dismissed quite so lightly and be seen in purely thematic terms, as Muscetta tried to argue. Indeed, against the background of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a minor literature, Belli's real literary rebellion may be fully grasped. Bakhtin, for whom 'literary realism is shaped by a protean restlessness', with its 'dominant modes […] of comedy, irony and parody', had already identified similar tendencies in the 'essentially iconoclastic' novel form, which he sees as being capable of 'subverting conventional literary forms'.[12] In this regard, others too have been right to point to an almost novelistic approach on Belli's part, including Moravia:

> La narrativa italiana dell'ottocento ha poche cose che possano reggere al paragone dell'opera belliana. Parliamo di narrativa perché i sonetti del

[10] Auerbach, Eric, *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 491.
[11] Carducci, Giosuè, *Arte e poesia* in *Opere*, 52 vols (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1937), XXIII, p. 387.
[12] Morris, Pam, *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003), p48.

> Belli, nei loro vari aspetti drammatici, psicologici e descrittivi tengono molto più della narrativa che della lirica.[13]

In this sense, the early recognisers of Belli's innovative poetry, such as the eminent linguist Hugo Schuchardt, were right to conclude that 'le sue opere non si rifanno a nessun precedente'.[14] Despite the clear influence of Carlo Porta, towards whose poetry Belli clearly feels compelled, there is nevertheless a constant polemical dialectics, with the Roman poet continually striving to outdo his Milanese predecessor. Belli thus uses Porta merely to further his own literary development, like any creative artist, as a figure against which to deifne himself through an act of differentiation.

The over 200 examples of dialogue sonnets, which have received little attention to date, certainly require further study as the fulcrum of Belli's poetics. Besides drawing attention to spectacular poem sequences such as 586-593. 'Le confidenze de le regazze', a real poetic tour de force which has been consistently overlooked, the findings of this thesis have proven that the dialogue sonnet is not merely an exercise in authorial exuberance, but the stage for the most intimate forms of opposing voices, which characterizes Belli's work as a whole. The dialogue sonnet is integral to the realist enterprise, with its natural privileging of direct speech, and thus the perfect battleground for Belli's plebeian characters.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of this thesis, however, is the demonstration of how Belli's *Sonetti* may be explored against the background of gender studies. Gender is clearly a fertile area for future study, as this first exploration has shown, and is yet further proof of the way in which Belli can be brought into much broader literary discussions at

[13] Moravia, *L'uomo come fine* cit., p. 40.
[14] Quoted in Giachery, *Belli e Roma* cit., p. 72.

the European level. Belli's female portraits go far beyond the 'credula femminetta' promised in the introduction, but equally reflect the wider patriarchal tendencies of nineteenth-century Europe.[15]

With the application of theory opening up all sorts of possibilities, a full-length study of Belli from various theoretical positions could easily be maintained, against a much wider selection of the sonnets than is feasible in a doctoral thesis. As Petrocchi stated in 1981, 'Belli è, nonstante tutto, ancora un poeta pieno di segreti'.[16] This emphatically remains the case some thirty years on, but an approach similar to the one proposed in this thesis, with a mixture of the traditional philology and modern literary theory, may finally pave the way for Belli to be situated at a European level. In 1983 Roberto Vighi, who has done the most so far to promote the case for Belli, along with Pietro Gibellini, hoped optimistically in the appendix to *Belli oltre frontiera* that the survey of Belli's reception outside Italy, in practice confined mostly to translations of the sonnets, might lead to 'gli ulteriori approfondimenti che certamente verranno a confermare la fama del Belli "europeo"'.[17] It is high time that such further studies appeared. The way to confirm Belli's status as a giant of European literature, however, is not to analyze the translations, but to re-examine his poetry through the medium of modern literary criticism in the same way that most major European figures have been studied, precisely as this thesis has sought to suggest.

[15] *PR*, I, p. 23.
[16] Petrocchi, 'Il romanesco' cit., p. 15.
[17] Abeni, Damiano, et al., (eds.), *Belli oltre frontiera: la fortuna di G. G. Belli nei saggi e nelle versioni di autori stranieri* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1983), p. 374.

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