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NARRATING THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL NOVEL

by

SANDRA A. WATERS

A Dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Italian

written under the direction of

Elizabeth Leake

and approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

January, 2009

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Narrating the Italian Historical Novel

By SANDRA A. WATERS

Dissertation Director:

Elizabeth Leake

This dissertation examines the relationship between the representation of history and the narrative devices and strategies that authors use to sew their readers deeper into the story in Italian historical novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My theoretical framework builds on the assertion that history as a professional discipline in Europe emerged toward the beginning of the nineteenth century—the same time period in which the historical novel was cementing itself as a legitimate literary genre in Italy. I claim that his tandem emergence of history as a discipline and the historical novel is paralleled in the late twentieth century by their critical denouement, as some theorists of postmodern theory argue that a sense of the end of “official” history permeates the latter part of the twentieth century and continues today. I argue that this outlook permits us to look backward in time and rethink authoritative history, filling in its previously ignored blank pages. I demonstrate how nineteenth2 century narrators establish a connection with their readers by deflating conventional authority, and how narrators of contemporary historical novels establish and confirm their narrative authority by claiming that they have none, as they are all marginalized figures in society and in history. The novels I

discuss include Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, Ippolito Nievo's *Le confessioni d'un italiano*, Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi's *Beatrice Cenci*, Anna Banti's *Artemisia*, Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*, Luisa Muraro's *Guglielmo e Maifreda*, Maria Rosa Cutrufelli's *La briganta*, Sebastiano Vassalli's *La chimera*, Luther Blissett's *Q*, and Wu Ming's *54*.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Andrea Baldi, Alessandro Vettori, Ruth Glynn, and especially Elizabeth Leake, my principal advisor throughout my doctoral studies. All of the faculty and staff of the Italian Department at Rutgers University have been supportive in ways unimaginable, Mrs. Carol Feinberg above all. Regina F. Psaki is responsible for my interest in the historical novel, and Michael F. O'Riley helped me give my separate chapters a cohesive frame. Besides my official advisors, Tamao Nakahara, Sara Teardo, Monica Bilotta, and Marco Codebò provided essential feedback on early drafts. Thanks to Roberto Pesce for introducing me to Luther Blissett, and thus, my final chapter. I could not have finished this project without the moral support of Bryan Cracchiolo, Annachiara Mariani, Kathleen LaPenta, and Lex Perryman. Special thanks to Jonathan L. Bredin for providing me with inspiring workspaces and supporting me in the most difficult of times.

An earlier version of Chapter 2 was published as “The Intradiegetic Narrator in the Italian Historical Novel,” in *La Fusta: Journal of Italian Literature and Culture* vol. 15 (Fall 2007).

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## Chapter 1

**Introduction**  
**The Italian Historical Novel**

Nel romanzo storico, il soggetto principale è tutto dell'autore, tutto poetico, perché meramente verosimile...Ma (...) è scritto per degli altri.  
-Alessandro Manzoni

While Alessandro Manzoni's I promessi sposi (1827, 1840 rev.) is indisputably considered the pioneer of the Italian historical novel—a genre that originally prospered until the end of the nineteenth century—it also served as the novel that brought Italy out of a literary black hole that had previously been filled with other nations' popular literature. For this reason, Manzoni's novel is often regarded as the definitive Italian novel, a signpost to which many novels, genres, authors, and literary movements that appeared before and after are compared and defined. Whereas previous literary movements in Italy are defined by poetry, the tract (political, scientific, social), the epic, and theater, the nineteenth century (with much help from Manzoni) ushers in the novel as a new form that dominates the field of Italian literary studies to this day.

As is the case with most new literary and artistic forms, the novel was first seen as a “low” genre, appealing to the masses as opposed to the literary elite. Debates in literature between Romanticists (who favored new and changeable views and modes of expression) and Classicists (who insisted upon artistic expression in fixed, well-established forms) at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth highlighted this opposition. Of course, new forms and genres must appear eventually, and in a grand convergence of historical and literary importance, this task fell

to Manzoni. Traditionalists felt that Manzoni, who had authored such “classical” texts as the Inni Sacri, odes, and tragic plays (Aldelchi and Il conte di Carmagnola), had betrayed his classicist roots, lowered himself, and compromised his artistic clout by writing a novel.<sup>1</sup> Burgeoning Risorgimentalists and those looking to literary and historical trends in other European countries, on the other hand, saw Manzoni’s novel as a logical step in the trajectory of an historical process.

For many reasons that I delineate here, the emergence of the historical novel in Italy occurred in tandem with that of Unification, or the Risorgimento. Although its events take place entirely in seventeenth-century Italy, I promessi sposi was published during the first years of the Risorgimento and is often categorized as a Risorgimentalist novel. If we place the publication of Manzoni’s novel at the beginning of events that would eventually lead to Italian Unification, then Ippolito Nievo’s Le confessioni di un italiano (published posthumously in 1867) lies at the concluding position of the Risorgimento, and also at the end of the Italian historical novel’s first surge in popularity. Having given the Italian nation a clearly defined, formative historical period, the Risorgimento also gave the historical novel a clearly defined first epoch, as most examples of the Italian historical novel from this period either discuss directly or address indirectly the concept of Italy as a unified nation.<sup>2</sup> The growth in tandem of history in

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<sup>1</sup>“...il Tommaseo, recensendo *I promessi sposi*, dirà che anche il Manzoni...si era “abbassato” a scrivere un romanzo.” Salvatore Guglielmino e Hermann Grosser, Il sistema letterario: guida alla storia letteraria e all’analisi testuale: Ottocento, vol. 4 (Milano: Principato, 1994) 142.

<sup>2</sup> Besides Manzoni and Nievo’s examples, see also Massimo D’Azeglio’s Ettore Fieramosca, o La disfida di Barletta (1833), and his L’assedio di Firenze (1836) and Giuseppe Rovani’s Cent’anni (first published in installments between 1857 and 1864 in the Gazzetta ufficiale di Milano, and as a novel in 1868).



the making and rise of the historical novel in Italy is reflected on a much larger, European scale by the concept and awareness of history, which was budding at the same time.

### **A Sense of History (or history)**

Throughout this dissertation, I make the distinction between History (with a capital H)—the kind that Hayden White discusses (which I will further explain below): what is found in history books, the authoritative history, the academic profession, dates and places, battles, famous generals—and history (with a small h), which encompasses points of view, events, and people that are not usually found in History. The former discusses Napoleon Bonaparte’s military feats, the details of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the contents of a syllabus for a university level history course, whereas the latter discusses the duties of Bonaparte’s valet and his wife’s maid, what happened in the tailor’s shop down the street on the day the Declaration of Independence was signed, and what was edited from that same university history course’s textbook because it was not “relevant” enough. History (capital H) often explores the names and events that have always been explored, while history (lower-case h) attempts to investigate people and events that generally fall through the cracks of History. This distinction is important to the discussion of the historical novel because the most compelling examples of the genre (according to Georg Lukács, as I will explain shortly) elucidate the process of History through the characters and events of history. The distinction is relevant to my study in particular because parameters that separate the two different kinds of history I delineate here are rapidly diminishing in contemporary

examples of the historical novel. I employ this distinction because I believe that both History and history offer essential, differing viewpoints that, taken together, can approach an attempt at a more complete (or at least a less incomplete) account of past events. I am also under the impression that History may soon become simply one more facet of history, as more authoritative accounts are questioned and challenged, and newer approaches take center stage.

Critics like White claim that History as an academic and professional field in Europe emerged toward the beginning of the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> precisely when the movement of Italian Unification was emerging. Although it was established in the academy comparatively later than many of its humanistic counterparts, History steadily gained credibility and critical ground through the 1880s with the creation of academic positions and journals.<sup>4</sup> History's relatively belated appearance as a legitimate domain of study is usually attributed to a social awakening, a sense of history that Georg Lukács claims occurred in Europe during the years 1789-1814:

It was the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a *mass experience*, and moreover on a European scale...Now if experiences such as these are linked with the knowledge that similar upheavals are taking place all over the world, this must enormously strengthen the feeling first that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes and finally that it has a direct effect upon the life of every individual.<sup>5</sup>

Looking back at this phenomenon from the vantage point of the early twentieth century (The Historical Novel was first published in 1937), Lukács infers the explanation of

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<sup>3</sup> Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 136.

<sup>4</sup> White 136.

<sup>5</sup> Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 23.

History as having popular roots. The historical novels he touts as exemplary boast “humble” people as protagonists. From his Marxist point of view, Lukács rallies behind “every individual;” he claims that not only does history have an effect on them (not just on the privileged participants of History), but that they, too, can effect history. But Lukács’ argument stems from a national one, as his point of reference is the French Revolution, which spawned many similar national movements throughout Europe, including but not limited to those in England, Germany, and Italy.

The first example of the European historical novel showcases a sense of nationalism paired with popular protagonists and subjects; Sir Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe (1819) directly addresses the struggle between occupying forces and occupied peoples, even though the novel’s setting is not Scott’s contemporary Britain, but its Middle Ages. Ivanhoe delves into issues that lie at the heart of how England was defined as a nation, through the eventual mixing of Norman and Saxon peoples, and in doing so, gave his early nineteenth-century readers a sense of England’s history and “birth” as a nation. Inspired by Scott’s project, I promessi sposi addresses these same issues in a very similar fashion, even though the “birth” of the Italian nation will come well after its publication.<sup>6</sup> Several of the nations that Lukács includes in his study do not actually succeed in Unification until many years after this development, although he discusses a pan-European sense of awakening.

According to History books, Italian Unification occurs in 1860 (or in 1861 or 1870, depending on which History book is consulted), which is much later than many

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss Scott’s influence on Manzoni more extensively in Chapter 2.

other European countries' "birthdays." Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) unified in 1707, the French Revolution occurred in 1789, and the United States unified its colonies in 1776.<sup>7</sup> Organized nationalist sentiment occurs later in Italy than in many of its European neighbors, and since Italy's "birthday" is the culmination and not the impetus of its Risorgimento period, it is a point of arrival rather than that point's inspiration. After centuries of foreign rule, expectations of what Unification should mean once it was finally achieved were problematic because of this shift between expectation and fulfillment.

Italian Unification after the fact is normally considered from one of two positions: that of Benedetto Croce, or that of Antonio Gramsci. Scholar Roberto Dainotti (with some help from Lucy Riall) succinctly explains the difference between the two, here in terms of regionalism:

The first of these approaches—the Crocean one—imagines the Risorgimento as a beautiful movement from division to unity, from regional separation to a 'synthetic' national identity. The nation would then be the locus in which all local and regional tensions are resolved in to a perfected form of national 'identity.' The problem with this approach is that it fails to explain the persistence of regional tensions in post-unification Italy—from the vexed 'Southern Question' to the resurgence of regionalist feelings in northern Italy with the 'Leagues.'

The second approach to the Risorgimento, which takes its cue from Gramsci's notion of the 'failed' revolution, rejects, in Riall's words, 'the national explanation of unification, pointing instead to the persistence of regional and local identities/conflicts in Risorgimento Italy.'"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Germany, one of the countries on which Lukács bases his assumptions about a sense of history in the making, did not unify until after Italy, in 1871.

<sup>8</sup> Roberto Dainotto, "'Tramonto' and 'Risorgimento': Gentile's Dialectics and the Prophecy of Nationhood," Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento, eds. Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001) 243. Dainotto refers to Riall's The Italian Risorgimento: State, Society and National Unification (London: Routledge, 1996) 65.

According to Dainotti, the Crocean version of history touts a successful, positivist, unified outcome; Gramsci denies Croce's idealized conclusion and instead sees continued multiplicity of identities in Italy's still extant regionalism. Croce's "successful" Unification falls under the category of History, it is easily defined with its lists of heroes, dates, and national celebrations, while Gramsci's alternative to the monolith definition of the Risorgimento is initially seen as problematic and subversive (Gramsci is, after all, speaking as a jailed intellectual under the fascist regime). Interestingly enough, many scholars today<sup>9</sup> have adopted Gramsci's alternate history to Croce's previously monolith History, demonstrating that histories can sometimes undermine History.

If the Risorgimento is often seen as the birth of the Italian nation, its events and heroes are habitually mythicized. This phenomenon is mirrored in the twentieth century by the events of the Resistance during World War II. Both of these historical markers have been challenged in terms of their generative abilities; Gramsci's claim that the Risorgimento was not a popular movement (although fascism was) is echoed in the late-twentieth century by recent revelations regarding certain heroes of the Resistance. This deconstruction of previously definitive historical signposts in the last century signals a shift in the concept of history. Some critics argue that a sense of the end of that kind of history permeates the latter part of the twentieth century and continues today.<sup>10</sup> In giving History a beginning and an ending, these critics create a finite and thus more easily definable period, which actually permits us to look backward in time, to attempt to fill in

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<sup>9</sup> Including many in Ascoli and Henneberg's collection cited above.

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke UP, 1991); Gianni Vattimo, The End of Modernity (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1988); and The Transparent Society (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), for example.

its blank pages, and to rethink that History from a more marginalized position (creating a more complete history); this process and position connect the wide range of texts that I use.

## **Tools**

I consider the novels I examine to be works of fiction, and my approach to them is literary. I read history as an ongoing, narrativized process that does not have one definitive version. I see History as defined above as an impossible construction, attempted and touted by many, but always eventually collapsed. For the theoretical framework of my dissertation, I use (and perhaps at times, abuse) the idea that history and narrative are not knowable, relatable things. I rely heavily on the works of Hayden White, Fredric Jameson, and Linda Hutcheon in this regard.

I briefly use White's early work on history and its emergence as a base definition in this Introduction; in my chapters I rely on his work in The Content of the Form and in "The Modernist Event."<sup>11</sup> In the former, White claims that

...events are real not because they occurred but because, first, they were remembered and, second, they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence. In order, however, for an account of them to be considered a historical account, it is not enough that they be recorded in the order of their original occurrence. It is the fact that they can be recorded otherwise, in an order of narrative, that makes them, at one and the same time, questionable as to their authenticity and susceptible to being considered as tokens of reality. In order to qualify as historical, an event must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence. Unless at least two versions of the same set of events can be imagined, there is no reason for the historian to take upon himself the authority of

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<sup>11</sup> Hayden White, Metahistory: The Content of the Form (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987); "The Modernist Event," The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) 17-38.

giving the true account of what really happened. The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable by the imposition upon its processes of the formal coherency that only stories possess.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, an event must always have two possible accounts (“narrations”). He continues to say that historical discourse, as put into story form, becomes desirable to the reader because it is coherent in that story form; it has been narrativized. It has a moral and thus a meaning, and through that meaning we are able to understand an event that would otherwise remain unnarrativized and thus, incomprehensible. White’s earlier work on historiography categorized various forms of conveyance (Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Farce) through which readers understand nineteenth-century historical writing. In his 1996 article “The Modernist Event,” White explains that events like the Holocaust create problematic “factual” events in that they cannot be understood by the terms previously laid out by historians in the nineteenth century. The tools of deciphering historical events have remained the same, even though the caliber of the historical event has changed; this new, twentieth-century event has so many meanings for so many people: those who experienced it firsthand, those who continue to feel its effects well after it happened, as well as those who are affected by it “secondhand.” Thus one event (or fact, as White calls it) can bear numerous possible meanings, which do not necessarily resemble one another.<sup>13</sup>

Jameson’s work in The Political Unconscious, like White’s assertions about narrativization, are based on Lacan’s theory of the Real, and claims that history (or

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<sup>12</sup> White, The Content of the Form 20.

<sup>13</sup> White, “The Modernist Event” 21.

Lacan's Real) "...is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization."<sup>14</sup> I have been influenced by Jameson's theories on the postmodern in his aptly titled Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism; I do not use his work published before The Political Unconscious. Jameson's arguments about the Real and White's theories about narrative in The Content of the Form function as my base for analyzing nineteenth-century texts. White's later theories on the twentieth-century event paired with Linda Hutcheon's work on postmodern narrative in A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction aid my interpretation of twentieth-century novels.<sup>15</sup> Hutcheon claims that postmodern narratives do not aspire to verisimilitude as nineteenth-century narratives did; rather, they revel in their mixture of fact and fiction. Since these two seemingly contradictory elements are presented as having the same value, all absolutes previously based on that value—truth, meaning, subjectivity, authority—are questioned since multiple versions of all of those elements are now possible.

White's formulation about the twentieth-century event is useful for me when discussing trauma theorists Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, whose ideas I weave together in order to approach problems of narrativization and traumatic experience. I related Hutcheon's multiplicity to Sarah Dillon's work on palimpsest texts. In terms of narrative theory regarding narrators and authors, I use and entwine the theories of Wayne

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<sup>14</sup> Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 35.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New York: Routledge, 1988).



Booth in Rhetoric of Fiction and Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author." To a lesser extent overall but providing me with the ammunition of a big finale is the idea of the Hitchcockian McGuffin as a narrative device that lays bare the empty meaning of many late-twentieth-century historical novels.

### **The Historical Novel and its Critics**

I do not attempt a description, original or conventional, of the historical novel in this dissertation. The fact that I examine historical novels from such a vast time period that covers almost two hundred years would render such an attempt quite difficult, and somewhat forced. If I must offer a rubric that describes, albeit very generally, the novels I analyze, then let it begin with that of Manzoni himself, who once described the historical novel as "...una specie d'un genere... che comprende tutti i componimenti misti di *storia* e d'*invenzione*, qualunque sia la loro forma."<sup>16</sup> His definition appeals to me because it avoids a definition that makes universal claims about fact and fiction. Manzoni, rather, uses terms that are no less contested (history and invention), but that allow for more diverse examples to be included in this "kind of genre." Manzoni appears to understand the fact that the form of the historical novel did not spring from Scott's head, fully formed and developed like Athena from Zeus, but rather resulted from many different historical and literary factors. Manzoni also seems to anticipate the fact that the genre that he helped launch in Italy would always suffer an identity crisis of sorts. The historical novel is piecemeal by nature: it consists of elements of the *romanzo di*

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<sup>16</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, "Del Romanzo Storico, . . . : 1738. Emphasis mine.

*formazione* (or bildungsroman), the faux autobiography/biography, the romance, the epic, the mystery novel, the epistolary novel, the picaresque, and perhaps others as well. The historical novel, like its two main elements—history and narrative—are always subjective and always changing. Attempting static, binding, exclusionary definitions of the genre would also be complicated by the span of years during which the novels I examine were published.

No single critic has been so extensive in theory of the historical novel before or after Lukács, and it would be negligent not to acknowledge his rightful place at the helm of critical theory on the genre. Lukács was a Marxist, and his Marxist views lie at the very heart of his analysis of the historical novel. As I have already mentioned, development of the genre that is so imbued with the machinations of history stems in part from a European consciousness that connects and affects every individual. It is this form of consciousness, paired with the “...derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age”<sup>17</sup> that makes the historical novel unique and new, and potentially revolutionary, should that Marxist consciousness fully develop. In Lukács’ own words, “...in this mass experience of history the national element is linked on the one hand with problems of social transformation; and on the other, more and more people become aware of the connection between national and world history.”<sup>18</sup> According to Lukács, the historical novel could demonstrate his possibility by telling the stories and events of history through its minor characters, which is what all of the novels that I have chosen to analyze in this dissertation do.

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<sup>17</sup> Lukács 19.

<sup>18</sup> Lukács 25.

Although many notable historical novels were published in the period after the genre's first surge in popularity had ended in the late-nineteenth century, new contributions to the genre in the past thirty-odd years have considerably expanded and transformed the parameters set by Manzoni. Certainly Anna Banti's Artemisia (1947) is critically hailed as a masterpiece of twentieth-century Italian literature, but given its difficult narrative it is not widely read outside university courses today. Perhaps Umberto Eco's Il nome della rosa (1980) is the most well-known historical novel to be published in the latter half of last century, although it is more widely cited than widely read. Historical novels with women protagonists have been prevalent since Eco's novel was published, although most are not known outside literary or feminist circles. Laura Mancinelli's historical novels set in medieval Europe were published in Eco's shadow. Perhaps Dacia Maraini's La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria (1990) is the most famous of this type of novel to come out in recent years, given Maraini's high (and international) profile in literary and feminist circles. However, in the same year that Maraini's novel was published, several other novels featuring women protagonists were also published that remain unknown to the general reading public, including Maria Rosa Cutrufelli's La briganta and Sebastiano Vassalli's La chimera.<sup>19</sup> The anticipated appearance of Luther Blissett's Q (2000) definitely garnered wide attention within and outside of literary circles, and once again brought attention to the genre that first defined the modern Italian novel.

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<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that Italy on the whole does not consume novels on the same level as many European and North American countries. Cutrufelli's novel has recently been republished on a grander scale (La briganta [Torino: Frassinelli, 2005]), and translated into English (The Woman Outlaw, trans. Angela M. Jeannet [Mineola, NY: Legas, 2004]), which no doubt increases her readership immensely.

The historical novel's resurgence in contemporary Italy has spawned several critical studies regarding the nature of the genre and its revival (Della Coletta, Ganeri),<sup>20</sup> the role that the philosophy of history plays in recent historical novels (Glynn),<sup>21</sup> and the influence of women's and gender studies on a previously male-dominated field (Marotti and Brooke, Lazzaro-Weis);<sup>22</sup> surprisingly little analytical attention has been paid to the figure of the narrator and his or her efficacy as a narrative device within this genre.

The two-fold focus of my larger project explores the relationship between the representation of history and the narrative devices that authors utilize to sew their readers deeper into the story in Italian historical novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries precisely by pointing out the narrative devices that writers use. Chapters 2-4 adhere to thematic analysis, and chapter 5 demonstrates the analyses proffered in previous chapters, as well as the cycle of History that I have mentioned. I begin in chapter 2 by looking at the figure of the intradiegetic narrator and the end result of several historical novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, what ideologies are apparent or morals preached in each novel, and how the reader gleans that information: is it obvious, or does she have to read between the lines in order to understand what she is "supposed" to by the end of the novel? How does that process change in these novels over the course of the last two

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<sup>20</sup> Cristina Della Coletta, Plotting the Past: Metamorphoses of Historical Narrative in Modern Italian Fiction. (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1996); Margherita Ganeri, Il romanzo storico in Italia: Il dibattito critico dalle origini al postmoderno (Lecce: Piero Manni, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Glynn, Contesting the Monument: The Anti-Illusionist Italian Historical Novel (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Maria Ornella Marotti and Gabriella Brooke, eds., (Gendering Italian Fiction: Feminist Revisions of Italian History (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999); Carol Lazzaro-Weis, (From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing, 1968-1990 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

centuries? Chapters 3 and 4 address the means of the final result achieved: the voice and process of the “message” that is delivered (examined in chapter 2). Chapter 3 addresses the previously silent voice of the woman historical subject, and how her story is told and heard through her words, but also through her gendered body, while in chapter 4 I point out how narrators become confused with their authors through a palimpsest process, how these narratives are constructed, from the point of view from within the text. Chapter 5 addresses the more recent phenomenon of the anonymous group author (later exposed) posed by Luther Blissett and Wu Ming. I use these two novels as case studies to demonstrate the collective theses offered in my previous chapters, and thus as exempla of the denouement of History proffered by many critics as explained above.

## Chapter 2

### The Intradiegetic Narrator

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

-Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”

In my introduction I explored the historical novel’s emergence at the beginning of the nineteenth century and its reemergence and reexamination by both authors and critics at the end of the twentieth century. In this chapter I examine the figure of the intradiegetic narrator and how it works in historical novels in order to appeal to the reader, in examples from the genre’s inception to the end of the twentieth century. The texts I choose to illustrate my point are Alessandro Manzoni's I promessi sposi (1840), Umberto Eco's Il nome della rosa (1980), Ippolito Nievo's Le confessioni d'un italiano (1858), Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi's Beatrice Cenci (1860), and Sebastiano Vassalli’s La chimera (1990).

What most critics concerned with historical discourse—including Hayden White, Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon—agree upon is that history (or the “real,” or historical events) is “...*not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but...it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and...our approach to it...necessarily passes

through its prior textualization, its narrativization.”<sup>23</sup> Jameson’s study, largely influenced by the Lacanian notion that desire arises from lack, works to unmask the underlying political or social problem (the real) in certain genres of narrative. He claims that the real is “that which resists desire,” even though it is only through desire itself that we can detect the manifest effects of the latent real.<sup>24</sup> On a related note, White asserts that the real is made desirable when a formal coherency of a story is imposed on its events. “The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand,” he suggests, “for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, historical narrative, as opposed to annals or chronicle, requires an ideological, narrative closure to the events recounted according to the authority represented by the social systems at play in the narrated story. White and Jameson provide excellent tools for analyzing nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical novels that adopt their predecessors’ narrative style and ideological framework.

Hutcheon, building on White’s theory of an imposed formal coherency, is ultimately less concerned with representations of the real than she is with the way “facts” and “fiction” are intertwined in what she calls “historiographic metafiction.”<sup>26</sup> Whereas historical novels, in Georg Lukács’ opinion, succeed in representing history through generic character types and assimilation of the “historical record,” Hutcheon claims that

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<sup>23</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 35; see also pp. 82, 184. On related ideas, see also Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” and “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory” in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987); and Linda Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction: The Pastime of Past Time” in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Jameson 184.

<sup>25</sup> White 21.

<sup>26</sup> Hutcheon 116.

historiographic metafiction

...incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data. More often, the process of *attempting* to assimilate is what is foregrounded: we watch the narrators of [historiographic metafiction] trying to make sense of the historical facts they have collected. As readers, we see both the collection and the attempts to make narrative order. Historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today.<sup>27</sup>

Hutcheon points out the reader's active role in scrutinizing not the events narrated, but what the narrator accomplishes and how he accomplishes it. Elements of the "historical record" are presented, then questioned and even undermined by the introduction of fictive elements, which are presented or integrated into the story in the same way as the "facts" are. The combination of fact and fiction in this type of contemporary historical novel ultimately contests the order that the narrative has imposed on "real events," leaving no moralizing conclusion, "...no reconciliation, no dialectic...just unresolved contradiction."<sup>28</sup>

Although Hutcheon's theoretical work is grounded in previous studies on representations of the real in historical narrative, her own theoretical elaborations concern contemporary fiction. Contemporary historical narrative is generally more interested in ambiguities of fact and fiction, and relies less on conventional historical narratives that attempt verisimilitude and delivery of ideological content. In fact, what many examples of historiographic metafiction profess in presenting both fact and fiction in the same way is the impossibility of a single, universal truth: these novels, Hutcheon claims, "...openly assert that there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely

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<sup>27</sup> Hutcheon 114. Emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> Hutcheon 106.



falseness *per se*, just others' truths."<sup>29</sup> The multiplicity of truths represented in historiographic metafiction makes the presentation of these (competing) truths more complicated than that of a single truth that is usually held to prevail in conventional historical narratives. While truth or ideological content in conventional narratives is usually conveyed by an omniscient narrator, multiple or competing truths in historiographic metafiction are accordingly presented by multiple or unreliable narrators.<sup>30</sup> Narrative authority, which in conventional narratives is demonstrated through the narrator's omniscience, personal testimony or claims of fact-checking and research, becomes ambiguous in historiographic metafiction. The very presence of multiple truths and narrators introduces the theme of problematic subjectivity, an argument dear to proponents of feminism and gender studies. Hutcheon's analysis thus can also be utilized in approaching contemporary problems of gender and ideology in historical fiction, problems that are not directly addressed by Jameson or White.

The mid- to late-twentieth century historical novels that Hutcheon analyzes are stylistically quite different from the realist novels that Jameson investigates and more conventional early nineteenth-century historical novels that fall easily into White's parameters of historical narrative, but the manner in which their respective narratives mask the real remains the same. White suggests that "...we can comprehend the appeal of historical discourse by recognizing the extent to which it makes the real desirable, makes the real into an object of desire, and does so by its imposition, upon events that are

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<sup>29</sup> Hutcheon 109. See also pages 13 and 21.

<sup>30</sup> "Narrators in [postmodern historical] fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate (...) or resolutely provisional and limited—often undermining their own seeming omniscience." Hutcheon 11.

represented as real, of the formal coherency that stories possess.”<sup>31</sup> In this chapter I argue that the most evident way in which the Italian historical novel—from its emergence with Manzoni’s I promessi sposi to the contemporary novel—imitates and incorporates the characteristics of historical discourse is through the literary figure of the intradiegetic narrator (who addresses the reader in some way while attending to the narrated story). This figure’s function is to organize and prioritize events in a coherent fashion, revealing “facts” and character traits at opportune and auspicious moments, while hiding the plot with these diversions in order to make the story seem real. In this chapter I restrict my argument to two categories of historical novel. The first type of narrative claims to be a re-presentation of a found manuscript or story; the second inserts its narrator as a character into historical events that serve as a backdrop to the novel’s fictive events. The examples I have chosen for this chapter cover a period of almost two centuries, beginning with the early nineteenth century, when the historical novel first appeared on the Italian literary scene, and ending in the 1990s.

Although a significant period of time and many literary trends separate the publication dates of I promessi sposi from Eco’s Il nome della rosa, both novels employ the narrative device of the found manuscript and the voice of the narrator who is temporally removed from the events depicted. The prototype of this kind of narrator—not to mention the genre of the historical novel itself—first emerged in Sir Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe (1819). Scott’s narrator Laurence Templeton introduces many themes that will become integral elements of the genre in its future incarnations: he accuses historians and

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<sup>31</sup> White 21.

history books of being difficult to access, too “antiquarian;” he calls attention to his own abilities as a writer, which hinge on his interpretation of the found manuscript, and he admits to the probable historical inaccuracies in his own text. He also anticipates a critical debate that will haunt the genre and some of its authors: “Still, the severer antiquary may think that, by thus intermingling fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions, and impressing upon the rising generation false ideas of the age which I describe.”<sup>32</sup> This brief sentence seems to anticipate Manzoni’s 1850 critical essay “Del romanzo storico,” which condemns the mixture of fact and fiction in literature, particularly in the historical novel. With the publication of his own historical novel I promessi sposi just a few years earlier, however, Manzoni implicitly substantiated such a mixture. Manzoni’s narrator’s explanation of his narrative decisions is paralleled in the reasoning that Templeton offers to defend his narrative against this type of criticism:

It is true, that I neither can nor do pretend to the observation of complete accuracy, even in matters of outward costume, much less in the more important points of language and manners. But the same motive which prevents my writing the dialogue of the piece in Anglo-Saxon or in Norman-French... prevents my attempting to confine myself within the limits of the period in which my story is laid. It is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in.<sup>33</sup>

With the intent that the story itself be appealing to and understood by a general public, the narrator justifies any historical inaccuracies that may have occurred with his insertion of contemporary language and mannerisms. The elaborate explanation of the

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<sup>32</sup> Sir Walter Scott, Ivanhoe (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001) xix.

<sup>33</sup> Scott xix.

“modernization” of the found story is a trait that Manzoni’s narrator also adopts.

Although the device of the overtly humorous introduction also resonates in Manzoni's derivation of the genre, the named and clearly identified narrator does not.<sup>34</sup>

That Manzoni's two narrators (the sixteenth-century narrator and his early nineteenth-century counterpart who translates the former's manuscript) are both nameless at first appears to further distance the author's responsibility regarding the veracity of the events related. Indeed, the contemporary narrator refers to his predecessor as "l'Anonimo" (Anonymous), officializing his forerunner's ambiguous identity while legitimizing his own anonymity as a continuation of the previous mode of the story's presentation.<sup>35</sup> It is the inherent appeal of the story itself that initially inspires the latter narrator to re-present the manuscript in readable form:

...mi sapeva male che una storia così bella dovesse rimanersi tuttavia sconosciuta, perchè, in quanto storia...a me era parsa bella, come dico; molto bella. —Perchè non si potrebbe, pensai, prender la serie de’ fatti da questo manoscritto, e rifarne la dicitura?”<sup>36</sup>

The narrator's confirmation through research of the manuscript's historical accuracy, however, not only accentuates his need to place the story's events in a secure historical past that can be referenced; it also gives rise to his avowedly continual citation of the results of his research in his own manuscript: “citeremo alcuna di quelle testimonianze, per procacciar fede alle cose, alle quali, per la loro stranezza, il lettore sarebbe più tentato

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<sup>34</sup> The humorous narratorial introduction as found in Manzoni, however, seems to disappear in most twentieth-century Italian historical fiction.

<sup>35</sup> Manzoni also promotes this type of ambiguity in the narrated story by calling one of his protagonists “L’Innominato” (The Unnamed).

<sup>36</sup> Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi* (Verona: Mondadori, 1962) 15-16.

di negarla.”<sup>37</sup> The appeal of the extraordinary re-presented story is such that the reader takes it to be a work of fiction; Manzoni’s narrator must aver its basis in real events. By frequently citing Giuseppe Ripamonti, a real historian of the sixteenth century, the narrator continues to downplay his own intervention in the events narrated and regularly underscores his own anonymity throughout the novel, as though he were a mere vessel through which the events are passively related.<sup>38</sup> Only the most carefully attentive of readers will have remembered that the narrator is carefully reconstructing a previously unreadable manuscript, and augmenting it by inserting information not previously present in the original manuscript.<sup>39</sup>

In Il nome della rosa, Eco’s narrator also highlights his own anonymity when he complicates the source identity of his story. Eco’s narrator works with his own translation of a nineteenth-century French translation of a fourteenth-century Latin manuscript until the French translation goes missing; he then fills in the narrative gaps with excerpts from an Italian translation of a Castilian translation of a Georgian text on a subject entirely foreign to the original manuscript in order to compile a late twentieth-century Italian version of his found (and lost) story.<sup>40</sup> The narrator works with so many different sources that it is impossible to designate a single one as primary. Even the

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<sup>37</sup> Manzoni 16-17.

<sup>38</sup> Ippolito Nievo also makes extensive use of real historians’ texts, although he does not explicitly refer to them. Instead, he inserts them in slightly modified form, assimilating them into his own text. Identifiable tracts from Carlo Botta’s La Storia d’Italia dal 1789 al 1814 (1854) and G. Cappelletti’s Storia della repubblica di Venezia (1850-55) are found in passages of Nievo’s Le confessioni d’un italiano that describe real historical events. Ugo M. Olivieri, Narrare avanti il reale: “Le confessioni d’un italiano” e la forma-romanzo nell’Ottocento (Milan: Franco Angeli Libri, 1990), 75-80.

<sup>39</sup> I will explore the concept of this patchwork configuration further in chapter 4, when I address the figure of the palimpsest in historical novels.

<sup>40</sup> The narrator also alludes to questions of subjectivity when he disguises the gender of his own lover by using vague pronouns.

original manuscript, he claims, is tainted by the culture and ideology surrounding its production. “In conclusione,” he says, “sono pieno di dubbi. Proprio non so perché mi sia deciso a...presentare come se fosse autentico il manoscritto di Adso da Melk.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, by noting the subjunctive mood of the previous contrary-to-fact sentence, the reader assumes that the manuscript is not authentic at all. When the narrator begins to find his various sources in ever increasing exotic and random places all over the globe, the reader’s desire to accept the events related as truth may begin to diminish along with her credulity. Unlike Manzoni’s narrator, who desires to relate “historical” events found in a verifiable and documented source, Eco’s narrator re-presents his found story out of “semplice gusto fabulatorio.”<sup>42</sup> Eco’s narrator admits that he is not concerned with the veracity of the events he relates, and he presents to his reader an amalgam of various “truths” gathered from different sources. The impossibility of determining a single, verifiable source of the events related points to what Hutcheon suggests is the possibility of multiple truths in historiographic metafiction.

Manzoni and Eco’s narrators purport to have no “authority” in their respective stories because the stories were already complete in finished form when the narrators “found” them. Yet the narrators’ imprints are necessarily left when they re-present and “translate” the manuscripts.<sup>43</sup> Throughout Manzoni’s novel, the narrator imparts his ideas and opinions in interjections that pass judgment on characters, events, and the language in which the manuscript was originally written. The concluding words of the

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<sup>41</sup> Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa* (Milan: Bompiani, 1980) 15.

<sup>42</sup> Eco 15.

<sup>43</sup> Manzoni’s narrator translates his found story from seventeenth-century Spanish-inflected Italian to nineteenth-century bourgeois Italian. I have already mentioned the complicated nature of Eco’s narrator’s task of reconstructing his story.

novel intentionally lay bare the narrator's organizing apparatus and present a final appeal to the reader's expectations:

Questa conclusione, benchè trovata da povera gente, c'è parsa così giusta, che abbiám pensato di metterla qui, come il sugo di tutta la storia.

La quale, se non v'è dispiaciuta affatto, vogliatene bene a chi l'ha scritta, e anche un pochino a chi l'ha raccomandata. Ma se in vece fossimo riusciti ad annoiarvi, credete che non s'è fatto apposta.<sup>44</sup>

The narrator refers to certain elements and requirements of the story (conclusion, author ["chi l'ha scritta"], moral ["il sugo di tutta la storia"]) and even explains the narrative's conclusion, in effect demonstrating White's theory of the demand for closure and its inherent ideological authority in historical narratives. If these concluding remarks are taken at face value, then the task of eliciting an ethical meaning from the story is already completed. If we take into account Jameson's theory of the latent real, however, another conclusion must be drawn. The moral referred to at the conclusion of the story is found by the "povera gente" of the story itself, and not necessarily gleaned by its reader or intended by its author. The conclusion of Manzoni's novel reveals to the reader *an* ideological end of the story, but the real ideological (or political or social) message of divine Providence remains implicit in the text, referred to periodically by the narrator.<sup>45</sup>

Although Il nome della rosa was written more than 150 years after I promessi sposi, its events are set in 1327, exactly 500 years before the first appearance of I promessi sposi.<sup>46</sup> Eco's use of the found manuscript paired with the narrator who

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<sup>44</sup> Manzoni 914.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Dombroski has published repeatedly on the *author's* ideology. See his "The Ideological Question in Manzoni," Studies in Romanticism 20:4 (Winter 1981): 497-524; and "Manzoni on the Italian Left," Annali d'Italianistica 3 (1985): 97-110.

<sup>46</sup> Although I have been unable to find commentary on this fact by the novel's critics or author, I do not believe that it is a coincidence, given Eco's attention to historical detail. Renzo e Lucia, which would serve

presents the new version of the story mirrors and complicates Manzoni's use of the same elements. The apparent lack of a moralizing conclusion in Il nome della rosa initially differentiates its ideological end from that of I promessi sposi, and leaves its reader, along with its narrator Adso, at a loss for meaning. Hutcheon suggests that "...nineteenth-century structures of narrative closure (death, marriage; neat conclusions) are undermined by those postmodern epilogues that foreground how, as writers and readers, we *make* closure."<sup>47</sup> Rather than finding the apparent "neat conclusion" of the nineteenth-century historical novel, or the intentionally open-ended conclusion of the modern novel, contemporary readers must find meaning for themselves from the "unresolved contradiction" presented at the conclusion of this postmodern historical novel.

Protagonist and narrator Adso relates his concluding thoughts:

Più rileggo questo elenco più mi convinco che esso è effetto del caso e non contiene alcun messaggio....che tu ora leggerai, ignoto lettore...Non mi rimane che tacere ...Lascio questa scrittura, non so per chi, non so più intorno a che cosa: stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus.<sup>48</sup>

The narrative within the narrative—that of Adso—suggests that the book the reader is holding is an empty container,<sup>49</sup> devoid of meaning, but again, this is the manifest message spelled out by one of the novel's protagonists, and we must look to the unnamed narrator who re-presents Adso's story to find its latent truth.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the original Latin

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as the basis for the more extensive Promessi sposi published in 1827 and 1840, was first published in 1822-23.

<sup>47</sup> Hutcheon 59. In order to avoid any confusion regarding the much-debated term "postmodern," I will use it in this chapter to refer to the contemporary period rather than an identifying set of aesthetic qualities.

<sup>48</sup> Eco 502-503.

<sup>49</sup> The Latin phrase that concludes the previous passage translates as "yesterday's rose endures in its name, we hold empty names." Translation from Latin by Adele J. Haft, Jane G. White, and Robert J. White, The Key to The Name of the Rose (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999) 175.

<sup>50</sup> If we go one step further and search for the *author's* intended meaning through his literary, historical and



manuscript that Adso supposedly wrote is not extant. The story that the unnamed narrator presents to us has gone through so many fragmentations, translations and retextualizations that any remaining “truth” left in the story—manifest or latent—is questionable, a fact to which the narrator himself attests. The absence of the manuscript itself—the closest that the narrator can(not) get to the truth of the events narrated—allows the narrator to adapt the story to his own truth.

The object(s) of desire of both Adso and Eco's unnamed narrator is utterly unattainable, but the object of desire of the framing narrative becomes that of the story retold. The unnamed narrator's introductory story of his own search for Adso's story reads like a map of Adso's narrative of lost and desired objects. Both the unnamed narrator and Adso briefly have a love interest who is subsequently lost, but the more significant lost or absent objects of both narrators and narratives—the narrator's framing story and Adso's story—are books.<sup>51</sup> The unnamed narrator never finds Adso's Latin manuscript, and he loses the French translation of it, much as William of Baskerville (protagonist of Adso's story) loses Aristotle's treatise on comedy just moments after it has finally come into his possession.<sup>52</sup> The contemporary narrator claims to re-present Adso's story out of sheer narrative pleasure, but he is really cathartically recounting his own narrative of lost and desired objects.

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philosophical sources, we get an even more complicated and contradictory message, as the extensive research in *The Key to The Name of the Rose* suggests.

<sup>51</sup> Teresa de Lauretis stresses the fetishization of the book as opposed to the woman in her essay “Il principio Franti” *Saggi su “Il nome della rosa,”* ed. Renato Giovannoli (Milano: Bompiani, 1985) 53.

<sup>52</sup> Seeing as the two narratives mirror each other so often, Adso's Latin manuscript has more than likely been destroyed, as has Aristotle's treatise. This accentuates and complicates the theory of lost objects, as they will never be found, yet always desired. In this instance, the lost objects have been destroyed.

Despite the historical distance between the appearances of Manzoni's and Eco's novels, both narratives present an obvious conclusion (whether it be overflowing with ethical guidelines, or devoid of all meaning) that must be rethought through the figure of the re-presenting narrator who brings to the forefront questions of the latent desire for the real. In embedding one narrative within another, Eco is able to combine in one novel two modes of narration that I explore in this chapter—that of the narrator who happens upon an interesting story (the obvious precursor is Manzoni), and that of the confessional memoir written by the protagonist-narrator years after the events recounted. This second mode of narration, in which the narrator attempts to draw a moral conclusion from his/her life by recounting its events, is also evident in Nievo's Le confessioni di un italiano.

The confessional memoir narrative as presented by Nievo and Eco claims testimonial narrative authority by placing the narrator directly into the story as a protagonist. Rather than giving the manifest moral of the story at the conclusion of the novel as do Manzoni and Eco, Nievo gives it to us on the first page as an explanation of the events he will recount:

Io naqui veneziano...e morirò per la grazia di Dio italiano quando lo vorrà quella Provvidenza che governa misteriosamente il mondo.

Ecco la morale della mia vita. E siccome questa morale non fui io ma i tempi che l'hanno fatta, così mi venne in mente che descrivere ingenuamente quest'azione dei tempi sopra la vita d'un uomo potesse recare qualche utilità...<sup>53</sup>

That Carlino, the narrator, was born Venetian but will die Italian masks the real historical events that led to the unification of Italy, and serves as a reader's guide as to how to

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<sup>53</sup> Nievo, Le confessioni di un italiano (Milano: Garzanti, 1996) 3.

interpret this latent ideological meaning.<sup>54</sup> To make sure that the reader follows this guide, Carlino directly addresses him/her throughout the novel, and goes so far as to tell us as readers what reactions we should have had to certain parts of the narration: “Il maggior effetto prodotto nei lettori del capitolo primo sarà stata la curiosità di saper finalmente, chi fosse questo Carlino.”<sup>55</sup> The narrator in that he repeatedly reminds readers that we are, in fact, reading a story composed of separate elements that are woven together. More specifically, we know that we are reading a *novel*: “...le memorie del giorno prima mi passarono innanzi chiare ordinate e vivaci come i capitoli d’un bel romanzo”.<sup>56</sup> After a particularly suspenseful and abrupt chapter ending, the narrator “explains” the structure and content of each chapter: “...io ho preso l’usanza di scrivere ogni giorno un capitolo terminandolo appunto quando il sonno mi fa cascare la penna.”<sup>57</sup> Carlino denies any pretense of purposefully building up narrative tension by explaining that his writing habits are restricted by his bodily needs. Here Nievo disguises a real element of the novel form—narrative suspense—with the daily habits of his narrator, thus claiming as accidental any occurrence of tension or curiosity that attempt to keep the reader’s attention. Like Manzoni’s narrator, Carlino names the necessary elements of the form of the novel (reader, main protagonist, chapter), but also the expected effects of

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<sup>54</sup> Stephanie Hom Cary points out that Carlino begins his memoirs in the name of Italy, and ends them in the name of Pisana, his life-long love interest. Hom Cary provides an excellent discussion of how Pisana comes to represent Italy in Nievo’s novel, and how the terms *indole* (usually associated with Pisana’s character in *Le confessioni*) and *patria* are utilized in nineteenth-century historical discussions. “Patria’s-otic Incarnations and Italian Character: Discourses of Nationalism in Ippolito Nievo’s *Confessioni d’un Italiano*,” *Italica* 84:2-3 (Summer/Autumn 2007): 214-32. I will discuss the figure of Pisana in terms of character development in a few pages.

<sup>55</sup> Nievo 48.

<sup>56</sup> Nievo 123.

<sup>57</sup> Nievo 556.

such a narrative upon consumption by a reading public (effect produced in the reader) and precisely how his chapters are composed (whatever he can write in one day). Again, the ordering structure of historical narrative that White delineates—and its inherent pleasurable effect on its reader—is laid bare in Le confessioni d'un italiano by its very narrator (Carlino), while its narrative devices are accordingly hidden by its author (Nievo).

The fact that Carlino displays his moralizing framework at the beginning of the narrative rather than at its termination leads to further rearrangement of the story's elements. Nievo pays homage to Manzoni in the novel's first lines (“morrò per la grazia di Dio italiano quando lo vorrà quella Provvidenza che governa misteriosamente il mondo”), acknowledging him as a narrative and ideological predecessor, which allows Nievo to leave the conventional paradigm behind and incorporate different techniques, including first-person testimonial narrative.<sup>58</sup> The organizational dilemma brought on by the problem of memory—Carlino is in his eighties when he begins to narrate his life story—is resolved when Carlino directly addresses the novel's reader: the inherent nature of the “confessions” to which the reader is now obligated to listen suggests an intimacy between the “confessor” and his listener. The oral nature and spontaneous essence of the confession, as opposed to the well-ordered and researched events of Manzoni's novel, compels the listener/reader to forgive any mistakes or lapses in memory, and to trust that Carlino's testimonial authority will suffice.

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<sup>58</sup> Nievo's novel has been described as an amalgam of different genres of the novel, including historical, picaresque and epistolary, as well as the Bildungsroman. I believe that this homage that begins the narrative is another of the author's hints as to how to read the novel.

Adding to Carlino's narratorial authority is the fact that he adopts the role of two narrators: one who claims testimonial authority (the narrated "I") and the other who is more or less omniscient (the eighty-year-old narrating "I"). The doubling of the narrator is a common element of historical fiction that occurs in Manzoni and Eco (and less blatantly in Scott), but it is usually represented by two characters, separated chronologically by several centuries; in Nievo the same doubled narrator is consolidated into one character. Carlino has the privilege of being able to recount the events of his own life from its near end, but he is not always able to keep the two narrating roles separate, as Ugo Olivieri writes: "Il presente dell'ottuagenario non è esente da una complicità con il passato narrato e in un'alternanza tra la forma del narratore onnisciente e il filtro dell'autobiografia, la sua voce s'inserisce in una congerie di materiali accumulati e riletti nel *détour* del commento."<sup>59</sup> For example, when recounting childhood experiences, Carlino is apt to insert knowledge of events that he could not possibly have witnessed at the time, but only learned in the future. It is impossible for the narrator/protagonist, knowing how the "plot" is resolved, not to incorporate information generating from the narrating "I" when the narrated "I" is speaking, which creates a temporal dislocation. Whereas the temporal rift caused by the doubled narrator in Manzoni and Eco remains a static part throughout their respective novels, in Nievo it will eventually disintegrate as the narrated "I" catches up to the narrating "I" and they

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<sup>59</sup> Ugo M. Olivieri, Narrare avanti il reale: "Le confessioni d'un italiano" e la forma-romanzo nell'Ottocento (Milan: Franco Angeli Libri, 1990) 74.

become one character near the conclusion of the novel.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the last chapter of the novel assumes a different narrative style than the rest of the novel: it is simply the presentation of letters sent to Carlino by his son in South America.

The reorganization of conventional narrative devices in Carlino's story highlights Nievo's distinction from previous historical novelists who adhere to a proven formula (story re-presented by narrator + concluding moral at the end). Nievo's inclusion of a female character who is not stereotyped or exemplified is another characteristic that sets his narrative apart from Manzoni and Eco's novels. While Manzoni relies on stock female characters and Eco mostly avoids them by placing his narrative events in a monastery,<sup>61</sup> Nievo gives his reader Pisana, a complex character who continues to develop throughout the novel rather than representing static extremes of a Manichean binary as we see in Manzoni's Lucia (innocent and beautiful yet humble object of desire) and Gertrude (scheming and conniving nun from an upper class family). In Pisana, the reader of the historical novel finds a precedent for the subjects of many historical narratives by and about women that do not follow a rigid narrative order and present alternative narrative techniques.

Instead of presenting Pisana as a simple object of masculine desire or an unchanging, stock character, her character grows in tandem with that of Carlino, as they are more or less the same age. In theory, this allows for a direct comparison of gendered

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<sup>60</sup> This also occurs in Alberto Moravia's *La ciociara* (1957), whose protagonist Cesira relates past events, in which she took part, from a present-day point of view.

<sup>61</sup> Given his stature as monk, Adso's relationship with the woman is especially elicited, a fact that is stressed in the novel by the fact that Adso and his lover do not even speak the same language, and that he can do nothing upon her second appearance in the novel, when she is burned at the stake, having been suspected of witchcraft. I will further address problems of communication and language in chapter 4 when I discuss Luisa Muraro's *Guglielma e Maifreda*.

characters in nineteenth-century Italian literature. Pisana, however, does not fit into conventional parameters of gender roles. In fact, while Carlino appears to go through developmental stages at a normal and expected pace, (timid yet strong and mischievous boy, to rebellious youth, to idealistic young man, to stubborn middle age, to contemplative old age), Pisana's character does not follow such an ordered timeline. Carlino's first description of her as an attractive yet slightly spoiled young girl begins as one might expect:

La Pisana era una bimba vispa, irrequieta, permalosetta, dai begli occhioni castani e dai lunghissimi capelli, che a tre anni conosceva già certe sue arti da donnetta per invaghire da sé, e avrebbe dato ragione a color che sostengono le donne non esser mai bambine, ma nascer donne belle e fatte, col germe in corpo di tutti i vezzi e di tutte le malizie possibili.<sup>62</sup>

Pisana's first appearance as a character quickly morphs, however, into a generalization about the female gender. Also, the reader must remember that the narrator is looking back on his past with knowledge of what happens later (the narrating "I"), so his presentation of Pisana the child is imbued with some of the qualities she exhibits later in life. In a sense, Carlino makes her a more complete, synthesized version of the two parts of himself as narrator: whereas his narrated "I" must catch up to his narrating "I", he collapses some of what will become Pisana's mature, adult traits onto her three-year-old self:

...e siccome l'era una fanciulletta...troppo svegliata e le piaceva far la donnetta, cominciarono gli amoretto, le gelosie, le nozze, i divorzi, i rappacimenti; cose tutte da ragazzetti s'intende, ma che pur dinotavano la qualità della sua indole...mi meraviglio come la si lasciasse...ruzzolar nel fieno e accavallarsi con questo e con quello; sposandosi per burla e facendo le viste di dormir collo sposo, e

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<sup>62</sup> Nievo 43.

parando via in quelle delicate circostanze tutti i testimoni importuni. Chi le aveva insegnato cotali pratiche? ...per me credo che la fosse nata colla scienza infusa sopra tali materie. Quello poi che dovea spaventare si era ch'ella non restava mai due giorni coll'egual amante e collo stesso marito, ma li cambiava secondo la luna.<sup>63</sup>

Whereas in the previous passage, Carlino concentrates more on Pisana's physical traits, in this second passage he describes Pisana's childhood friendships and actions in terms of mature, adult relationships ("amoretto, gelosie, matrimoni, divorzi"). Even though his disclaimer ("cose tutte da ragazzetti s'intende") breaks up his jealousy-tinged tirade, it is clear that he is not introducing a new character objectively, and he continues to use terms such as "amante," "sposo," and "marito" well after his disclaimer. In fact, in this second passage, Pisana not only possesses womanly "arts," but also (metaphorically) engages in human mating rituals, all the while remaining a small child. Again, Carlino collapses adult traits and activities onto a small girl's character, and moves to a more general statement: he expands on his previous statement about how girls are "born" women, and inadvertently initiates an essentialist argument in saying that Pisana was born with a "scienza infusa sopra tali materie," when, in fact, it is Carlino himself as narrator who infuses her with the aforementioned traits. It will become clear after this passage that there is always a mutual attraction between the two characters, and even though Carlino and Pisana have divergent destinies, we will always see the influence of Carlino as the narrating, always infatuated "I."

Although it becomes increasingly more clear to the reader that Carlino loves Pisana dearly, until now I have shown how his responses to her "relationships" with

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<sup>63</sup> Nievo 52.



others are depicted from a remote stance; when we do see them interact with one another, their exchange (after Carlino has been punished for wandering too far away from the villa) has mature overtones. Pisana comes to see him and proclaims, "...ti vengo a trovare e ti bacio, perché ti voglio bene...lascia far a me a guarirti," while Carlino continues the narration and interprets it: "E mi mise la bocca sulla ferita baciandomela e succiandomela, come facevano le buone sorelle d'una volta sul petto dei loro fratelli crociati."<sup>64</sup> In this passage, I clearly distinguish two competing modes of interpretation available to the contemporary reader: that of the pure relationship between medieval Crusaders and their nurse/nuns, and the erotic, romantic one, suggested by the terms "baciandomela" and "succhiandomela." This erotic subtext—ever so slight and almost negligible in this citation and context—is amplified in the following pages, in which the two children—who are now eight and ten years old—appear to recognize and declare their dedication to one another as adults would:

...Addio, addio Carlino. Ringraziami perché sono stata buona di venirti a trovare.

--Oh sì, ti ringrazio, ti ringrazio! --le dissi io, col cuore slargato dalla consolazione.

--E lascia che io ringrazio te; --la soggiunse, inginocchiandomisi vicino e baciuzzandomi la mano --perché seguiti a volermi bene anche quando son cattiva. Ah sì! tu sei proprio il fanciullo più buono e più bello di quanti me ne vengono dintorno, e non capisco come non mi castighi mai di quelle malegrazie che ti faccio qualche volta.

--Castigarti? perché mai, Pisana?...piuttosto ti bacerei!

--Voglio che tu mi strappi i capelli! --soggiunse ella riprendendomi le mani.

--Ed io invece non voglio! --risposi ancora.

--Come non vuoi?...Ti dico che voglio essere castigata!...E mentre io non sapeva che fare, la dimenò il capo con tanto impeto e così improvvisamente che quella ciocca de' suoi capelli mi rimase divelta fra le dita. --Vedi? --Aggiunse allora tutta contenta. --Così voglio essere castigata quando lo voglio!...

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<sup>64</sup> Nievo 116-17.

Io mi stetti attonito ed immobile con quella ciocca fra le dita...e quei capelli che m'erano rimasti testimoniavano piuttosto della mia servitù che del suo buon cuore verso di me.<sup>65</sup>

Pisana admits that she can be “bad,” and recognizes that Carlino loves her regardless. I read her desire to be punished in three ways: first as a sympathetic gesture toward Carlino, who has just been punished; second as another way in which the reader can witness the tandem development of both characters; and third as a bizarre way of enchanting Carlino even more. The sadomasochistic nuances of this third interpretation are complicated by the protagonists’ young age, but the lock of hair that Carlino will save and cherish for the rest of his life functions as a sign of the power that Pisana holds over him emotionally, and, at this point in the narrative, socially.

Carlino and Pisana’s relationship at this initial stage delineates a hierarchical class structure: since Carlino is thought to be of lowly origins (his higher lineage will later be revealed), he is part of the “working class” of the villa, toiling as kitchen and errand boy, while Pisana has greater power over him as part of the “ruling class,” even though she is younger than he, and of the “weaker” sex. Pisana remains in control, even when insisting on being punished, in apparent sympathy with Carlino; her statement “voglio essere castigata *quando lo voglio*” emphasizes the fact that she will choose when and how her punishment is meted out. These passages show Pisana’s power over Carlino, which will continue throughout the novel to varying degrees.

As I have shown, the child Pisana is introduced as having mature traits; when both characters reach middle age, however, Carlino continues to develop and age

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<sup>65</sup> Nievo 118-20.

according to conventional parameters, while Pisana retains—at least from Carlino’s point of view—her youthful countenance:

Io mi guardava qualche volta allo specchio e sapeva come i quarantacinqu’anni mi si leggessero comodamente sulla fisonomia; ella all’incontro mi parve essere più giovine di quando l’avea lasciata; una maggiore rotondità di forme aggiungeva dolcezza alla sua idea di bontà, ma erano sempre i suoi occhi languidi, infuocati, voluttuosi, il suo bel volto fresco ed ovale, il suo collo morbido e bianco, il suo andare saltellante e leggier...io la vedeva sempre la mia Pisana d’una volta; e basta!<sup>66</sup>

Again, Carlino assigns Pisana attributes that do not correspond to her current age; he does acknowledge changes in her physical appearance (“una maggior rotondità di forme”), but they are positive changes that add “dolcezza alla sua idea di bontà.” This time, however, he assigns youthful traits to her mature self, and claims that he always sees her as she was in the past. His narrating, omniscient “I” has once again taken over the narrated “I,” although his character’s point of view now looks backward in time instead of forward.

In between the passages I have cited above that depict Carlino and Pisana as children and mature adults, both characters appear to assume more conventional gender roles as the novel progresses: Carlino goes to university and fights in wars while Pisana stays at home and marries, effectively growing into the mature role that Carlino had drawn for her when she was a child. Although the attraction between the two characters remains clear after their childhood, Pisana continues to delight in teasing Carlino, which is reminiscent of his descriptions of the childhood torments that she inflicted upon him, cited above. Again, though, her true affection for Carlino is illustrated for the reader when Carlino is struck blind, and it is she—not his wife—who arrives from far away in

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<sup>66</sup> Nievo 749.

order to nurse him back to health:

Per quanto il cuore me lo avesse detto, credo che in quel punto fui per impazzire. La Pisana era il mio buon angelo; io la trovava dappertutto dove il destino sembrava avermi abbandonato nei maggiori pericoli; vincitrice in mio favore dello stesso destino. Ella si precipitò di furia fra le mie braccia, ma si ritrasse nel momento che io le chiudeva per istringermela al cuore. Mi prese poi le mani e si accontentò di porgermi la guancia a baciare. In quel punto dimenticai tutto; l'anima non visse che di quel bacio.<sup>67</sup>

Just as Pisana visited Carlino after he was punished, and acted as his nurse, caring for his wound when they were children, the two protagonists re-enact the exchange they had as children many years later, although this time Pisana really will go on to nurse Carlino back to health. Carlino essentially relives what he sees as his first romantic encounter with Pisana, and they both retain their roles of subjugated (Carlino) and ruler (Pisana). Pisana still has the upper hand, as she does not let Carlino get too close to her, his object of desire. Carlino will also duplicate the physical sign of his devotion to her years later, after her death: upon his return to their childhood home, he contemplates his past, “baciando...due ciocche di capelli. L’una l’aveva strappata dai bei ricci della Pisana fanciuletta; l’altra l’aveva tagliata religiosamente sulla palida fronte della Pisana morta.”<sup>68</sup> Thus not only do the two protagonists revisit their first “romantic” yet strained encounter, but Carlino also acquires fetishes that remind him of his unconsummated love. Pisana is stubborn and headstrong, but she is not represented as a solely negative character, as is Manzoni’s Gertrude. The complicated and contradictory nature of Pisana depicts a much deeper character development than Manzoni’s Lucia.

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<sup>67</sup> Nievo 760.

<sup>68</sup> Nievo 806.

## A Return to Form

Here I have shown how Nievo takes Manzoni's accomplishments in the historical novel and develops them in innovative ways, complicating the figure of the intradiegetic narrator by making him the protagonist of his story, and creating complex women characters that serve as more than props for men to ogle, kidnap, or save.<sup>69</sup> In my dissertation, Nievo functions as a precursor to several historical novels of the twentieth century that feature complex women protagonists, such as Anna Banti's Artemisia (which I discuss in chapter 4), Maria Rosa Cutrufelli's La briganta (which I discuss in the next chapter), and Vassalli's La chimera. But before I look at another complex woman figure in Vassalli, I find it necessary to address the return to a woman character as a static, stock figure in Guerrazzi's Beatrice Cenci, a novel contemporary to Nievo's. The flawless image of Beatrice Cenci in Guerrazzi's 1860 eponymous novel adheres to that very Manichean binary that Nievo had begun to erase.

The popular legend of the real historical figure of Beatrice Cenci, unfortunate daughter of Count Francesco Cenci, continues to thrive in contemporary Italy, more than four hundred years after her death.<sup>70</sup> It is certain that Beatrice died by beheading on 11 September 1599, after her conviction and torture for the crime of parricide:<sup>71</sup> all other

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<sup>69</sup> In addition to Pisana, Carlino's sister Aglaura (first presented as a love interest for the protagonist) is also a non-conventional woman character. Nievo also features more conventional women characters, such as the pious and devoted Clara (Pisana's sister), or her somewhat devious mother, the doddering grandmother, and the conniving Doretta.

<sup>70</sup> Mary Russo, "Purity and Gore: The Urban Legend of Beatrice Cenci," Marie G. Ringrose Lecture in Italian Studies, 220 Stephens Hall, UC Berkeley, 14 March 2002. See also Mario Bevilacqua and Elisabetta Mori, eds. Beatrice Cenci: la storia il mito (Roma: Viello, 1999).

<sup>71</sup> Gustavo Brigante Colonna and Emilio Chiorando, Il processo dei Cenci (1599) (Milano: Mondadori,

information concerning her life and death seems to be inspired by the imagination of several artists, aided by that of the general populace. The “real” events surrounding Beatrice Cenci have been clouded by romanticizations and exaggerations of the facts in drama, painting, film, literature, and opera.<sup>72</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley,<sup>73</sup> Guido Reni<sup>74</sup> and Lucio Fulci<sup>75</sup> have all depicted Beatrice through rose-tinted lenses, but the qualities that Guerrazzi assigns her in his novel would thrust her toward sainthood. She endures her own father’s lusty gazes and murderous rampages, as well as imprisonment, torture and death with divine grace, and she inspires positive qualities in others near her. And, of course, she is quite beautiful. The narrator introduces the novel’s main protagonist and heroine as a visual representation, already fragmented for easy fetishization later; Beatrice is presented as an aesthetic spectacle to be admired from the novel’s opening sentence:

Io quando vidi la immagine della Beatrice Cenci, che la pietosa tradizione raccontata effigiata dai pennelli di Guido Reni, considerando l’arco della fronte purissimo, gli occhi soavi e la pacata tranquillità del sembiante divino, meco stesso pensai: ora, come cotesta forma di angioiolo avrebbe potuto contenere anima

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1935) 301.

<sup>72</sup> George Elliott Clark’s 1999 Canadian opera, *Beatrice Chancey*, set in Nova Scotia in 1801, tells the story of the daughter of a black slave who was raped by a white man; the titular character is eventually raped by her own father.

<sup>73</sup> Shelly’s *The Cenci* (1819) is the most well known dramatic adaptation of the story. Honorable mention goes to Vincenzo Pieracci’s *Beatrice Cenci* (1816), Julius Slowacki’s *Beatryks* (1839) and Antonin Artaud’s *Beatrice Cenci* (1935).

<sup>74</sup> The painting is now commonly attributed to Elisabetta Strani (1638-65), daughter of Andrea Strani, Reni’s assistant. Some critics claim that Reni’s portrait (supposedly painted on the eve of her execution) is actually a sibyl. Rossella Vodret, “Un volto per un mito, il “ritratto di Beatrice” di Guido Reni” *Beatrice Cenci: la storia il mito*, 134. Nonetheless, there was an abundance of paintings in the early nineteenth century--almost all entitled “Beatrice Cenci”--that copied Reni’s portrait.

<sup>75</sup> Fulci’s film *Beatrice Cenci* (1969) enjoys a cult status, but Fulci was not the first nor last to adapt her story to film. See also Albert Capellani’s *Béatrix Cenci* (1908), Mario Camerini’s *Beatrice Cenci* (1909), Baldassare Negroni’s *Beatrice Cenci* (1926), Guido Brignone’s *Beatrice Cenci* (1941), Riccardo Freda’s *Beatrice Cenci (Le chateau des amants maudits)* (1956) and Bertrand Tavernier’s *La Passion Béatrice (Quarto comandamento)* (1987).

di demonio?<sup>76</sup>

Guerrazzi's narrator is obviously taken with the stunning image of Beatrice, whose attributes he singles out and lists like any Romantic poet of the late nineteenth century. The anonymous storyteller—a thinly veiled Guerrazzi—expresses his doubt regarding her guilt, doubt caused by her physical beauty. His equation of physical beauty with inherent goodness is a construction that will permeate the entire novel. The narrator is clearly infatuated with the idea of his subject, who may or may not have committed parricide; he portrays her as innocent victim. Beatrice retains her beauty, virtue, and composure throughout the trials of her torture and death.

The form of Guerrazzi's incipit mirrors Manzoni's in that both pose a rhetorical question, but whereas Manzoni's serves to explain his narrator's reasoning behind rewriting the original found manuscript, Guerrazzi's serves to question the official record (that Beatrice was found guilty of parricide) in favor of her angelic appearance. It is precisely Reni's portrait (which here functions as Guerrazzi's precursor manuscript), not some terrible injustice or crime, which inspires Guerrazzi's narrator to carry out his own "investigation" regarding Beatrice's (hi)story, and retell it:

...mi dava a ricercare pei tempi trascorsi: lessi le accuse e le difese; confrontai racconti, scritti e memorie, porsi le orecchie alla tradizione lontana. La tradizione, che quando i potenti scrivono la storia della innocenza tradita col sangue che le trassero dalle vene, conserva la verità con le lagrime del popolo, e s'insinua nel cuore dei più tardi nepoti a modo di lamento. Scoperchiai le antiche sepolture, e interrogai le ceneri.<sup>77</sup>

The narrator refers to two possible versions of Beatrice's story: that written by those in

<sup>76</sup> Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi, Beatrice Cenci: Storia del secolo XVI (Milano: E. Politti, 1869) 5.

<sup>77</sup> Guerrazzi 6.

power (“I potenti”) and the “truth” recorded by “tradition” and “the tears of the people.” Although Beatrice Cenci is not considered part of the conventional canon of historical novels,<sup>78</sup> its narrator calls attention to divergent histories, of which the less “official” will take precedence in his narrative. Although the narrative that follows depicts Beatrice Cenci as a heroic victim, Guerrazzi’s narrator points out that there is not one single version of her story, which foreshadows narratives about and by women published in the twentieth century that deviate from what is normally found in the historical record.

Guerrazzi’s novel and scope, however, concern the actions and fate of one woman; it is not an attempt to give meaning to a story—like Nievo’s—or to a time period—like Manzoni’s and Nievo’s. Beatrice Cenci is an example, rather, of escapist literature that appeals to the general public precisely because it has nothing to do with them. In Lukács’ terms, Beatrice Cenci is a world-historical person, and therefore her story is not an adequate representative of historical trends or the “social-historical process.”<sup>79</sup> As I will explain in the next chapter, Beatrice Cenci is essential in analyzing representations of gender and the body, but Guerrazzi seems to have undone what Nievo accomplished in terms of creating a new, non-stereotypical woman protagonist, just a few years after Le confessioni was published.

Regarding narrative development, Guerrazzi presents an intradiegetic narrator who does not take part in the events he relates, but unlike Manzoni, he makes no attempt to separate his own feelings for his protagonist from his duties as a narrator, or hide those

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<sup>78</sup> One critic has called Guerrazzi’s novels “...reminiscent of modern heaters disguised as period log fireplaces: one does not know whether to deplore their phony style or their ineffectiveness.” Giovanni Carsaniga, The Cambridge History of Italian Literature eds. Peter Brand and Lino Pertile. (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996) 441.

<sup>79</sup> Lukács 149.



feelings from his readers. This distinguishes Guerrazzi from all of the other narrators I have examined thus far. In a sense, he seems to have been duped by his own narrative devices, as he appears to care so deeply for his subject. His goal, in fact, appears to be Beatrice's exoneration through his cathartic retelling of her sad tale; it does not, neither directly nor indirectly, involve historical nation-forming events, which is the case with Manzoni and Nievo. Guerrazzi's use of Manzoni's narrative template, however, remains the same. Guerrazzi's use of Manzoni's framework is but one example in a tradition that begins before him with Nievo, and extends throughout the twentieth century with Eco's Il nome della rosa, and as I will now explain, using Sebastiano Vassalli's La chimera.

On a superficial level, Vassalli's novel resembles Manzoni's in content and form: his story is set in early seventeenth-century Lombardy, and its backdrop centers on the relationship between the ruling and lower classes, illustrated through the figure and fate of a young peasant woman, Antonia; Vassalli's intradiegetic narrator speaks to his reader at the beginning and end of the story proper, explaining that he accidentally found the story he retells and why he recounts it. Vassalli's narrator contemplates the disorganized nature of Italy, while looking out the window on the landscape where events of his story took place centuries before:

L'Italia, si sa, è un paese disordinato e qualcosa fuori posto si trova sempre, qualche storia che si doveva dimenticare finisce sempre per salvarsi: ma io, che pure avevo avuto la fortuna di imbattermi nella storia di Antonia, e di Zardino, e della pianura novarese nei primi anni del Seicento, esitavo a raccontarla, come ho detto, perché mi sembrava troppo lontana.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Vassalli 5.

The theme of chance regarding the provenance of Vassalli's story contains a new element specific to twentieth-century historical novels. In contrast, Scott's narrator claims that the manuscript that his story is based on is housed in a personal library, offering the illusion that the reader would be able to consult it: "Of my materials I have but little to say. They may be chiefly found in the singular Anglo-Norman MS. Which sir Arthur Wardour preserves with such jealous care in the third drawer of his oaken cabinet, scarcely allowing any one to touch it, and being himself not able to read one syllable of its contents."<sup>81</sup> Manzoni does not say where he found his manuscript, which lends an air of mystery to the two nineteenth-century historical novels that I analyze. On the other hand, Vassalli seems to suggest that stories like the one he found are not rare; it's just a matter of chance that they are eventually found and "saved." Eco initially makes his narrator a passive force in the events leading to his re-writing, as his novel begins thus: "On August 16, 1968, I was handed a book written by a certain Abbé Vallet, *Le Manuscrit de Dom Adson de Melk*."<sup>82</sup> What follows in Eco's introduction is a very personal journey, as the reader learns about the *narrator's* romantic misadventure and his journey all over the world in search of more details about Adso's story. As I have mentioned before, the story of Eco's narrator resembles the search within the story he retells; his own actions mirror those of his protagonists, as he personalizes the medieval story given to him. Unlike Guerrazzi's narrator, who becomes emotionally attached to his subject, or Eco's, who adopts the story as his own, Vassalli's narrator marks a return to Manzonian separation from events related:

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<sup>81</sup> Scott xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>82</sup> Eco xiii.

Mi chiedevo: cosa mai può aiutarci a capire del presente, che già non sia nel presente? Poi, ho capito...

Guardando questo paesaggio, e questo nulla, ho capito che nel presente non c'è niente che meriti d'essere raccontato. Il presente è rumore: milioni, miliardi di voci che gridano, tutte insieme in tutte le lingue e cercando di sopraffarsi l'una con l'altra, la parola <<io>>. Io, io, io... Per cercare le chiavi del presente, e per capirlo, bisogna uscire dal rumore: andare in fondo alla notte, o in fondo al nulla... Nel villaggio fantasma di Zardino, nella storia di Antonia. E così ho fatto.”<sup>83</sup>

Vassalli's narrator, like Manzoni's, at first expresses doubt about representing Antonia's story, fearing it is too far removed from contemporary relevance (“mi sembrava troppo lontana”), which resembles Eco's narrator's feelings about *his* found story: “provo conforto e consolazione nel ritrovarla così incommensurabilmente lontana nel tempo...così gloriosamente priva di rapporti coi tempi nostri, intemporalmente estranea alle nostre speranze e alle nostre sicurezze.”<sup>84</sup> Although the sentiment of Eco's narrator regarding temporality resembles that of Vassalli's narrator, he does not offer a reason other than “semplice gusto fabulatorio” why he eventually re-presents his found story. The rationalization of Vassalli's narrator delves into reasons why representing Antonia's story should be relevant to present day readers, but his reasoning has a decidedly more negative bent than Manzoni's, which was based, albeit superficially, on his judgment of it as a pleasurable story. Yet the reasoning of Vassalli's narrator is reminiscent of how the contemporary narrator in Eco's novel comprehends the relationship between past and present. The overt reason offered by the historical novel's narrator, then, has progressed (or regressed?) from Manzoni's positivist outlook in presenting a pleasing story, to Eco's almost nihilist stance that denies any correlation between past and present, to Vassalli's

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<sup>83</sup> Vassalli 5-6.

<sup>84</sup> Eco 15.

mediating position, which echoes some of Eco's negativity regarding the present day ("nel presente non c'è niente che meriti d'essere raccontato"), but he also places value on making an attempt to understand the present through the past, which recalls the underlying subtext of Manzoni's novel that explored early Risorgimento sentiment through the seventeenth century.

At the conclusion of La chimera, Vassalli's narrator is found at the very place he began his narration: at the window: "Guardo il nulla dalla finestra. Là è Zardino...Là ci morì Antonia."<sup>85</sup> The reader is offered a picture of Vassalli's narrator as a spectator, peering upon a setting, not unlike herself. Unlike Manzoni's narrator, who is never assigned a concrete physical place by his author and who retains his ironic distance from his characters throughout the novel, Vassalli geographically places his narrator where the events of his story occur, although he is temporally removed from the story by several centuries. This desire for physical vicinity takes Vassalli's narrator closer to the story than Manzoni's, and aligns him somewhat to Eco's narrator, who, while recounting his own story and travels in hunting down various versions of Adso's story, briefly visits the monastery where Adso lived. While Manzoni relates what happens to the important characters in his novel and offers a meaning ("il sugo") to his story, Vassalli's narrator points out what he cannot do: make the story complete:

Che fine poi fecero gli altri personaggi di questa storia io non posso raccontarlo perché non lo so, so soltanto qualcosa di qualcuno: per esempio del vescovo Carlo Bascapè, dell'inquisitore Manini...Anche di mastro Bernardo Sasso, boia di Milano, chi volesse cercare notizie negli archivi Lombardi qualche cosa certamente troverebbe: un boia è un personaggio storico. Di tutti gli altri personaggi, che non appartengono alla storia e che quindi sono <<terra, polvere,

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<sup>85</sup> Vassalli 301.

fumo, ombra, nulla>>, per dirla con le parole di uno dei massimi poeti di quell'epoca, si può soltanto immaginare cosa fecero dopo il rogo di Antonia...<sup>86</sup>

Just as Nievo's narrator Carlino lays bare the narrative devices that the author uses, Vassalli's narrator points to where the author of the historical novel begins his process: in the archive. It is almost as though Vassalli's narrator is inviting us to follow in his footsteps and find the stories of certain "historical characters" ourselves, which differs greatly from Scott's narrator Templeton, who tells us where his found manuscript resides, should we want to check *his* references. Vassalli's narrator shows his twentieth-century roots in referencing well known theories about historical novels, specifically, Lukács' ideas about historical characters. As Lukács claims, "The "world-historical individual" can only figure as a minor character in the novel because of the complexity and intricacy of the whole social-historical process. The proper hero here is life itself."<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the world-historical characters that Vassalli adopts in his novel—Carlo Bascapè, Manini, Bernardo Sasso—are minor characters that support Antonia's story. Bascapè, Manini, and Sasso's stories are traceable and researchable, and as such, not suitable vessels through which we can understand the social-historical process. Rather, that can be expressed through what Lukács calls "maintaining" characters:

The difference between "maintaining" and "world-historical" individuals is expressed in this living connection with the existential basis of events. The former experience the smallest oscillations in this basis as immediate disturbances of their individual lives, while the latter concentrate the main features of events into motives for their own actions and for influencing and guiding the actions of the masses...a total historical picture depends upon a rich and graded interaction between different levels of response to any major disturbance of life. It must

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<sup>86</sup> Vassalli 301-302.

<sup>87</sup> Lukács 149.

disclose artistically the connection between the spontaneous reaction of the masses and the historical consciousness of the leading personalities.<sup>88</sup>

What conveys historical meaning to the reader, then, are precisely depictions of characters who are *not* found in archives, who cannot be traced through the usual channels. Antonia is, therefore, an anomaly, since her story is supposedly found in archives, alongside the stories of world-historical individuals. It is through these untraceable stories that we understand how and why major historical changes took place, since the “smallest oscillations” began with them. These oscillations (Lucia’s kidnapping, Antonia’s trial), seemingly so unimportant in the grand scheme of History, are what makes these historical novels so intriguing to the reader. The “maintaining” individuals in La chimera, claims Vassalli,

Continuarono tutti a vivere nella gran confusione e nel frastuono di quel loro presente, che a noi oggi appare così silenzioso, così morto, e che rispetto al nostro presente fu soltanto un po’ meno attrezzato per produrre rumore... Infine, uno dopo l’altro, morirono: il tempo si chiuse su di loro, il nulla li riprese; e questa, sfrondata d’ogni romanzo, ed in gran sintesi, è la storia del mondo.<sup>89</sup>

Since their stories are not recorded and preserved in archives, they do not get told, and are lost to time, which, in Vassalli’s nihilistic conclusion, is analogous to nothingness. As the narrator claimed in his introduction, the present offers nothing of value to relate, but in his conclusion he avers that the past eventually disintegrates and leads to nothingness. From the conclusions of Vassalli and Eco’s contemporary twentieth-century narrators, I distinguish an illustration of the end of historicity in these novels,

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<sup>88</sup> Lukács 43-44.

<sup>89</sup> Vassalli 303.

which adopt and adapt narrative techniques of nineteenth-century novels that embraced a sense of History in the making.

### **Old Hat and New Tricks**

La chimera and Il nome della rosa are amalgams of many examples of Italian historical narrative, although Manzoni's prototype remains a massive presence past which readers and critics find difficult to see. I do not deny Manzoni's influence and magnitude within the genre of the historical novel; however, if critics continue to assert his dominance without allowing room for new ideas, as some have done in the case of Le confessioni d'un italiano, Il nome della rosa, and La chimera, they risk limiting their own vision. One way to open out analysis of the historical narrative is by examining the various incarnations of the intradiegetic narrator. In this chapter I have concentrated on that very intradiegetic narrator, one of the most effective ways in which the historical novel incorporates characteristics of historical discourse.<sup>90</sup> I have restricted my argument to two types of historical novel; the first is a "rewriting" of a found manuscript, the second's protagonist is also its narrator. Both types posit a different kind of intradiegetic narrator, and each alters the status of the real (the object of desire) to accommodate its ideological ends. While many of the early characteristics of the historical novel have either disappeared or evolved into something entirely different, the intradiegetic narrator

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<sup>90</sup> I have purposefully avoided historical narratives that have little or no specific reference to a narrator, such as those written by Laura Mancinelli (her medieval trilogy consists of I dodici abati di Challant [1981], Il miracolo di Santa Odilia [1989] and Gli occhi dell'imperatore [1993]) and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (Il gattopardo [1957]). Concentrating on this type of narrative that "speaks itself" without the assistance of a foregrounded literary narrator would prove to be an interesting counter-perspective to the argument at hand.

has remained a fixed code in a changing genre. In the novels I have analyzed here, narrative authority is established in conventional historical narratives through testimony and claims of truth-value, but for postmodern historical novels the same task is achieved through a mixture of truth and fiction, through meticulous archival or historical research and artistic invention. White and Jameson's studies provide a strong foundation for analyzing early historical novels that strive to present a moral meaning construed from the real (truth/history), but prove to be inadequate in examining more contemporary novels that question and ultimately undermine the real. Hutcheon offers an excellent introduction to the analysis of contemporary historical fiction that incorporates then alters conventional paradigms. I suggest that critics who insist on an unchanged, fossilized Manzonian-Lukácsian paradigm follow Nievo's lead, acknowledging Manzoni and his achievements in the first lines of their work, and moving on to create new paradigms.

It has been intriguing to trace the development of the depictions of women characters in tandem with that of their narrators. Women characters change radically and in unexpected ways from Manzoni's Lucia to Vassalli's Antonia. Although Manzoni and Guerrazzi's women characters might learn and develop slightly over the course of their stories, they are relatively simple characters who fall into stock categories and remain static. Whereas the initially "terribile uomo" L'Innominato in Promessi sposi has an epiphany of sorts and he experiences a crisis that leads to the reversal of his character, Lucia will remain humble and ignorant despite her misadventures. At the conclusion of Beatrice Cenci, Guerrazzi's eponymous protagonist is just as saintly and beautiful (even when shorn and beaten) as she was at the beginning, even though she has experienced a



number of unjustified cruel acts by those high authorial positions. Vassalli's Antonia, on the other hand, does not behave in such a saintly way as Beatrice Cenci, even though they share a similar fate. Antonia is a more compelling character precisely because of her complicated nature, just as the intradiegetic narrator provides more substance for analysis than a simple omniscient or "invisible" narrator.

In conclusion, I point out how development of women characters is corollary to the role that the narrator plays in each novel. Manzoni's narrator remains distanced throughout his story, just as Lucia remains a static character. Guerrazzi's narrator is perhaps too attached to his subject, and his melodramatic tendencies are paralleled only by those of his protagonist; he has already placed Beatrice on a pedestal long before he started relating her story, leaving her no room for any sort of character development. Vassalli's narrator wants to find meaning in the past, but his desires are dashed alongside Antonia's undeserved downward spiral through the judiciary system of seventeenth-century Lombardy, as both protagonist and meaning dissolve into nothingness. Nievo's novel provides the most varied development in terms of both its intradiegetic narrator who is also its main protagonist, and its principal woman character, Pisana, as the reader witnesses both change over time. Adso's lover in Il nome della rosa provides the most problematic entry in this list of paradigms: although she is the only female character in Eco's novel, she appears only twice, once to have sexual relations with Adso and then to be burned at the stake. Just as Eco's contemporary narrator—as well as Adso himself—loses his manuscript, Adso's lover is erased after a short period of contentment. The fact that she and Adso do not share a common language, and that Adso does not understand

her words initially highlights their physical relationship, but it also illustrates the essence of my next chapter.

In my next chapter I will continue to explore the theme of the intradiegetic narrator, and I will also examine women's stories that would normally be lost to more authoritative History. I begin with Maria Rosa Cutrufelli's La briganta (1990) and I will also revisit Vassalli's La chimera and Guerrazzi's Beatrice Cenci.

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

-Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte"

## Chapter 3

**Writing Trauma, History, and the (Dis/Re)Appearance of the Body**

L'inconfutabile realtà di questo corpo,  
di questa presenza, di questo abbandono...  
-Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, Complice il dubbio

In the preceding chapter I explored developments in the Italian historical novel over almost two centuries, from the emergence of the genre itself with Manzoni's I promessi sposi at the beginning of the nineteenth century to Vassalli's La chimera at the end of the twentieth century. In terms of narratology, I examined the figure of the intradiegetic narrator; I also traced the development (in Nievo), regression (in Guerrazzi), and redevelopment (in Vassalli) of complex women characters. In this chapter, I concentrate on the depiction and development of women characters. I explore the reasons behind and ramifications of what happens when the intradiegetic narrator is also the novel's woman protagonist in Maria Rosa Cutrufelli's La briganta (1990). The other two novels I analyze in this chapter do not feature an intradiegetic narrator who takes part in the events narrated, but they are essential in establishing women's voices in historical novels over a significant period of time. I revisit Guerrazzi's Beatrice Cenci (1869) and Vassalli's La chimera (1990). Although the legend of Beatrice Cenci endures to the present day, the protagonists of the contemporary novels I explore in this chapter are women whose stories would be lost to "official" History. These women are victims of

violent traumatic experiences brought on by the patriarchal societies in which they lived; theories of contemporary trauma theorists Dominick LaCapra, Cathy Caruth, and Laura S. Brown prove essential in supporting my claims in this chapter.<sup>91</sup> The novels I analyze here give the stories of Beatrice, Antonia, and Margherita (Cutrufelli's protagonist) a place in the annals of history; it is my contention that their recounted traumas give them a collective voice. Nonetheless, they continue to be defined in terms of their physical bodies well after their collective female voice is established.

An intriguing facet that history and trauma share is problematic representation; they are both concerned with explaining "what happened," and the ramifications of "what happened" in the present day. How the diverse fields of history and trauma studies approach these problems benefit from comparative study.<sup>92</sup> Whereas conventional accounts of history are concerned with the ultimate Truth, the Real, the Facts and What Happened, contemporary methodologies are more receptive to less exclusive accounts, and stories of those invisible to more conformist explanations of history. Contemporary trauma theorists, as well, are less concerned with the "facts," or "what really happened" in favor of something that is more accessible to the trauma victim, even if that version of events strays from the official record. I claim that the way narratives of history and trauma approach accessibility and further understanding of what happened in the past

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<sup>91</sup> Dominick LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1994); Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996); and Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma" Trauma: Explorations in Memory. Cathy Caruth, ed. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 100-12.

<sup>92</sup> For example, there are numerous studies on the experience of the Holocaust that combine these two fields. An excellent example is Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution" Ed. Saul Friedlander. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992).

stands to gain from unusual, non-traditional perspectives; one way in which to establish such an understanding is through unconventional narrators and narration, which are often understood to be a significant element of postmodern literature.

What postmodern theory—including that of Fredric Jameson, Hayden White, and on the more specific level of the novel, Linda Hutcheon—has taught us is that there is not one single History, one single truth, but multiple histories and truths; and that subjectivity itself is problematic and always in flux. In many late twentieth-century historical novels official textbook History—so essential to nationalist thinking that pervaded most of the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth—becomes just one version of many possible histories, and can even become obscured or overshadowed by stories about those who are usually lost in the archives, transparent to more authoritative accounts. The twentieth-century narratives that I include in this chapter are not explicitly part of a nationalist project as those of the nineteenth century were; their aim, rather, is to question the process that leads to History, to fill in the blanks of History, and attempt to create more complete histories. Cutrufelli's La briganta illustrates a twentieth-century alternative to more conventional narratives.

Cutrufelli's novel is set in Sicily; the majority of its narrated events take place in the spring and summer of 1861. The novel's protagonist Margherita narrates her story in retrospect, from 1883 from her prison cell. Margherita comes from an upper-class family, and she is well educated. After her mother dies, her father negotiates a marriage for Margherita to a man for whom she feels no romantic bond. For reasons that are never made entirely explicit, Margherita murders her husband in his sleep with a hat pin. She

flees to the surrounding forest where she is found by her brother, who has joined a band of reactionary brigands. Margherita joins the band as well, accompanying her companions in raids and looting. She shares a special bond with Antonia, the girlfriend of the group's leader. When the brigands are eventually either captured or executed (or both) by the authorities, Margherita is put on trial for the murder of her husband. Twenty years after her conviction (her sentence is life in prison), a criminologist convinces her to write her story down.

Although I have discussed women protagonists in my last chapter, Margherita is unique to my study because she is also her story's narrator. Since Margherita is also the main protagonist of the events related, she—like Carlino—can claim authority of witness. Like Le confessioni d'un italiano, her story is set during the period of the Risorgimento. Unlike Nievo's book, which follows the formation of the main protagonist as parallel with that of Italy, Margherita's is a story of subjection that presents a part of history that often goes untold, an attempt by the powers that be to remove people like her from society.

In a formal sense, Cutrufelli adheres to well-established parameters of the nineteenth-century historical novel in that the events of La briganta are surrounded by an introduction and conclusion that function as a guide to the content of the story. However, the events themselves begin *in medias res*, contrary to those of I promessi sposi or Le confessioni d'un italiano; the first chapter begins directly after Margherita has killed her husband when she narrates in first person:

Mi sentivo calma, padrona di me. Solo le mani, poco prima ferme e sicure, tremavano tanto che non riuscivo a controllarle. Rinunciai a vestirmi e mi misi di

nuovo a sedere sul letto, voltando le spalle al corpo di mio marito. Il silenzio della stanza, non più spezzato da altri fiati che dal mio, mi anebbiò la mente. L'immobilità. Era l'immobilità che rendeva il suo corpo ogni secondo più pesante e anche così, con la faccia rivolta al muro, io lo vedevo e avvertivo la sua forza maligna che mi paralizzava...Distolsi in fretta il viso, ma il luccichio dello spillone d'argento nella gola scoperta mi bruciò ugualmente gli occhi. È fatta, pensai, è fatta. E ora? Di nuovo mi colse l'apatia. Mi sentivo vuota e stanca come se mi fossi affaticata in maniera eccessiva. Avevo voglia di andarmene, di fuggire da quella stanza almeno, ma le gambe erano torpide e fiacche e temevo che non mi sostenessero.<sup>93</sup>

The sense of lethargy and immobility in this passage accentuates Margherita's state of shock and the fact that she has not mentally processed what she has just done. I claim that the rest of Cutrufelli's novel can be read through a filter of various trauma theories.

Scholar and trauma theorist Cathy Caruth claims that victims of trauma inevitably experience a referential resurfacing of their original trauma: "...the story of trauma is inescapably bound to a referential return,"<sup>94</sup> a return that appears for Cutrufelli's protagonist Margherita in the murder of her friend Antonia toward the end of the novel. Recent trauma theory by Dominick LaCapra claims that in order for the victim of trauma to be able to work through his or her situation, a therapeutic retelling (and thus reliving) of the original traumatic event is necessary. The fact that Margherita never actually recounts the murder of her husband—the event that opens the novel—renders her coming to terms with it problematic at best. What Margherita relates are her experiences that *follow* her trauma. In this chapter, I examine the implications of how Margherita's murderous act of extreme aggression resurfaces only when it is condensed onto her witnessing another violent death. Finally, psychologist and scholar Laura S. Brown (a

<sup>93</sup> Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, *La briganta* (Palermo: La Luna, 1990) 14-15. A newer edition of the novel is available: *La briganta* (Torino: Frassinelli, 2005). The former is currently out of print.

<sup>94</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996) 7.

self-proclaimed “feminist analyst”)—working from the idea that post-traumatic stress disorder can occur intergenerationally among Holocaust survivors—suggests that trauma can laterally affect an entire social group, specifically, women.<sup>95</sup> Subjugation of women that is so ingrained into a culture that is nearly invisible, Brown claims, can result in symptoms and behavior common to trauma victims.<sup>96</sup> Fear of rape or fear of unfair treatment in the workplace, for example, can be found in many late-twentieth-century American women. I build on Brown’s theory to investigate the subtler allusions to violence in Cutrufelli’s novel which are symptomatic of a deeper psychological trauma that is even less explicit than the absent narration of her husband’s murder: that of being a woman in late-nineteenth-century Sicily.

### **La briganta: The Personal**

Immediately after killing her husband, Margherita’s mental lethargy, caused by the state of shock she is in, is reified in the corpse of her husband, next to which she lingers:

Era l’immobilità che rendeva il suo corpo ogni secondo più pesante...La tentazione di sdraiarmi e lasciarmi soffocare a poco a poco da quel corpo grave e immoto che pietrificava tutto intorno a sé, perfino l’aria...E il suo corpo riverso occupava, come sempre, tutto il lato destro del letto. Le braccia aperte e abbandonate nell’inerzia della morte.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Brown 108.

<sup>96</sup> Brown’s theory rests heavily on her colleague Maria Root’s concept of insidious trauma: “...the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit.” Brown 107.

<sup>97</sup> Cutrufelli 14-15.



The choice and repetition of the word “corpo” (as opposed to “mio marito,” or “il corpo di mio marito”) allows Margherita to distance herself from her husband as a person, and also from her agency in his death, as Manzoni’s narrator distances himself from the events he narrates. The distinction between the everyday (“il suo corpo...occupava, come sempre, tutto il lato destro del letto”) and the definitive end of routine actions are blended together in more striking images of death and immobility. The terms “pesante,” “soffocare,” “pietrificava,” and “inerzia” highlight both the state of her husband’s now putrefying, inert body and her inertia to act, which both counteracts the previous distancing use of the term *corpo*, and links Margherita to him corporeally and terrestrially. The body itself seems to affect Margherita’s subsequent actions (or lack thereof), but her inability to react is also connected to the space of the house itself, particularly the space of their bedroom. After Margherita flees the house and takes refuge in the surrounding woods, her thoughts return to the domestic sphere:

Violento era il ricordo dell’aria chiusa, stagnante della camera da letto. Ogni mattina di quel lungo anno il risveglio era stato una sofferenza: non mi potevo assuefare a quel corpo steso accanto al mio e che nella notte consumava a poco a poco tutta l’aria, sottraendomi perfino lo spazio dei sogni. Non sognavo più, infatti.<sup>98</sup>

The only space with which the reader repeatedly associates Margherita’s husband is their bedroom, which serves as an everyday reminder of her forced marriage and, implicitly, her conjugal duties to her husband. Margherita’s metaphorical truncation as a literary and intellectual person emerges as the physical sensation of suffocation within closed or small spaces, with her husband taking away her life force by simply breathing.

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<sup>98</sup> Cutrufelli 17.

### **La briganta: The Political**

Whereas Manzoni and Nievo gave the newly formed nation of Italy the chronological borders of the “official,” northern Risorgimento, Historical events that unfolded in Sicily during and after Unification are acknowledged only briefly in the narrative of La briganta. Just after Margherita decides to remain with the brigands instead of seeking refuge in a convent, she explains her political “conversion” from republican to reactionary:

Fui così che scelsi la reazione, io che m’ero infervorata alle letture patriottiche, ai nobili ideali di redenzione e di unità patria. Scegliendo le montagne, avevo scelto—senza rendermene conto—la reazione. Il tempo è opaco mentre lo si vive e non permette una consapevolezza piena delle proprie azioni. Un solo, unico gesto: e non si è più in grado di fermare i mille rivoli che prendono a scorrere da quella sorgente. Mai avrei immaginato che mi sarei trovata a compiere una simile scelta. Io avevo sognato l’Italia e la Costituzione, la fine della monarchia assoluta e dei tiranni. Ma quando il sogno era diventato realtà, m’ero unita agli uomini della reazione: questo il nome dato al legittimismo e, al tempo stesso, alle sollevazioni contadine che la bandiera Bianca dei Borboni tentò di coprire in quegli anni. Gli anni perduti, così amaramente perduti, della mia giovinezza.<sup>99</sup>

This is the only passage in the novel that mentions directly events of the Risorgimento; it is concise and the reasons that Margherita to explain her sudden change in allegiance are presented in a logical way. I point out three different levels (which range from overt to subtly embedded) on which to interpret this passage: the personal, the national, and the legal.

Margherita is not ignorant about the political upheaval that Italy is experiencing, and previous to her flight she clearly supported Unification. Her switch of allegiance,

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<sup>99</sup> Cutrufelli 27-28.

however, has nothing to do with her convictions, but her survival. Margherita explains that her new loyalty to the reactionaries was an unconscious effect of her conscious decision to remain physically free; she ties the personal to the political, but her political affiliation is the after-effect of her choice of personal freedom.

Unlike Nievo's Carlino, who literally fights for the cause of Unification, and Manzoni's Renzo, who witnesses the ill effects of an Italy occupied by foreign forces, Margherita recounts her experiences from the opposite side of the Risorgimento. Although she provides the counter example to the Crocean version of Italian history, we must keep in mind that her story takes place in Sicily. Besides the fact that she is a woman, and therefore unique to novels recounting the Risorgimento that I analyze here, her situation is particular also with regard to her geographical position. Just as the twentieth-century events of World War II differ greatly between northern and southern Italy, Unification in the previous century carried very diverse consequences and ramifications in the north and south.

I have already noted that parts of Nievo's novel speak directly to Italian Unification and that Carlino develops in tandem with the Italian nation. Manzoni, on the other hand, must simply allude to Risorgimento sentiment in depicting a previous struggle for the domination of Italy. Both of these novels take place in northern Italy. Many historians and cultural theorists have noted Sicily's unique role in Italian history generally and in Risorgimento lore specifically. Benedetto Croce's (in)famous citation that Naples is paradisiacal but for its devilish inhabitants is continually cited even today. Nelson Moe points out how southern Italy has been depicted since the eighteenth century

as being either backward or picturesque, while more recently it has been envisioned as a savage, liminal zone between Europe and Africa.<sup>100</sup> Gabriella Gribaudo mentions anthropologist Edward Banfield's landmark 1950's study of amoral familism in The Moral Basis of a Backward Society, which continued in the vein of seeing Sicily as separate from Italy, specifically in its ingrained culture; Gribaudo also claims that images of dead Sicilian brigands distributed in the north during and after Unification augmented the south's image as a savage place.<sup>101</sup>

Brigandage that was rampant in Sicily just after Unification casts the setting of the novel's main events, and is referenced directly in the novel's title. Not only does the title elicit negative connotations of illicit behavior in a part of Italy that does not "belong" to its more well-behaved northern part, but it is also the female version of said behavior, which doubly alienates the novel's subject (both Margherita and brigandage). In giving her novel a sensationalistic title (not only will the novel discuss the outlaw way of life, but it will do so from the point of view of a woman outlaw), Cutrufelli goes against the grain of nationalist sentiment conveyed in Nievo's Le confessioni d'un italiano, or Manzoni's family-based title I promessi sposi, the latter two of which concentrate on that which unites rather than on that which sets apart.

I propose to examine the parallel between Sicily as Italy's Other and Margherita as society's subjugated Other who refuses to be confined to a simple definition. I have already discussed how Margherita comes to the world of brigandage and thus to a life

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<sup>100</sup> Nelson Moe, "'This is Africa': Ruling and Representing Southern Italy, 1860-61," Making and Remaking Italy, eds. Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (New York: Berg, 2001) 120-21.

<sup>101</sup> Gabriella Gribaudo, "Images of the South," Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction, eds. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 75.

outside the law, and find it necessary to explain how that process developed out of what many would consider a fortunate existence.

Protagonist Margherita can read, write, and is passionate about literature. During a time in which the illiteracy rate for women in Italy was over 80%,<sup>102</sup> she could have been considered an exceptional woman who enjoys the advantages of being educated. Nevertheless, her fate as a noblewoman is to marry a man whom she hardly knows, who is much older than she, and who curtails any literary ambitions she might have. However, any chance of Margherita's life story falling through the cracks of History perish when she makes a decision that will drastically change the course of her destiny. Margherita's voice is momentarily silenced—a silence that lasts the length of her marriage (another form of subjugation). It is clear that Margherita's story would never have been told had she been illiterate. Her ability to read and write gives her the capability of leaving a trace of herself; many other women's stories go untold simply because their subjects are illiterate. Antonia and La Bizzarra (other women who belong to the brigand group) would be intriguing complements to Margherita's story, but they will likely never be heard.

### **La briganta: Trauma**

There are many acts of violence—both physical and psychological—committed in the novel, but the fact that Margherita's own murderous actions are not narrated at all is

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<sup>102</sup> In 1861 the illiteracy rate for the entire population of Italy was almost 75%, while that of women only was 81%. Lucia Re, "Passion and Sexual Difference: The Risorgimento and the Gendering of Writing in Nineteenth-Century Italian Culture," *Making and Remaking Italy*, eds. Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (New York: Berg, 2001) 159.

intriguing, given they are the impetus of the events of the novel itself. The narration of events between the protagonist's introduction and her afterword begins moments after she has murdered her sleeping husband with a hatpin.

Margherita's introduction and conclusion are dated "Primavera 1883" and "Estate 1883," which gives the reader the time frame in which the protagonist writes her story. In the first chapter she explains her current situation (serving a sentence of life in prison), and her personal history (upper-class childhood, adolescence, marriage, privileges taken away). Margherita's adventures as a brigand comprise most of the novel proper, from the moment just after she murders her husband (which begins the second chapter ("Marzo 1861")), to the moment in which she is sentenced for murder ("Primavera 1863"). The novel's concluding chapter lets us know that she has finished her task of writing down her story, but in it she also conveys her present feelings of being buried alive and how those are inextricably linked to her violent past actions.

Whether Margherita is more perpetrator or victim (she suffers psychologically at the hands of her ignorant husband, although the reader never catches glimpses of physical harm), at the onset of the novel's events she is clearly suffering symptoms of a traumatic experience, and it will require another traumatic experience to rouse her from a lengthy state of shock. Recounting the events of the spring and summer of 1861 from her jail cell 20 years later, she narrates her own actions and those of the band of brigands she joins in Unification-era Sicily, yet she seems separated psychologically from her surroundings and does not really relate to her fellow brigands, who come from a much lower social stratum than she does. What finally propels her into cognizant action is her witnessing

another violent death—that of her friend Antonia—after which she saves her own life by baring her breasts to a soldier.

In her book Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History Caruth builds on Freud's theory of trauma in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and explains how original repressed traumas will eventually resurface afterward when she states that "...trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on."<sup>103</sup> Indeed, toward the end of the novel we see how Margherita, mistaken for a man because of her male clothing and short hair, is shaken out of her months-long stupor after Antonia is shot by soldiers:

Mi chinai ancora di più, tenendole...il volto fra le mani e guardandola fisso negli occhi chiari, sempre più a fondo...perdendomi dentro di lei, dentro la sua morte. Rimasi così senza sentire nulla, senza vedere altro che il pallore di Antonia...quando alzai gli occhi, proprio di fronte a me...un soldato aveva levato l'arma e prendeva la mira. Non vedevo il suo volto controluce, solo l'alta, salda figura e la bocca di quel fucile. Allora lentamente posai a terra la nuca bionda di Antonia, mi alzai e con un gesto sicuro aprii la casacca, mostrando in piena luce il seno. Il fucile tornò ad abbassarsi...Perchè avevo evitato la morte? ...Lo strazio per Antonia, da solo, non mi avrebbe dato quella prontezza decisa e istintiva, ci doveva essere un'altra spinta, un movente più nascosto e oscuro che m'incitava a ritardare la resa dei conti.<sup>104</sup>

Even the narrator herself makes a Freudian reading of repressed and resurfaced trauma explicit, suggesting a "hidden motive" doubled with fresh anguish that drove her to finally react after months of mechanically going through the motions of life in a languid haze.

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<sup>103</sup> Caruth 4.

<sup>104</sup> Cutrufelli 98.

The repressed trauma of her husband's murder, which occurs right after the narrator's introduction, and Antonia's murder, which occurs right before the narrator's concluding remarks, function as reverse bookends to the framing structure of the novel. This nesting doll effect, however, is almost too structurally precise and simple as it calls significant attention to the ramifications and formal placement of both traumas, and leads the reader to believe that more lies under the nicely constructed surface, just as more complicated ideological structures may be distinguished when one looks past the seemingly simple frameworks that Manzoni and Nievo crafted.

Following Caruth and LaCapra's theories of referential return and therapeutic retelling, it results that the murder of Margherita's husband cannot be her original trauma repressed—one must keep in mind that she never does recount it—but simply the first in a series of violent episodes and images that recall her psychological suffering first at the hands of her father who forces her into a marriage that she does not want, and then by her husband. He initially allows his young bride the pleasures of reading since she enjoyed an extensive literary education under the tutelage of her mother, but eventually considers her books frivolous and donates them to the *comune*, whence they are taken apart and made into fireworks, literally blown up for the brief pleasure of spectacle. With theoretical support from Brown, I claim that the real original trauma experienced by Margherita is her repression by the hierarchy of gender present in mid-nineteenth-century Sicily, a trauma that is revisited repeatedly over the course of the novel in terms of a physical tear or wound.



Freud's theory of trauma is summarized as that of a wound on the mind, not on the body, and the example he takes from Italian literature is the passage from Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata when Tancred, who has accidentally killed his beloved Clorinda, strikes a tree with his sword in grief and frustration. The tree, however, now houses Clorinda's soul and cries out; Tancred has unintentionally relived his first trauma. Caruth points out that it is through the physical wound that Tancred creates in the tree that Clorinda's voice is heard; she claims that repressed trauma "... is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available."<sup>105</sup> Although both Freud and Caruth concentrate on psychological wounds that recur after the initial trauma, in La briganta it is the recurrence of very physical wounds (on objects as well as women) and an emphasis on corporality that fill in the blanks in between the murder of Margherita's husband and that of Antonia, and eventually indicate a deeper trauma.

When Margherita flees her house after murdering her husband it is night and she is dressed only in her nightgown; the following citation recounts her getting dressed in men's clothing in front of the other women in the group:

Mi vestii con lentezza. Ogni indumento richiedeva un gesto lunghissimo, non ero abituata a vestirmi senza aiuto di sorta e senza uno specchio...Il seno si perdeva nella camicia bianca, larghissima, e scompariva del tutto sotto il giubbotto colorato. Poi rifeci la treccia e la nascosi sotto un berretto a cono ornato di nastri. E ad ogni indumento entravo in un tempo e in una dimensione nuova: la verità è che non stavo indossando un abito ma una vita. Di mia volontà rinunciavo anche a un'ultima parvenza di femminile decoro...  
...Le mie difficoltà con lacci e nastri ogni tanto accendevano nei loro sguardi un malizioso piacere. Ma non chiesi aiuto. In una situazione analoga avevo indossato il vestito delle nozze, sotto sguardi attenti ma preoccupati, e però con

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<sup>105</sup> Caruth 4.

mani premurose che infilavano, allacciavano, stringevano. Tuttavia, agitata e maldestra, nell'indossarlo l'avevo ugualmente lacerato: uno strappo lungo, irrimediabile...

Finalmente strinsi l'ultimo laccio: provavo una curiosa sensazione con i calzoni stretti sui fianchi e i capelli nascosti completamente dal berretto. Ma in fondo era soltanto una maschera che mi aiutava ad ingannare la sorte, nient'altro che un gioco rassicurante.<sup>106</sup>

From the beginning of the passage we see the protagonist's distinctly female features, and thus her exterior female identity, vanish when she puts on men's clothing. Margherita realizes that she is "putting on a life," another mask, that this new identity as brigand is a role that she assumes; it is not her true identity. Her exterior transformation from a proper bourgeois woman into a brigand on a superficial level brings back memories of her transformation from girl into wife on her wedding day, and symbolically negates her previous initiation into the Lacanian symbolic order of society. However, while she manages to successfully put on the men's clothing by herself, she had torn her wedding dress while putting it on. Just as the tear in her wedding dress functions as a bad omen, indicative of her unwanted fate as wife, it is also a portent of a more immediate physical and psychological violence in her near future: what will happen to her own body on her wedding night.

Soon after these memories of her wedding day, the group of brigands Margherita has joined is enjoying success in taking over small towns by force. While the other brigands are looting and sacking, Margherita is overcome by her return to an ordinary domestic setting after months of hiding and living in the woods:

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<sup>106</sup> Cutrufelli 35-36.

Mentre gli altri cercavano gli ori e...oggetti preziosi, io mi fermavo davanti alle sedie e ai tavoli rovesciati, davanti ai mobili sventrati e aperti...Cresceva in me una specie di esultanza per quelle case violate e sconvolte, finalmente aperte a qualsiasi sguardo e a qualsiasi passo. Ma l'esultanza cedeva presto a una sensazione di...malessere fisico...sopraffatta dalla pena, fissavo le porte fracassate...I vasi rotti e le botte spaccate, il vino che si perdeva a terra in rivoli che tentavano di mischiarsi alle pozze dell'olio.<sup>107</sup>

Juxtaposed with the passage describing the tear in Margherita's wedding dress, it is easy to see the houses personified as women violated and the puddled wine as vaginal blood, but this metaphor is simply an introductory passage for the more obvious marker of violation that directly follows it: "Sulla sovraccoperta di un letto vidi chiazze scure di sangue, come dopo una prima notte di nozze: in quelle macchie stava racchiusa una piccola, crudele storia d'intimità violata, d'orgoglio spezzato che mi feriva più della morte, più d'ogni altro abuso."<sup>108</sup> Although the bloodstain is metaphorically representative of Margherita's forced relationship with her husband, it is also a clear indicator of virginity lost on a wedding night, a reminder of corporality that becomes ever more prevalent toward the conclusion of the novel.

That same evening, the brigands decide to go to a nearby bordello, and Margherita accompanies them, perhaps wanting to forget the image of the bedspread and what it means for her, perhaps wanting to insert herself more concretely into her new exterior masculine identity. What awaits her is a scene filled with images of the female body, a reminder of that which she had, in herself, recently attempted to hide:

Le donne stavano raggruppate attorno a un divano..., un ammasso indistinto di carne e di sete. Lì per lì mi parvero tutte uguali. La stessa ricchezza di carni

<sup>107</sup> Cutrufelli 70-71.

<sup>108</sup> Cutrufelli 71.

bianche, di riccioli sparsi, sfuggenti sul collo e sulle spalle, lo stesso profumo penetrante. Le guardavo negli specchi, poiché ancora non osavo affrontarle direttamente. E vedevo alcuni particolari che mi abbagliavano e mi sfuggivano, allora tornavo a guardare, fermando gli occhi su un movimento o un colore maggiormente vivo: un seno che si rivelava nudo, un bracciale che scivolava scintillando lungo il braccio, una veste che si apriva mostrando le trine del busto.<sup>109</sup>

This scene functions as a negative complement to that of her putting on men's clothing, in that all of the feminine characteristics that Margherita hides underneath her clothes—breasts, hair, shoulders, arms—are now revealed to her as a spectacle. Indeed, there is a strong emphasis on the act of looking that underlines women as object of the gaze, and Margherita's new role as someone who looks instead of one who is looked at.

Margherita's adoption of the male gaze paired with the setting of the bordello has various possible ramifications. That she is the only woman present who is not a prostitute accentuates her position as an interloper. The fact that she does not feel comfortable looking directly at the prostitutes, but steals glances at their reflections in mirrors underlines her liminal status as someone who does not really belong in either group present: neither with those who look directly (the brigands she accompanies) nor with those who are looked at (the prostitutes). Margherita is clearly fascinated by the women's attributes (hair, necks, perfume, breasts) that are often fetishized by men. Her male clothing, adoption of the male gaze, and fetishization of women might indicate that she is attempting to refute her female identity and inhabit a male one. Her hesitancy and timidity, however, link her strongly to the gender role that society has assigned her. It is also possible that she delights in the spectacle of women as a woman, and attempts to

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<sup>109</sup> Cutrufelli 75.

inhabit both female and male tendencies. In any case, the ambiguity of her own place and the force of what this spectacle of femininity means for her culminates in uncontrollable violent feelings:

Di colpo io persi ogni timore e mi sentii trasportata da quel palpitare nudo e scoperto, da quei seni tremanti. Avrei voluto afferrare con le mie mani quella paura vivida e bianca che mi affascinava e in quell'affanno terrorizzato affondare con forza le dita e la faccia e tutta me stessa. Saliva dentro di me un impulso, una volontà di violenza che non avevo ancora mai provato. Non l'avevo provato durante tutto quel giorno e neppure nei mesi trascorsi alla macchia o quando avevo ucciso l'uomo che era stato mio marito.<sup>110</sup>

At this point one of the brigands touches Margherita's cloak as if to unmask her and reveal her true identity as a woman, and she flees, running into the street:

Mi arrestai, decisa, e col coltello incisi profondamente un braccio. Il dolore fisico allentò la tensione che mi stringeva la mente. Lasciai che il sangue colasse a terra, denso.

Mi è rimasto sul braccio a ricordo di quella notte un lungo segno bianco, quasi un ricamo, lieve, incomparabilmente più lieve del marchio con cui talvolta vengono segnate le assassine e le prostitute.<sup>111</sup>

The desire for physical violence, triggered by the spectacle of femininity that precedes it, culminates in Margherita creating a physical—not psychological—wound on her own body. She punishes herself, suppressing feelings of desire through inflicting physical pain on herself. Margherita (the narrating I) writes her story in words, but in deeply cutting her arm, the narrated Margherita—who cannot yet convey her sentiments in words—writes on her own body, not in words, but in signs. The scar left by her self-mutilation is a permanent reminder of her self-discipline, but also of her identifying

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<sup>110</sup> Cutrufelli 75.

<sup>111</sup> Cutrufelli 77.

herself through this scar with other liminal women: killers and prostitutes, other women who transgress the moral parameters of society.

This passage is also reminiscent of the scene I analyzed a few pages ago: the violent impulse inspired by the erotic images of prostitutes of the second passage mirrors the “malessere fisico” brought on by the sight of violated houses (“case violate”). Margherita’s own blood (from her self-inflicted wound) that falls to the ground recalls the puddled wine and oil of the previous passage. In a sense, Margherita is re-enacting a traumatic scene from earlier in the day, but the violated houses are substituted with the prostitutes (who, as such, are often violated), and herself for the broken wine and oil vessels. A significant difference between the two scenes is the prominent role that Margherita plays in the second, while in the first she was simply a witness. She is both victim (a broken vessel that bleeds) and perpetrator, as she is the one who cuts herself.

Note here that just as the two murders of Margherita’s husband and Antonia create a narrative circularity that complements and accentuates the narrator’s framing device (introduction and afterword), so do the four scenes that I have just cited generate a formal symmetry: the scene of Margherita dressing in brigands’ clothing and the memory of her wedding dress is complemented and reversed by the spectacle of female semi-nudity in the bordello, and the images of violated houses are complemented and reified by Margherita’s self-inflicted wound.

In contrast with Margherita’s shame and confusion about her own gender, the other woman in the brigand group who dresses in men’s clothing—la Bizzarra—retains her feminine identity even though she wears men’s clothing, and gladly attracts the

attention of men: at the conclusion of the novel, Margherita recalls witnessing a brigand making advances on la Bizzarra, to which she exclaimed, “Sono briganta, io, non donna di brigante.”<sup>112</sup> While Margherita appears uncomfortable in a number of identities, la Bizzarra is sure of herself and her sexuality, and takes on various (male) lovers. Margherita’s sexuality, on the other hand, remains unclear.

Margherita’s lesbian tendencies in her attraction to another woman are clear from Antonia’s first appearance, even if Antonia herself is unaware of Margherita’s true feelings: “finchè avrò la vita ricorderò questo mio primo incontro con Antonia. Antonia D’Acquisto, così si chiamava la druda di Carmine Spaziante, il capobanda...Mi colpì soprattutto il biondo dei capelli e il lampo della bocca ridente...Ero meravigliata.”<sup>113</sup> She speaks of Antonia as a romantic interest, and shows special attention to Antonia’s hair and mouth: feminine features which she herself will soon attempt to hide. After a short time, Antonia gets pregnant by Carmine. Her body naturally begins to change, and she often has pains and feels weak. Carmine eventually loses interest in her, stops sharing a bed with her, and even avoids touching her. At this point Margherita and Antonia begin to spend more and more time together, almost as if Margherita has taken up the masculine role of the couple, a role left empty by Carmine’s absence.

Carmine, like Margherita’s husband, has a small yet pivotal role in the novel. Both men are figures who assert their authority with negative effects on women. Margherita’s husband takes away her liberties (reading) after their wedding and appears

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<sup>112</sup> Cutrufelli 105.

<sup>113</sup> Cutrufelli 26.

to act ignorantly.<sup>114</sup> Carmine does not have much “page space” in the novel; he is mostly seen as a decision-maker for the brigands and as the man who impregnates then essentially abandons Antonia. Thus Carmine and Margherita’s husband mistreat the two main women protagonists. Margherita attempts to reverse the mistreatment that she suffered in her own marriage by acting as a positive male companion to Antonia, who has also been mistreated.

In fact, taking up the man’s role is something that comes more and more easily for Margherita. When the band of brigands is celebrating their success in a villa with people from the area, Margherita recalls a particularly significant episode for her:

...potevo essere scambiato per un giovinetto. Me ne resi conto quando mi presentarono un bicchiere di vino, come ad un uomo. L’equivoco mi tentò e mi rese euforica. Col bicchiere in mano mi avvicinai ad Antonia...Le feci bere un sorso del mio vino...Le premure fecero sorridere le serve e le cameriere, che ci scambiarono per amanti...[Antonia] Mi sorrise perfino, maliziosa: <<Che occhi galanti.>><sup>115</sup>

At this point Antonia also begins to act a part—that of Margherita’s lover. However, the farce ends when Margherita’s hat falls off, her hair tumbles down, and the game is discovered. Later that same evening, in front of a mirror in the bedroom that Margherita and Antonia have chosen, Antonia pulls back Margherita’s hair and tells her: “Con i capelli corti, così, così davvero saresti un bel giovinetto da mangiarsi di baci.”<sup>116</sup>

Confronted with her own image in the mirror, Margherita decides to complete her physical transformation and cuts her hair, and comments: “Compiuta l’opera, sparsi sul

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<sup>114</sup> Margherita’s father is also seen as a negative character, who forces Margherita into a marriage she does not want.

<sup>115</sup> Cutrufelli 89.

<sup>116</sup> Cutrufelli 90.



letto le ciocche in un gesto di lutto per una vecchia me stessa.”<sup>117</sup> Margherita and Antonia begin to share a bed in the villa, though it is unclear if they never have a sexual relationship, and Margherita begins to take care of pregnant Antonia, just as Antonia had taken care of Margherita at the beginning of the novel.

The role reversal of the two women—now Margherita is the stronger one who takes care of the ailing Antonia—marks Margherita’s interior, psychological transformation from subjugated daughter and wife to supportive caretaker. Soon after, Antonia is killed and Margherita, mistaken for a man because of her clothing and short hair, bares her breasts to the soldier who is about to kill her as well. In doing so, Margherita lays bare her femininity, which she had so recently attempted to hide.

In effect, Margherita provides a female, fetishistic spectacle of her own body; having been on the receiving end of the spectacle, she knows what the reaction will be in her “audience”: enthrallment. As before, when she made the conscious decision to remain physically free in joining the group of brigands, here she makes a conscious decision to remain alive, even though the ironic effect of her decision will be her physical imprisonment. When she assumes a male identity she is free; when she exposes her femininity she is imprisoned (literally in jail or figuratively by an unhappy, forced marriage).

Many critics (as well as Margherita herself) ask why she saved her own life, knowing that she would be condemned as either a brigand or a murderer. Carol Lazzaro-Weis responds to this question when she claims that Margherita’s actions “...mark[s] her

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<sup>117</sup> Cutrufelli 90.

refusal to become a victim in a revolution that is not hers and that still needs to be defined.”<sup>118</sup> However, as discussed above, Margherita’s story is not one that belongs to the History of great battles, class and ideological revolutions, but one that fills in the holes left by the conventional, authoritative historical record. Lazzaro-Weis is correct in saying that Margherita does not become a victim of Unification or its subsequent upheavals in Sicily; she is, however, a victim to the laws of society before her transgressive actions, and to Sicily’s legal system afterwards. She only lives outside constraint while transgressing conventional parameters of gendered behavior, and must return to her imprisoned status once she reveals her biological gender.

Angela Jeannet explains why Margherita’s transgression happens precisely during such a turbulent moment in the History of Italy: “All periods of historical rupture allow individuals to go beyond the boundaries of custom that imprison them, and make transgression possible.”<sup>119</sup> More than identifying with or refusing an historical moment, then, Italian Unification would allow Margherita to go outside that which is “acceptable.” Her venture into cross-dressing and assuming male tendencies and roles is contained within her already transgressive status as an outlaw. The culmination of the erotic relationship with Antonia, which would represent the apex of her complicated role-playing game, is never brought to fruition, and their game is uncovered as such. With Antonia’s death, Margherita realizes that she must return to the symbolic world of the law and men from which she had fled when she killed her husband. And yet, it will be

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<sup>118</sup> Carol Lazzaro-Weis, “The Historical Novel: History as Female Subjectivity,” From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women’s Writing, 1968-1990, (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1993) 150.

<sup>119</sup> Angela Jeannet, “Introduction,” The Woman Brigand (Minneola, NY: Legos, 2004) 12-13.

her transgression of the law (as a murderer and a brigand) and not that of society's norms (displaying lesbian tendencies and assuming male roles) that will result in her incarceration. The transgression that truly marks her as an individual remains hidden behind the term for the legal transgression that marks the book's cover: the name "brigand."

The way in which Margherita inserts herself into history is through writing. Her literacy has always marked her as someone outside the norm. The origins of her literary tendencies extend to her mother. Her literary pleasure is what her husband attempted to take away from her in donating her books without her consent. Ironically, it is another man—a scientist—who encourages Margherita to record her story in writing. His intentions as a criminologist are not the same as those of an historian, but the effect of her writing will begin to fill in some of the blanks of History. Whereas Margherita's narrative pleasure was smothered by her husband, she will eventually regain that pleasure through her own writing, at the behest of a scientist.

I have already indicated the parallel between Margherita as a substitute for violated homes—which are also symbolic of many violated women. Margherita's status as Other can also be symbolic of the region in which she lives. I propose that Margherita's forced marriage, subsequent subjugation to her husband, and eventual incarceration is analogous to unified Italy's subjugation and annexation of Sicily. Better known historical novels and short stories have highlighted Sicily's historical, cultural and political position as Other, including Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il gattopardo*, as well as De Roberto's *I Viceré* and Verga's "Libertà," but Cutrufelli's novel succeeds in bringing to

light a differently focused picture that extends beyond static questions of class that has framed previous accounts: Margherita was born a noblewoman but will finish her days an outlaw brigand. Margherita's social trajectory is the opposite of the more conventional, upward arc that underlies the transgressive nature of her story in terms that are more accessible to conventional history: class status. Regardless of the complex issues brought about by her transcendence of class barriers, she still has no place in the official catalogues of either world that would categorize her as either a mother and a wife, or a condemned criminal.

Just as Cutrufelli bypasses conventional Gramscian or Crocean interpretations of the Risorgimento (which belong to the realm of official History) in favor of a more personal, gendered history, so does her representation of trauma circumvent conventional theories of psychological signs of trauma in favor of a return to the corporality and corporeal violence of the physical wound. The trauma of Margherita's subjugation within the (Lacanian) symbolic—being stripped of her books and denied the legacy of her mother who headed a literary salon in Palermo—resurfaces in signs and effects of physical violence: the tear in her wedding dress, sacked and looted homes, and her self-inflicted wound. Nevertheless, the working through of Margherita's psychological trauma begins long after her physical wound closes up and heals, leaving a scar, when her voice is heard years later in her own testimony, her own book.

## **Herstory**

Margherita's goal in telling her story does not serve History as do those written by Manzoni and Nievo; what is at stake is her own healing process and sense of self.

“Perché scrivo, dunque?” she asks herself, “Solo uno è il mio intento e il mio scopo: sentirmi viva ancora una volta, forse l'ultima. Sentirmi viva nel semplice riaffiorare dei ricordi, ma anche nel tentativo di ripensarmi e conoscermi attraverso lo specchio della memoria.”<sup>120</sup> Margherita clearly states the scope of her writing, and it has nothing to do with the greater record of how Italy became a nation, which is what Manzoni's novel begins and Nievo's novel concludes. Her goal is not to recount events exactly as they happened for future generations of readers; writing for her is instead an activity whose objective is to know herself. Rather than impeding the writing process, the typically problematic element of memory becomes a filter through which Margherita is able to recognize her own self as she was twenty years earlier. Her personal story becomes a way of escaping her life sentence in prison, and given that she does not write for other people or for leaving an official record for posterity's sake, it does not have to conform to the parameters of a formal document of any type. Even though she adopts certain tried and true narrative devices and rejects others, through the act of writing she is able to finally approach coming to terms with how she did not fit into any previously existing parameters of gender and class. As I discussed in the previous section, Margherita's marginalization both as woman and as brigand mirrors the marginalization of Sicily, which is often represented as having weak or feminine traits (see Gribaudi) and as the source of problematic outlaw groups, such as brigands and, later, the mafia. Cutrufelli's

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<sup>120</sup> Cutrufelli 12.

decision to utilize certain tropes of the traditional nineteenth-century historical novel, however, allow the formal entry of her story into the canonical lists of Italian literature.

For example, one way in which Cutrufelli achieves this goal is by imitating the framework of I promessi sposi: Manzoni's unnamed narrator introduces the events of the novel and gives his two cents' worth after they are finished, as does Margherita in her introduction and afterward. Margherita's story, however, is her own, whereas Manzoni's narrator claims to have found the story he recounts, which serves a dual purpose: it removes him from the events narrated, as he is simply "translating" a seventeenth-century manuscript that someone else wrote into "readable" nineteenth-century Tuscan dialect, and it forgives him any historical errors within the text (which will be a key factor in the critical debate surrounding the nature of the historical novel that erupted soon after I promessi sposi was published). Manzoni's narrator further distances himself from the story by deriding the language of the original manuscript as well as its characters' behavior and flaws. At the same time, however, he establishes a bond with his readers by catering to their intelligence and taste. He presents reading his book as an activity that can be easily abandoned if not compelling enough, so throughout the novel he directly addresses his readers, and even explicitly presents a moral of the story ("il sugo della storia") at the novel's conclusion, so his readers may feel as though they have accomplished something, taken away a simple nugget of information, if nothing else.

The narrator's framework is the springboard from which Margherita jumps into an entirely different strategy. Margherita is not removed from the events narrated because they are her own experiences, nor does she have to translate anything. Her story

did occur in the past, but the version we see is Margherita's story in narrative form for the first time. Margherita does not offer a moral to her story, overt or subliminal. She does not, like Manzoni's narrator, interrupt the narration in order to offer moral judgment. Because she is her own subject, she does not possess detachment from her own actions. In this way, she resembles Nievo's Carlino more than Manzoni's narrator.

Carlino's story—a fictional memoir (like Margherita's) recounted in retrospect toward the end of Unification—serves as a continuation and explicit clarification of Manzoni's story. Carlino takes part in the events of Unification, giving meaning to his life and authority to the novel. He is part of the powers that be (the Crocean version of the formation of Italy). He is also the main protagonist of Nievo's novel, which gives him authority of witness, having lived through the events he recounts. Carlino states the “moral” of his story—that he was born Venetian but will die Italian—in the very first paragraph of the novel, paying homage to Manzoni's unnamed narrator all the while altering his paradigm by coming down to brass tacks immediately. The utility of what he recounts is still summed up in once concise phrase (“morrò per la grazia di Dio italiano”), as in *I promessi sposi*, but the backdrop of *Le confessioni d'un italiano* is more clearly the image of an emerging nation rather than an occupied nation we see in Manzoni's novel. In other words, the personal story of Carlino Altoviti is unmistakably couched in the events of textbook Italian History, while that of Margherita fills in the holes left by more “authoritative” accounts.

Margherita's lineage as a narrator is clear: she speaks directly to her readers (as do Manzoni's and Nievo's narrators), creating a personal bond with them: “Tutte le

memorie cominciano con un nome. Il mio è Margherita.”<sup>121</sup> Like Manzoni and Nievo’s narrators, Margherita points out how her story will conform, at least in a formal manner, to reader expectations while introducing herself to her public. Interestingly, this is the only time that her name is printed in the novel, whereas her brother’s and the names of the other members of the group she now lives with are mentioned repeatedly. Although she relates her life story and crimes committed in detail, she refuses to give certain particulars: “E basti, ai lettori, il mio nome proprio. Già troppo e troppo dolorosamente ho coinvolto il nome della mia famiglia in scandali e vergogne. Del resto che importa, in questo caso, il nome se non per un’identificazione tanto inutile quanto maligna?”<sup>122</sup> The decision to not include her last name in consideration of her family’s honor lends her story a sense of immediacy, as it would appear that her relatives could still be affected by what she will relate, which also reinforces the bond between possible readers and the events narrated. The fact that Margherita gives only her first name prohibits her inclusion in traditional History (which can often read like a list of names, dates, and “facts”), but at the same time makes her personal story available to many possible Margheritas, to a collectivity of many histories in the feminine.

Cutrufelli’s novel is but one example of contemporary narrative that aims to explore the hidden side of official History, but Margherita’s concluding remarks speak to the ongoing process of creating History, or histories: “Tra poco smetterò d’inseguire l’eco di quell’estate lontana e si fermerà anche il fruscio della penna sulla carta. Ho

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<sup>121</sup> Cutrufelli 8.

<sup>122</sup> Cutrufelli 8.



riempito l'ultimo foglio. Ho scritto l'ultima parola. E adesso?"<sup>123</sup> The reader may recall that very same question Margherita posed to herself just after she killed her husband, which once again points out the formal symmetry and of the text. At the same time, these last phrases recall the personal nature of Margherita's story, the physical process of writing, and point toward what comes after for their author. The final question, as opposed to its first appearance, has a triple function: on one hand, it is not self-reflexive, but posed to us as readers. It is almost as if Margherita is asking us, "Whose story will you read next?" On the other hand, Margherita's question must be directed toward herself: what will she do now that she has finished writing and relating her story? Now that she has completed the task of relating her memoirs, she is still imprisoned for life. Thirdly, her final question is reminiscent of her question "E ora?"<sup>124</sup> that she asked just after killing her husband at the beginning of the novel. Margherita's final question coincides with the conclusion of her narration, which, in LaCapra's terms, leads to some sort of understanding or coming to terms with her traumatic experiences. The initial manifestation of the same sentiment appears just after her murderous act, which initially sought to release Margherita from a symbolic imprisonment. Throughout the novel there are several instances of closed in, suffocating spaces: the bedroom she shared with her husband, the salon in the bordello, and the prison where she will live out her days. Margherita physically escapes the first two spaces, but can only escape the third figuratively through her writing and memories.

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<sup>123</sup> Cutrufelli 107.

<sup>124</sup> Cutrufelli 15.

As I have mentioned before, the novel begins and ends with Margherita's explanation of why she is relating her story after many years of silence; one of the reasons Margherita offers is the desire to feel alive once again. Whereas the related events of the novel take place for the most part outdoors and in constant movement, the novel's introduction reminds us that Margherita is now very much stationary and enclosed:

Sono una sepolta viva. Venti anni di bagno penale (tanti ne ho già trascorsi qua dentro) sono più eterni della morte e solo con la morte avrà fine questa eterna agonia. Eppure ogni giorno mi adopro per sopravvivere, soffocando ogni sentimento e desiderio incompatibile con la condizione del sepolto vivo. Ma nel vuoto della mente, nell'insensabilità del corpo che si è come ispessito cerco sempre di trovare qualcosa, il chiarore di un ricordo, lo sguardo improvvisamente vivo di un'altra reclusa, che mi risvegli. Ognuna di noi, qua dentro, cerca di ritrovare la sensazione di sé nell'automatico consumarsi del tempo, sia pure attraverso un dolore, una malattia, una violenza. Ogni occasione è buona perché un desiderio, uno almeno, torni a far accelerare i battiti del cuore.<sup>125</sup>

Not only has she been imprisoned or ostracized symbolically as a Sicilian and a woman (both of the upper class and outside social class ranks), but now she is imprisoned in her own body, awaiting the only release she will know again: death. Whereas before she felt suffocated by the presence of her husband, she now suffocates any feeling within herself that contradicts her status as a prisoner. At the same time, she and her fellow prisoners also attempt to find or remember something particular about themselves. This dual and seemingly contradictory activity highlights the other contradictory and complementary motions in the novel: Margherita's downward social shift from noblewoman to brigand to prisoner, or her role from wife to male substitute. Her repeated descriptions of herself as

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<sup>125</sup> Cutrufelli 5.

buried alive declare her imprisonment in figurative terms, but also accentuate the role of the physically trapped body and the fact that her mind, although stifled, lives on in anguish.

What distinguishes Margherita from the other two imprisoned women I will discuss in the next section is that she is not executed, but must live out her days incarcerated. She is doubly imprisoned: once by the bars that physically keep her inside, and again by the society rules that cannot let her loose in society.

### **Imprisonment and Torture: Vassalli and Guerrazzi**

In a sense, Margherita—imprisoned for life and “buried alive” in late nineteenth-century Sicily by a society that did not know how to define her—escaped a fate far worse than those of Antonia and Beatrice Cenci. To briefly remind the reader, Antonia is the early-seventeenth-century protagonist in Vassalli’s La chimera who is suspected of witchcraft and burned at the stake, and Beatrice is the early-seventeenth-century noblewoman who is charged with parricide, tortured, and eventually beheaded in Guerrazzi’s Beatrice Cenci.

Antonia can be seen as a literary descendant of Beatrice Cenci as embodied in Guerrazzi's novel: they are both imprisoned, tortured and put to death in their early 20s for crimes they did not commit.<sup>126</sup> Vassalli’s narrator—like Guerrazzi’s—is inspired by a painting of his heroine, but this inspiration occurs years before he is aware that his heroine even existed. The unnamed narrator—a thinly veiled Vassalli—happens upon

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<sup>126</sup> Whereas the historical Beatrice Cenci may or may not have actually committed parricide, Guerrazzi presents her as innocent.

centuries-old documents of a witch trial while conducting research in the archives of Novara.<sup>127</sup> Antonia of Zardino's story is "found" by chance (like that of Scott's *Ivanhoe*, or Manzoni's *Renzo and Lucia*, or Eco's *Adso of Melk*), and Vassalli's novel is a liberal reconstruction of her story. The narrator is able to furnish himself with a visual aid: he finds a photograph that he had taken several decades earlier that depicts an adolescent Madonna, a madonna who shares many facial features with Antonia, including a mole on her lip. The reader will later learn how Antonia's face came to adorn so many frescoes of the valleys surrounding Novara, but now the narrator explains why he took the photograph of the (then) unknown countenance:

A quell'epoca non sapevo niente di Bertolino d'Oltrepò e non avevo ancora avuto modo di imbattermi nella storia di Antonia; ignoravo tutto ciò che ora sto raccontando. In quell'affresco sbiadito e rovinato mi attirò il viso della Madonna: così vivo, da sembrare estraneo al resto della pittura e da farti restare là incantato a guardarlo. Quegli occhi neri come la notte, e luminosi come il giorno; quel neo sul labbro superiore; quelle labbra rosse e carnose e poi quel ricciolo ribelle che scappa fuori dal panneggio, sulla guancia sinistra.<sup>128</sup>

This passage mirrors several aspects of Guerrazzi's opening sentences. Both narrators list their subjects' eyes as a feature they admire, and continue to single out other facial features. Both narrators fetishize their subjects' facial features. Vassalli's narrator, however, does not claim Antonia's beauty, but her story as the driving force behind his narrative. Whereas the historical Beatrice Cenci's story has become a regenerative narrative force all its own that has spawned plays, statues, novels, paintings and films,

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<sup>127</sup> Vassalli wrote this novel while he was doing research for a biography of poet Dino Campana, references to whom are scattered in this novel's preface and afterword, although he is never mentioned by name. I will revisit this theme in my next chapter.

<sup>128</sup> Sebastiano Vassalli, *La chimera* (Torino: Einaudi, 1990) 94.

Vassalli's narrator introduces Antonia's beauty as a fascinating force that stands alone. Vassalli's narrator relies on sheer scopophilic pleasure, while Guerrazzi's invokes the nature that lies behind Beatrice's angelic beauty. Literary and artistic references to Beatrice Cenci have been plentiful through the centuries,<sup>129</sup> but accounts of the historical Antonia's life are limited to two: the original court documents of her trial for witchcraft and the narrator's interpretation of them.

Vassalli's fictional account of the 1610 trial of Antonia would make his literary heroine Beatrice's contemporary. Antonia and Beatrice share the physical quality of beauty and the sorry fate of torture and execution; in fact, the similarities between the accounts of their imprisonment and deaths are almost bizarre, and I will explore them shortly. What separates the two characters is class hierarchy: Beatrice is of noble birth, but Antonia is a peasant. Like Beatrice, Antonia is physically attractive, but the projected general public (as represented by Guerrazzi's enamored narrator) assumes Beatrice's moral fiber to reflect her physical appearance. Antonia's beauty, on the other hand, is an attribute that is held against her, due to the superstition that permeates the social sphere of her low class position, her unknown lineage (she was abandoned as a baby on the steps of a cloister) and her eternal status as an outsider (she was adopted). Thus, she will always be more marginalized than her ruling class counterpart Beatrice. Because of her dark hair and skin,<sup>130</sup> Antonia does not share the Lombard physical traits that those around her have: "Antonia rappresenta l'eccesso: scura di pelle e di capelli è, da bambina considerata

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<sup>129</sup> I cited many in the previous chapter.

<sup>130</sup> Antonia is probably of Spanish descent.

“un mostro” ma diventa pericolosamente bella ed indipendente da adulta.”<sup>131</sup> She stands out in a world of mediocrity, and this will be her downfall;<sup>132</sup> she will become the sacrificial lamb of social reform initiated by Pope Clement VIII. Her exceptional beauty is repeatedly attributed to her alleged diabolic connections and evil spirit, whereas for Guerrazzi’s narrator Beatrice’s beauty reflects her innocent, pure soul.

Both Vassalli and Guerrazzi concentrate on recounting the stories of beautiful young women destined for an early death; their readers know or intuit from the first few pages that the heroines will die young. Guerrazzi’s narrator does not explicitly state that Beatrice dies, but in following a more flowery, less direct speech often common in late-nineteenth-century popular novels, he indirectly refers to the injustices that she suffers and the trial she is put through. Her story, after all, is a rather famous one; whoever might be interested in the novel because of its title would probably know how its subject met her untimely death. On the third page of *La chimera*, Vassalli’s narrator describes his subject as “...una ragazza che visse tra il 1590 e il 1610 e che si chiamò Antonia...che subì a Novara un processo e una condanna correndo l’anno del Signore 1610.”<sup>133</sup> Both revelations of death appear before the narrative proper of their respective stories begin. In contrast, Margherita’s story begins and ends with an image of her “buried alive.” Vassalli and Guerrazzi’s narratives are driven from introductory sublime images of beauty to morbid and disconcerting images of death. Elizabeth Bronfen claims that this structure allows the reader (or viewer) to construct the illusion that she is beginning to

<sup>131</sup> Cristina Della Coletta, “L’altra metà del Seicento: da *I promessi sposi* di Manzoni a *La chimera* di Vassalli” *Italica* 73:3 (Autumn 1996) 362.

<sup>132</sup> Like Manzoni’s “untori,” Antonia is singled out as a marginalized person on whom the phobias and fears of an entire social group are concentrated. Della Coletta 361.

<sup>133</sup> Vassalli 5.

comprehend death:

We invest in images of wholeness, purity and the immaculate owing to our fear of dissolution and decay. The function of beauty...is to point to the relation that man has with his own death...to indicate this only as a dazzling sight. The idea of beauty's perfection is so compelling because it disproves the idea of disintegration, fragmentation and insufficiency, even though it actually only serves as substitution for the facticity of human existence one fears yet must accept...to substitute death with its contrary, beauty, serves a highly ambivalent form of wish-fulfilment.<sup>134</sup>

I adopt Bronfen's idea of the function of images of beauty to a literary setting, that the wish-fulfilment of a death made "dazzling" and less horrendous by the spectacle of physical beauty is achieved in narrative form, whose conclusion (death of the protagonist) is known from the start. In popular discourse, Beatrice's grisly death by beheading is continually juxtaposed with her beauty that remains with us today in Guido Reni's portrait (among others). The myth of Antonia's beauty, however, is destroyed by her own death and by the destruction of a fresco that bore a likeness of her face.<sup>135</sup> In Vassalli's novel, Antonia's beauty is immortalized in a fresco on the wall of an *edicola votiva*. Ironically, it is not Antonia herself who is depicted, but rather her distinct facial features appear on the head of the Madonna del Divino Soccorso.<sup>136</sup> When Antonia is condemned for witchcraft, the edifice is torn down because they see *her* face, not the Madonna who is symbolically represented. The function of physical beauty in the two narratives is the same: to disavow what happens to every person after death: putrefaction.

The driving force of these narratives is inevitable death; most of their content

<sup>134</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic (New York: Routledge, 1992) 62.

<sup>135</sup> The representation (photograph) of a representation (fresco) of her beauty remains, however.

<sup>136</sup> Its painter, Bertolino d'Oltrepò, saw Antonia on the way to his job and her features remained in his memory.

constitutes the process of how these two women of the same time period from opposite ends of the social spectrum arrive at a similar moment of death. Whereas Beatrice is accused of a specific crime, parricide, Antonia is suspected of originating a series of chance events: high infant mortality rate, strange animal deaths and particularly bad weather that produce meager crops are all attributed to her alleged practice of witchcraft. Antonia has not actually practiced witchcraft, but her personal relationships and everyday rituals become the subject of malicious gossip. Her herbal perfumes are transformed into magic potions, and her lover Gasparo would be the devil incarnate, according to fellow townspeople and her interrogator, the inquisitor Manini. Antonia is arrested and her trial begins.

The process of the trial is characterized by the two elements of theater and ritual that will eventually unite for the elaborate show of her execution.<sup>137</sup> The ritual aspect of witch trials like that of Antonia

...riflette il tentativo, da parte dei giudici, di dare un costrutto razionale al procedimento legale, e allo stesso tempo risponde al desiderio di innalzare delle barriere, nel nome dell'ordine e dell'organizzazione, contro lo spettro del caos e dell'anarchia rappresentato dal sabba e dai suoi partecipanti.<sup>138</sup>

Thus, the extreme measures that are taken to ensure order and obedience are rationalized and institutionalized in the structures of hierarchy. Torture, one of the main aspects of the trial ritual, "...consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation," claims Elaine Scarry, who elaborates: "The verbal act, in

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<sup>137</sup> Cristina Della Coletta, "L'altra metà del Seicento: da *I promessi sposi* di Manzoni a *La chimera* di Vassalli," *Italica* 73.3 (1996): 362.

<sup>138</sup> Della Coletta 362-63.



turn, consists of two parts, “the question” and “the answer,”...[which] objectify the fact that while the prisoner has almost no voice...the torturer and the regime have doubled their voice since the prisoner is now speaking their words.”<sup>139</sup> Vassalli’s narrative illustrates the network of these two observations, when Antonia initially denies the charges of witchcraft and her torture begins:

Sottoposta per la prima volta all’annientamento fisico e morale della tortura, Antonia reagì con furore...come quegli animali che non sopportano di sentirsi prigionieri, e s’avventano contro le sbarre della gabbia fino ad uccidersi. Roteò gli occhi, schiumò, urlò, sputò contro i suoi aguzzini, si morsicò le labbra: insomma, si comportò da strega. Infine disse: slegatemi. Vi dirò tutto quello che volete sentir dire da me, e forse anche qualche cosa di più.<sup>140</sup>

The means of torture goes on to produce its desired ends, as Antonia—first reduced to a inhuman state—acquiesces to the words that the inquisitor wants to hear her pronounce. Of course, torture is not an effective way to get the truth, as people under torture are likely to say anything that will relieve the pain that they are experiencing, as Pietro Verri asserted centuries ago.<sup>141</sup>

Antonia does give the answer desired by her inquisitor in her “confession” after a long session of torture: “Io mi incontro col mio Diavolo...e non sapevo niente di lui: nemmeno che era un Diavolo! Ma se anche l’avessi saputo le cose non cambiavano. Camminante o Diavolo, ci sarei andata lo stesso.”<sup>142</sup> In her answers Antonia says the words that the inquisitor places in her mouth, but in embellishing them with sarcasm and

<sup>139</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 35-36.

<sup>140</sup> Vassalli 237-38.

<sup>141</sup> Pietro Verri, *Osservazioni sulla tortura* (Milano: Serra e Riva, 1985) 61-63. Originally published around 1770 in response to the severe trials of the “untori” following the outbreak of the black plague in Milan in 1630.

<sup>142</sup> Vassalli 239.

allusions to her belief that she is innocent, she also displays a defiant heroism and irony that enrages her inquisitor to intensify her tortures:

...nelle risposte che poi diede...la sua rabbia e la sua disperazione diventano eroismo, volontà di vincere gli aguzzini nell'unico modo possibile, cioè dimostrandosi più forte di loro. È in quelle risposte che il personaggio di Antonia, sbiadito purtroppo nelle carte del processo come nella pittura del...Bertolino, ci mostra i suoi connotati più autentici e vivi, d'ingenuità, di fierezza, di determinazione.<sup>143</sup>

She does, in fact, lose all physical power as well as her very life to the state. In this sense, she recalls Margherita in that they are both prisoners, although the latter physically survives. Unlike Margherita, Antonia is illiterate and cannot produce her own manuscript, but the legacy of Antonia's spirit lives on in her words that survive in the written account of the trial, in the very structure that was established to extinguish her independent spirit. Ironically, it is the state apparatus of the Inquisition that will ensure the future of Antonia's story, even though they succeed in eliminating her as a person. She is condemned of witchcraft and will be burned at the stake.

In contrast, after Beatrice is arrested and accused of parricide, she undergoes some of the same tortures that Antonia did.<sup>144</sup> However, Beatrice "...rimase ferma nel proponimento di morire in mezzo ai cruciati, anziché contaminare la sua fama con la confessione di un misfatto, ch'ella non aveva commesso."<sup>145</sup> Since Beatrice refuses to produce the desired confession with "conventional" means, more brutal forms of torture

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<sup>143</sup> Vassalli 254.

<sup>144</sup> Guerrazzi is quite detailed and explicit in describing the various tortures used on Beatrice, that include the *curlo*, *ter squassata*, *tortura vigiliae*, *canubbiorum*, *tortura capellorum*, *rudentium*, and *taxili*. 495-504. Vassalli's descriptions of the tortures (234-38, 253-54) are less drawn-out Guerrazzi's, but Antonia's rat-infested cell and repeated rape by her jailors (278-79) paint a picture even more morbid and squalid than Guerrazzi's.

<sup>145</sup> Guerrazzi 496.

are utilized: *tortura capillorum* and *taxili*.<sup>146</sup> The physical pain she endures is tremendous, but she stands firm in her refusal to speak the words of the state, nor does she give in to the anti-language of torture: “Atrocissimi dolori erano quelli, che da cotesto tormento derivavano; la natura umana non li poteva sopportare...e nondimeno Beatrice, temendo da un lato sconfortare i suoi, e dall’altro desiderando porgere loro lo esempio del come si abbia a soffrire, domava lo spasimo, e taceva.”<sup>147</sup> Her herculean control over her own physical pain only inspires more rage in the members of her family, who “...ululavano come bestie feroci, nè il sembante loro pareva più umano.”<sup>148</sup> This outburst also enrages and upsets the inquisitor Luciani, who also takes on animal qualities.<sup>149</sup> Her silence during the last round of torture is answered by the inhuman, animal utterances that escape from the other people present—her family and her inquisitor. Regardless of her refusal to confess, Beatrice is found guilty and condemned to death. Her resolution did not save her, just as Antonia’s “confession” did not save her: the outcome of both trials is the same. The ritual of the trial has been performed; the actual content that arises in the trial is irrelevant specifically because it is a ritual, a going through the motions to be able to arrive at its end: the spectacular death.

Before Beatrice can be beheaded, tradition calls for her hair to be cut off, making the executioner’s job easier. Strangely, after the mental and physical duress of being arrested, interrogated, tortured and condemned to death for a crime that she did not commit and remaining firm in her determination, this is the point when Beatrice’s resolve

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<sup>146</sup> The former is done by raising up the victim by her hair, and the latter involves burning the toes with a candle flame.

<sup>147</sup> Guerrazzi 511.

<sup>148</sup> Guerrazzi 512.

<sup>149</sup> “Riportateli, ritto sopra il limatare della porta, abbaiava il Luciani.” 512.

breaks down:

Beatrice rimase stupida a contemplarla sparsa sul pavimento; le lacrime le si affacciarono agli occhi...Fin qui nessun dolore le aveva passato l'anima come quello, dacchè nessuno tanto l'avesse umiliata. Quando anche adesso le concedessero la vita, come ricomparirebbe fra gentili donzelle sue compagne, ella così tosata dalle mani del carnefice? Priva dei capelli, suo decoro e suo vanto, le avevano (si perdoni alla stranezza della espressione in grazia della efficacia a manifestare il sentimento, che in quel punto assalse Beatrice) decapitato la testa.<sup>150</sup>

Of all the tortures she has endured, nothing affects her so much as the loss of her hair, something that does no physical harm to her. The metaphor of decapitation that the narrator uses gives the reader a preview to Beatrice's real death. In claiming that this is the expression that comes to Beatrice's mind, the narrator brings the experience of death to her, one day before it will happen. She quickly regains her poise, and continues to organize her earthly belongings. She gathers her chopped locks together, and, "come se fosse persona, le rivolse la parola. --Compagna fedele di ogni mia sventura! Io avrei sperato che tu meco fossi discesa sentro il sepolcro..."<sup>151</sup> Half she gives to her maid in thanks, and entrusts the other half to be given to her lover and secret husband, Guido Guerra. Her hair is literally "un frammento del [su]o ente", a fragmented, fetishized body part, cherished for its sentimental and symbolic value. In fact, Guido carries it with him and contemplates it in his future adventures; it even comforts him as though it were a person.<sup>152</sup> This fetish is Beatrice's legacy: long after her death she will be known by her body parts, depicted in words as well as in images.

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<sup>150</sup> Guerrazzi 608.

<sup>151</sup> Guerrazzi 611.

<sup>152</sup> Nievo's Carlino does the same thing with two locks of Pisana's hair; he keeps them in a special place with other personal treasures that he values immensely.

Antonia's legacy of words, however, remains dormant for several centuries after her death. Any legacy of beauty that might have been associated with Antonia is destroyed with the means of her death which require the complete annihilation of her body on the stake: "Si videro i capelli della strega che svanivano nella luce e la sua bocca che s'apriva in un grido senza suono. La veste rossa si dissolse, il corpo si scurì e si raggrinzì, gli occhi diventarono bianchi, Antonia non fu più."<sup>153</sup> Her story will remain buried, misplaced in an archive for almost four hundred years. It is her testimony, her printed words that will give Antonia an historical referent.

Margherita, herself "buried alive" like Antonia's account in the archives of Novara, is able to tell her story in her own words, unlike Beatrice and Antonia whose stories are interpreted or translated for us by male narrators. La briganta, La chimera and Beatrice Cenci have, in part, begun to fill in some of the blank spaces of History left behind by more "authoritative" stories. Nonetheless, all three novels display a distinct relationship between voice and body that is singular to stories about women. Beatrice is famous for her beauty just as much as for her suspected parricide; Guerrazzi's novel fetishizes her beauty in its very destruction by torture and beheading, although reproductions of her beauty remain with us to this day. Antonia's beauty (and reproductions of it) is also destroyed at the conclusion of her novel when she is burned at the stake. In a sense, their narrators let their voices be heard only to then recount their spectacular silencing. Although Margherita survives her trial she is also silenced by her imprisonment and thus incapable of engaging in society. At the conclusions of these

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<sup>153</sup> Vassalli 299.

three novels, after their protagonists' stories have been heard, there is a return to corporality, which is either erased entirely through death, or imprisoned forever. These women must be destroyed or contained.

In this chapter I concentrated on the voice of women protagonists; in the next chapter I will analyze how the voice of the author emerges in the voice of the narrator. I will look at Anna Banti's Artemisia and Luisa Muraro's Guglielma e Maifreda, as well as other novels I have already examined.

#### Chapter 4

### **The Rebirth of the Author: A Post-Barthesian Response**

“Even the novel in which no narrator is dramatized creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails.”  
-Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction

In the last chapter I examined how women's voices are heard—and the blank pages of history written—through the stories of women who had been cancelled previously from the pages of official history. In this chapter, I examine how the figure of the author emerges through that of the narrator in Anna Banti's Artemisia (1947) and Luisa Muraro's Guglielma e Maifreda (1985), utilizing the narrator figures in Nievo and Guerrazzi (and to a lesser extent, Manzoni) as a springboard. The four novels analyzed

in this chapter do not follow any coherent “guidelines” regarding author’s gender or chronology: the two male-authored texts appear furthest apart, as Guerrazzi’s novel appears mid-nineteenth century, and Vassalli’s in 1990. Muraro’s publication appears in 1985, but the most narratologically innovative text I examine here is Banti’s Artemisia, which is first published in 1947. There is no discernable pattern among these four texts, and, in terms of what I have observed here, there is no general rule regarding narrator-authors, palimpsests, and chronology; each text must be scrutinized as its own complex, Benjaminian constellation, and then how it relates to other texts. Here I utilize Barthes’ assertions about the death of the author, Wayne Booth’s ideas about author-narrator figures, and Sarah Dillon’s theories about palimpsest and palimpsestuous readings in order to better examine how these historical narratives written by women subvert more conventional (i.e. patriarchal) literary standards to claim their own authorial voice.<sup>154</sup> Ignoring the ramifications of Roland Barthes’ seminal essay “The Death of the Author,” Banti and Muraro insert themselves as evident author-narrators into their historical texts.<sup>155</sup> In these two historical narratives, the figure of the real author emerges in the text when she constructs an imaginary relationship with her subject. In contrast, the figure of the author also emerges in Vassalli’s La chimera and Guerrazzi’s Beatrice Cenci as we have seen, but through a much more limited and detached relationship with their subjects. I will examine the progression (albeit not necessarily chronological) from the

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<sup>154</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” Image, Music, Text. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977); Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961); Sarah Dillon, “Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest: The Significance of The Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Studies,” Textual Practice 19:3 (2005): 243-263.

<sup>155</sup> I do realize that Banti writes her novel decades before Barthes first publishes his article; my argument, however, addresses the figure of the author in a larger context that encompasses historical narrative of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

figure of the male author-narrator, who recounts the story of his protagonist from a distance, to that of the woman author-narrator, who begins to erase that distance, creating a much more complicated narrative structure.

The conventional nineteenth-century narrator—such as that seen in Manzoni, Nievo, and Guerrazzi—is typically understood to be a reliable one. His authority is not questioned, but assumed. With the advent of modernity and the crisis of the modern individual as seen, for example, in Luigi Pirandello and Italo Svevo's protagonists in Il fu Mattia Pascal (1902) and La coscienza di Zeno (1923) respectively, these two key literary figures become harbingers of a major shift in twentieth-century Italian narrative, which concentrates more on psychological character composition and its causes and effects rather than on plot development.<sup>156</sup> In following this narratological shift, many historical novels written in the second half of the twentieth century utilize new narrative techniques that Hutcheon attributes, in part, to problematic subjectivity: "The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to [be] a coherent, meaning-generating entity. Narrators in fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate or resolutely provisional and limited—often undermining their own omniscience."<sup>157</sup> This is particularly evident in historical narratives with female authors, narrators and subjects who must differentiate themselves from male accounts of history, in which women are often marginalized or nonexistent. In fact, new paradigms must be invented, or the old ones altered, to accommodate the large number of such narratives that do not fit into older paradigms or patriarchal literary standards.

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<sup>156</sup> See also Giacomo Debenedetti's "Il fu Mattia Pascal," Paragone 220 (1968): 69-93.

<sup>157</sup> Hutcheon 11.



Whereas Hutcheon's deviations from the Lukácsian paradigm of the historical novel stem from the latter's analysis of Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* in particular, Maria Ornella Marotti instead begins with Lukács' genealogy of the nineteenth-century historical novel in general. According to Marotti, Lukács finds the roots of the European historical novel in the Enlightenment novel and the Romantic novel: the former recounts historical events leading up to the French Revolution through the eyes of the "common people" and the latter touts major historical figures as protagonists of a subjective and nostalgic interpretation of "the past as a time of irretrievable harmony."<sup>158</sup> Although historical novels with major female historical figures do exist, they "do not express nostalgia for an irretrievable past, because there is no golden age for women's history."<sup>159</sup> In fact, the majority of canonical historical novels specifically about women do not address such (in)famous historical figures such as Beatrice Cenci, but adopt ordinary women as protagonists.<sup>160</sup> Whether the events narrated are mostly quotidian (see Elsa Morante's *La storia* [1974]) or extraordinary (see Cutrufelli's *La briganta*),<sup>161</sup> "[t]he goal of...these [feminist] texts," claims Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "is precisely to describe the formation of a new subjectivity."<sup>162</sup> Many forms of women's writing began

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<sup>158</sup> Maria Ornella Marotti, introduction, *Gendering Italian Fiction: Feminist Revisions of Italian History*, eds. Marotti and Gabriella Brooke (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999) 16.

<sup>159</sup> Marotti 17. Examples of this type of historical novel include Maria Bellonci's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1939) and *Soccorso a Dorotea* (1972).

<sup>160</sup> Indeed, Guerrazzi's *Beatrice Cenci* is often considered an example of a lesser genre, that of popular fiction, or a mediocre example of the historical novel. Giovanni Carsaniga, *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, eds. Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 441.

<sup>161</sup> Although *La storia* is set during the tumultuous events of World War II in Rome, the trajectory of the novel follows the everyday activities of its protagonist. I have already explained the extraordinary nature of the events depicted in *La briganta* in the previous chapter.

<sup>162</sup> Carol Lazzaro-Weis, "The Historical Novel: History as Female Subjectivity," *From Margins to Mainstream: Feminism and Fictional Modes in Italian Women's Writing, 1968-1990* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 150.

to thematize subjectivity as a key organizing narrative factor after World War II, while many male authors moved on to embrace a more collective, reporting stance,<sup>163</sup> putting questions of subjectivity on hold, perhaps having momentarily come to terms with these questions through this very collective experience.

In the postwar period, fictional narrative by Italian male authors mostly concentrated on contemporary events, which began to address ideological issues in a collective, neo-realist mode.<sup>164</sup> While their male counterparts searched for solidarity in narrating experiences common to many, post-World War II narratives by women tended toward what had become labeled more “personal” genres of the historical novel and autobiography/biography,<sup>165</sup> which I shall elucidate later on in this chapter using Banti and Muraro as examples.

Just a few decades later, the critical emphasis on problematic subjectivity brought to light by Pirandello and Svevo shifts focus from the narrator to the author. Barthes’ essay offers an excellent reading of how the figure of the real author has been perceived traditionally in relation to his/her artistic production: “The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person,

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<sup>163</sup> Ann Hallamore Caesar, “The Novel, 1945-1965,” *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy*, eds. Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 212.

<sup>164</sup> Caesar 205. See also Carol Lazzaro-Weis, “Stranger Than Life? Autobiography and Historical Fiction,” *Gendering Italian Fiction*, 44. Some male authors, such as Elio Vittorini with his *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1941), instead adopted magic realism as their narrative mode, which nonetheless displays a certain air of collectivity. Anna Banti has been said to use a similar narrative mode, as Cesare Garboli has asserted: “Si potrebbe definire il realismo della Banti un realismo fantasmatico, un tipo di realismo che attualizza,” Garboli, “Anna Banti e il tempo,” *Paragone* 498 (1991): 9.

<sup>165</sup> On the topic of women writers’ narrative genres of the twentieth century, see Marotti, Caesar and Lazzaro-Weis, “Stranger Than Life?”

the author ‘confiding’ in us.”<sup>166</sup> As I have shown in Chapter 2, this authorial “explanation” or meaning is reified, demonstrated on a superficial level with Nievo’s first person narrator Carlino, who offers us his “confessions.” Barthes continues: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”<sup>167</sup> Nievo demonstrates this when Carlino presents his “moral” on the very first page of his novel. As I have established, however, this is simply the superficial meaning of the story, the icing on the cake that contains a much more complicated center.

The many possible ideological interpretations of Le confessioni d’un italiano (and Il nome della rosa, I promessi sposi, etc.), regardless of its real or constructed author’s intended “message,” speak to Barthes’ continued argument, which removes the figurehead of the author in favor of that of the (many possible) reader(s): “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”<sup>168</sup> According to Barthes’ assessment of contemporary literary criticism, the importance and influence of the reader has surpassed and eclipsed that of the previously monolithic author. In order for texts to be “open” to various interpretations (and for literary scholars to have jobs), Barthes claims that the author, who represents one “closed” interpretation of the text, must no longer exist, and must cease to influence readings of his work, hence: “...the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”<sup>169</sup> Echoing this sentiment, Umberto Eco responds to many of his critics when they inquire about the

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<sup>166</sup> Barthes 143.

<sup>167</sup> Barthes 147.

<sup>168</sup> Barthes 148

<sup>169</sup> Barthes 148.

meaning of his work in Il nome della rosa: “Un narratore non deve fornire interpretazioni della propria opera, altrimenti non avrebbe scritto un romanzo, che è una macchina per generare interpretazioni.”<sup>170</sup>

Whereas Barthes proffers the metaphorical death of the real author in exchange for an open reading, the *implied* author (as described by Booth below) continues to thrive as a replica of the real author, often exhibiting similar points of view, character traits, and physical similarities—he is a palimpsest, an echo of the “real man.” Although Booth’s publication predates the appearance of “Death of the Author,” parts of his argument logically follow Barthes’. The continuation of Booth’s quote with which I began this chapter speaks to the image of the author as perceived in conjunction with his literary works: “This implied author is always distinct from the “real man”—whatever we may take him to be—who creates a superior version of himself, a “second self,” as he creates his work.”<sup>171</sup> This “second self” embodies a simulacrum or a reproduction of the “real man,” conjured up by the reader, as part of the fictional narrative in order to titillate or satisfy the curiosity of the “ideal” reader, yet another figure constructed outside the text itself, that like the implied or real author, inspires much criticism. More often than not, the implied author shares characteristics of the “real man,” furthering the reader’s imagination, and actually inspiring the reader to identify this “second self” or “superior version” with the “real man.” As a copy of something existing previously but now absent (if we follow in Barthes’ footsteps and accept the real author’s “death”), the implied

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<sup>170</sup> Umberto Eco, Postille a “Il nome della rosa” (Milano: Bompiani, 1984) 7. Although Eco uses the term “narratore,” it is clear from the context of his essay that he means the author of the text.

<sup>171</sup> Booth 151.

author shares several characteristics with the figure of the palimpsest, having been formed or recreated in and from the shadow of the real author, conjured in tandem with the work itself.

The structure of the palimpsest is usually defined in a broad sense in two ways: as a writing surface that has been erased and used again, and also as something having various aspects beneath its surface.<sup>172</sup> The figure of the palimpsest, first used to describe reused manuscript parchment, lends itself quite easily to the field of literary analysis as well as to analogies regarding the physical act of writing. If taken in this literary manner, both definitions allow for reading effects, and not just exterior meanings/signs, which are exactly that which became relevant in my previous chapter.

Sarah Dillon has specified even further the use of the term “palimpsest” in order to better utilize it in an exclusively literary-critical sense: “Traditional palimpsest reading has as its sole aim and objective the resurrection of the underlying script; the overlying one is irrelevant.”<sup>173</sup> I contend that this is akin to what Barthes claims about the Author and critics, and the “resurrection” (or interpretation, in Barthesian terms) of the underlying script (the Author’s essence) coagulates nicely with Barthes’ claim that the Author exists *as* his own text.<sup>174</sup> Dillon, however, goes further:

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<sup>172</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘palimpsest’ thus: 1. Paper, parchment or other writing material designed to be reusable after any writing on it has been erased. 2.a. A parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing. 2.b. In extended use: a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a *multilayered record*. Emphasis mine.

<sup>173</sup> Dillon 253.

<sup>174</sup> “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line.” Barthes 145.

...palimpsestuous reading...does not focus solely on the underlying text, for to do so would be to unravel and destroy the palimpsest, which exists only and precisely *as* the involution of texts. Rather, such reading seeks to trace the incestuous and encrypted texts that constitute the palimpsest's fabric. Since those texts bear no necessary relation to each other, palimpsestuous reading is an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none; hence the appropriateness of its epithet's phonetic similarity to the incestuous.<sup>175</sup>

Dillon's expansion of the term "palimpsest" concentrates on its secondary definition (having various aspects beneath its surface), allowing for its use in exploring understated relations both within literary texts and in a metatextual sense, involving relations—imaginary and otherwise—between authors, authors and their subjects, subjects and readers, etc. If we continue the analogy of Barthes' Author as text, we might say that the "incestuous" and "encrypted" texts made possible by the palimpsestuous reading described by Dillon correspond to the numerous interpretations made available by Barthes' reader(s). To clarify, Dillon does not engage directly with Barthes; it is my contention that Dillon's theories take into account Barthes' death of the author, then acknowledge the multiplicity of readings enabled by the reader as encrypted texts that actually comprise the text itself (the "texts that constitute the palimpsest's fabric"). In this way, the text's various readings would undermine any one as singular. The Barthesian Author (as text) simply becomes one of the many incestuous and encrypted texts that are the structural composition of the palimpsest.

I claim that Dillon's theory on palimpsestuous reading is also similar to Hutcheon's idea that "fact" and "fiction" are presented as having equal weight in historiographic metafiction (which I discuss in chapter 2). The Author's text ("fact") is

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<sup>175</sup> Dillon 254.

taken from its primal, authorial position and placed beside and made equal to many possible reader interpretations. The Author loses his authority, but we are able to fill in the gaps previously left by such a monolithic structure. Dillon, in a way, also addresses the critics that Barthes discusses: “Scholars must not only listen to the previously silent or suppressed voices in history but analyse how such voices are interwoven with, speak in and through, infect and affect supposedly ‘dominant’ and ‘authoritative’ historical narratives.”<sup>176</sup> The first section of the previous quote speaks to much of what I discussed in the previous chapter; the second to what I will assert in this chapter. All texts that I examine in this chapter present a palimpsestic subject, reconstructed through previously existing but now destroyed images and documents.<sup>177</sup> My goal here is to examine the ramifications of when the subject crosses the line from simple palimpsest and becomes palimpsestuous, and how that is connected to the various subliminal ways in which the author-narrator figure asserts his/her presence within the text.

Filling in the gender gaps left by a dominantly male history is a task that often falls to women writers, whether as a task that women appropriate for themselves, or one of personal narratorial interest. One exception to this unspoken rule of reconstructing women’s history and personal involvement with the narrated subject is Vassalli’s La chimera, in which a male narrator-author recounts the story of Antonia Spagnolini, a peasant woman convicted and burned at the stake for witchcraft in early seventeenth-century Lombardy. Given the novel’s setting in time and place, most critics concentrate

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<sup>176</sup> Dillon 255.

<sup>177</sup> “Where ‘palimpsestic’ refers to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest, ‘palimpsestuous’ describes the structure with which one is presented as a result of that process, and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script.” Dillon 245.

their studies on Vassalli's narrative in relation to that of I promessi sposi.<sup>178</sup> However, Vassalli's novel incorporates characteristics of several previous historical narratives, a fact that many of these critics tend to overlook. The story itself and Vassalli's narrative style ultimately have more in common with Guerrazzi's Beatrice Cenci than they do with Manzoni's I promessi sposi. Both La chimera and Beatrice Cenci tell the stories of young women (one a peasant, the other a noblewoman) in early seventeenth-century Italy who, convicted of crimes they probably did not commit, were tortured and executed. The narrators of both of these novels become emotionally involved with the public and artistic images of their narrative subjects.

Guerrazzi's *introduzione* begins with a vivid description of Reni's portrait of Beatrice Cenci (which I cited in the last chapter as well), but the narrative focus is on the reaction of the narrator himself—the novel proper begins with the word “io”—and his address to the reader:

Io quando vidi la immagine della Beatrice Cenci...meco stesso pensai: ora come cotesta forma di angelo avrebbe potuto contenere anima di demonio? ...Io so...che cosa avete sostituito voi? O giovani generazioni a cui mi volgo...<sup>179</sup>

There are no references to the specific time period from which the narrator speaks; the only clue the reader has is that the narrator is able to view Reni's portrait, so we can deduce that the possible time period spans when that particular painting was on display to the public (possibly from the year of its completion, 1662, to the year of the novel's first

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<sup>178</sup> Criticism on Vassalli's novel in this regard is extensive. On La chimera as I promessi sposi in a realist vein, with protagonist Antonia as an anti-Lucia, see Cristina Della Coletta, “L'altra metà del Seicento: da *I promessi sposi* di Manzoni a *La chimera* di Vassalli,” *Italica* 73.3 (Autumn 1996): 348-68. On La chimera as a commentary on I promessi sposi see Verina Jones, “Intertextual Patterns: *I promessi sposi* in *La chimera*,” *Italian Studies* 47 (1992): 51-67.

<sup>179</sup> Guerrazzi 31.



publication, 1854). Guerrazzi makes it simple for his readers to assume that he himself is the narrator figure, as there are no references to the narrator's name, gender, age, or profession—nothing but his interest in Beatrice Cenci. Rather than give biographical details about the narrator figure, the emphasis is on what the first-person narrator feels and thinks. In contrast, the first page of Vassalli's narrative assumes the impersonal voice: "Dalle finestre di questa casa si vede il nulla...si muovano piccole automobili...che il nulla si trasformi in un paseaggio nitidissimo...Si vede allora un orizzonte molto vasto...un croce di via di vite, di storie, di destini, di sogni."<sup>180</sup> There is no narrator as character, just description.

The two passages represent two vastly different introductions, but what follows the first page of each is strikingly similar, as—after Vassalli's narrator does emerge as a concrete character—both narrators divulge that they have conducted research into their respective subjects. Guerrazzi's narrator says: "Così pensando, io mi dava a ricercare pei tempi trascorsi: lessi le accuse e le difese; confrontai racconti, scritti, memorie, e porsi le orecchie alla tradizione lontana."<sup>181</sup> Inspired by Reni's painting, he decides to investigate the history behind the woman, although his methods and sources outside official documents remain unclear. The fact that he has read "accusations" and "defenses" suggest that he has read legal documents, but as he does not reveal the authors of the "accounts," "writings," and "memoirs" that he mentions, his sources remain obfuscated. Guerrazzi, like Vassalli (as we shall see), has his narrator wax philosophic about the process of history and what it means to his present day, but his point of view is

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<sup>180</sup> Vassalli 3.

<sup>181</sup> Guerrazzi 34.

clearly and logically that of the positivist, Crocean, nineteenth-century variety: “Ma la storia non si seppellisce coi cadaveri dei traditi: essa imbraccia le sue tavole di bronzo quasi scudo, che salva dall’oblio i traditi e i traditori.”<sup>182</sup> History, for Guerrazzi the narrator-author, is an active force that saves its lesser-knowns for revelation later. At the same time, Guerrazzi’s narrator acknowledges what a difficult task it is to “unearth” something or someone “buried” in the annals of history: “Scoperchiai le antiche sepolture, e interrogai le ceneri.”<sup>183</sup> Vassalli’s narrator, on the other hand, comes across his subject by chance as he was conducting research on a different, well-known historical figure.

In Vassalli’s *premesse*, the narrator overtly refers to the poet Dino Campana, and how the latter once described the Lombard area of Novara, the novel’s setting:

...un “macigno bianco”—così lo descrisse all’inizio del secolo il mio babbo matto, il poeta Dino Campana—attorno a cui “corrono le vette / a destra a sinistra all’infinito / come negli occhi del prigionero”. Campana era arrivato a Novara una sera di settembre, in treno...gli era apparso il Monte Rosa in un ‘cielo pieno di picchi / bianchi che corrono’: un’immagine inafferrabile e lontana...”<sup>184</sup>

Vassalli’s narrator allows Campana to do the work for him, to speak for him (or, he assumes Campana’s voice as his own). The seemingly out of place reference to a twentieth-century poet becomes less obscure when the reader realizes that Vassalli was conducting research on Campana when he came across court records documenting Antonia’s trial.<sup>185</sup> Vassalli’s narrator-author never discusses this context overtly; we as

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<sup>182</sup> Guerrazzi 35.

<sup>183</sup> Guerrazzi 34.

<sup>184</sup> Vassalli 4.

<sup>185</sup> One of the works that emerged from this research is Sebastiano Vassalli, ed., Un po’ del mio sangue: Canti orfici, poesie sparse, Canto proletario italo-francese, by Dino Campana (Milano: Biblioteca

informed readers or literary scholars assume that Vassalli's narrator is a thinly veiled version of the author himself. He does say, however, how he came across his "found" story:

In questo paesaggio che ho cercato di descrivere e che oggi—come spesso capita—è nebbioso, c'è sepolto una storia: una grande storia, d'una ragazza che visse tra il 1590 e il 1610 e che si chiamò Antonia... L'Italia, si sa, è un paese disordinato e qualcosa fuori posto si trova sempre, qualche storia che si doveva dimenticare finisce sempre per salvarsi: ma io, che pure avevo avuto la fortuna di imbattermi nella storia di Antonia, e di Zardino, e della pianura novarese nei primi anni del Seicento, esitavo a raccontarla, come ho detto, perché mi sembrava troppo lontana. Mi chiedevo: cosa mai può aiutarci a capire del presente, che già non sia nel presente?"<sup>186</sup>

Now the reader can put together the puzzle pieces that Vassalli has laid out in random order: while researching Campana's stay near Novara he accidentally finds court documents about Antonia, and in a mix of anonymity and homage, uses Campana's words to break up his own nihilistic descriptions of present-day Novara that surround Campana's quote. He also inserts biographical information about his subject, and stresses the fact that he came upon this data by chance. Guerrazzi's narrator-author purposefully searches for information on Beatrice Cenci, but Vassalli happens upon Antonia's facts, not unlike how Manzoni's narrator "finds" the manuscript that tells the story of Renzo and Lucia.

Vassalli's arguments for representing Antonia's story are structured like Manzoni's, but his declared reasons for doing so are much more overtly philosophical,

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universale Rizzoli, 2005). Zygmunt G. Barański discusses how Vassalli's research and personal history effect his novels and published letters in "Sebastiano Vassalli: Literary Lives," *The New Italian Novel* eds. Zygmunt G. Barański and Lino Pertile (Toronto: U Toronto P, 1993) 239-57.

<sup>186</sup> Vassalli 5.

linked to arguments of philosophy of history, rather than claiming her story to be a “pleasant” one for the reader, as does Manzoni. A pessimistic version of Manzoni’s narrator, he continues:

Guardando questo paesaggio, e questo nulla, ho capito che nel presente non c’è niente che meriti d’essere raccontato. Il presente è rumore: milioni, miliardi di voci che gridano, tutte insieme in tutte le lingue e cercando di sopraffarsi l’una con l’altra, la parola “io”. Io, io, io... Per cercare le chiavi del presente, e per capirlo, bisogna uscire dal rumore: andare in fondo alla notte, o in fondo al nulla.<sup>187</sup>

The emphasis on the “io,” which is the basis of Guerrazzi’s introduction, here is almost ridiculed and juxtaposed with nothingness (“nulla”) and the impersonal voice with which the novel began. Vassalli’s framing narrative—in which we most clearly see the figure of the narrator-author—is thematically reminiscent of Guerrazzi’s: he reveals the archival origins of his story and attempts to tell the reader why he transcribes it, although he remains within the established narrative parameters of his nineteenth-century predecessors.

Vassalli’s narrator, à la Manzoni, frames the narrated events with an introduction and afterword, and claims that his is a “found” story. However, his framing chapters are both entitled “Il nulla,” and thematically are more reminiscent of those written by Eco’s narrators, the first of whom (the unnamed narrator) questions the truth-value of his presented narrative, and the second of whom (Adso) questions his own faith and suggests that his narrative is empty of meaning. There is no manuscript to which Vassalli’s narrator refers, only court documents and paintings that supposedly bear his subject

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<sup>187</sup> Vassalli 5-6.

Antonia's face (like Reni's portrait of Beatrice Cenci that inspired the narrator of Guerrazzi's novel). Thus both depictions (Vassalli's and Guerrazzi's) reflect one reconstructed not from a disappeared manuscript, but from two entirely different media: legal documents and the fine arts (reliance on Inquisition trial documents is a characteristic that the narrator-author Vassalli shares with Muraro, a similarity I shall explore later in this chapter).

As I have shown in the previous chapter, Guerrazzi's narrator functions as a tool through which the reader has access to the fetishized historical figure of Beatrice Cenci. However, the figure of the narrator-author almost disappears at the conclusion of Beatrice Cenci; there is no afterward, no *congedo* as in Vassalli's novel. Instead, the last chapter begins much in the same way as Vassalli's *premess*a begins, with the impersonal voice: "Si ode un orma, si ripete...si pone a sedere; si abbraccia la gambe...si stacca un'altra ombra."<sup>188</sup> There is no clear agent, as was seen at the outset of the novel. Instead, the novel concludes with a list of dates, names and occurrences related to Beatrice Cenci's trial,<sup>189</sup> very much like the list of dates, names, and occurrences that appear at the end of Vassalli's novel.

Vassalli's first-person narrator limits his meta-textual comments within the story itself (he certainly makes fewer comments within the story than Manzoni's anonymous narrator and Guerrazzi's doting one), but his voice emerges mainly in the *premess*a and *congedo* (both entitled "Il nulla") that surround the story. These two framing chapters function as rumination on the present and the past, the role of history, and seem to be a

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<sup>188</sup> Guerrazzi 597.

<sup>189</sup> Guerrazzi 600-602.

Lukácsian-Nietzschian defense of his novel. After closing the last chapter of the story proper with Antonia's death, the narrator ties up loose ends (mimicking the "wholeness" of narrated history), explaining what happened to the other characters of the novel and when: "Guardo il nulla dalla finestra. Là è Zardino...Là ci morì Antonia. Che fine poi fecero gli altri personaggi di questa storia non posso raccontarlo perché non lo so, so soltanto qualcosa di qualcuno: per esempio del vescovo Bascapè, dell'inquisitore Manini."<sup>190</sup> The fate of bishops and inquisitors will inevitably be found in archives, since they are part of "official" history. But when the narrator-author arrives at the "lesser-knowns"—the wanderers, the peasants, the town idiot—he cannot say exactly what happened to them:

...si può soltanto immaginare cosa fecero dopo il rogo di Antonia...Continuarono tutti a vivere nella gran confusione e nel frastuono di quel loro presente che a noi oggi appare così silenzioso, così morto, e che rispetto al nostro presente fu soltanto un po' meno attrezzato per produrre rumore, e un po' più esplicito in spietatezze... Infine, uno dopo l'altro, morirono: il tempo si chiuse su di loro, il nulla li riprese; e questa, sfrondata d'ogni romanzo, ed in gran sintesi, è la storia del mondo.<sup>191</sup>

At first glance, the philosophy of history explained here seems pessimistic, contrary to that in Guerrazzi's introduction, but upon further scrutiny, the two do not necessarily clash; they simply represent two sides of the same coin. Guerrazzi's narrator speaks of being able to resurrect those previously lost to history, but the figure he chooses is a world-famous historical person, whereas the characters that Vassalli's narrator recalls at

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<sup>190</sup> Vassalli 301-302-check.

<sup>191</sup> Vassalli 302-303.

the end of his narrative are not, thus there are no official records of their fates. One character that does merit reference in archives is Antonia's executioner:

Anche di mastro Bernardo Sasso, boia di Milano, chi volesse cercare notizie negli archivi lombardi qualche cosa certamente troverebbe: un boia è un personaggio storico. Di tutti gli altri personaggi, che non appartengono alla storia e che quindi sono <<terra, polvere, fumo, ombra, nulla>>, per dirla con le parole di uno dei massimi poeti dell'epoca, si può soltanto immaginare cosa fecero dopo il rogo di Antonia...<sup>192</sup>

Here Vassalli lays bare some of his narrative tactics and his knowledge of criticism and theory of the historical novel in explaining exactly who is a "historical figure," and who will be lost to the processes of history. It is unusual that a figure such as Antonia, an orphan peasant, would survive through official channels; apart from her purported beauty, she was not an extraordinary person. What makes her extraordinary is what Vassalli does with the facts that he does find in the archives: he fills in the blanks of her history, making her story appealing to the reader. He is able to do this precisely because she is not a well-known figure whose data can be easily researched, double-checked, and contested.

Guerrazzi and Vassalli allow the voices of their women protagonists to be heard through the figure of the narrator/author. Guerrazzi's novel, however, does not fall into the parameters of the historical novel as defined by Lukács, as its protagonist is too famous, too much part of "official" history:

The "world-historical individual" can only figure as a minor character in the [historical] novel because of the complexity and intricacy of the whole social-historical process. The proper hero here is life itself; the retrogressive motifs, which express necessary tendencies of development, have as their hidden nucleus

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<sup>192</sup> Vassalli 302.

the general driving forces of history. The historical greatness of such characters is expressed in their complex interaction, their manifold connection with the diverse private destinies of social life, in whose totality the trends of popular destiny are revealed.”<sup>193</sup>

Antonia represents this hidden nucleus, precisely because she becomes victim to the powers that be in seventeenth-century Italy. Her story, in its anonymity, becomes the story of many, whereas Beatrice’s story (or stories, as it were) can only be her own. Vassalli’s Antonia, on the other hand, is a perfect example of Lukács’ parameters of the historical novel. She is anonymous, non-existent in “official” history, and allows for “historical” events—what happened to orphans abandoned at a nunnery, the Inquisition, the torture and execution of a young woman condemned by the Inquisition—to shine through in the novel’s background, whereas Guerrazzi’s novel reads more like a family melodrama.

Both Guerrazzi and Vassalli’s narrators, regardless of how much they shape (or warp?) the stories they tell and how much they might resemble their real authors, remain in the background, nameless, representative of the male fetishizing gaze that admires from afar. In contrast, both Muraro and Banti emerge as clear author-narrators; they are not anonymous. This emphasis, however, tends to mask whatever other objective the narration of the latter two authors may have.

### **Artemisia-Banti-Lopresti**

Anna Banti’s *Artemisia*, first published in 1947, reconstructs events in the life of

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<sup>193</sup> Lukács 149-50.



seventeenth-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1654?), daughter of artist Orazio Gentileschi and author of Giuditta che decapita Oloferne (1614-20).<sup>194</sup> Although Banti's novel is considered fiction, the strength of the historical Artemisa Gentileschi shines through in several episodes: after having been raped by her tutor Agostino Tassi, she endured a grueling trial and torture, and eventually established herself as an artist in her own right, emerging from the shadow of her famous father. Gentileschi was an extraordinary woman, who overcame numerous obstacles in a male dominated and oriented society. Banti's narration is extraordinary and unique as well.

The goals of the narrative—whether they are manifest or latent—are not proffered by Artemisia's narrator, as is the case for Manzoni, Eco and Nievo. The object of desire (the real), which is masked in conventional male accounts of historical narrative, lies even further beneath the surface in Artemisia, since its narrator does not even offer a veiled moralizing conclusion of the novel's fictive events to decipher. The object of desire of the Author of the destroyed manuscript is clear, but as readers we do not receive a manifest meaning or goal of the reconstructed novel. The ideological goal of this type of narrative (fictive events) is not to narrativize “true” or “important” historical events, but to fill in the gaps left by male accounts of history by presenting alternative histories.

Accordingly, the narrative devices used to attain this goal often differ from those found in conventional examples of the historical novel. For example, establishing narrative authority by claiming the story's factual basis (something that Vassalli and Guerrazzi's narrators do with references to archival research), while integral to many

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<sup>194</sup> The more famous version of this scene (an earlier version was completed in 1612-13) is currently housed in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

conventional historical novels, is precisely what several women authors of twentieth-century historical narrative are trying to avoid.<sup>195</sup> The logically impossible collaboration between the historical figure of Artemisia and the narrator of the novel Artemisia disavows any conventional notion of narrational authority, since it is an obvious fictional scenario. The distance that usually separates intradiegetic narrators (if the narrator is not also the protagonist) from the stories that they recount is eclipsed in Banti's novel. The author-narrator Banti expresses an emotional involvement with and personal attachment to her subject that continues to characterize more contemporary historical narrative, in fiction written by both men and women, as we have seen with Vassalli.

While their male counterparts searched for solidarity in narrating experiences common to many, post-World War II narrative by women tended toward what had become labeled more "personal" genres of the historical novel and autobiography/biography.<sup>196</sup> Banti's Artemisia embodies all three of these genres/modes mentioned above: the novel presents the historical "facts" of the documented life of painter Artemisia Gentileschi (biography), reconstructs and reconfigures the artist's personal experiences using both documented fact and fictive imagination (historiographic metafiction), and portrays Banti's own personal experiences (autobiography). By incorporating a more conventional method of conveying historical information (biographical presentation) alongside her innovative narrative techniques, Banti utilizes

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<sup>195</sup> In fact, Garboli points out that Banti flagrantly "fudges" certain facts in her autobiographical novel Un grido lacerante (1981). Specifically, she makes herself older when she meets her future partner (no longer in high school, but at university), and that he (Longhi) falls ill and dies when she is younger than when she really was. Garboli 13. Interestingly, Cutrufelli, Banti, and Muraro spent long hours researching their historical subjects, but do not allude to the research in their accounts.

<sup>196</sup> On the topic of women writers' narrative genres of the twentieth century, see Marotti, Caesar and Lazzaro-Weis, "Stranger Than Life?"

the established parameters of the genre—like Vassalli who imitates Manzoni and Guerrazzi—and then expands them from within. *Artemisia* is representative not only of the major trends in Italian women’s writing of the twentieth century, but also of the continued use of the intradiegetic narrator in the historical novel, who is evident from the novel’s first pages. In fact, critic Garboli explains further, that Banti’s writing process

...spiega la perversa e involontaria tendenza dei romanzi della Banti a viaggiare lungo due sensi contrari: uno costruttivo, positivo, lo stradone pieno di segnali e di frecce un po’ anni cinquanta, anche un po’ ostentante, in direzione Verga, Manzoni, Balzac, Ottocento, realismo, ecc.; l’altro un viale novecentesco...dove cammina un romanziere di luce artificiale e di fissità stralunata, dalle visioni convulse e dai traumi nodosi e irreali, schiavo di rabbie puerili e posseduto da un aggressivo senso di vanità del mondo.<sup>197</sup>

Although Garboli is describing the entire opus of Banti, he singles out Banti’s bifocal narrative tactics that are seen in *Artemisia*, which stretch from nineteenth-century positivism toward a more anxious twentieth century that addresses problems of subjectivity. In this citation, Garboli’s opinions are clear: he considers 1950’s realism and nineteenth-century tendencies to be constructive and positive, while more contemporary trends he deems artificial, knotty, and unreal. The complicated nature of this sort of contemporary narrative is evident from the very beginning of Banti’s novel, even before her fictional story begins.

In a direct address to the novel’s reader (“Al lettore”), the author of *Artemisia*, also assumed to be its narrator, relates the objectives and fate of her first manuscript, destroyed in World War II:

Un nuovo accostarsi e coincidere fra vita perenta e vita attuale; una nuova

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<sup>197</sup> Garboli 9.

misura di connivenza storico-letteraria; il tentativo d'immettere nella palude bastarda dell'italiano letterario in corso vecchie e potabilissime fonti dell'uso popolare nostrano: tali erano le ambizioni del racconto che, intitolato Artemisia, era alle ultime pagine nella primavera del 1944. In quell'estate, per eventi bellici che non hanno, purtroppo, nulla di eccezionale, il manoscritto veniva distrutto.<sup>198</sup>

Banti makes evident the meta-textual connections that her first manuscript was to have.

In a sense, Banti foreshadows and elucidates my arguments about how women authors must adopt conventional (patriarchal) techniques in order to “let herself into the bastard bog of current Italian” using “old and most potable sources of common use.” Her disdain for the present state of Italian literature and what is necessary to be considered part of it is quite clear. Banti also reverses the conventional importance of events: World War II becomes “nulla di eccezionale” while her own manuscript—victim of those very events considered part of “official” history—becomes the primary concentration of her narrative.

Whereas Manzoni and Nievo situate their narratives during the “making” of Italy—the Risorgimento—Banti begins her narrative during the “unmaking” of Italy: “lo sfacelo della patria.”<sup>199</sup> The analogy to be made clear here is the author’s struggle to become part of “that bastard Italian bog,” and it concerns the author Banti’s insertion into the literary canon during a time in which the *patria* (the Fatherland) is being undone. It is similar to Cutrufelli’s La briganta, set during the upheavals in Sicily directly following “Unification.” As I have noted in the previous chapter, transgression is more acceptable during a time of uncertainty, such as unification of the nineteenth century or the two

<sup>198</sup> Anna Banti, “Al lettore,” Artemisia (Milan: Bompiani, 1996) 7.

<sup>199</sup> Banti 9.

World Wars of the twentieth century. The epoch of socio-historical upheaval here, however, belongs to Banti the Author, *not* her protagonist. Banti's reader hears almost nothing about the historical period that serves as a backdrop to Artemisia's personal story. Indeed, seventeenth-century Italy is traditionally viewed as representative of a decline in Italian history. Perhaps it is fitting that a different aspect of Italian culture—art—is emphasized in Banti's novel. It is Banti's voice, representative of many women authors of the post-war period, that is heard.

Even though this section of the novel describes the setting of the author's, not the historical subject's, story, it is part of the palimpsestuous nature of Banti's existing novel, and is just as relevant, if not more so to my argument, as the original, underlying parchment (Artemisia's destroyed story). She continues:

A giustificare l'ostinazione accorata con cui la memoria non si stancò, negli anni successivi, di tener fede a un personaggio forse troppo diletto, queste nuove pagine dovrebbero, almeno, riuscire. Ma perché, questa volta, l'impegno del narrare non sosteneva che la forma commemorativa del frammento, e il dettato si legava, d'istinto, a una commozione *personale* troppo imperiosa per essere obliterata—tradita--: credo che al lettore si debba qualche dato dei casi di Artemesia Gentileschi, pittrice valentissima fra le poche che la storia ricordi.<sup>200</sup>

The role of history on which Vassalli and Guerrazzi concentrate so much is eclipsed here by the process of writing, which becomes key. Thematic links to Nievo and Manzoni recall their emphasis on the act of writing (“nuove pagine,” “l'impegno del narrare,” “la forma commemorativa del frammento”), references to the novel's reader (“al lettore”),

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<sup>200</sup> Banti 7, emphasis mine. Much criticism of Banti's novel refers to the “author-narrator.” See in particular Deborah Heller, “History, Art, and Fiction in Anna Banti's *Artemisia*,” Contemporary Women Writers in Italy: A Modern Renaissance, ed. Santo Aricò (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990): 45-60.

and several facts about the novel's subject as such ("personaggio," "qualche dato dei casi di Artemisia Gentileschi"). Banti's adoption of her predecessors' techniques display her attempt to achieve acceptance into the "old boys' club" of the historical novel canon without dwelling on the processes of history itself, making the process of writing more significant.

However, the narrative that follows this introduction is the second manuscript rewritten from memory of the first, destroyed, absent narrative. Working from the memory of her lost manuscript, Banti's narrator creates a palimpsest, a reconstruction of her first narrative, but then incorporates her own experiences into the second narrative, much as Eco's narrator works from memory of his lost manuscript and incorporates his personal experiences into the novel's framing narrative. The resulting novel, then, is palimpsest, in that it attempts to recreate what was written before, but it is also palimpsestuous because it incorporates other "voices" that were not part of the first manuscript, and are not clearly connected to it. At the same time, however, the two separate stories—that of Artemisia, the novel's subject, and that of Anna Banti the writer—reflect one another as stories of loss and submission. Artemesia's rape and constant struggle for acknowledgement as an artist by her father and the art world of the seventeenth century is analogous (and perhaps influential on) Banti's trauma of losing her manuscript (loss of voice) and her struggle for affirmation as an art scholar in the eyes of her husband (the famed art critic Roberto Longhi) and as a twentieth-century novelist. In this way, Banti's traumas—which were not part of her original, destroyed manuscript—add to the palimpsestuous nature of the published novel, and refute Barthes' "Death of

the Author.”

Whereas in La chimera the story proper (Antonia’s story) and that of the author-narrator are clearly divided and kept separate, in Artemisia the two stories bleed together: Artemisia as an active agent appears in the *author’s* story, as well as in her own. After the Author’s address to her reader, the novel proper begins with Artemisia the character presumably addressing the Author Banti, as she laments the loss of her Artemisia manuscript:

<<Non piangere.>> Nel silenzio che divide l’uno dall’altro i miei singhiozzi, questa voce figura una ragazzetta che abbia corso in salita e voglia scaricarsi subito di un’imbasciata pressante. Non alzo la testa. <<Non piangere.>>: la rapidità dello sdrucchiolo rimbalza ora come un chicco di grandine, messaggio, nell’ardore estivo, di alti freddi cieli. Non alzo la testa, nessuno mi è vicino.<sup>201</sup>

Artemisia appears as a spectral force, very much in the present tense of the Author: she is an echo of Artemisia the artist/historical figure, of Artemisia the character in the now destroyed manuscript, and of the Author herself, whose description will directly follow. Immediately following the traumatic loss of her first manuscript in a World War II bombing in Florence, Banti refuses her loss by resurrecting the most essential element of what she has lost. Banti also demonstrates a secondary meaning of the term palimpsest, in bringing to fruition a relationship that seems otherwise impossible.

In explaining the multiple meanings of “palimpsest,” Dillon’s point of departure is Thomas De Quincey (author of Confessions of an English Opium Eater [1821] and Suspiria de Profundis [1845]), who likened the human brain to a palimpsest, something

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<sup>201</sup> Banti 9.

that cannot be erased entirely. Dillon discusses De Quincey's resurrective fantasy involving his dead sister Elizabeth:

The resurrective fantasy of the palimpsest of mind provides the assurance that Elizabeth is not dead, but sleeping. That in De Quincey's mind, and through his writing, the 'pall' (not merely a dark covering but, literally, the cloth spread over a coffin or tomb) covering Elizabeth can be drawn off and revive the 'sleeping' Elizabeth beneath...De Quincey's writing repeatedly performs this resurrection of Elizabeth; it continually enacts the impossibility of his forgetting of her...De Quincey's fantasies of resurrection, including the palimpsest of the mind, are part of his refusal to mourn his sister Elizabeth's death 'normally'. As a result, they create and consolidate a crypt in his mind that shelters Elizabeth, and the trauma of her death. The palimpsest of the mind may therefore be understood as a structure of cryptic haunting in which Elizabeth 'lives on'.<sup>202</sup>

De Quincey is not ready to deal with the loss of his sister, as Anna Banti is not ready to deal with the loss of her manuscript, Artemisia included. Both De Quincey and Banti react to their loss by writing about it, but whereas De Quincey's spectrum is passive, the spectrum of Artemisia is the driving force of the Author's resurrected manuscript.

Whereas De Quincey enacts a mourning without end, Banti will eventually move toward literary closure when she approaches Artemisia's death toward the end of her novel.

Several pages later, the reader sees a very distinct break in the storyline, when the narrator-author, frustrated by the repeated appearance of spectral Artemisia in her present day, says:

Decido che non lascerò più parlare Artemisia, non parlerò più per lei, nel mio presente non c'è più posto per il passato né per il futuro. Ma mentre discorro coi polverosi vivi, una fresca vocina ostinata e querula ripete la sua domanda: <<Non dico bene?>>, che ricorda la inabilità delle donne sciocche e curiose: e Artemisia fu una gran donna. Simile a un marito irritato, ritorno all'offensiva: <<Come se tu credessi a quell che scrivevo! Come se t'importasse veramente della mia

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<sup>202</sup> Dillon 246, 250.



perdita!>> Cerco una pietra pulita dove sedermi, un'altra giornata di guerra è alla fine, sono stanca e i vialetti di Boboli sono un'immensa latrina... e la terza passeggiata di Artemisia mi perseguita.<sup>203</sup>

Another imaginary conversation illuminates Banti's writing process, as it is clear that she has returned to work on her palimpsest manuscript at Boboli gardens, the site of the first "apparition" of Artemisia as her companion, and the first exchange between the two artists. Interestingly, Banti also assigns herself the conventionally masculine characteristic of being on the offensive. We also catch a glimpse of Banti's disdain for the present ("polverosi vivi"), which complements her taking refuge in the past and in resurrecting historical personages. The first apparition of Artemisia as a character in the Author's present is directly followed by a description of her (Banti's) state of shock: "Poche cose esistono per me in quest'alba faticosa e bianca di un giorno d'agosto in cui siedo in terra, sulla ghiaia di un vialetto di Boboli, come nei sogni, in camicia da notte."<sup>204</sup> The image of a woman in a state of shock, wearing only her nightgown in a public place is reminiscent of *La briganta*'s Margherita, who also flees her home after a severe trauma in a state of shock, wearing only her nightgown (see chapter 3). Whereas Margherita's episode appears as part of her—the subject's—trauma, the scene described in *Artemisia* belongs to its author. The scene continues:

...Dallo stomaco alla testa mi strizzo in lagrime, non posso farne a meno, in coscienza, e ho il capo sulle ginocchia. Sotto di me, fra i sassolini, i miei piedi nudi e grigi; sopra di me, come le onde su un affogato, il viavai smorto della gente che sale e scende l'erta da cui vengo, e che non può curarsi di una donna accoccolata in singhiozzi... Senza rendermene conto, piango per quello che ciascuno di loro vedrà dal Belvedere, e i miei singhiozzi seguitano a bollire,

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<sup>203</sup> Banti 25.

<sup>204</sup> Banti 9.

irragionati, balenandoci, pazze festuche, il ponte Santa Trinità, torrioni dorati, una tazzina a fiori in cui bevevo da piccola. E di nuovo, mentre mi fermo un istante e raccapezzo, nel mio vuoto, che dovrò pure alzarmi, quell suono <<non piangere>> mi tocca in fretta come un'onda che s'allontana. Alzo finalmente la testa che è già una memoria, e in questa forma gli presto orecchio. Taccio, attonita, nella scoperta della perdita più dolorosa.

Sotto le macerie di casa mia ho perduto Artemisia, la mia compagna di tre secoli fa, che respirava adagio, coricata da me su cento pagine di scritto.<sup>205</sup>

The very real experience of the historical person Anna Banti (or Lucia Lopresti) herself—that of losing her original manuscript during the World War II bombing of the city of Florence in 1944—appears at the beginning of her novel. Not only does Banti recount her own personal experiences in her novel about Artemisia Gentileschi, but she also inserts *herself* as a character, and begins to tell *that* character's past (parts of the city she knew well, a cup that she used as a child). Here we see a multi-layered history: that of the present day author Anna Banti, her childhood memories, and that which has recently been destroyed: her manuscript on Artemisia Gentileschi. What follows will not be a simple palimpsestic reconstruction of the original (destroyed) manuscript, as Banti's goal is not a replicant reconstruction of her manuscript. Instead, what Banti produces in her second manuscript is a palimpsestuous text, one that creates relationships where they do not naturally occur: specifically one between author (Banti) and subject (Gentileschi). She does not say that she has lost Artemisia the novel, but Artemisia, the person (which she does repeatedly throughout the reconstructed novel).<sup>206</sup> The narrator-author also

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<sup>205</sup> Banti 9-10.

<sup>206</sup> See also "...m'era venuta la tentazione di una nuova storia, quando non sapevo che avrei perduta Artemisia." Banti 10-11.

makes explicit references (like Nievo's *Carlino*) to the novel-writing creative process when she describes Artemisia as a child:

...vedo all'altezza della sua testa e così nettamente come non mi è mai riuscito un visuccio verdastro di bambina negletta, occhi che tirano al grigio, capelli bionducci, una delicatezza di tratti proterva e strapazzata: Artemisia a dieci anni. Per meglio rimproverarmi e farsi rimpiangere, abbassa le palpebre: come volesse avvisarmi che pensa a qualche cosa e che non me lo dirà mai. Ma io indovino: <<Cecilia, pensi a Cecilia Nari?>>. La sento, da ragazzina disperata, stringermi le ginocchia. Non mi sono ancora levata in piedi, e i miei singhiozzi sono ora per me e per lei soltanto: per lei nata nel millecinquecentonovantotto, anziana nella morte che ci sta intorno, e ora sepolta nella mia fragile memoria. *Le avevo regalata un'amica*, bisogna che la rassicuri anche se non credo, come succede agli adulti, di potergliela restituire. E nella pietà per lei trovo una scusa per me, una scusa che non controllo, tutta di oggi.<sup>207</sup>

In this very complex passage the reader is expected to follow the jumps in narration from Artemisia's childhood to Banti's present-day Florence, and accept that the author is able to interact with her subject, the historical Artemisia, simultaneously as she invents characters to entertain her ("Le avevo regalata un'amica"). Artemisia soon after comments on the author's decision to have Cecilia die: "<<Non me l'avevi detto,>>"<sup>208</sup> she says to the author-narrator, in a sense, providing editorial commentary. Thus, Banti and Artemisia seem to work together in the creative process, whereas in *La chimera* the author-narrator and his creative inspiration, Dino Campana, never interact; Vassalli simply cites Campana.

The writing process as creative act is highlighted in the following passage:

Ora è per me sola che Artemisia recita la lezione, vuol provarmi di credere tutto quel che inventai e si fa tanto docile che persino i suoi capelli cambiano di colore,

<sup>207</sup> Banti 11, emphasis mine.

<sup>208</sup> Banti 17.

divengono quasi neri, e olivastro l'incarnato: tale io l'immaginavo quando incominciai a leggere e verballi del suo processo sulla carta fiorita di muffa. Chiudo gli occhi e per la prima volta le do del tu. <<Non importa, Artemisia, non importa quel che il giudice pensasse delle donne: se ne scrissi, non è vero.>> China la testa, ritorna di quel biondo opaco delle ragazze malsane, dal sudore acido; ma insiste.<sup>209</sup>

The reference to Banti's archival research on the historical figure of Artemisia Gentileschi is embedded between changing visual images of Artemisia the character. The author begins to "paint" her subject, taking on professional, painterly characteristics of Artemisia (the painter), describing the color schemes of Artemisia's different phases, just as Artemisia helps to "write" Banti's novel. Artemisia's coloring changes along with the changes in mood that Banti describes, highlighting the nuances of slight modifications in her descriptions. Writing and painting as creative processes become yet another analogy that links the two separate worlds of narrated and narrator. The author takes part in these creative processes, unlike Guerrazzi and Vassalli's author-narrators, who admire from afar (both chronologically and professionally). In keeping their distance from their subjects, Guerrazzi and Vassalli essentially retain the male fetishizing gaze, while in becoming close to her subject, Banti eliminates the space required by a Freudian reading between desirer and desired, and is able to present her subject as such, not as an object.

### **Muraro's Guglielma e Maifreda**

Although Artemisia can clearly be placed within the canon of the twentieth-

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<sup>209</sup> Banti 20-21.

century historical novel, with Beatrice Cenci as its predecessor and La chimera as its progeny, Muraro's Guglielma e Maifreda is more difficult to categorize, although it shares some narratological tactics and plot elements with the previously mentioned novels. The Guglielmiti were put on trial by the Inquisition in 1300. The religious sect believed that their spiritual leader Guglielma was the reincarnation of God, and thus were convicted as heretics. Guglielma's body (she died in 1281) and some of her followers were burned at the stake at the conclusion of the trial. The inclusion of the author-narrator's personal experiences in relation to the narrative's subject matter and characters is also a driving force of Guglielma e Maifreda, which presents the results of Muraro's extensive archival research on the eponymous historical figures.<sup>210</sup>

Muraro's voice at the outset of her text differs from all I have previously discussed, as she uses the "we" form that immediately unites her with her reader: "Conosciamo...nostro possesso...I nostri verbali..."<sup>211</sup> However, the narrator does not immediately confer a relationship—imaginary or otherwise—with her subject, as do Guerrazzi and Banti. She does, nonetheless, address the complex origin of the documents she studies:

Gli atti in nostro possesso non sono completi. Gli interrogatori e gli altri atti del tribunale furono messi a verbale da due notai... Sono arrivati fino a noi i verbali... I quali si trovano custoditi nella Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano.

Il merito primo della loro conservazione va dato alla fortuna e a un Monaco del Cinquecento... che costui, entrato nella bottega di un droghiere, vi scorgesse dei fogli di pergamena ricoperti da una scrittura antica e destinati, presumabilmente, a servire da cartocci per la merce in vendita. Il certosino comprò i fogli.

L'Inquisizione Milanese non aveva l'abitudine di dare via i suoi incartamenti ai droghieri. Al contrario, li conservava gelosamente in archivio. Archivio che poi

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<sup>210</sup> Luisa Muraro, Guglielma e Maifreda, storia di un'eresia femminista (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1985).

<sup>211</sup> Muraro 7.

è andato distrutto in un falò illuministico acceso nel 1788 dal governo Milanese con lo scopo di distruggere così una vergogna del passato. Strano ragionamento e disgraziata decisione.

I nostri verbali, dunque, si sono salvati anche perché erano fuoriusciti dall'archivio dell'Inquisizione. Forse erano stati trafugati.<sup>212</sup>

Muraro explains how the history of the Guglielmites has survived not because of official archives, but in spite of them. She points out that the conventional ways of preserving historical documents (state archives) are not necessarily the best way to ensure their safety, as they may not be safe even from their own keepers. In fact, there is a lacuna in the court documents' history, in between when the Milanese government set fire to the archives in which the documents were housed, and when they were found to be used as a pharmacist's wrapping paper.<sup>213</sup> Here, as for Vassalli, the role of chance plays an integral part in how the documents survive to twentieth-century Italy. The two references to the accounts cited on Muraro's first page ("i verbali," "i nostri verbali") are split by a mini-narrative (that regarding the pharmacist and the monk), and an excursus explaining how "official" history can be changed according to the powers that be. Here Muraro highlights the fact that it is the Milanese government that sets fire to its own archives in order to rid itself of its now embarrassing past. History changes, and not just because there are new "historians" filling in the blank pages of what was not part of History, but because those in charge of its archives decide what will be erased. Fortunately, due to an unknown force in this case, those in charge did not succeed in their intended destruction, and Muraro is able to "unearth" their (hi)story. Working from Jacques Derrida's claims

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<sup>212</sup> Muraro 7.

<sup>213</sup> The almost-fate of these documents recalls that of Margherita's books turned into fireworks in La briganta.

about the archive recording but also producing the events it records through its own machinizations as an archive,<sup>214</sup> I claim that the archive also functions as an entity of its own, not something that can be controlled by the “authorities.”

It is not until the narrator explains the main idea of the Guglielmites that we catch a glimpse of the Author as narrator:

La loro idea è che il rinnovamento della società cristiana verrà dal sesso femminile ed è iniziato con Guglielma.

Si tratta dunque di un’eresia femminista. Altri prima di me hanno sottolineato la rispondenza tra le idee guglielmitiche e il femminismo moderno.

Se si dovesse badare soltanto ai termini, non sarebbe corretto dare a un’eresia medioevale un nome coniato appena un secolo fa. Ma la ragione storica del femminismo è più antica della parola e oltrepassa la cultura in cui la parola fu conosciuta. La ragione del femminismo sono quelle donne che vedono e non accettano la subordinazione del loro sesso a quello maschile, il fatto cioè che gli esseri umani femminili siano tenuti socialmente ad accordare i propri interessi a quelli dell’altro sesso.<sup>215</sup>

Muraro’s formation as a feminist is made clear through the voice of the narrator, as she uses terms and constructions that are considered feminist; we, as with the narrator-author figures of *Beatrice Cenci* and *La chimera*, begin to think of the narrator as Muraro herself. Muraro also makes clear the distinction between the time period of her subject and the emergence of feminism (as a term and as a field of study), which highlights her ability to engage the two in one study.

Although Muraro’s book is not a historical novel in the conventional sense of the genre, it does fall within the parameters of Hutcheon’s definition of “...historical fiction as that which is modeled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made

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<sup>214</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25:2 (1995): 9-63.

<sup>215</sup> Muraro 8.

operative by a notion of history as a shaping force (in the narrative and in human destiny).”<sup>216</sup> In fact, Guglielma e Maifreda appears to contain all three kinds of historical representation—annals, chronicle and narrative—that White discusses.<sup>217</sup> After the narrative itself concludes, Muraro includes a synchronic table of historical events (annals) and a chronology (chronicle) of the Inquisition’s trial of Guglielma Boema and her followers. Despite having the appearance of a historical narrative, the main body of Guglielma e Maifreda does not adhere to an ordered timeline, nor does it attempt an overt moralizing conclusion, like much previous historical narrative. Within the narrative itself Muraro presents facts found in court documents, rumors, and legends that shaped Guglielma’s image in the popular imagination after her death. All aspects of the author’s research are combined and presented in the same fashion, regardless of any authority or legitimacy that one may have over the other.<sup>218</sup> In this respect, her narrative corresponds to historiographic metafiction. However, Muraro as a narrator makes no attempt to naturalize what little “plot” she is able to reconstruct, in effect making her narrative less engaging or desirable for the reader by White’s standards of the genre.<sup>219</sup> Her stated objective in the book’s preface is less an attempt to convey a moral conclusion than it is simply to read the signs left by her subject’s “human, feminine power”:

Lo scopo del mio lavoro ne dice i limiti. Ho voluto conoscere e far conoscere i fatti e le idee che ebbero al loro centro Guglielma...

La figura di Guglielma sfugge a una compiuta rappresentazione storica, in parte

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<sup>216</sup> Hutcheon 113.

<sup>217</sup> White 4.

<sup>218</sup> Muraro dedicates an entire chapter to presentation of material based on rumor in “Le due leggende,” however, she also describes actual historical events in great detail; for example, see the chapter entitled “Il processo.”

<sup>219</sup> “[T]he plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as ‘found’ in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques.” White 21.



per la scarsità delle notizie e in parte per quel di più inafferrabile che forma il segreto delle grandi personalità umane. Non avendo io alcuna disposizione artistica per supplire con l'immaginazione a ciò che sfugge, per conoscere Guglielma mi sono rivolta ai suoi effetti. Attraverso gli effetti di un processo penale, non abbiamo altro punto di partenza, ho cercato di ricostruire quello che Guglielma era e voleva dire. In coloro che l'avvicinarono, come nei fatti e idee associati al suo nome, è possibile scorgere il segno lasciato dalla sua potenza umana femminile. Tentare di leggere quei segni era la cosa più accessibile a me ed è insieme la cosa che considero più importante per il mio sesso: significarsi.

Il mio lavoro, naturalmente, ha parecchi altri limiti, quelli dovuti alla mia personale limitatezza e dei quali non è dato a me di giudicare. Ne giudicherà chi legge, come di tutto il resto.<sup>220</sup>

Much as Nievo gives his reader a guide for interpreting the real historical events that he will recount in his opening lines, here Muraro signals to the reader the author-narrator's feminist ideology, which gives form to the events recounted. Not only does she overtly refer to mechanic components of a narrative ("punto di partenza") as Nievo's narrator does, she also openly refers to limitations and factors that will shape her narrative ("lo scopo del mio lavoro," "i limiti"). Muraro's strong base/formation in feminist theory allows her to approach her subject as such, and as a narrator she "translates" her findings accordingly.

The author-narrator of Guglielma e Maifreda does not attempt to hide the inadequacies that the historical record presents, and admits that supplementing narrative with imagination is a normal route to follow when the object of desire—in Muraro's case, Guglielma's story—is ultimately unreachable. To reiterate Jameson: "...this Real—this absent cause, which is fundamentally unrepresentable and non-narrative, and detectable only in its effects—can be disclosed only by Desire itself, whose wish-fulfilling

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<sup>220</sup> Muraro 9.

mechanisms are the instruments through which this resistant surface must be scanned.”<sup>221</sup> As Muraro herself relates, she must reconstruct (“ricostruire”) Guglielma’s story through the effects left by her trial and the people with whom she came into contact. Yet the last sentence of her preface, reminiscent of Manzoni’s preface and concluding remarks, acknowledges the fact that the reader will attempt to judge (“guidicare”) or moralize the events and people recounted as well as her own limits, an attempt that she renounces. In fact, the concluding remarks of the narrative are evocative of those with which Adso of Melk terminates his narrative: “E consegnandosi [Guglielma] pronunciò le parole che dicono la sua trovata coincidenza fra destino e scelta: *sit de me quicquid esse potest.*”<sup>222</sup> Although Adso’s last words relate an apparent sense of meaninglessness and existential despair, Guglielma’s last words convey that Muraro has achieved her goal: she has let Guglielma speak, and in doing so, reconstructed at least one woman’s story that had previously been untold, like Vassalli does after her (even if both narratives end with their subjects being burned at the stake for heresy or witchcraft).

Although differences between Vassalli and Muraro are apparent—the former recreates an entire novel’s worth of places, people, and their daily lives while Muraro concentrates on reconstructing the beliefs of a small group of people—both authors’ sources are bare-bones documents found in archives. Thematically, Vassalli’s narrative has much in common with Guerrazzi’s subject, although Banti’s subject is more closely

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<sup>221</sup> Jameson 184.

<sup>222</sup> Muraro 167. “Let whatever become of me what may.” My translation.

linked to Guerrazzi's in terms of historical renown and artistic fame.<sup>223</sup> Vassalli uses Campana's art to inspire his own, in a less integrative creative act than what happens in *Artemisia*, where Banti and Artemisia work together to create her manuscript. Vassalli repeats Campana while Banti evokes Artemisia. Campana is Vassalli's 'babbo matto,' someone to be revered, but not someone to whom he can relate directly. All four texts analyzed in this chapter refer to their philosophies of history, to varying degrees, and all four transgress the standard parameters of the historical novel in some way.

I have concentrated mostly on beginnings and endings, how the novels' subjects are introduced and put to rest. The philosophy of history and storytelling is revealed here as well: Guerrazzi practices a positivist Crocean version, complemented by Vassalli's nihilist philosophy; Muraro espouses a feminist philosophy of history, and Banti elucidates how the personal becomes intertwined in the philosophy of history. *Artemisia* begins in a very complicated way, presenting the brain palimpsest of Artemisia the character coming back from her destruction in a bombing, and ends in a very simple way: with the eponymous figure's imminent death, a logical stopping point to a narrative that concentrates on the high- and low-lights of its protagonist's lifetime. Nonetheless, there is no "moral" of the story, just the now existing record of what Artemisia Gentileschi the artist accomplished. Muraro's narrative mirrors Banti's in that she relates the important dates and accomplishments of the Guglielmities, but does not give their story a nice "wrapping" as much historical narrative deems necessary. Both Vassalli and Guerrazzi, however, package their stories with logical, easy to comprehend introductions and

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<sup>223</sup> Granted, Artemisia Gentileschi produced much of the art for which she is famous, while Beatrice Cenci inspired much of the art for which she is famous.

conclusions that leave very few loose ends.

Another facet of this chapter has been the revelation in the texts of exactly how their narrator-authors discover or become interested in their subjects, and—if their subjects are relatively unknown—how documentation has survived (or not) through the centuries. Creating a story to round out or plump up the facts found in official documents is one way of making a (hi)story palatable to the general public (as White has proclaimed). White is more concerned with the final result of the manufactured story; the process of how that story is produced concerns the different ways in which the author “finds” or creates his or her story from previously existing documentation, which is how palimpsest theory comes into play. In this chapter I have shown how the narratives of two historical novels written by men (Beatrice Cenci and La chimera) were reconstructed using court documents of the seventeenth century and visual images of their subjects (novels that lean toward simple palimpsest reconstruction), whereas the two historical narratives by women I have chosen to analyze here (Artemisia and Guglielma e Maifreda) are narratives inspired by their own personal relationships with their subject matter, narratives that incorporate and celebrate rather than attempt to hide these (sometimes imaginary, always complicated) relationships (leaning toward palimpsestuous representations). I conclude that the degree to which a text displays diverse palimpsestuous traits is directly related to what degree the figure of the narrator-author leans toward displaying elements of the “real” author, as Muraro and Banti emerge much more clearly as Authors than do Vassalli and Guerrazzi. An essential difference between all of these narrator-authors and the anonymous narrators of Manzoni and Eco is that the

former are not anonymous at all, but they appear to celebrate *how* they become identified with their Authors. Although both Guerrazzi and Vassalli present unique stories about extraordinary women, their narrative innovations pale in comparison to those of Banti and Muraro, who call to the forefront a return of the importance of the Author figure, turning Barthes' landmark essay on its side.

In my next and final chapter, I analyze two texts whose group authors also call attention to themselves, although in a very different way than what I have already pointed out. Whereas Banti and Muraro incorporate themselves into the narrative proper of their stories, and Guerrazzi and Vassalli adopt a more detached, Manzonian stance, Luther Blisset (author of Q) and Wu Ming (author of 54) erase themselves from their narratives proper, but their meta-literary presence looms large.

## Chapter 5

**Preliminary Conclusions and New Directions:  
The Group Author**

To tell a story is a political activity.  
-Wu Ming

In the last chapter I explored the possibilities, complications, and ramifications of the palimpsest story, and how and to what degree the author-narrator is connected to it. In this chapter I examine the recent phenomenon of the anonymous/group author represented by the collectives known as Luther Blissett, who published the historical novel Q in 2000, and Wu Ming (the same group of authors who were Luther Blissett, plus one) who published 54 in 2002. Luther Blissett and Wu Ming are unique authors in my dissertation for various reasons: they are the only group authors, collectively consisting of four and five people respectively; their novels, short stories, and collections of essays are available in their entirety in Italian online, free of charge (some of their works are also available to download in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Polish, and French). Here I analyze the two aforementioned novels in terms of narrative, authority, and palimpsest theory, but I will also discuss how the figure of the anonymous author is mirrored by the protagonists as well as by the story in their texts. In the previous chapter, I have shown that the figure of the author-narrator emerges in the text; here I demonstrate how that emergence is possible when the author is first anonymous, and then multiple. I

use Q and 54 as case studies of my previous chapters' theses (on narrative theory, the palimpsest story, and the relationship between the author and the narrator) and as illustrations of the end of historicity that I discussed in my introduction.

It is my contention that in approaching the end of historicity, the historical novel, perhaps anticipating its own dissolution, becomes more and more piecemeal, seeming to belong to multiple genres. Already toward the end of the nineteenth century, Nievo's Le confessioni d'un italiano—although clearly following the timeline of Italian Unification and exhibiting many traits of the historical novel—is also an excellent example of a *bildungsroman*. In approaching the end of the twentieth century, Eco's Il nome della rosa displays elements of the historical novel, the detective novel, the philosophical treatise, and the murder mystery. Similarly, the novel Q—like Il nome della rosa and Le confessioni di un italiano—displays traits of various genres, as scholar Gian Paolo Renello says: “Q in effetti non è solo un romanzo storico; è epistolario, diario, diario di viaggio, poliziesco, romanzo d'amore e d'avventura; è anche un manuale di lotta e un testo politico.”<sup>224</sup> In true postmodern fashion, Q is a difficult novel to place into one single category. In fact, Renello describes Q as “[u]n romanzo multiplo di identità multiple di autori multipli.”<sup>225</sup> Its authors are multiple, the categories within which it can be placed are multiple, the plotlines are multiple, the identities of its characters are multiple, its narrators are multiple, but also the styles in which it is written are

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<sup>224</sup> Gian Paolo Renello, “Q. Romanzo Storico e azione politica,” Narrativa 20-21 (2001): 357.

<sup>225</sup> Renello 354.

multiple.<sup>226</sup> But before delving into these multiple issues, a brief summary of the novel's events is necessary.

The events of Q take place during the first part of the sixteenth century in Western Europe, and there are four major series of events regarding its principal protagonist, whose true identity remains unknown throughout the novel. The first part of the novel recounts the Peasants' Revolt that occurred in Thuringia, Germany in 1524-25 after the rise of Martin Luther, from the first-person, present tense point of view of one of radical Reformer/Anabaptist Thomas Müntzer's followers.<sup>227</sup> The second part of the novel is largely a reconstruction of a similar uprising in the town of Münster in Westphalia, Germany from 1534-35,<sup>228</sup> always from the point of view of the same protagonist, who tells his stories to a rapt listener. The third part connects the first three sections, as it frames the retelling of the second part, makes references to the first, and becomes its own story set in the Netherlands after the retelling of the second part, with the listener of part two having been turned into a secondary protagonist of part three. The final section is set mostly in Venice during the years 1545-51 (with a brief epilogue set in Istanbul, in 1555), with the same principal character narrating most of the action.

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<sup>226</sup> Although the authors of the novel claim that homogeneity is not their goal, Renello says that: "L'alternanza degli stili cui si assiste nel corso della lettura non è dettata solo dal variare del passo prosastico rispetto alle esigenze narrative, ma anche dal "cambio di mano" autoriale, benché i quattro scrittori, per lor stessa ammissione, abbiano proceduto attraverso una forma di scrittura collettiva, forse con lo scopo di non lasciare trasparire alcuna identità personale sotto la sua apparente omogeneità." Renello 354.

<sup>227</sup> See Frederick Engels, The Peasant War in Germany (New York: International Publishers Co., 2000), especially chapter 6: "The Peasants' War in Thuringia, Alsace and Austria."

<sup>228</sup> See Hermann von Kerksenbroch, Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness: The Overthrow of Münster, the Famous Metropolis of Westphalia, trans. Christopher S. Mackay (Boston: Brill, 2007); and Tal Howard, "Charisma and History: The Case of Münster, Westphalia, 1534-1535" Essays in History 35 (1993) for a summary of events and an analysis of the influence of the two Anabaptist leaders (who both appear in Q as characters) who were executed there.



The novel's historical events are not limited to a single town, region, or even country, but span countries, continents, languages, social classes, outlook (from optimistic to pessimistic), and goals (from lofty and idealistic to self-serving and base). The novel's protagonist takes part in documented historical events, from popular uprisings in Germany, to the distribution of banned books in the Veneto region, to the importing of coffee to Italy from the Near East where the novel concludes. The novel begins with the ideological struggles of the lower classes, and although those ideals are never abandoned throughout the course of the novel, its driving plotline becomes more centered on the financial gain and means to support those ideological struggles, and ends with a nod to the economics of importing material goods. In a sense, this change in intent segues in a metaliterary sense toward some of the less philosophical and more lowbrow topics of 54 (which was released just two years after Q): namely, matinee idols and famous gangsters. Q more than 54 reflects the conventional side of historical novels like Il nome della rosa in that it displays the philosophy behind a popular ideology, and it is clearly well researched. Much research went into the production of 54 as well, but many of its multiple subjects, at first glance, do not seem to hold as much historical "sway" as do those of Q.

54 can also be considered an historical novel, but many of the events it recounts do not resonate as "historical," but "popular": Cary Grant's decision to not make movies anymore, or Lucky Luciano's foray into the heroin trade in Naples, for example. These are events that can be documented by various sources, but taken individually do not impact the greater meaning of twentieth-century thought, as did the posting of Luther's

theses for sixteenth-century Europe. The goal of 54 is not to trace a single religious ideology (like the ideas of Luther, the beliefs of the masses, Anabaptism, the Counter Reformation), but to examine how random events can be linked to one another. Although Q has two narrators and several different narrative styles (that I will address shortly), 54 follows at least a dozen characters—one of whom is a pigeon—and their respective points of view. Some of the disparate plotlines and major themes of 54 include post-World War II reconstruction and discontentment in Italy, Lucky Luciano's drug trade in Naples, Russian spies and politics of the Cold War, and the movie star Cary Grant. Essentially, Q is about fighting for a popular cause; the more "historically"-based episodes in 54 are about *remembering* fighting for a cause (the resistance during WWII). I claim that Q displays the materialization of History as theorists such as Lukàcs and Jameson would have it (based on of the emergence of the middle classes),<sup>229</sup> and 54 mocks the process of history in mixing its various "genres," and in doing so, presents a possible end to the kind of History that was so vital to the genre of the historical novel and to the field of history as a discipline at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

### **Narrative**

The narrative structure and styles of 54 and Q resemble one another at first glance, but upon further examination represent two very diverse threads of nineteenth-century attempts at verisimilitude and twentieth-century historiographic metafiction, which often presents elements of fact and fiction in the same light. Many chapters of

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<sup>229</sup> This is illustrated in a sense through the main character's rise to the merchant class.

both novels begin with a time and place to orient the reader, and those in 54 often give a more detailed, brief summary of what will be narrated in that chapter, not unlike the introductions to the chapters in Nievo's Le confessioni d'un italiano. Both novels utilize first person narrative, although 54 also incorporates second and third person narratives, and while Q concentrates on two main characters, 54 follows multiple points of view (including those of Pierre, Cary Grant, Steve "Cement" Zollo, Lucky Luciano, a homing pigeon), switching seemingly at random between them. The events in Q are related in a staid and straightforward manner; the narrative of 54 ranges from somber description and dialogue to ludicrous slapstick. The trajectory of Q's narrative follows the life and adventures of one man—not unlike the *bildungsroman* structure of Nievo's Confessioni—but leaves its conclusion (and the life of its protagonist) open-ended, its protagonist ready to embark on a new adventure. In 54, random and chance encounters abound, and will be linked to one another, as most elements of the narrative are tied up and "resolved" at the novel's conclusion, if only in a preposterous, deus-ex-machina fashion. Both novels end with extradiegetic information related to their respective storylines: Q offers bibliographic information on the more famous of its characters, and 54 reproduces many illustrations and photographs of places and people depicted in its events, all of which are commented upon at length by the novels' authors (*not* their narrators). The beginnings of these novels also appear to be similar, but upon deeper textual analysis prove to be quite different.

Both novels begin with a short mini-chapter: Q's, however, is clearly labeled "prologo," and offers an historical introduction and background (names, dates and

events) to the events that the reader will soon read, as well as the reason why the narrator is going to tell his story (because he promised he would). At the prologue's conclusion, he writes: "Un punto di origine. Memorie che ricompongono i frammenti di un'epoca. La mia. E quella del mio nemico: Q."<sup>230</sup> The narrator offers a few snippets to the reader before the narrative proper begins, giving him a point of reference (time, date, place, and intent) for the novel. 54, on the other hand, begins thus: "Non c'è nessun "dopoguerra". Gli stolti chiamavano "pace" il semplice allontanarsi del fronte...gli scontri proseguivano...il Cielo pieno d'acciaio e fumi, intere culture estirpate dalla Terra...Difendevano un simulacro di pianeta."<sup>231</sup> The section of narrative that follows this passage is entitled "antefatti," but there is no heading for the initial page of text, partially reproduced above. It is unclear exactly who the passage is about, what sort of narrator appears, or where and when the events take place; the only certain element appears to be war. Only in the following section ("Antefatti") does it become clear that the narrative is set during World War II, as the title of the chapter is "Fronte jugoslavo, primavera 1943." What the first part of this chapter entails, however, is not a narrative of events, but a reproduction of a Slovenian communist manifesto, addressed to fascist Italian soldiers. The rest of the section entitled "Antefatti" includes a narrative about Italian soldiers turning against their fascist commanding officer in Yugoslavia during World War II, another about a rally in Trieste in 1953, and a confusing, brief narrative of a heroin user. The disparate passages do reflect several of the main themes of the novel,

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<sup>230</sup> Blissett VIII.

<sup>231</sup> Ming 3.

although they are not presented as such, but as random bits of narrative. The only concrete information the reader is offered is a general time frame (World War II and the postwar period), although even that is rendered questionable by the novel's very first printed words ("Non c'è nessun <<dopoguerra>>"). In fact, what does inexorably unite the events of the novel is not cited within the text, but in the title of the novel itself: the narrative proper of 54 takes place entirely within the year 1954 (excluding the "Antefatti" and "Coda").

After the bipart prologue to Q,<sup>232</sup> its narrative proper begins confusingly in medias res, during the violent mercenary repression of Müntzer's followers in Frankenhausen:

Quasi alla cieca.

Quello che devo fare.

Urla nelle orecchie già sfondate dai cannoni, corpi che mi urtano. Polvere di sangue e sudore chiude la gola, la tosse mi squarcia.

Gli sguardi dei fuggiaschi: terrore. Teste fasciate, arti maciullati... Mi volto continuamente: Elias è dietro di me. Si fa largo tra la folla, enorme. Porta sulle spalle Magister Thomas, inerte.

Dov'è Dio onnipresente? Il Suo gregge è al macello.

Quello che devo fare. Le sacche, strette. Senza fermarsi. La daga batte sul fianco.

Elias sempre dietro.

Una sagoma confusa mi corre incontro. Mezza faccia coperta di bende, carne straziata. Una donna. Ci riconosce. Quello che devo fare: il Magister non deve essere scoperto. La afferro: non parlare. Grida alle mie spalle: --Soldati! Soldati!

La allontano, via, mettersi in salvo. Un vicolo a destra. Di corsa, Elias dietro, a capofitto. Quello che devo fare: i portoni. Il primo, il secondo, il terzo, si apre. Dentro.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> The first part of the prologue is described above, while the second part of the prologue contains letters written by the novel's antagonist to his employer.

<sup>233</sup> Luther Blissett, Q (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), 5.

The first person, present tense narration lends a sense of immediacy to its events, which are magnified by the mayhem the narrative is clearly depicting. Truncated sentences reduce conveyance of information to a bare minimum; at the same time, the phrase “Quello che devo fare” is repeated four times, which suggests immediate intent and determination of the protagonist (as well as perhaps alluding to the four distinct parts of the novel in a metaliterary way). Although the passage I have cited is brief, many elements and themes that permeate the novel emerge here: physical combat and threat, a sense of camaraderie, religious beliefs, violence, a threatened or ill figurehead who needs to be protected. Whereas 54 presented its various themes in its “Antefatti” with separate narrative threads spanning several pages, Q’s diverse themes are united in one brief narrative account.

In the first pages of the story proper, Blissett combines repetition with multiple themes, unveiling a pattern that will be revealed throughout the novel: on at least three occasions the protagonist aligns himself with a subversive religious group, which inevitably leads to violent persecution and salvation through escape. The reader cannot, however, reduce the novel’s distinct episodes as variations on a theme. Instead, each episode presents new aspects and quandaries that celebrate and accentuate its own uniqueness. This repetition of episodes is related to my earlier arguments regarding multiplicity, but whereas in chapter 2 I discussed differing points of view and how they are presented as having the same value at the same time, here I underline how the same protagonist experiences a similar situation three different times with differing results. We see the same point of view—that of the protagonist—every time, but the character

has developed in between the episodes, using knowledge of previous experiences to avoid mistakes in subsequent events, and thus his perspective has changed. Instead of seeing multiple points of view from the same point in time regarding one event, we witness multiple points of view from different points in time regarding similar events. The protagonist does not usually narrate in retrospect from one fixed point in time, like Nievo's *Carlino* (whose narrated self eventually catches up to his narrating self), but from the present tense, so we experience his revelations contemporaneously with him.

Because of this, only after the initial rebellion in *Q* has been repressed does the reader get a clearer picture of what has happened already when the novel begins, and who the narrative is about, as the protagonist then is able to bring his reader up to speed by recounting his recent memories of his journey with Müntzer (the 'Magister' of the citation above), and also those not so recent which detail Martin Luther's rise in popularity, leading to the mass movements and reactionary rebellions (including that of Müntzer) that came out of his ideas:

Città di merda, Wittenberg. Miserabile povera, fangosa. Un clima isalubre e aspro, senza vigneti né frutteti, una birreria fumosa e gelata. Che cosa c'è a Wittenberg, se togli il castello, la chiesa e l'università? Vicoli sudici, strade piene di mota, una popolazione barbara di commercianti di birra e di rigattieri.

Siedo nel cortile dell'università con questi pensieri che affollano la testa, mangiando un bretzel appena sfornato. Lo rigiro tra le mani per raffreddarlo mentre osservo il bivacco studentesco che connota quest'ora della giornata. Focacce e zuppe, i colleghi approfittano del sole tiepido e pranzano all'aperto in attesa della prossima lezione. Accenti diversi, molti di noi vengono dai principati vicini, ma anche dall'Olanda, dalla Danimarca, dalla Svezia: rampolli di mezzo mondo accorrono qui per ascoltare la viva voce del Maestro. Martin Lutero, la sua fama è volata sulle ali del vento, anzi sui torchi degli stampatori che hanno

reso famoso questo posto, fino a un paio d'anni fa dimenticato da Dio e dagli uomini.<sup>234</sup>

Like the previously cited passage, this one also begins with truncated sentences, and is expressed in the present tense. Unlike the first passage, which appears to recount tumultuous events as they are happening, the second is largely description, from the point of view of someone who is also part of the scene described. The reader understands that the narrator's point of view influences his somewhat negative description of the university city of Wittenberg, just after Martin Luther has rendered it famous; he also foreshadows the outcome of his own beliefs. In juxtaposition with the previous passage, this one immediately gives the reader references to a physical place (Wittenberg), a setting (academia), and a specific time period (soon after Martin Luther posted his theses). We the readers are receiving our information in reverse order in these two passages that depict two very diverse types of narrative. At the same time, we can see the narrator's style emerge as a particular voice in both passages.

In a passage that occurs chronologically eight months after the quashed rebellion, the narrator describes his memories of the rebellion before its demise:

Mi appare nitido come una delle incisioni di quel grande artista delle nostre regioni, per sorte non sempre rozze dei gusti, a volte addirittura intrise di soavi abilità. Sembrava scoppiare dentro la stretta delle mura. Le case e le guglie delle chiese si ergevano una sull'altra come grappoli di funghi su un tronco d'albero.

Certo, così potrei dire del ricordo del primo ingresso a Mühlhausen: quattro cavalli lacianti dalle nostre urla di stupida celia, sul sentiero a un paio di miglia dalle mura del borgo imperiale, la risata tonante di Elias e i rimbrotti al vento di Otilie. Poi al passo, quasi marziali, in prossimità del gigantesco portale, a darsi

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<sup>234</sup> Blissett 29.



un contegno di autorità non investite, ma non meno importanti, con lo sguardo fiero, diritto, in quella mattina rovente di mezzo agosto.<sup>235</sup>

Although the subheading that introduces this chapter is entitled “Eltersdort, gennaio 1526,” what immediately precedes the citation above consists mostly of the narrator’s memories of a more hopeful time with Müntzer, before the latter’s death. The first paragraph, although describing the art of Albrecht Dürer, also seems to describe the different styles of narration of the narrator himself: “Sembrava scoppiare dentro la stretta delle mura” although referring to Dürer, can also apply to the immediacy of the first cited passage above, whereas the “soave ability” attributed to the painter could very well allude to the detailed description of the second cited passage, as well as the second half of the third passage that follows it: “Certo, così potrei dire del ricordo...” introduces the second paragraph as a clear (“nitido”) “painting” as his narration as well becomes more and more painterly and descriptive, and less manic and rushed. In these three passages the narration has proceeded from chaotic and somewhat muddled, to clear description of time and place, to nostalgic and self-aware, describing itself as artistic.

In fact, the three different kinds of narration I have cited resemble many varieties of the artistic process that begins crudely or simply in its primitive stages—like drafts of a manuscript or the initial phases of a painting or sculpture—and through revisions becomes more refined. Instead of disguising the artistic process and reproducing only the refined end product to the reader, the authors have laid bare the artistic process in the

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<sup>235</sup> Blissett 68-69.

very modes of its narration, much as Nievo did in revealing Carlino's narrative strategies in Le confessioni d'un italiano.

These different types of narration make it difficult for the reader to follow the novel's convoluted chronology, as in the first part of the novel there are at least three distinct periods represented (the narrator's studies at Wittenberg, the rise and fall of the Peasants' Rebellion, and the narrator's time recuperating afterwards), out of chronological order. The other historical novels I analyze in this dissertation follow a more chronological structure, although Banti plays with the effects of bleeding together the separate worlds of the narrated and the narrator-author in Artemisia. Whereas the narrator-author's manifestations in Artemisia appear with no warning and dissolve just as quickly, narrative jumps between time periods in Q are usually marked by the date and place that precedes the chapter or section, an extradiegetic and necessary clue without which the reader would feel lost and find the narrative difficult to follow.

The chapters narrated by the protagonist are intercut throughout the novel at seemingly random intervals with chapters consisting of formal letters sent from the titular "Q" or (Qoèlet) to his employer, Giovanni Pietro Carafa.<sup>236</sup> Q's letters are always marked by the date and place from which they are sent, as well as the city or town to which they are sent, giving the reader physical and temporal bearing. Q often informs his employer of his movements and discoveries, as in this first letter that is reproduced for the reader:

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<sup>236</sup> The historical Carafa became pope in 1555 with the name Pope Paul IV. He was known as the Father of the Roman Inquisition. Qoèlet is another name for the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, which explores the debate between good and evil.

All'illustrissimo e reverendissimo signore e padrone osservandissimo Giovanni Pietro Carafa, presso la consulta teologica di Sua Santità Leone X, in Roma.

Illustrissimo e reverendissimo signore e padrone mio osservandissimo, il servitore piú fidato di Vostra Signoria si accinge a dare conto di quanto accade in questa sperduta landa, che da un anno a questa parte sembra esser divenuta il focolaio d'ogni diatriba.

Da quando otto mesi fa il Monaco agostiniano Martin Lutero ha affisso le sue famigerate tesi al portale della Cattedrale, il nome di Wittenberg ha viaggiato in lungo e in largo sulla bocca di tutti. Giovani studenti dagli stati limitrofi affluiscono in questa città per ascoltare dalla viva voce del predicatore quelle incredibili teorie.<sup>237</sup>

Q's letters represent part of the same general plotline of the novel as the narrative of its protagonist. The narrative style of these letters, however, is entirely different than that of the protagonist: Q writes formal letters, sent from an employee expressing exponential amounts of reverence, necessary protocol that displays the nature of their relationship. Q is obviously conforming to epistolary expectations: the letter begins with an extended opening and a salutation that repeats much of its opening, before any new information is conveyed. We comprehend that Q is relating information received at roughly the same time and place that the narrator does in the second citation I quoted above, and we as readers become aware of yet another narrative technique that sews us into the story. We realize that we receive the same information through two different narrators and several different narrative styles. Rather than presenting a single, omniscient narrator (as Manzoni, Nievo, Vassalli, and Guerrazzi do), or a narrative in which the temporally separated narrator and subject work as a team to recreate the latter's story (as Banti does), Blissett allows the same information to be relayed by "competing" narrators, an idea that

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<sup>237</sup> Blissett XI.

I will explore further later in this chapter. In a sense, Q and his adversary represent two versions of the same story, illustrating Hutcheon's idea of multiple truths.

The rest of Q's letter relays information regarding popular sentiment, and subsequent letters will recount the machinations that result in the repression of the popular uprisings with which the protagonist is involved:

All'illustrissimo e reverendissimo signore Giovanni Pietro Carafa, in Roma.

Signore mio onorandissimo, è con grande soddisfazione che scrivo per dare la lieta notizia: gli ordini di Vostra Signoria sono stati eseguiti il più rapidamente possibile e hanno ottenuto il risultato sperato.

Avrete forse già avuto nuove dalla terra di Germania e saprete che l'esercito dei contadini insorti è stato sconfitto. Mentre vergo queste righe i mercenari dei principi si accingono a debellare gli ultimi fuochi della più grande rivolta che queste lande abbiano mai conosciuto.

La città ribelle più fortificata, che è stata l'epicentro dell'incendio, Mühlhausen, si è arresa già da alcuni giorni all'esercito dei principi e la testa del suo capopopolo...insieme a quella di Thomas Müntzer. Le voci riportano che nelle sue ultime ore il predicatore, sottoposto alla tortura, abbia taciuto senza un lamento in attesa del boia e che solo una volta, nell'ultimo istante di vita, abbia fatto risuonare la voce per la quale si è reso famoso presso il volgo: "Omnia sunt communia", dicono sia stato il suo unico grido, lo stesso motto che ha animato il furore popolare di questi mesi.

...confesserò di aver dovuto agire assai precipitosamente, rischiando finanche di mettere a repentaglio i mesi di lavoro e di sforzi concentrati nel tentativo di procurarmi la fiducia del focoso predicatore dei contadini. Solo grazie a tale precedente tessitura...è stato possibile accelerare la rovina di Müntzer. L'avergli offerto i miei servizi e informazioni sugli intrighi di Wittenberg ha consentito di guadagnarne la fede e di potergli passare le false notizie che lo hanno spronato allo scontro campale.<sup>238</sup>

A manifest difference from Q's first letter is that the opening is much shorter, which could signal a more cordial relationship between Q and Carafa (several years have passed between the two letters), or a sense of immediacy in Q's desire to convey his information

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<sup>238</sup> Blissett 123-24.

regarding Müntzer's death, and his place in that plot. In this letter we hear from Q of his "infiltration" into Müntzer's plans. None of this is new information for the reader, as Q's letter to Müntzer containing false advice was already reproduced as part of the narrative,<sup>239</sup> but it is summarized for us in a more orderly fashion, also reminding us of Müntzer's credo ("omnia sunt communia") and how he died, and other key players in his group. This information is also revealed to us from a different point of view—from that of the narrator's enemy. With the addition of this letter we see another example of a palimpsest story, as here the reader has now read two possible interpretations of the story: that of the protagonist and that of the antagonist. It is the same story—that of Müntzer's death—but the two versions present different points of view and details, offering the reader more information than if she had just one of the two versions.

Q, of course, writes in the first person in his letters and diary, as does the protagonist in the other parts of the novel. Thus, the novel actually has two narrators, who narrate entirely in the first person. This is not unlike some of the other novels I have discussed, but whereas multiple narrators in other novels generally write from different time periods, creating a temporal dislocation—for example, Eco's contemporary narrator who speaks from the twentieth century and Adso who writes in the Middle Ages—Blissett's two narrators speak from the same time period, as they co-exist temporally. The two general types of the novel's narration represented by the principal character's narration and Q's letters to Carafa comprise most of the novel's style until two thirds through the novel. The reader is allowed a glimpse at a more personal facet of the

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<sup>239</sup> Blissett 108-9.

narrator's antagonist when several of Q's diary entries appear as chapters. The first diary entry contains the following information:

*Sul Beneficio di Cristo*

Sono quasi due anni che il libro è stato stampato...

*Sul Concilio*

29 giugno 1542: pubblicata la bolla papale di convocazione del Concilio ecumenico...

*Su Carafa...*

...Padrone mio e Monaco, maestro di simulazione e dissimulazione, da genia nata per comandare, vescovo prima e poi povero teatino per voto. Nemico dell'Imperatore, che tenne infante sulle ginocchia, già disprezzandolo...<sup>240</sup>

Q writes down what appear to be his notes and general ideas about his employer Carafa, a Papal Council, and the distribution of a heretical book: the last two events of which are integral to the novel's denouement. In effect, what the authors are accomplishing here—via the ruminations of one of their principal characters—is another brief summary for the reader of what is happening in the novel, reminding us of important dates, places, and character traits, in what White would call chronicle form. As I discussed in chapter 2, White delineates three types of historical discourse. While the annal represents seemingly random events and facts in list form, and historical narrative gives ideological meaning to the story it relates (and necessarily concludes), the chronicle lies in between, “marked by a failure to achieve narrative closure. It does not so much conclude as simply terminate. It starts out to tell a story but breaks off *in medias res*, in the chronicler's own present; it leaves things unresolved...in a storylike way.”<sup>241</sup> Q's narrative, especially his diaries, represent elements of chronicle and annal forms, while

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<sup>240</sup> Blissett 423-24.

<sup>241</sup> White 5.

the protagonist's narrative attempts White's third category: historical narrative. The protagonist's story has meaning because it concludes; Q's letters and diaries, like his life, simply terminate suddenly.

At the same time, the annal entries in Q's diary serve another narrative function: surrounding and perhaps disguising the expository intent of his recapitulation—distracting the reader from the “facts” she is being fed—the diary entry just cited begins and ends with references to its author Q as part of history:

Nell'affresco sono una delle figure di sfondo.

Al centro campeggiano il Papa, l'Imperatore, i cardinali e i principi d'Europa.

Ai margini, gli agenti discreti e invisibili, che fanno capolino dietro le tiare e le corone, ma che in realtà reggono l'intera geometria del quadro, lo riempiono e, senza lasciarsi scorgere, consentono a quelle teste di occuparne il centro.

Con tale immagine nella mente mi risolvo a tenere questi appunti...

Pro memoria: capire, annotare, non tralasciare dettagli in apparenza irrilevanti, che potrebbero risultare chiavi di volta di un'intera strategia...

.....  
*Su di me*  
 L'occhio di Carafa.<sup>242</sup>

His first diary entry reproduced in the novel begins rather abruptly, describing a fresco in which he himself appears. In theme, the passage resembles that of the protagonist describing one of Dürer's paintings. The style and content of the two passages and the paintings described within those passages are quite diverse. Whereas Dürer's painting depicts a landscape, the fresco that Q describes depicts world-historical figures: popes, emperors, cardinals, and princes. Dürer's painting includes no people, but he himself is

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<sup>242</sup> Blissett 422-24.

famous; the content of the fresco that Q describes is historically relevant, but Q never mentions its artist. The protagonist creates an analogy between Dürer's painting and his memories of entering the city of Mühlhausen for the first time, while Q analyzes the fresco's arrangement of the figures—both central and marginal. Both narrators and their passages are inspired by works of art, yet Q derives the structure of his diaries and his work as Carafa's spy from the structure that he sees in the fresco. He sees himself in the margins of the painting, but also acknowledges his importance as a figure who "regge l'intera geometria" of the fresco; he is a structural necessity of its central figures (geometrically/artistically and figuratively). Q is a unique figure in the trajectory of the historical novel because he is intelligent enough to recognize that he himself will not be a remembered part of History's process, but he does know that he is an integral part of that process. He shows a painting to his reader and then analyzes its composition in Lukàcsian terms. He closes his first diary entry by mixing its two distinct parts: he lists himself ("Su di me") among the other relevant people and events to make note of, but he then defines himself in terms of how he is useful to one of the major players in History (Carafa).

The four different types of narration I have presented here represent four very different styles of writing: the present tense entries of the protagonist depict propinquity and confusion while his recounted memories are ordered and logical; Q's letters to Carafa are formal and carefully constructed while his diaries lay bare their author's malicious intent and are presented in scraps and pieces, jetsam of Q's mind, and in their terseness they are not altogether dissimilar from the some of the present tense narration of the



protagonist. At times one narrator repeats information already conveyed to the reader by the other narrator, which does two things: it depicts them as a doubled, co-temporal narrator figure (which is a unique occurrence among all of the novels I've examined thus far),<sup>243</sup> but they also present two different points of view of the same events, which create a palimpsest story.

The narrative device of Q's letters gives the reader both an inside glimpse at the "other side" of the story already told as well as a sense of incompleteness, as Carafa's responses are not included in the narrative, and thus we are able to read only half the exchange between lord and spy; we as readers must fill in the blanks. Q's letters to Carafa serve as one layer of the palimpsest (hi)story of the protagonist that is recreated throughout the narrative. Carafa's missing letters represent yet another possible part of the palimpsest story; they simply do not appear in this version of it. Q's letters to Carafa are mirrored in other parts of the narrative by letters written to Müntzer from his supporters, as we never read Müntzer's responses to these letters. Also, while Q's letters to Carafa chronologically follow the plotline of the novel, the letters written to Müntzer are inserted into the narrative months and years after their original receipt. At the same time, these letters have a diegetic place in the narrative, while Q's letters do not. Q's letters seem to appear at random times, and on a superficial level function as plot summary.

The letters to Müntzer offer missing information regarding past events, and also function as a mental trigger for the protagonist. To comfort himself years after Müntzer's

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<sup>243</sup> I will address this in greater detail later in the chapter.

demise, the protagonist occasionally reads these letters of praise addressed to Müntzer which are reproduced in the narrative of the novel;<sup>244</sup> reading these letters and the names of their senders (groups of peasants, lords, and even Q) triggers memories of what role those people played in the uprisings, which the protagonist then recounts. These letters have an altogether different function than those from Q to Carafa. Most of the letters to Müntzer proclaim support and/or thanks, but among the letters of praise to their recipient are also several letters from Q to Müntzer, letters that progress from falsely ascertaining Q as a supporter of Müntzer and his cause, to containing false information and bad advice that will eventually lead to the addressee's capture and execution. The first letter establishes Q as a potential ally to Müntzer's cause:

A messer Thomas Müntzer de Quedlinburg, dottore eminentissimo, pastore della città di Allstedt.

La benedizione di Dio innanzi tutto, a colui che porta la parola del Signore agli umili e impugna la spada di Gedeone, contro l'empietà che ci circonda. Quindi il saluto di un fratello che ha potuto ascoltare dalla viva voce l'orazione del Maestro, senza poter abbandonare la prigione di codici e pergamene in cui la sorte lo ha confinato...

Ecco, per ciò che Vi rigurada dico di star saldo e non perderVi mai d'animo; quanto a me, da questo mio avamposto, nei tempi a venire avrò cura di trasmetterVi ogni notizia che possa tornare a maggior Gloria di Dio.<sup>245</sup>

The tone of Q's first letter to Müntzer is one of reverence, not unlike that in the letters he writes to Carafa; Q expresses his admiration for Müntzer, and offers himself as a useful font of information, while stressing the fact that he is confined to help Müntzer's cause on paper only ("codici e pergamene"), that is, through lettered communication, and not in person. This allows Q to remain physically anonymous to Müntzer and his followers

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<sup>244</sup> Blissett 24-25, 53-54, 61-62, and 102-9.

<sup>245</sup> Blissett 53-54.

while offering the fruits of his physical proximity to those with information, which is disclosed in the next letter he sends to Müntzer. In this second letter—supposedly received too late by accident, most certainly sent too late on purpose—Q attempts to build trust in Müntzer by offering his services as an informant and repeating his feelings of admiration:

...Già ho avuto modo di illustrarVi come le mie orecchie avrebbero potuto aiutarVi, data la loro prossimità a certe porte che celano intrighi. Ebbene non so dire cosa sia piú forte in me, se la gioia di poterVi essere finalmente utile, dopo molti mesi dalla mia prima missiva, oppure l'ansia e lo sdegno per ciò che contro di Voi si sta macchinando.<sup>246</sup>

Q continues to inform Müntzer of what certain officials will offer him, and how those officials will act, and he even lends his seemingly prudent and timely advice: “Zeiss sarà la Vostra Dalila, e stringe già le forbici tra le mani. Lo ripeto: non lasciate Allstedt.”<sup>247</sup>

The protagonist comments on the letter: “Certo è che questa missiva rivelava in anticipo ciò che sarebbe successo. Colui che vergava queste righe era davvero vicino alle stanze dei principi.”<sup>248</sup> In this letter we see how the narrative function of the two narrators has switched: now it is Q whose language is not necessarily easy to follow (like that of the protagonist when he recounts battles as they happen), and the protagonist who summarizes in very simple and succinct terms the substance of Q’s first two letters, as Q had summarized many of the novel’s events in his letters to Carafa. After having built trust in Müntzer’s group, as expressed by his follower the protagonist, Q sends a third letter which contains false information that will eventually lead to the latter’s demise.

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<sup>246</sup> Blissett 61.

<sup>247</sup> Blissett 62.

<sup>248</sup> Blissett 62.

This final letter encourages Müntzer to take physical action against his enemies, claiming that the princes against whom he is fighting are disorganized. This false advice leads to Müntzer's capture, torture, and execution. Reading this letter for the first time two years after the fact, the protagonist realizes that there was a conspiracy led by the powers that be, and that it was through no fault of their own that their uprising failed: "Qoèlet. La terza missiva di un informatore prodigo di dettagli riservati a pochi, come per la vicenda di Weimar. Missive importanti, che avevano conquistato la fiducia del Magister. Mi riecheggia nella testa quella decisiva discussione, Magister Thomas che brandiva la lettera...quella lettera."<sup>249</sup> The reproduction of Q's last letter to Müntzer is followed by a conversation that recounts Müntzer's decision to push forward, based on advice contained in Q's letter. The epistolary denouement revealing Q as the enemy looses no venomous resentment in the protagonist, even though years have passed since the initial betrayal. In fact, the apparent chronological retardation of the protagonist's revelation appears to build narrative tension, and it is the form of the letter as a container of information that allows this narrative suspense. We the readers already know that Q is not working for Müntzer, but for his enemy, Carafa; waiting for the moment in which we see this information revealed to the protagonist sews us deeper into the story, as we feel as though we are in a superior position (knowing something the protagonist does not). The fact that we do know more than the protagonist owes much to the form in which the information is held and eventually conveyed: letters.

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<sup>249</sup> Blissett 109.

On a narratological level the letters function in many ways: as a link between the martyred Müntzer and his disciple, as a springboard for the protagonist's background narratives, but also as the catalyst for the protagonist's plan of revenge. The information contained in the letters is clearly a narrative device to further the plot, but collectively the sack of letters is also a mysterious physical object that appears at key moments in the narrative as a useful tool.<sup>250</sup>

### **Narrative Device: the McGuffin**

The idea of this kind of metamorphic narrative device has cinematic roots; scholar Slavoj Žižek explains the narrative device used in many of Alfred Hitchcock's films, the McGuffin:

First, then, the McGuffin itself, 'nothing at all', an empty place, a pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion... It is a pure semblance: in itself it is totally indifferent and, by structural necessity, absent; its signification is purely auto-reflexive, it consists in the fact that it has some signification for others, for the principal characters of the story, that is of vital importance to them... The McGuffin is clearly the objet petit a, a gap in the center of the symbolic order—the lack, the void of the Real setting in motion the symbolic movement of interpretation, a pure semblance of the Mystery to be explained, interpreted.<sup>251</sup>

The argument I advance here is that the McGuffin in Q begins as the sack of letters that the protagonist saves from destruction, and ends with identity (of both the protagonist and Q), and that both McGuffins change in order to continue playing the part of narrative device. In having a beginning, an ending, and an evolving middle, the McGuffins are a

<sup>250</sup> The protagonist initially saves two sacks of Müntzer's letters; in keeping with the idea of a palimpsest narrative, it already arrives to its function as partially missing.

<sup>251</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction: Alfred Hitchcock, or, The Form and its Historical Mediation," Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock), (London and New York: Verso, 1992) 6-8.

process, akin to that of the process of history itself. I claim that the illustration of the end of historicity is executed in Q and 54 through the figure of the Hitchcockian MacGuffin.<sup>252</sup>

To illustrate the McGuffin as a continuing process, it is necessary to examine Müntzer's letters: once Müntzer is killed, the sack of his letters first symbolizes the protagonist's link to his ideals. As soon as the information contained in the letters is revealed to the protagonist, its use value as narrative device to further the plot has been used up; indeed, its next appearance in the novel occurs when the protagonist uses it as a tool in a plan to steal someone else's identity: he uses it to distract his victim, claiming it is a bag of precious possessions, as he hits him over the head with a large stick and renders him immobile:

Libero la borsa dalla cintura e lo rotolo in un fosso. È fatta.

Taglio l'intrico di corde che assicura il carico e salgo a dare un'occhiata: tessuti, rotoli di varia foggia e colore. Povero bastardo, i tuoi affari sono rimandati. E anche i vestiti non ti serviranno per ora. Tantomeno il nome che leggo inciso sul lato del carro: <<Lucas Niemanson, tessitore in Bamberg>>.<sup>253</sup>

Just as the protagonist tricks his victim into believing that the sack of letters is something valuable to him, Blissett uses slight of hand to switch the form of the novel's narrative devices. In a sense, the novel's first McGuffin is used to pass the torch to its second. The sack of letters no longer holds information valuable to the protagonist: it has become useful, however, as a physical object in a deception to steal an identity, that of the weaver Niemanson. Thus the sack of letters is transformed from a container of useful

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<sup>252</sup> Although Alfred Hitchcock's MacGuffin is found primarily in film, it is clear that this narrative device can also be used in literature.

<sup>253</sup> Blissett 164.

information to empty object useful only as that. The identity of the protagonist (and later, that of Q) then assume the place of the previous McGuffin, as it is now what propels the novel's action: Q continues to search for his employer's enemy, as later the protagonist will seek out Q's alternate identity. Identity becomes the desired, sought object. The protagonist's assumed identities change frequently throughout the novel, but his true identity will remain unknown, and thus represents the Real, the "symbolic movement of interpretation" that propels the events of the novel.

McGuffins in *Q* are multiple and shifting; the McGuffin in *54* is more straightforward. The object around which many of the novel's stories revolve is an American luxury television, aptly named McGuffin.<sup>254</sup> The television never actually functions as such, since its main purpose within the story is as a hiding place for Lucky Luciano's heroin. Since its physical appearance leads people to believe it is indeed a luxury television, its apparent use value is of just that, and it changes hands as various petty thieves take it at face value. The various people who deem it worthless after they acquire it (a husband and wife allowing themselves a new pastime, a jealous wife being placated by a philandering husband, a neighborhood bar in Bologna that wants to increase business by being able to show soccer games) discard it as worthless. At the novel's conclusion, the McGuffin sits in a dump outside Bologna:

McGuffin aveva trasmesso cartoon di gatti che inseguivano topi.  
Il topo di nome <<Jerry>> viveva dietro il battiscopa di un tinello spazioso e ben arredato...Il gatto si chiamava <<Tom>>. Passava le sue giornate a inseguire <<Jerry>>.

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<sup>254</sup> In stressing the popular origin of the McGuffin, Alfred Hitchcock also appears as a character in the novel, but no overt connection between the filmmaker and the television set is made in the novel.

Topi e gatti si aggiravano intorno a McGuffin, in cima alla collina di rifiuti. Sovente, una gatta s'appisolava dentro McGuffin. Non somigliava a <<Tom>>.

Non avrebbe piú captato onde elettromagnetiche per trasformarle in sogni o incubi.

Nessuno l'avrebbe piú fissato con lo sguardo spento come i mozziconi di sigaretta che ora lo circondavano.

Tuttavia, McGuffin serviva a qualcosa. La gatta era incinta. Avrebbe partorito prima di Natale.

Era passato di casa in casa. Adesso era una casa. Qualcuno aveva davvero bisogno di lui, alla buon'ora.<sup>255</sup>

The authors have laid bare their narrative device in calling it by its extradiegetic name, and by pointing out its use value, its function, and how those things change throughout the novel. Real cats and mice “si aggiravano intorno a McGuffin,” much in the same way Hitchcock’s characters race around their cinematic McGuffins. At the same time, the difference between real and representation is highlighted in the cited passage above through the cartoon characters Tom and Jerry—whose stories the McGuffin television once transmitted—and the real cats and mice that now surround, and in one case, will live, inside the McGuffin. All the same, the television remains the sought after object of desire, whether it be as a television set or as a large shipment of heroin. Its use value as a cat’s home at the novel’s conclusion points out its empty meaning, and perhaps the empty meaning of the novel itself.

The McGuffin television, which is behind the impetus of much of the narrative events of 54, remains an empty container at the end of the novel, the embodiment of Žižek’s description of it as “an indifferent void.”<sup>256</sup> All the same, Blissett and Ming do not simply engage in the conventional idea of the McGuffin; whereas Hitchcock’s

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<sup>255</sup> Wu Ming 626-27.

<sup>256</sup> Žižek 7.



McGuffins were fixed throughout his films, Q's McGuffins are multiple and changing, and 54's McGuffin lays bare the novel's narrative device in calling it by name, and in revealing the McGuffin's emptiness it reveals its own emptiness. Toward the end of the novel the McGuffin television, having used up its use value as both a television set (before the narrative ever begins) and as hiding space for drugs, is literally abandoned, of no more use to the story. The television is at the same time a continuation of the McGuffins in Q and an indicator that the impetus behind the narrated events is not important (like the television set), but it is the story that counts (what happens to and around the television). This conveys the opposite intention of conventional historical novels like I promessi sposi and Le confessioni di un italiano, which build their story around ideals of Unification. There are no ideals in 54, just movie stars and drug dealers, indicators of an age empty in ideological purpose.

### **Delivery and Dissemination**

The fact that there is no underlying ideology that drives the narrative of 54 highlights both the end of historicity that permeates the last half of the twentieth century (54 displays all form with no content) and the fact that one of the main themes of Q is the distribution and dissemination of ideology and information on paper.

The events of the first and second parts of Q, in fact, largely occur due to information conveyed in paper form (as opposed to direct contact between characters), and printed information will be the driving force of the second half of the novel as well. The impetus that sets the events of the novel in motion is based on Martin Luther's

theses, which he posted on paper; the protagonist discovers the conspiracy against Müntzer by reading the latter's personal letters; and the ideals of the Peasant and Münster Rebellions are mass distributed on paper, with the help of the newly invented printing press. The Anabaptists in the third part of the novel are largely funded by falsified bank documents, and the storyline of the fourth part of the novel lies on distribution of a printed book. It also becomes evident, I believe, that the protagonist survives the oft-quashed popular movements precisely because he learns how to manipulate the situation at hand through printed matter. As I have already discussed at length the role of Müntzer's letters, I now turn to the role of disseminating ideas and the printing press.

Through the character development of the protagonist we also see development of his (and others') use of printed materials. Before joining the Anabaptist movements, the protagonist is a student, and his exposure to Martin Luther's ideas is through a relatively legitimate, academic channel: the posting of a scholar's theses. In the first two parts of the novel, the protagonist is part of underground movements, which distribute their ideology through developing the flyer form in:

...migliaia di fogli separate, di piccolo dimensioni, sui quali era riprodotta una versione brevissima del nostro programma...Avremmo potuto distribuirli liberamente, durante gli spostamenti tra campagne, borghi, contadi. Dopo una discussione non priva di momenti di ilarità, decidemmo di chiamarli *flugblatt* proprio per via di quella caratteristica di fogli singoli dalla forma ridotta, che potevano passare agevolmente di mano in mano, adatti alla gente umile, in una lingua semplice che molti avrebbero compreso direttamente o facendosene dare lettura da qualcuno.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Blissett 83.

Their targeted audience is the general public, but their delivery does not ensure that their message will be received, due not least in part to illiteracy. The protagonist's trajectory from a socially acceptable standing (that of student) to belonging to a subaltern group (the Anabaptists) is mirrored by the claimed authorship of the ideas being disseminated (that of the acclaimed Martin Luther as opposed to the "anonymously" authored flyers) and their mode of distribution (posted in a fixed place by a scholar as opposed to the random distribution by a group of misfits to the lower classes).

As the protagonist reacts to his experience of these failed revolts, his manipulation of printed matter also changes. Several years after taking part in the popular Anabaptist uprisings in Germany, he becomes involved in a conspiracy based in the Netherlands that is able to produce counterfeit bank documents that finance false shipping enterprises. The forgery of formal documents is mainly a means of making money, and less about his Anabaptist ideology, although the victims of this conspiracy are the bankers who financed the repression of the rebellions with which the protagonist was involved. Q is able to eventually link the protagonist's various identities, however, precisely (or ironically?) through the paper trail left by this enterprise.

In the last part of the novel, the protagonist blends together his previous two methods of manipulating a printed message in order to unite ideology and profit. He mixes ideology with business, making his third a successful operation, as opposed to those that were quashed and not connected to financial gain. This also links the activity of the last part of the novel with what will be the protagonist's trade after the novel's conclusion: economic gain through the international market.

Although Gutenberg's printing press, first developed in 1440's Germany, was initially used for ideological ends (to reproduce and widely disseminate the Bible), by 1545 in Venice—the setting of the last part of *Q*—it had been turned into a business for profit. As *Q* explains in a letter to Carafa: “Venezia gode di una particolare libertà riguardo alla stampa e al commercio di libri... Il mio signore sa bene quale arma pericolosa possa essere la stampa: senza di essa Lutero sarebbe ancora il docente della sconosciuta università di una piccola e fangosa città sassone.”<sup>258</sup> An adjacent point of view is proffered by one of the protagonist's future business partners, João Miquez, who, in attempting to convince him of the printing press' promising future, describes it as much more than a simple business venture: “La stampa è l'affare del momento. E non è importante solo per il profitto: veicola le idee, feconda le menti e, cosa non trascurabile, rafforza i rapporti tra gli uomini.”<sup>259</sup> Indeed, in these two passages we see opposing (or palimpsest) views on the outcome of what the printing press can accomplish: *Q* sees it as a dangerous weapon, whereas Miquez believes it has more humane capabilities. At the same time, both Miquez and *Q* understand that the press is a powerful instrument in terms of spreading ideas and accumulating profit.

The protagonist is now able to invest (financially and emotionally) in a more advanced form of ideological dissemination: instead of flyers distributed randomly, he has an entire book mass printed and distributed. The book (*Il Beneficio di Cristo*) has been condemned by the Church, as were the messages printed on the Münster and

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<sup>258</sup> Blissett 389-90.

<sup>259</sup> Blissett 459.

Müntzer flyers, but the message's incarnation in book form allows for a certain success in reception as well as permanency that the flyers did not.

The book *Il beneficio di Cristo* in *Q* functions somewhat like Aristotle's treatise on laughter in *Il nome della rosa*. Whereas both books are frowned upon by the Church (or those representing the Church) because of their content, they are also seen as objects in both novels: in *Il nome della rosa* it is the object of desire, there is just one copy, and it also functions as a murder weapon, as its pages contain a poison deadly to the touch; in *Q* it is a means of conveyance and it is multiple, although we as readers of the novel *Q* never are privy to the specific contents of *Il beneficio di Cristo*, just its general message.<sup>260</sup>

The idea of disseminating a message through printed matter, specifically books, is a question that, on a greater scale, concerns the reception of the historical novel as well as the ideals of its authors. When asked in an interview why they write about history, Blissett responded thus:

Perché è un grande serbatoio di vicende che aspettano solo di essere raccontate come Dio (non) comanda. La nostra *missione* è ripescare storie di conflitti, sottrarle alla narrazione dei vincitori, smontarne e ricostruirne l' epos, riproporle sotto un' altra luce. Scriviamo i romanzi che vorremmo leggere, lavorando sui coni d'ombra della Storia, su vicende mistificate o dimenticate. Ciò che conta, è mettere anni-luce tra noi e il romanzo storico "borghese" o ipercommerciale: vero protagonista della Storia (e delle storie) non è il Grande Personaggio (Ramses, Alexandros, Napoleon), bensì l' anonima folla dei comprimari e, dietro di essi, la brulicante "moltitudine", il reticolo di eventi, destini, movimenti, vicissitudini umane.<sup>261</sup>

<sup>260</sup> The idea of receiving a message through a book is a theme that is also addressed in *54* with the novel's character Cary Grant and Ian Fleming's James Bond novel *Casino Royale*. In keeping with the general "message" of *54*, however, the message received through Fleming's novel is tangential, and eventually misinterpreted.

<sup>261</sup> Loredana Lipperini, "Il suicidio di Luther Blissett," *La Repubblica* 7 March 2000: A1.

Here the newly revealed authors of Q echo Lukàcian sentiments about who the true protagonist of History is, but they also rail against more mainstream (or commercially successful?) examples of the historical novel, and include their own tastes and desires in explaining their “mission,” which is not dissimilar to that of Q’s protagonist.

We are able to see more of Blissett’s tactics regarding their particular brand of the historical novel through another of their protagonist’s business partners, Pietro, as he explains what sort of narrative is currently popular: “Insomma via, gli attacchi frontali, le dispute che spaccano il capello in quattro, le accuse, non piacciono piú a nessuno. La parola d’ordine adesso è *commistione*, capito?, *com-mi-stio-ne!* Quelle robe che ti lasciano col fiato sospeso, capito?, e fino alla fine non capisci se si tratta di un autore eretico o ortodosso.”<sup>262</sup> The parallels between the work that Pietro describes and the novel in which he exists begin with the idea of *commistione*, or, the mixing of styles. I have already explained earlier in this chapter how Q (and other historical novels before it, including Il nome della rosa and Le confessioni d’un italiano) have assimilated elements of other genres, and I believe that this mixing of styles is just one of the ways in which Q moves away from the more conventional examples of the historical novel that Pietro might well be describing at the beginning of the above citation.

The authors of Q and 54 contribute to the general argument regarding the nature of the historical novel also in interview format, in which they are able to plainly state their ideas:

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<sup>262</sup> Blissett 398.

We make use of historians' work, their research and their interpretations, but then we go on beyond the point at which they're constrained to stop. Testimonies, documents, and evidence are the insuperable limits for a historian beyond which he or she can do nothing but formulate hypotheses.

The novelist, however, can free his fantasy and build narratives in the spaces left empty by the lack of documentation. We have a golden rule: maintain a radical verisimilitude, that is, complete the historical record with plausible and coherent stories.<sup>263</sup>

Although the authors have claimed, through the invectives of their fictive spokesperson Pietro, to have surpassed the conventional template of the historical novel, they assume the conventional scholar's stance in explaining their own ideology in writing historical fiction and in clarifying the role of the novelist and the restrictions that those who write history face. At the end of his citation, Pietro's nod towards the reception of the figure of the author with regard to what he has produced can also be read as a reference to Luther Blissett's intent and metaliterary presence. I find it necessary to discuss once again the relationship between author and narrator, as the distinction in Q and 54 becomes blurred as it did in Banti's Artemisia, and Vassalli's La chimera.

### **Revelation and Re-veil-ation of author (narrator?)**

In order to best illustrate my argument, it is necessary to explain exactly who Luther Blissett and Wu Ming are. In their own words, then:

Luther Blissett was a multi-use collective alias adopted by hundreds of artists and activists all over Europe (and sometimes in South America) during the 1990s. We

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<sup>263</sup> Baird 255.

were part of that project, which ended in December 1999. Our debut novel *Q* was authored by “Luther Blissett”. The following books were Wu Ming’s work.<sup>264</sup>

The contingent of Luther Blissett made up of the four anonymous authors from Bologna was also responsible for various hoaxes that laid bare the questionable competence of the news media.<sup>265</sup> Their ability to keep their own “civilian” identities secret while at the same time being able to disseminate their ideas, create elaborate hoaxes, and publish a novel is due in part to their presence on the internet, and their talent in regards to this particular brand of 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology, with which they are able to mix more conventional media (novels and manifestoes, for example).<sup>266</sup> The immediate recognition offered by the internet certainly adds to their initial appeal, mystery, and widespread renown as a socio-literary-political figure, and potentially provides them with a significantly sized public outside literary circles. Their elaborately planned hoaxes, furthermore, foreshadow the intricate way in which their identities are finally revealed to the public: the novel *Q* is published in February of 2000; on March 6, 2000 the newspaper *La Repubblica* reveals the four identities behind the name Luther Blissett, giving them yet more recognition in the form of a well-planned and opportune publicity

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<sup>264</sup> Cited in Robert P. Baird, “Stories Are Not All Equal: An Interview With Wu Ming,” *Chicago Review* 52.2-3-4 (2006): 250.

<sup>265</sup> Several of their more well-known hoaxes involve the art world (Harry Kipper [January 1995], Loota the chimpanzee [June 1995], and Darko Maver [1998-99]) and Satanism (in Viterbo in 1997)

<sup>266</sup> See <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/> and <http://www.lutherblissett.net/>. Their latest novel, *Manituana* (2007), also has a cinematic movie trailer (although there are no current plans to adapt the novel into a film), available to watch online: <http://www.manituana.com/section/73>, mixing at least three media (literature, film, internet). *Manituana* is also available to download to read on iPods (in Italian only).



stunt.<sup>267</sup> Hence “Luther Blissett” is put to rest, but their ideals continue in its resurrection, Wu Ming, even though their true identities are now common knowledge:

The Wu Ming Foundation is a band of novelists, a small combo devoted to telling stories. Currently we are based in Italy. Our name means “Anonymous” in Chinese, although we are not anonymous ourselves. Our names aren’t secret, indeed, “Wu ming” may also mean “Five names” if you alter the way the first syllable is pronounced. However, we use five noms de plume composed by the name of the band plus a numeral, following the alphabetical order of our last names. The line-up is: Roberto Bui AKA Wu Ming 1, Giovanni Cattabriga AKA Wu Ming 2, Luca Di Meo AKA Wu Ming 3, Federico Guglielmi AKA Wu Ming 4, and Riccardo Pedrini AKA Wu Ming 5. The name of the band is meant as both a tribute to dissidents (“Wu Ming” is a common byline among Chinese citizens demanding democracy and freedom of speech) and as a refusal of the celebrity-making, glamorizing machine that turns authors into stars.<sup>268</sup>

Ideals of collectivity and sharing that began with the works of Luther Blissett continue with those of Wu Ming, while the collective author still rejects conventional ideas of “authority” and what that entails. Indeed, one of their repeatedly used emblems consists of five faceless figures side by side, all in the same posture. The emblem appears to erase individuality while at the same time emphasizing collectivity.



Remaining true to their collective values, the image is in the public domain, and anyone can use it for their own purposes (one of Luther Blissett’s emblems was identical,

<sup>267</sup> Lipperini A1.

<sup>268</sup> Baird 250.

but had only four faceless figures). In fact, the authors have licensed the content of their websites under a Creative Common License, which gives the public a surprising amount of legal rights concerning its content.<sup>269</sup> The various authors who are Wu Ming also publish singly using their Wu Ming monikers, often speak in public about their writing and philosophies, and support various musical projects inspired by their projects.<sup>270</sup>

The fact that Wu Ming (and Luther Blissett before them) are involved in many different media outlets and projects makes it difficult to define exactly what their public role is, as they are not known only as novelists, but also scam artists, political activists,<sup>271</sup> etc. In Q the protagonist is, like his authors and the genre to which he belongs, difficult to define. We as readers never know his true identity, but we become very familiar with his various identities of “unimportant” characters (that he has taken, been assigned, or stolen) that comprise the entirety of his being by the end of the novel. 54 boasts there are several “world-historical” people (Lucky Luciano, Cary Grant, Tito) among its protagonists, as well as entirely fictional characters, which is reminiscent of the collective author Wu Ming. “Luther Blissett” was an anonymous collective of four authors who, in the novel Q, depicted one protagonist who assumes many identities, although his true identity is never known. Wu Ming is a collective of 5 authors whose double identities (their given names, as well as their “Wu Ming” aliases) are known, who, in the novel 54,

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<sup>269</sup> “Except where stated otherwise, the content of this website is licensed under a Creative Commons License. You are free to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work. You are also free to make derivative works, under the following commandments: thou shalt give the original author credit; thou shalt not use this work for commercial purposes...”  
<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/englishmenu.htm>.

<sup>270</sup> Recent speaking engagements in the US include Middlebury College and MIT, both in spring 2008.

<sup>271</sup> Members of Luther Blissett were highly involved in the protests at the G8 summit in Genoa 2008.

depict many protagonists, some of whom are well-known world-historical characters and some of whom are effectively anonymous to the pages of History. Q and Blissett's protagonist know they are pawns or lesser players in History; they are self-aware, and able to point out their place in the larger picture.<sup>272</sup> Most of the characters in 54 are oblivious to anything but their own immediate situation, which reflects the waning awareness attributed to the postmodern period and the waning of historicity that falls into that period.

I have mentioned how the principal character in Q does not have an official, fixed identity, but rather he takes on a multitude of identities throughout the novel. As Renello points out: "Non si tratta insomma di un'assenza di identità ma di una costruzione di identità... Spinto da continue perdite di identità il protagonista ne costruisce diverse."<sup>273</sup> The protagonist changes his name and assumes a new identity (sometimes adopting that of someone else, sometimes stealing that of a dead person, sometimes invented altogether, or even assigned to him) with each different "chapter" of his life story, some of which are only alluded to briefly.<sup>274</sup> During the first part of the novel that recounts the Peasant's War, the reader has no reason to believe that the protagonist is using anything but his real name, yet we never read what that name is: he is never addressed directly by the other protagonists, although they are repeatedly called by name. While the narrator is

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<sup>272</sup> See Q's first diary entry, and his knowledge that he will be killed by agents of his own employer once he has carried out his last assignment and possesses too much information.

<sup>273</sup> Renello 352-53.

<sup>274</sup> The first time in the narrative that the protagonist has a name in the text it is given to him, but before and after that he assumes many different ones. Just to name a few of his identities and the pages on which they first appear: Lot (169), Gerrit (Gert from the Well) Boekbinder (175), Gustav Metzger (188), Lucas Niemanson, weaver in Banberg (180), Thomas Puel (192), husband of Melancholy, Hans Grüeb (431), and Ludwig Schaleidecker (493).

not intradiegetic, the narrative is in the first person, which, in addition to creating a feeling of proximity to its readers, also augments this anonymity, as the protagonist tends to highlight the importance of the Lukàcsian world-historical characters that appear in his story, while relegating himself to the background.<sup>275</sup>

The ease with which he adopts new names and then discards them stresses the fact that these names are, in fact, disposable. Perhaps a more useful way of analyzing his character is through what kind of role he plays within the narrative. In what I have identified as the first two parts of the novel (time spent with Müntzer and with the group in Münster), he is a disciple to charismatic leaders; in the third part of the novel (set in the Netherlands), he is a storyteller; and in the fourth part (set in Venice) he is a bordello owner masquerading as a prophet figure (or, perhaps, vice versa). His role and location constantly change, whereas Q's identity and role is fixed.

The protagonist's changing identity makes Q's task of finding him that much more complicated; conversely, the fact that Q's identity remains mostly static makes the protagonist's identifying him somewhat simpler. The protagonist only begins his search for the infiltrator (Q) towards the end of the novel, which balances out the intent of both characters; they are both searching for the identity and then location of one another, whereas initially Q was searching for the protagonist, who would disguise himself again and again. As I have said, the changing identities of the protagonist reflect the transitory role of identity as one of the novel's McGuffins; on a larger scale they also reflect the

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<sup>275</sup> The reader later sees that his antagonist does the exact same thing.

changing power relations between Q and the protagonist, and by extension, the rising importance of the unknown protagonists of History.

When the two characters finally come face to face, it is the protagonist who has the upper hand. Whereas throughout most of the novel the reader perceives Q to be in a position of higher authority and power, we understand at the novel's conclusion that he is continually in a subordinate position, first to Carafa, but also to the protagonist, for whom he fought when he successfully infiltrated the Münster uprisings as Heinrich Gresbeck, and then again when he realizes that his utility to Carafa is coming to an end and he will soon be "eliminated." Q in effect switches allegiance since he perceives that Carafa has used him as much as possible; Q knows far too much about the inner workings of the Church and those who are in charge of it: he possesses too much information. His change in loyalty is really a switch from one charismatic leader to another, although he had previously worked for the protagonist (who is now in Venice) in Münster. What I find essential here is the parallel between the protagonist's rise from humble origins and distributing flyers to Venetian gentleman/publisher and that of Luther Blissett from elaborate hoaxer to published author. Both the protagonist and Luther Blissett are able to accomplish this without a known identity; both the protagonist and "Luther Blissett" assume the identity of a famous person.

In *Q*, the protagonist repeats his actions, creating a cycle of history that repeats itself, but he plays different roles in each cycle. His first role is that of disciple—first for Müntzer, the "true" prophet, and then for the revolving door of "constructed" prophets in

Münster), and then he constructs himself as his own prophet. In order to distribute his message to the largest public possible, he assumes the name Tiziano to garner attention:

Un solo uomo si aggira tra i territori della Serenissima e il ferrarese ribattezzando la gente, lasciando trapelare il nome che ha scelto. Quando l’Inquisizione arriva, è già scomparso nel nulla, irpiombato nei meandri della storia che lo ha vomitato. È abbastanza ovvio: non si tratta di un pellegrinaggio, non lo si può inseguire. Solo singole puntate, a colpo sicuro, bettezza, lascia il proprio nome ben impresso nelle orecchie e scompare. Altrimenti perché scegliersi un nome così bizzarro e famoso?<sup>276</sup>

The protagonist’s assumption of the name of the Venetian painter who was so well known for his sensual depictions ironically clashes with his own spiritual message. This process is collapsed into one character and then reversed in 54, when “Cary Grant” regresses to his previous identity as Archie Leach while visiting his mother. Again, the authors of 54 complicate this process even further when they relate the scene in the second person, implicating that the reader is also involved in the switching of identities:

E ora...siete di nuovo due.

Due, perché sei tu, <<Mr. Grant>>, quello costretto a camuffarsi perché nessuno lo riconosca, ma sei tu, Archibald Alexander Leach, quello paradossalmente libero da camuffamenti, autorizzato a respirare, sei tu che...percorri le strade della tua città natale, in procinto di incontrare Elsie.

Vostra madre.

Elsie, che continua a chiamarvi <<Archie>>...

Poche ore dopo il commiato dalla vecchia madre, Cary—alloggiato sotto il nome di <<George Kaplan>> in un alberghetto di Swindon...<sup>277</sup>

Not only does the scene play with issues of narrativity and readership, but it also complicates the identity of the *reader* even further in changing from the singular familiar

<sup>276</sup> Blissett 525. The time period in which the protagonist spreads his word in the Veneto region is the same time period in which the painter Tiziano was prevalent in Venice.

<sup>277</sup> Ming 275-77.

“tu” form of address to the plural “voi” form. The passage concludes with yet another assigned identity, that of “George Kaplan,” that Cary Grant must assume in order to protect his “identity” as Cary Grant. “George Kaplan” is the name of the agent invented by the CIA and for whom Grant’s character is mistaken throughout the 1959 film North by Northwest, and is thus another empty plot device, another McGuffin, here borrowed from Hitchcock’s film and inserted into Blissett’s novel. It is, however, either a temporally misplaced McGuffin, as its appearance in the film occurs five years later than the events in Blissett’s novel, or a McGuffin taken from “Archie Leach’s” life and relocated to Hitchcock’s seminal film, in a sense, reversing Bloom’s idea of anxiety of influence.<sup>278</sup> Juggling three distinct identities creates confusion in the protagonist’s mind, as all of them appear to exist in different time periods (if they exist at all).

Archie Leach was the historical Cary Grant’s given name, and he naturally associates his pre-Hollywood life with his “first” identity. He becomes confused when returning to England to visit his mother and the two identities both appear to belong to him at the same point in time. The fact that “Cary Grant” must then assume a second “false identity”—that of “George Kaplan”—exacerbates the problem of identity, and allows for the protagonist to easily begin to identify with the character James Bond in the novel that he is reading, Casino Royale. Cary Grant’s identity as an actor, as someone who assumes other people’s identities, lends itself to his problems with identity and the passing of time, which occurs in another thread of the novel.

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<sup>278</sup> Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford UP, 1973).

The character Pierre is consumed by ideals of wartime Resistance, although he is not old enough to have actually fought in the Resistance as his father and brother did. He harbors a sense of nostalgia for a period of which he does not have direct experience.<sup>279</sup> For him, the Resistance is already a myth; for the rest of Italy that myth will continue to grow through the decades. Temporal dislocation as a principal characteristic of postwar Italy and problematic or mistaken identification are symptoms of what will become the much larger problem of waning historicity at the end of the twentieth century.

In conclusion, I have shown that Q displays the major achievements of the twentieth century historical novel, and 54 tells us that those achievements are irrelevant at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both novels display several traits of postmodern narrative (multiple narrators and storylines), yet they encompass many of the accomplishments of Italian narrative since Manzoni re-established the Italian novel at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Q successfully inserts itself into the canon of the Italian historical novel by adopting and then adapting narrative tactics frequently used in the genre, as many novels had done before it. 54 also adopts some of the same narrative tactics that Q does, but it mocks White's idea of historical narrative in its deus-ex-machina ending, forcing conclusions (and thus, meaning) for many of its major and minor characters. Since history is an ongoing process, the fact that all narrative threads and characters in 54 are assigned an ending demonstrates the false and constructed nature of that very ending. Q, on the other hand, has an open ending that alludes not only to a lucrative future for the protagonist, but to yet another beginning.

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<sup>279</sup> On this concept, see Jameson's "Nostalgia for the Present," Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 279-96.



In a sense, the ending of 54 mirrors the “ending” of Luther Blissett: both are given narrated and carefully constructed conclusions: the former’s is novelistic while the latter’s is professional. At the same time, the open ending of Q resembles what could be in store for Wu Ming, whose professional activities span many fields. It is a question of art imitating life, but also of life imitating art. In this chapter it was my explicit contention to examine the figures of Luther Blissett and Wu Ming through their novels, but since these authors are *themselves* constructions, I avoided problems associated with biography transfer that Barthes has warned us about. Luther Blissett and Wu Ming, as well as the transformation from one into the other, are creations invented by their group authors and as such allow for critical analysis alongside their novels. While working as Luther Blissett, the authors’ desire for anonymity reflected the opposite of more conventional authorial desire for acclaim, and rejected even the possibility of a Barthesian reading of their work. Wu Ming, in celebrating their multiplicity and constructed identities (Wu Ming 1, Wu Ming 2, etc.), continues that impossibility, and allows us to examine that very construction as fruit of the Author’s labor, not as the Author himself.

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**Curriculum Vitae**  
**Sandra A. Waters**

**Institutions attended, degrees earned:**

Rutgers University, Ph.D., January 2009  
University of Oregon, M.A., June 1998  
University of Minnesota, B.A., June 1995

**Principal Occupation:**

Assistant Professor, Texas Christian University

**Publications:**

“Stefano Benni,” *Literary and Biographical Review*, *Compendium of 20<sup>th</sup> Century World Novelists and Novels*, New York: Facts on File, Inc. (Spring 2008)

“The Intradiegetic Narrator in the Italian Historical Novel,” *La Fusta: Journal of Italian Literature and Culture* vol. 15 (Fall 2007)